
Available from www.schoonerfame.com

Reviewed by Frederick Leiner

Despite the near-avalanche of titles published about the War of 1812 in the past few years, little has been written about privateers and that little has largely depreciated their impact. Yet this recent back-of-the-hand treatment is a rather odd turn of events. From the beginning, observers assumed that privateers would be critical. In the same August 1812 letter in which ex-President Jefferson unforgottably wrote that conquering British Canada would be a "mere matter of marching," he also predicted "our privateers will eat out the vitals of their commerce." The older American historiography asserts that privateers had a moral and financial effect on the British shipping, particularly the West India trade, and ultimately may have cooled British ardor for continuing the war. The seascape is now very different. Recent American authors say next to nothing about privateering, and British authors belittle its effects. For instance, in his polemical The Challenge: Britain Against America in the Naval War of 1812, Andrew Lambert concludes that the privateers' "guerre de course" did not affect British diplomacy, maritime insurance rates remained stable, and the guerre de course was never a significant threat. Despite Lambert's reference to American privateers capturing perhaps as many as 7.5% of British merchant vessels in the War of 1812, privateers never produced an existential threat to Britain like the U-boat campaigns of the World Wars, so ergo (to Lambert), they were "never significant."

Now comes The Privateering Stroke: Salem's Privateers in the War of 1812, a privately published, old fashioned, operational account of the 43 privateers that sailed out of Salem. Michael Rutstein is the owner and operator of Fame, a replica Salem privateer schooner, but The Privateering Stroke is not a casual read for summer tourists who went on a day sail. The Privateering Stroke is serious history. The reach of Rutstein's research is remarkable, fully exploiting not only the secondary literature, but also National Archives' prize case files, British Admiralty records, obscure accounts buried in history journals, contemporary newspapers in Salem and elsewhere, and the collections of the Peabody Essex Museum.

Anyone writing on War of 1812 privateers faces daunting challenges, to describe what privateers were, why they existed, how prize law and ownership consortiums operated, as well as setting the backdrop of the War and the local situation, in this case, in Salem. These can be tricky issues because all but the most zealous readers may be put off by all the preliminaries, but Rutstein handles the background aspects clearly and concisely, in a sixteen-page introduction. Then he is off on his real story. Rutstein organized The Privateering Stroke around each privateer: there are 43 substantive chapters, corresponding to Salem's 43 privateers. Rutstein's approach allows a detailed look at the career of each vessel, from the tiny open boats sent out in
the war's first days, to the large, pilot-boat built schooners owned by the Crowninshield family. Rutstein painstakingly and colorfully describes the owners, officers, crew, and cruises of each privateer, to the extent his massive research found material. For the more obscure vessels, the chapters are short, even just one page, but even a seemingly stray detail allows Rutstein, a nimble writer, to segue into subjects thematically important to the overall story, such as "head money," smuggling, and the transfer of the Chesapeake Bay pilot-boat schooner design. Through it all, his writing is energetic, snappy, and confident.

Yet his privateer-per-chapter organization is imperfect. One problem is that, with forty-three separate stories, he cannot present each vessel or each cruise in the context of the war at that time. After finishing with one privateer, the reader begins anew with another, and thus goes back to an earlier point in the war. The effect is to put the reader in a time warp. A second problem is that by focusing on each ship, Rutstein sometimes repeats stories, and even the same block quotations, in several places. A third, critical issue is how these Salem privateers, individually or collectively, fit into the larger dynamic of privateering during the War of 1812, both in the sense of how they compared in number, success, and profitability with privateers elsewhere, and more important still, whether (or to what extent) Salem's privateers made a difference in the war. Rutstein's efforts to address these larger issues are meager. It is a shame that this valuable book did not find a commercial or university publisher, which not only might have promised a wider audience, but which also might have pushed the author to confront broader themes.

Nevertheless, The Privateering Stroke is well researched and well written, and fills a gap in the historical understanding by providing detailed accounts of the cruises of Salem's privateers. It is hard to imagine that Michael Rutstein has left undiscovered a lot of information about the Salem privateers or the men who owned and sailed them.

Frederick C. Leiner

Frederick C. Leiner is a practicing lawyer and a historian of American naval history. He is the author of The End of Barbary Terror: America’s 1815 War with the Pirates of North Africa (Oxford University Press, 2006) and Millions for Defense: The Subscription Warships of 1798 (Naval Institute Press, 2000). He has written widely about the U.S. navy and privateers in the age of sail, including topics such as naval leadership, shipbuilding, the economics of privateering, and maritime prize cases, in the Naval Institute Proceedings, Naval History, Northern Mariner/le marin du nord, Journal of Military History, American Journal of Legal History, and other scholarly and popular periodicals. He is the chairman of the maritime committee of the Maryland Historical Society.