

# Review

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Jonathan W. White. *Shipwrecked: A True Civil War Story of Mutinies, Jailbreaks, Blockade-Running, and the Slave Trade*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023. Pp. 315.

In 2023, the Portland Museum of Art opened an exhibition, “Passages in American Art,” which highlights the extensive connections between the Maine seaport and the heavily enslaved island of Cuba during the antebellum era. Many ships involved in transporting Africans to Cuba were built in Maine, and some Mainers participated directly in this outrageous traffic. Large quantities of Cuban molasses were imported to Maine to be refined as sugar or rum. Local farmers provided foodstuffs to exchange as part of the flourishing sugar trade. Harriet Beecher Stowe had reason to depict Simon Legree as a New Englander who went to sea and lost the humane values his mother had tried to inculcate.

Jonathan White turns his attention to another New Englander in his absorbing book *Shipwrecked*. White is a prolific scholar of the Civil War era whose books include studies of U.S.S. *Monitor*, African American visitors to the wartime White House, and the role played by Union army soldiers in securing Abraham Lincoln’s 1864 reelection. His latest work features a stranger-than-fiction lead character, Appleton Oaksmith, the son of Portland-born Elizabeth Oakes Smith and her improvident Maine husband, Seba Smith. Oakes Smith was a pioneering woman writer who had a national following in the 1840s and 1850s. But the world of ships and seafaring attracted her son Appleton. In 1862 he was convicted in federal court of outfitting a ship, the *Margaret Scott*, for slave trading. He managed to escape a Boston prison and somehow fled to Cuba. He then became involved in blockade-running between Cuba and Confederate Texas (a cargo of contraband cotton could command a princely sum by 1864). After the war he lived for a number of years in England as he and his mother aggressively lobbied officials in Washington for a pardon, which they finally secured from President U. S. Grant.

An assiduous researcher, White has uncovered everything worth knowing about his lead character, and then some. Readers must wade through Oaksmith's endless complaints about his unjust treatment, his poetic musings, and his incessant appeals for clemency. His mother thought and wrote likewise, and much from her is included here. Both Oaksmith and his mother became so exercised about civil liberties infringements that their missives read like a wartime Democratic Party newspaper or stump speech. Their animus was directed especially against Secretary of State William H. Seward. His alleged "little bell"—sounded to dispatch hapless political opponents to prison (a frequent target for Democratic and Copperhead strictures about "Washington despotism")—rings often in these pages (204). Oaksmith and his mother pestered Seward for special treatment in November and December 1861, a time when the fateful *Trent* crisis threatened to trigger a war between the United States and Great Britain. It is hardly surprising that the Secretary of State appeared irritable and unyielding. But the vindictive ogre whom Oaksmith and his mother blamed for their problems bears little resemblance to the cabinet member who renounced personal ambition and became Lincoln's "indispensable man," as depicted in Walter Stahr's fine modern biography of Seward.<sup>1</sup>

To his credit, White compiles ample evidence about American involvement in the ghastly international slave trade. He provides lurid details about the victims—men, women, and children stripped naked and squashed below decks where many perished amid their own excrement. For decades the U.S. government had refused to give the British Navy permission to board American ships on the high seas to inspect for slave cargoes. Under the aegis of the American flag, thousands of enslaved Africans were shipped to Cuba. Lincoln was determined to crack down on this reprehensible and illegal business. White devotes an entire chapter to the celebrated trial and execution of Nathaniel Gordon, a notorious Maine-born slave trader. Even as Lincoln fought the war for the Union, he also changed long-standing American policy by authorizing Seward to negotiate a treaty that allowed the British Navy to inspect American-flagged ships. Lincoln encouraged Seward and U.S. marshal Robert Murray to keep hounding suspected slave traders. White appears to think Lincoln's zeal excessive, with the result that innocent parties may have been ensnared. He relies on diaries kept by the two conservative cabinet members, Attorney General Edward Bates and Secretary of the Navy

1. Walter Stahr, *Seward: Lincoln's Indispensable Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012).

Gideon Welles. But White's readers will likely find Lincoln's actions long overdue.

