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Robert E. Sheridan, *Iron from the Deep: The Discovery and Recovery of the U.S.S. Monitor*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2004, 261 pages.

Jeffery A. Charlston, PhD

University of Maryland University College

Adelphi, MD

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The ironclad *U.S.S. Monitor* holds a special place in naval history as both the progenitor of the modern warship and as perhaps the most famous Union vessel of the U.S. Civil War. Robert Sheridan, a marine geophysicist, became involved with the vessel during the search for her remains and continued that association through the successful recovery of key artifacts from the wreck. In *Iron from the Deep* Sheridan recounts that decades-long association and provides one perspective on the complex issues involved in determining the fate of a national treasure.

*Iron from the Deep* is not a history in the strictest sense, despite forty pages devoted to the *Monitor's* career and her tragic end in a storm off Cape Hatteras, North Carolina. The two hundred pages which follow that necessary background section are Sheridan's memoir of what the title accurately proclaims as the volume's subject: the discovery and recovery of an American maritime icon. Sheridan's graceful prose and careful documentation make the distinction between objective and subjective passages reasonably clear. The result is an enjoyable and highly readable volume that combines a factual chronology of events with the personal views of a participant in them.

After establishing the *Monitor*'s significance and explaining how she sank in the predawn hours of 31 December 1862, Sheridan covers subsequent critical events through the recovery of her distinctive turret in 2002. The unique aspect of *Iron from the Deep* is its unabashed look at the competing interests and personal rivalries that shaped events after the discovery of what turned out to be the wreck of the *Monitor* in August 1973. Sheridan was one of the senior academic scientists on the vessel that made the discovery. Another team member, a young marine archeologist from the North Carolina Division of Archives and History named Gordon Watts, compiled the resulting photographic evidence that identified the *Monitor*. Subsequent feuds between academic and government scientists, private organizations, state and local governments, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Agency shaped events for the next quarter century.

After the wreck had been identified, authorities had to confront a range of options from leaving the site untouched to raising the entire vessel. Even the question of who those authorities should be was open. The U.S. Navy had surrendered title of the vessel to the General Services Administration in 1953. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Agency controlled access to marine sanctuaries, a status that North Carolina successfully requested for the area surrounding the wreck in 1974. The *Monitor* rested in U.S. waters, but outside the jurisdiction of North Carolina. That state had a considerable financial interest in the vessel, as one of the most famous of the many shipwrecks off the Outer Banks, and hosted the numerous research and salvage expeditions to the vessel. Neighboring Virginia had been the site of the historic battle between the *Monitor* and the C.S.S. *Virginia* (more often known as the *Merrimac*), and hosted the Mariner's Museum, the world-class facility that eventually gained responsibility for preserving and displaying major artifacts from the *Monitor*.

Sheridan describes the ensuing struggles through the eyes of a participant with great care. While he does not hesitate to criticize parochial interests and efforts to exclude or denigrate various groups involved in the decision making and recovery processes, Sheridan's own views influence even the seemingly objective aspects of *Iron from the Deep*. U.S. Navy surface-supplied diving techniques, for example, are praised

for their safety and contributions to the recovery effort. But recreational scuba divers exploring the wreck are condemned for what Sheridan considers the unacceptable risks that they ran in successfully executing emergency procedures, and the substantial contributions that volunteer scuba divers made to the recovery operation using similar techniques are not mentioned.

*Iron from the Deep* is worth reading for its subjectivity. More detached histories often make light of the intense conflicts, personal and professional, that shape the preservation and public presentation of the past. Sheridan's work puts a human face on that process and also compliments a volume produced by the Mariner's Museum, *The Monitor Chronicles: One Sailor's Account and Today's Campaign to Recover the Civil War Wreck* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 2000). In that volume, Editor William Marvel combines the letters of *Monitor* crewman George Geer with a history of the vessel and efforts to recover it. The combination of the two books ably demonstrates that the story of the U.S.S. *Monitor* continues to be a very human one. But those looking for an objective history of the *Monitor's* recovery must continue to wait.



The Editors  
International Journal of Naval History  
[editors@ijnhonline.org](mailto:editors@ijnhonline.org)

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