

ample illustrations of courage and determination by mariners who spent their lives at sea and were dedicated to their mission, their company, and their country. Through his narrative and the presentation of first-hand accounts, Edwards succeeds in his goal of an accurate and engaging history.

Timothy J. Demy  
Newport, Rhode Island

**Andrew R. English. *The Laird Rams: Britain's Ironclads Built for the Confederacy, 1862-1923*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., [www.mcfarlandbooks.com](http://www.mcfarlandbooks.com), 2021. v+207 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. US \$45.00, cloth; ISBN 978-1-4766-8276. (E-book available.)**

During the American Civil War, the Confederate states hastily constructed and bought a navy to challenge superior Union naval forces that enforced a blockade and descended on coasts to seize territory and strategic locations such as ports. The first naval clash between opposing ironclads incorporating improved armour and gun arrangements into designs occurred at Hampton Roads in March 1862. Due to limitations in industrial manufacturing and shipbuilding, Southern authorities could not build new ships quickly enough and to sufficient quality in performance, and instead, looked to friendly shipyards in neutral foreign countries in Europe to augment the Confederate fleet. The cruiser CSS Alabama, launched from the John Laird and Sons shipyard on the River Mersey at Birkenhead, undertook a series of raids in European waters, inflicting privations on Union shipping until it was finally hunted down and sunk off Cherbourg by the USS Kearsarge in June 1864. Two ironclad turret ships, clandestinely built at the same Laird shipyard, have generally garnered far less attention and suffered a disparaging reputation amongst contemporaries and historians. British seizure and purchase prevented the ships from entering into Confederate service, and equally important, kept them out of French or Russian hands, as European navies raced to add ironclads to their respective fleets. The ships, suited for operations close to coasts and lifting the Union blockade, were incorporated into the Royal Navy and spent their remaining decades of service in progressively unremarkable duties close to home and at far distant stations of the British Empire. Andrew English, an American intelligence professional and graduate of the Air Command and Staff College as a former air force officer, counters the view that the Laird ironclads can be judged failures by looking at the entirety of their chequered careers in light of innovation and technological advances. The book is derived from English's 2016 doctoral dissertation finished at the University of Exeter. As an historical reenactor, English helped to build and pilot a replica nineteenth-century

keelboat down the Arkansas River at Little Rock in 2005.

The book is divided into four chapters following a chronological framework, each further subdivided into sections with headings. The first chapter details the South's interest and need for building ironclads suitable for coastal attack and defence, in order to change its fortunes in a losing war. John Laird and his sons proved willing to take on the task for a good price and to demonstrate the talents of the shipyard in building warships of the most advanced design and armament for the day. They were not too picky, having entertained feelers from Union representatives earlier in the war and regularly exporting to other foreign countries, because the Royal Navy was a fussy customer. The principal Confederate agent in Great Britain overseeing the contracts and building was Commander James Bulloch, an efficient and astute officer, able to navigate the tricky financial, diplomatic, and technical obstacles thrown in the way of the enterprise.

Great Britain was officially neutral in the American conflict, but that did not explicitly prevent individual shipbuilders from building and transferring ships, so long as they were unarmed and not expressly built for a warlike purpose. The two ironclad turret ships nearing completion stretched the interpretation of that stance to the utmost. The second chapter tells the machinations and decisions behind eventual acquisition of the Laird ironclads by the British government. Under the guise of fake Egyptian names allotted to the two ships, Bulloch arranged financing and a backdoor sale to private interests in France. Meanwhile, Union representatives in Great Britain employed an intelligence network of detectives, spies, and informants to document the true ownership and purpose of the ironclads, to various degrees. A change of heart in enforcement of neutrality laws and growing fears about where the powerful ships might end up compelled the government to finally take action. After seizure, the two ironclads sat anchored in the River Mersey until the Lairds received £195,000 as settlement and a further £25,000 to complete them. The third chapter describes the commissioning of the Laird ironclads into the Royal Navy and their service as the Scorpion and Wivern up to 1880. Early impressions of the innovative armoured turret ships were mostly mixed. Due to basic design issues and haste in construction, neither ship was particularly good keeping at sea in all weathers, nor able to find a truly useful place in the squadrons operating around the British Isles. That relegated them to being guardships at certain spots and placement into reserve. The fourth chapter recounts the final phase for the two ironclads, refitted for duty in overseas possessions to bolster harbour and coastal defences. Scorpion was sent to Bermuda, a strategic island off North America and the West Indies, to protect a floating dry dock and dockyard, and Wivern went to Hong Kong, one of Great Britain's key colonial commercial ports in Asian waters, to be part of the China squadron. French

rivalries, war scares with Russia, and occasional armed demonstrations in local affairs gave the aging ironclads continuing relevance. By 1900, the now 35-year-old armoured iron ships and their guns were clearly obsolete, even for limited coastal defence roles, and they were struck from strength.

Besides the basic story of initial intrigue and later normal routine of the Laird ironclads, the book also provides considerable technical explanation in the context of changes to naval warfare and ship design, and rich descriptions of primary and secondary weapons carried on board the ships. The two ironclads, as originally conceived, were intended to operate near coastal waters and break, once and for all, the strangling Union blockade, which gave the ram a certain prominence, and reflected contemporary opinion about the importance of that weapon. The main guns housed in manually rotating turrets midships represented another notable innovation. The piercing effects of shell against armour attracted considerable attention, in which the Laird ironclads were at the start of a seesaw contest between guns versus armour based upon key industrial and ordnance improvements. Additional rapid firing guns and machine guns, such as the Nordenfelt, furnished increased firepower in close-quarter combat and an ability to ward off attacking torpedo boats. The armour-clads possessed the ability to fire their own Whitehead torpedoes, and as reconfigured, could carry their own torpedo boats for independent action. English points out, however, that any firing of the main guns was likely to damage or smash the torpedo boats kept on deck, and hoisting them out would have been very difficult in anything less than ideal sea conditions. Numerous illustrations picked by English from his own collections and the National Maritime Museum accompany the text, and are an important feature of the book and its account.

The Laird Rams is a serious book with academic and popular appeal. It can be read in conjunction with Howard Fuller's *Clad in Iron* (2008), from which it references. The book is recommended for readers interested in the American Civil War, the Confederate Navy, afloat coastal defences, and the technical and armament aspects of naval warfare in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Chris Madsen  
North Vancouver, British Columbia

**Eugenio Luis Facchin. *The Untold Story of a Fighting Ship: One Ship, Two Flags, A Thousand Battles*. Buenos Aires, Argentina: Springer Nature, [www.link.springer.com](http://www.link.springer.com), 2023. xiii+193 pp., illustrations, maps, appendices, notes, bibliography. US \$37.99, paper ; ISBN 978-3-030-92624-3. (E-book available.)**