Like many other Americans of his day, Appleton Oaksmith was an amoral opportunist who always pursued the main chance. Great fortunes were built at sea, often by slaughtering whales, sometimes by trafficking in human flesh. Born with a sense of entitlement but humiliated by the often cash-strapped circumstances of his family, Oaksmith stood ready to try his luck with most anything. His seafaring penchant brought him to the wild frenzy of the California Gold Rush. While in San Francisco, he gained command of the *Mary Adeline* and tried to cash in on the lucrative traffic across Southern Mexico and Central America. His ship unfortunately included a mutinous crew. Oaksmith audaciously nipped danger in the bud and continued down the Pacific coast of South America. Eventually he came back up the Atlantic coast to Rio de Janeiro, where he first became intrigued by the possibilities of the Africa trade and sailed to the Congo basin. White thinks it "not beyond the realm of possibility" that Oaksmith only intended to pursue legitimate commerce on the African coast, but there can be no doubt that while in Rio he made contact with George Marsden, a flagrant slave trader, and he plainly learned how slave trading afforded opportunities for illicit wealth (43).

Oaksmith apparently grew up in an antislavery household. His mother, Elizabeth, visited the South when young and was appalled by what she saw there. During the bloody anti-draft riots that swept New York City in July 1863, she shielded Jeremiah Hamilton, a prominent black New Yorker, in her Long Island home. But she and her son long favored Democrats, who routinely opposed any black advancement and sneered at the idea of equal rights. Having moved to North Carolina after being pardoned, Oaksmith won a seat in the North Carolina legislature in 1874. He thereupon urged white Southerners to accept blacks as voters. But it is not so clear, as White surmises, that he had developed "more enlightened views on matters of race" (236). He represented Carteret County, a coastal locale in which a coalition of blacks and anti-secession whites provided the foundation for his independent political stance. He had motive to present himself as a friend of the freed people.

The evidence presented in *Shipwrecked* convinces this reviewer that Appleton Oaksmith was justly prosecuted. He hid behind an alias as he laid plans to become a wartime slave trader, and he likely was connected to the infamous traffic before the war, too. He barely escaped capture in the Caribbean in 1864 when the U.S. Navy confiscated his blockade runner. Amid the welter of conflicting testimony, the

opinion of the eminent Richard Henry Dana, Jr., stands out. Dana, who prosecuted the case against the *Margaret Scott* and had extensive first-hand knowledge of both the seafaring world and Cuba, spurned all the crocodile tears being shed for Oaksmith: “There is no doubt that he was guilty and that his guilt was of an aggravated character, he being a man of unusual cleverness and with no scruples” (229).

White appears, however, to think that Oaksmith was treated unfairly. Notwithstanding White’s extensive research and careful writing, he may have fallen victim to the occupational hazard every biographer faces—becoming too close to his subject. The most heartbreaking personal tragedy Oaksmith suffered—when four of his daughters accidentally drowned in 1879—looms large in these pages. Readers of *Shipwrecked* will also conclude that the son’s ill-spent career wrecked his mother’s life. But White more than delivers on his subtitle: He offers an action-packed account of the swashbuckling age of sail at the moment it was about to be supplanted by mechanized ships.

The cruel backdrop for the scholarship in this volume is the continuing horror of the domestic slave trade, which remained legal and profitable. Current estimates suggest that at least a million enslaved persons were wrenched from their homes and families in the Middle Atlantic and Upper South states during the antebellum era and forcibly removed to cotton and sugar plantations in the Deep South. (Scott Shane’s *Flee North*, recently published, brings the disgrace of the domestic slave trade out of the shadows.<sup>2</sup>) Harriet Beecher Stowe hoped to prod white Americans to excise this cancer, but their commitments to the Constitution and the Union prevented them from doing anything to impede it before 1861. So too, many free African Americans living in the North were kidnapped and sent South, at least as many as ever escaped slavery on the underground railroad. War was the high price the United States had to pay to end these crimes.

2. Scott Shane, *Flee North: A Forgotten Hero and the Fight for Freedom in Slavery’s Borderland* (New York: Celadon Books, 2023).