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Ira Dye, **Uriah Levy: Reformer of the Antebellum Navy**, Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2006. 299 pp., photographs, end notes, bibliography, index.

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Uriah Levy (1792-1862) is perhaps best remembered in the history of the United States Navy as the first Jew to obtain flag rank. His other noteworthy contributions towards American naval history include an untiring effort to improve the conditions of the common sailor, most notably by arguing for the abolishment of flogging in the navy, and for having a what the editors call “. . . the record number of six court-martials and two courts of inquiry.”<sup>1</sup>

Born and raised in Philadelphia in 1792, Uriah Levy went to sea in the merchant marine at a young age, and began accumulating both sailing experience and money relatively early in his life. Enlisting in the Navy during the War of 1812, Levy served as a supernumerary sailing master on the brig U.S.S. *Argus* during her historic commerce raiding attacks off the coast of Great Britain. The *Argus* was eventually captured by H.M.S. *Pelican* and Levy spent the remainder of the war on parole.

Returning to the United States in 1815, Levy decided to remain in the Navy and attempt to work his way up the ladder of promotion. To obtain rank as an officer in the line of promotion, a young man usually had to start as a midshipman; sailing masters were seldom promoted to Lieutenant. Through political connections and two years of perseverance, Levy finally obtained the promotion to Lieutenant. For the next 43 years, Levy served his country, rising through the ranks of Master-Commandant and Captain, while enduring a constant stream of attacks on his character. In 1860 he was finally awarded the honorary title of “Commodore” and hoisted his own flag in command of the Mediterranean Squadron.

Ira Dye was uniquely positioned to write a biography on Uriah Levy. Having previously amassed a vast database on American sailors from the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century, including examining a vast quantity of Seaman’s Protection Certificates, he had unquestionably obtained good insight into the lives of the common sailor. His previous book, *The Fatal Cruise of the Argus: Two Captains in the War of 1812* (United States Naval Institute Press, 1994) introduced Dye to Levy as the brig’s supernumerary sailing master and gave much material that was worked into this biography. Finally, Dye’s background as an officer in the United States Navy, from 1940-1967,

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<sup>1</sup> *Uriah Levy: Reformer of the Antebellum Navy*, x.

provided him with experience in naval protocols and experience on court-martial boards. Regretfully, Captain Dye passed away last April, after his manuscript was submitted.

Throughout the book, the author focuses on Levy's court-martials and the various injuries and insults Levy had to endure in the wardrooms. Captain Dye seems to put most of the blame for these scrapes on Levy's often misunderstood personality, jealousy of Levy's wealth, and prejudice against Levy having risen from the ranks of a sailing master instead of a midshipman. Anti-Semitism is played down early in the book with the author stating that "By and large, Jews seem to have been accepted into mainstream American society at this time."<sup>2</sup> Part way through the work, the author seems to recant this with a statement attributing one court-martial to Levy's ". . . rather difficult personality and his mannerisms, his background as a sailing master, and perhaps most of all because he was a Jew."<sup>3</sup> However, even in this case, the word "perhaps" and the listing of anti-Semitism last, suggests that the author does not think Uriah Levy's Jewish background played much of a role in his tribulations. By page 146, the author is again diminishing any anti-Semitism Levy may have encountered stating "[a]lthough in the American navy and as an American citizen Levy had to put up with an occasional Jew-hater, this was not the norm."

Captain Dye's downplaying of anti-Semitism is a little puzzling when compared to the quotations found in the primary sources he used. For example, during one of Levy's court-martials, Captain F. H. Gregory was quoted as saying ". . . the prejudices existing against him originated in his being a Jew . . . ." At least two wardrooms did not want Levy admitted because he was a Jew, and Levy's own executive officer on the U.S.S. *Vandalia* was quoted as saying "I'll be damned if this old Jew shall come here to order me about."<sup>4</sup> Many more examples anti-Semitic comments exist in the quoted primary sources. Whereas it is true that an in-depth examination of anti-Semitism in early nineteenth century America is beyond the scope of this book, the author's apparent unwillingness to address the issue weakens the story.

The scholarship of the citations is one of the weak points of the book. For example, in the Introduction, the author states that past biographers of Levy have not delved deep into original primary sources on Levy and often repeated inaccurate anecdotes about his life. He gives one exception, which he lists in his notes as "Kanof. 'The Story of a Pugnacious Commodore,' unpublished manuscript, no date." However, Dye never cites this source in his bibliography, which would have made it nearly impossible for anyone wishing to consult the source to find it. Twenty years ago, this might have created a dead end for scholars wishing to build upon Dye's work. Luckily this source can now be tracked down quickly on the Internet. Many similar errors of improper citation of sources occur in the work, probably as a result of the author referring to notes he wrote years before for his other research. However, in many cases, the endnotes contain enough information for the sources to be located.

Aside from these annoyances of irregularities in the citations, the author also used a manuscript of a nineteenth century novel for his description of Commodore Charles Stewart. A novel is a

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 69.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 93.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 70, 74, 136-137, 179.

work of fiction and can never be used as a source in this context, even if the author knew Commodore Stewart, a relationship which is not asserted.

Despite these criticisms, the book succeeds in many places. It describes the life within the wardrooms of the nineteenth century American navy in a clear and understandable way. The political interactions between some of the factions of officers, most notably the followers of Captain Stephen Decatur versus the followers of Captain James Barron, repeatedly resurface. Although not the main theme of the work, the book shows how these interactions extended to the level of the junior officers.

Perhaps the book's biggest success is of the picture it paints of Uriah Levy's personality and desires. As the title suggests, the book does deal with Captain Levy's experiments and campaigns to abolish flogging in the navy, and gives credit to Levy for his accomplishments while clearly sharing the overall credit with others.



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