

the Falkland Islands, his autobiography, written after the events described, is supplemented by his personal diaries from this time, allowing him to compare the retrospective view with his contemporary impressions. For the professional historian this parallel of an autobiography and contemporary diary entries is especially interesting, allowing the reader to observe how perspective and interpretation have changed over time.

A selection of black and white photographs, mainly from the author's private collection, accompanies the text. Anybody already familiar with the South Georgia/ Falklands conflict, will not likely find any new images, but for readers dealing with the topic for the first time, the pictures will illustrate what it means to carry out military special operations under the extreme conditions to be found at the various South Atlantic islands.

Given the book's brief coverage of actual naval or maritime topics, this book might not be particularly relevant to a professional maritime historian or even a general reader interested in the history of South Georgia or the Falkland Island conflict, but it can be recommended without any doubt to every historian with an interest in the British SAS and military special operations at large. If there is one question that needs to be asked at the end of this review, it is the question of the title of the book.

Whether chosen by the author or the publisher, the title covers such a small portion of the book that it is somewhat misleading but was probably the result of a marketing decision linked to the fortieth anniversary of the Falklands War. The book is without any doubt an important contribution to British military history of the post-Second World War period. It provides authentic insight into the operations of special forces, although its contribution to the historiography of military conflict in the South Atlantic remains somewhat limited. The reasonable retail price of UK £25.00 for a high-quality hard-cover book of more than 200 pages will counter any dissatisfaction with the title, and readers will find the book worth the money and the time. Would I recommend the book to a colleague as an addition to his/her private bookshelf holding a collection of maritime or (sub-)Antarctic books? Probably not, but I am sure all maritime/ Antarctic historians will know a military historian who would appreciate it.

Ingo Heidbrink
Norfolk, Virginia

Thomas Sheppard. *Commanding Petty Despots: The American Navy in the New Republic*. Annapolis, MD: US Naval Institute Press, www.usni.org, 2022. x+241 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. US \$46.00, hardback; ISBN 978-1-68247-755-7. (E-book available.)

The title provides a more accurate sense of this book's contents than its subtitle. Thomas Sheppard's work is less an account of the first decades of the United States Navy's existence than it is an examination of two interrelated subjects: civil-military relations, and the professionalization of the navy's officer corps. As Sheppard demonstrates, these two were connected by one of the fundamental challenges facing America's civilian leadership during this period, that of finding naval commanders who were able to demonstrate equal parts zealotry in their pursuit of their duties and obedience to their civilian superiors.

Sheppard dates this challenge to the country's efforts to build a navy during the American Revolution. Though the Continental Congress authorized the creation of a navy in 1775, it provided little in the way of either direction or governance of the force. This ceded enormous autonomy to the officers of the new arm, who in the absence of "a [George] Washington to coordinate all its forces and operations in a coherent, unified fashion" (20) largely did whatever they wanted. As Sheppard notes, these were men who already were used to enjoying a great deal of autonomy in their activities. The Congress' inability to provide them with support, direction or even pay only increased their reluctance to follow the orders of a civilian leadership for which they held little respect. What determined their activities throughout the war was the need to maintain their authority with both their crews and their peers. This led to incessant disputes between officers, who proved extraordinarily sensitive to anything that might diminish their honour.

The importance of reputation in the early American navy is fundamental to Sheppard's analysis of the nascent officer corps. Though common to the militaries of the era, it was especially important to captains serving in a newly established navy that lacked traditions of its own. For the first generation of American naval officers, "the prevailing ideology of honor frequently trumped a commitment to civilian control." (7) Many of them made decisions that prioritized fame-winning heroics over the cause for which they were fighting. This resulted in a performance that, while punctuated by the famous escapades of captains such as John Paul Jones, did nothing to contribute to victory. Yet the officers' "thirst for glory" (as John Adams put it) paralleled that of the young nation, which gloried in those inconsequential victories over the British vessels for the same reason as the captains: they won a measure of respect for the country. As a result, America's civilian leaders decided not to stifle this thirst, but to harness it to the country's needs.

