



Raphael Semmes: The Philosophical Mariner

Warren F. Spencer

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Naval hero for all the South, Raphael Semmes (1809-1877) sailed two famous Confederate raiders. He outfitted CSS Sumter in 1861 and captured 18 Union merchant ships in six months before the raider was blockaded at Gibraltar. Next he took command of CSS Alabama, an English-built raider, and terrorized U.S. merchant vessels on the high seas from August 1862 until the raider was sunk in battle off Cherbourg in June 1864. During that two-year period, he captured more enemy merchant ships than any other cruiser captain in maritime history. He is considered one of the greatest ship's commanders that America has produced.

In this first, full-scale biography that relies on Semmes's private papers, unpublished diaries, and correspondence, Spencer has produced a well-balanced and comprehensive account of the man, as well as the naval officer. The biographer paints a vivid portrait of Semmes—the intellectual, the family man, lawyer, romanticist, nationalist—providing a greater understanding of the man behind the heroic deeds.

Semmes was born in Maryland to a slave-holding family and entered the United States Navy in 1826. In 1849, he moved his family to Mobile, Alabama, to be near the navy base at Pensacola, Florida, and to practice law during leaves. Semmes was an astute student, not only of international and maritime law but also of weather patterns; astronomy; flora and fauna; naval, social, and cultural history; and the classics. His study of constitutional law led him to side with his adopted state in 1861, a move that set the stage for his place in history.

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