



**KIDNAPPED
AT SEA**

THE CIVIL WAR
VOYAGE *of*
DAVID HENRY
WHITE

ANDREW SILLEN



[This book] is at once a fine work of engaged scholarship, the rescue of a hidden life, a depiction of the global dimension of the Civil War, and a critique of the mythology of the 'Lost Cause'.

Kidnapped at Sea:

The Civil War Voyage of David Henry White

By Andrew Sillen

Review by Alan Hirsch

Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024, 336 pages, Amazon R1,156 (hardcover only available), Kindle US\$37.89

K*idnapped at Sea* tells the true story of a free black teenager, David Henry White from Delaware on the east coast of the United States, who was captured from a transatlantic merchant vessel where he served as a junior member of the kitchen staff and held as a slave on the rebel warship *Alabama*. Captained by slave-owner and committed rebel Raphael Semmes, *Alabama* roamed the north and south Atlantic and the Indian Ocean, capturing, burning or ransoming dozens of US merchant ships, fighting off one US warship and finally being sunk in battle by another. White, who could not swim, was abandoned and drowned.

The arc of the story sweeps from Civil War US, following *Alabama* from its shipyard in the UK to the US, and then back across the north Atlantic, down to Brazil, to Saldanha Bay, Cape Town and Simonstown, across to south east Asia, back to the south Atlantic, to temporary respite in a French port and its demise in international waters between France and the UK. The story demonstrates how the conflict impacted many and implicated some in its global theatre of war.

Though it represented the resistance of slave owners, *Alabama* was admired and immortalised in song – the Cape folksong '*Daar kom die Alibama*'.

It was the Cape connection that drew author Andrew Sillen to the story. Walking down Strand Street, one of Cape Town's oldest streets, he was drawn into the Cultural History Museum then located in the historic Koopmans de Wet House. In it he found, unexpectedly, a Confederate battle ensign housed in a glass display cabinet. An American archaeologist working on African prehistory as a professor at the University of Cape Town, his curiosity was aroused.

Sillen discovered that in August 1863, the Confederate commerce raider *Alabama* sailed into Table Bay and captured an American merchant ship, the *Sea Bride*, in full view of the city and watched by thousands. Later he learned the story of the captured young American, David Henry White, and he steadily gathered evidence that would help tell the true story of White and recover it from the *ante-bellum* 'Lost Cause' mythology that justified slavery and paved the way for segregation. He was inspired by the modern anti-racist struggles in the US and South Africa and the movement to recover hidden histories.

In addition to telling the story of White, whose life is painstakingly pieced together from disparate scraps of evidence, Sillen provides vivid insights into the trans-Atlantic shipping business in the 1860s and the naval theatre of the US Civil War. The stories of White, Semmes, and some of their shipmates are woven into a narrative that follows *Alabama* from its manufacture in a UK shipyard and arming with British artillery for the Confederate navy, through many successful assaults on the US merchant shipping, to its demise off the shores of northern France two years later.



The exploits of *Alabama* achieved great fame and notoriety world-wide. Its final battle was depicted in a contemporaneous painting by Édouard Manet who was probably not among the many onlookers who had gathered in Cherbourg witness to the event.

Only two lives were lost in dozens of conquests, when *Alabama* destroyed the *Hatteras*, a Union gunboat off the coast of Galveston, Texas. But when *Alabama* went down most of the officers were saved but many of the men drowned. Sillen interrogates the several varying versions of this event, highlighting the deceptive accounts which failed to hide that Semmes and his officers pushed ahead to take the lifeboats leaving some, like White who could not swim, to drown.

Aside from the lively yet meticulous writing, several characteristics lift this book out of the ordinary. One is the way that Sillen interrogates texts to show deception and bias. In addition to dissecting the drownings, Sillen thoroughly proves that Semmes and his colleagues' depiction of White as already enslaved when kidnapped at sea is false. White was born free and was first and only enslaved by Semmes. Also, notions of the benevolence of slavery, the warm relations between master and slave, and the Civil War as a contest over states' rights are dismantled.

Another special feature of the book is the richness of the pertinent artifacts, tables and diagrams presented as evidence throughout the book. These include ships' manifests, tables of conquests, illustrations and photographs of places, people and events, maps and architectural diagrams of *Alabama*, all of which enrich the book. As a seasoned archaeologist Sillen could have been expected to collect many artifacts, but the publishers deserve praise for including them, appropriately interspersed in the text.

The seed for this book was sowed more than 30 years ago in a museum in Cape Town and it finally came to fruition in a memorable work of history. It is at once a fine work of engaged scholarship, the rescue of a hidden life, a depiction of the global dimension of the Civil War, and a critique of the mythology of the 'Lost Cause'. These threads are held together in a vivid, cinematic narrative.