

# 'War on the Waters: The Union & Confederate Navies, 1861-1865'

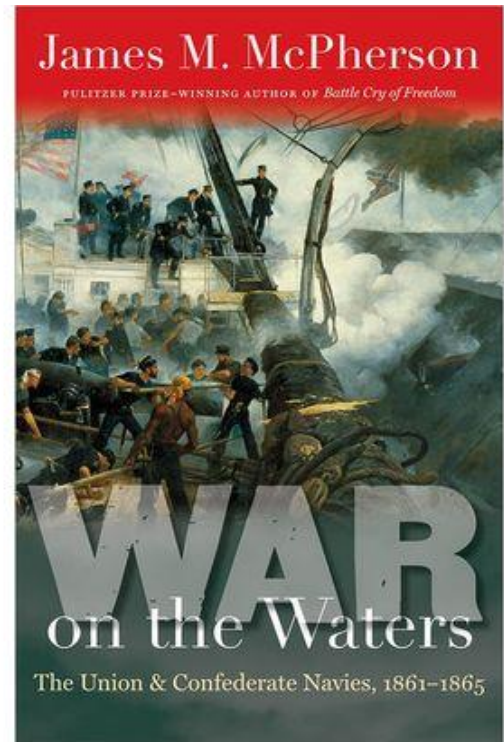
By James M. McPherson

Review by George Arnold

Here's something new from the renowned historian of the American Civil War, James M. McPherson: a short (226 pp.) but thorough book that covers the subject of ACW naval operations nicely, while also managing to serve up information that's sure to be new to all but the most knowledgeable of Civil War scholars.

McPherson is probably best known for his 1988 work, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, a one-volume account of the ACW that won the Pulitzer Prize for history. *War on the Waters* has a much narrower focus, in that it's concerned almost exclusively with naval matters. The land war is touched on only as it directly relates to the war on the oceans and rivers.

McPherson's contention is that the ACW naval war has gotten fairly short shrift in previous histories (presumably including his own): There's almost always a mention of the Monitor and Merrimac, a hat tip to the Union blockade as part of the Anaconda Plan, and some discussion of riverine warfare as it helped out in the broader context of the campaigns on dry land. Beyond that, not so much. This book intends to correct the oversight, or at least to begin the job.



James M. McPherson

The book divides the naval war into five parts: early Union successes, Confederate initiatives from early 1862 until about mid-1863, a period of more Union advances in late 1863, Confederate resurgence in early 1864, then the steady triumphs by the Union navy from late 1864 through the end of the war.

*War on the Waters* follows that chronology through 11 chapters. McPherson shifts back and forth between events on the rivers and those relating to the blockade. Events don't always fit perfectly into his five-part method of organization, but the fuzzy edges of reality still allow for a narrative that's easy to follow.

The broad outlines of the book will be familiar to many with an interest in the American Civil War. It's the details that are not so familiar that make this book so interesting. For example, there's a brief discussion of the Union "Marine Brigade," a force of infantry and cavalry that was part of the Union fleet on the Mississippi. The brigade would land from the fleet's boats and chase Confederate guerrillas who were harassing shipping on the river.

Then, there's discussion of the part that "contrabands," former slaves, played in manning the navy's ships and boats, and in providing sometimes crucial intelligence about Confederate positions and manpower to Union forces.

The big naval battles are covered: Forts Henry and Donelson, the capture of New Orleans, operations on the Atlantic coast and the Battle of Mobile Bay. But the details of life aboard the fleets are also included. And, of course, no book about the Civil War would be complete without a discussion of how the personalities of the commanders affected their efforts -- for good or ill -- to carry out the strategies assigned to them. There's plenty of that in "War on the Waters."

Finally, there are lots of photos -- including many portraits of individuals -- dropped into the text in appropriate places. In addition, the maps are cleanly drawn and easy to comprehend -- deserve a special mention. They are superb and might even provide ideas for some tabletop battles with ironclads.

**From the University of North Carolina Press, 2012**

**ISBN: 978-0-8078-3588-3**

**Available from Amazon USA in hardcover and Kindle editions, \$22.63 and \$19.25, respectively.**