This was one of the foremost challenges they faced when they began forming a new navy in the 1790s in response to the depredations of the Barbary states. Though there were now plenty of experienced officers from

which to choose, many of them spent as much energy bickering over their rankings in terms of seniority as they did fighting at sea. Initially, the burden of refereeing these disputes fell upon Benjamin Stoddert, the first Secretary of the Navy, who fielded numerous letters from officers complaining about slights to their honour. With his main goal of developing a reputation for the US Navy for aggressive action, Stoddert expended considerable amounts of ink soothing the bruised egos of John Barry, Thomas Truxtun, and other captains who were successful in the conflicts against France and the Barbary corsairs. Beyond this, Stoddert interfered little in the decisions of his officers, in part because his tiny and overworked staff had no ability to micromanage the navy they were building. Accordingly, the officers shaped the values of the new navy largely unimpeded by the civilian leadership, fostering a culture that was “aggressive, courageous, sensitive to any insult to their own or their country’s honor, and nearly impossible to control.” (55)

It was Stoddert’s successor, Robert Smith, who furthered the professionalization of the officer corps. Tasked by Thomas Jefferson with reducing the navy’s costs, he disposed of dozens of ships and dismissed the surplus officers. Sheppard argues that Smith’s reductions were beneficial for the service in the long run, as the officers who were retained constituted “a small corps who understood and embraced civilian control.” (109) This subordination was demonstrated by their embrace of Jefferson’s controversial gunboat program, as even officers who disagreed with the concept of a force comprised of small vessels went along with its development. Their compliance was also on display again when the United States went to war with Great Britain in 1812. The lack of a European-style battlefleet did little to discourage the sort of aggressive action the public wanted to see, even if, as in the Revolutionary War, the single-ship actions which brought so much pride mattered not at all in determining the war’s outcome. Such was the trust earned by the officer corps by the war’s end that, in its aftermath, a new Board of Navy Commissioners was formed consisting of serving officers who alleviated the secretary’s administrative burden and enhanced civil-military relations by creating a clearer division of responsibilities.

Sheppard sees David Porter’s conviction in his 1825 court-martial for his invasion of Fajardo, Puerto Rico, as demarcating the successful establishment of a culture within the navy that prioritized national interests over personal ones. It’s a fitting endpoint that illustrates nicely the changes he describes so persuasively in his book. Though his arguments about the development of an institutional culture would have been even more effective had he looked beyond the navy’s top leadership and examined further the attitudes of lower-ranking officers, it nonetheless is a work that adds to our understanding of

both civil-military relations in the early republic and the importance of honour in early American culture.

Mark Klobas
Phoenix, Arizona

Meredith F. Small. *Here Begins the Dark Sea: Venice, a Medieval Monk, and the Creation of the Most Accurate Map of the World*. New York, NY: Pegasus Books, www.pegasusbooks.com, 2023. 320 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography. US \$29.95, cloth; ISBN 978-1-63936-419-0.

Dark Sea is not Meredith Small's first work centering on Venice's critical role in "inventing the world," as we in the West look back on the hunt for new sailing routes and possibly overland trading routes that moved spices, fabrics, and more from east to west after the Ottomans captured Constantinople in 1453. This book is Small's tour de force suggesting how, most likely, Venetian cleric Fra Mauro, drew on knowledge from global sources to produce a "mappamundi," map of the world, that more accurately depicted the earth than the efforts of philosophers, artists, mathematicians, and seamen before him and many long after. As Small, an anthropologist by academic training, wrote in explaining why Mauro's work still matters: "According to NASA Landsat Science: 'The comparison is stunning when you consider that Fra Mauro compiled his data from the travel tales of myriad fifteenth century sailors.' Fra Mauro, who never saw anything beyond his native city, and certainly had no idea what the world looked like from above, got so much right." (233)

The map itself is seven feet in diameter, a "towering circle of blue and white covered with busy writing." What surprises her, and me, was that this large work was "hanging in a secluded space of wall outside the grand reading room of the Museo Corner in Venice." Small describes it as "the Rosetta Stone of world maps;" and having spent decades with maps and charts, this reviewer heartily agrees. So what does a visitor to the Museo see, if he or she stops? We absorb Mauro's geography in the map but also inscriptions in Venetian dialect that are often his reasons why certain decisions were made or serve as source notes. (xi)

Nothing proves NASA's point more than Mauro's decision to show that Africa could be rounded by sea. "The possibility of rounding Africa and finding open water on the other side is of prime importance because that was the Holy Grail for international trade" (147). The European shipbuilders' new designs for vessels capable of carrying greater cargo tonnage on longer routes made possible by better navigational charts was being translated into business when Mauro undertook the work.