



Civil War Clash of Ironclads

Iron Dawn: The Monitor, the Merrimack, and the Civil War Sea Battle That Changed History by Richard Snow.

New York: Scribner, 2016. Pp. xii, 395. ISBN 978-1-4767-9418-1.

“Our Little Monitor”: *The Greatest Invention of the Civil War* by Anna Gibson Holloway and Jonathan W. White.

Kent, OH: Kent State Univ. Press, 2018. Pp. xix, 283. ISBN 978-1-60635-314-1.

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The battle did not amount to much: not a single man was killed, and neither the *Monitor* nor the *Merrimack*¹ suffered much damage. Yet the world’s first encounter between ironclads² remains the best known naval battle in American history. Two new books now join the extensive literature on the subject. The first, Richard Snow’s beautifully written *Iron Dawn*, provides a fast-paced account that concentrates on the people—inventors, officers, politicians—involved in creating and commanding the two ships. On the other hand, the much longer *“Our Little Monitor”*, by maritime historian Anna Gibson Holloway (Museum Services Director, SEARCH, Inc.) and American Studies professor Jonathan White (Christopher Newport Univ.), covers the same ground, but features as well lavish photography and illustrations, along with many pages of letters and documents. It also describes the recovery of the *Monitor*’s turret, engine, and other artifacts in the last twenty years, something Snow mentions only in passing.

Both books begin by sketching the naval mismatch between the North and South as the Civil War began. The Confederacy had plenty of officers—men who had resigned from the US Navy in 1861—but few sailors and no warships. The Union’s modest navy was designed for service overseas. Both sides were aware of the ironclad vessels possessed by England and France, and their terrible potential. The South got to work on the hulk of the USS *Merrimack*, a steam-powered frigate that had been partially destroyed when Union forces abandoned the Norfolk Navy Yard. It would be roofed with a casemate plated with four inches of iron, and armed with ten powerful guns. As the *Merrimack* took shape over the winter of 1861–62, President Abraham Lincoln’s government, recognizing the threat it posed, started its own quest to build ironclads.

The books both chronicle in detail the difficult birth of the *Monitor*. The project faced great political and financial obstacles, as its inventor, Swedish-born John Ericsson, rushed to complete the novel vessel in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Author Snow, who was editor-in-chief of *American*

1. Both books address the endless controversy over the proper name of the Confederate ironclad. Officially, it was the CSS *Virginia*, but most people, north and south, called it the “Merrimack.” In addition, many observers and historians have referred to the original USN frigate and the ironclad built from its hulk as “the Merrimac.” The New Hampshire river for which the ship was christened is the Merrimack.

2. Also the first between steam-powered warships.

Heritage for seventeen years, enlivens this section with a typical description of one of Ericsson's antagonists, the Navy's chief engineer, Benjamin Franklin Isherwood:

Still in his thirties, the powerfully built Isherwood—his broad chest made him seem shorter than his five feet ten inches—had the reputation of being the “handsomest man in Washington,” which probably didn't sweeten the opinion of those who also found him the most abrasive one. His supporters like to speak of his frankness, but this quality manifested itself in a straightforward rudeness that needlessly brought him many enemies. In part, his character had been formed by the difficult service to which he'd devoted most of his life. Being a naval engineer in the years before the Civil War meant that you were responsible for the fuming, dimly understood, deeply resented machinery that had begun to show up in warships only a generation earlier. (17)

The books diverge once the scene shifts to Hampton Roads, a shallow harbor near the Confederate capital, Richmond, and not all that far from Washington. *Iron Dawn* provides a good account of the first battle (8 Mar. 1862), when the *Merrimack* steamed in and destroyed two of the five large wooden Union ships anchored there. It first rammed and sank the USS *Cumberland* and then used gunfire to set the USS *Congress* ablaze. This day demonstrated two things: cannon firing explosive shells could quickly destroy any wooden warship, and four-inch-thick armor rendered the *Merrimack* almost invulnerable to most naval weapons.

“*Our Little Monitor*” virtually ignores the battle of 8 March to focus on the fighting of the following day. That battle itself was anticlimactic, and neither book wrings much drama from it. Even at ranges less than fifty yards, neither the *Monitor*'s two XI-inch Dahlgren shell guns, nor the smaller guns on the *Merrimack*, could inflict any significant damage on their armored targets. Each ship was handicapped by ammunition problems: the *Monitor*'s guns were fired using 15-pound charges, rather than the usual thirty pounds, due to concerns about the effects of cannon recoiling inside the vessel's 21-foot turret. Full charges might have penetrated the armor of the *Merrimack*, which came equipped to destroy the Union's wooden ships with explosive shells rather than armor-piercing rounds. Readers may be left with the impression that iron armor was simply too much for the guns of that era. Neither book mentions the June 1863 battle between the CSS *Atlanta* (with armor similar to the *Merrimack*'s) and a new, better armed monitor, the USS *Weehawken*. The monitor fired only five shots before the Confederate ship, with a hole in its casemate, surrendered.³

Both ships remained near Hampton Roads for many weeks after the battle, but there was never a rematch. In May 1862, the Confederates blew up the *Merrimack* rather than let it be captured as Union troops advanced into Virginia. On the last day of 1862, the *Monitor* sank in a storm as it was being moved down the coast to a new station. Though both books describe the tremendous popularity of the *Monitor* after the battle, they also reveal just how ill-designed it was for anything beyond duels with other ironclads in shallow water. When the ship went up to Washington after the battle, it was overwhelmed with crowds of politicians, VIPs (Nathaniel Hawthorne among them), and ordinary tourists who came on board. But when put back into service and sent into southern rivers to shell forts, it proved a failure, and a hellishly hot ship for its crew.

Snow moves briskly along throughout *Iron Dawn*, which, except for a seven-page epilogue, ends with the *Monitor* foundering off Cape Hatteras on New Year's Eve, 1862. “*Our Little Monitor*,” on the other hand, offers a long chapter on the discovery and recovery of the *Monitor*'s wreck. And, too, its many pages of contemporary documents and letters will interest nautical archaeology fans and cultural historians.

3. See *Wikipedia*, s.vv. “Battle of Sinop” and “USS *Atlanta* (1861).”