
The reputation of Commodore James Biddle, though secure in the environs of Philadelphia, is less well known to students of American history. If pressed, most could recall the names of Nicholas Biddle, James’s brother, who was Andrew Jackson’s protagonist in the homeric struggle for the recharter of the Second Bank of the United States in the 1830s. Naval historians might even remember James’s uncle Nicholas, whose ship, the U.S.S. Randolph, blew up during a battle with the ship of the line H.M.S. Yarmouth during the Revolutionary war. David F. Long, in a well-written study, details Biddle’s accomplishments and explains the reasons for this comparative obscurity.

“As a professional seafarer,” Long concludes, “Biddle can be summed up as superb in navigation, gunnery, courage, and administrative ability” (p. 249). He served as midshipman under Captain William Bainbridge in the U.S.S. Philadelphia during the Barbary wars, enduring months of captivity in Tripoli following the Philadelphia’s grounding and capture. During the War of 1812, he was first lieutenant aboard the U.S.S. Wasp during her successful engagement with H.M.S. Frolic. Subsequently appointed to command of the sloop-of-war U.S.S. Hornet, the vessel’s accurate gunnery caused H.M.S. Penguin to strike her colors in an engagement fought in the South Atlantic after the war was over. He then escaped capture at the hands of H.M.S. Cornwallis by jettisoning stores and guns in a memorable display of seamanship during a three-day pursuit. Later he served as commander in chief of squadrons in the Eastern Pacific, South Atlantic, Caribbean, Mediterranean, and, finally, as commodore on a three-year cruise around the world in the U.S.S. Columbus (1845-1848). Biddle proved to be an able administrator, conscious of the needs of the sailors serving under him.

Commodore Biddle also proved to be “an adroit and accomplished diplomat” (p. 253). He successfully defended American interests off the west coast of South America during the Wars of
Liberation in 1816-1818, while managing to maintain good relations both with the Chilean patriot forces and the Spanish viceroy in Peru. A decade later, as commander of the Brazilian squadron, he performed in similar fashion during the Argentine-Brazilian war. He was involved in the negotiation of the first commercial treaty between the United States and the Ottoman Empire in 1830, and his objections were instrumental in the subsequent refusal of the Senate to ratify a secret article that would have committed the United States government to assist in the rebuilding of the Turkish fleet lost at the Battle of Navarino — clearly otherwise a breach of the long-standing avoidance of European affairs by the United States. In 1846 he exchanged ratifications of the Treaty of Wanghia with the Chinese, advising them of the necessity of modernizing their army and navy if they wished to avoid further incursions at the hands of the Western powers. He tried to ascertain if the Japanese wished to expand their commercial ties with the West. During the negotiations, he was assaulted by a Japanese soldier. Long defends his refusal to overreact to this incident, despite the provocation, on the grounds that retaliation would have endangered the mission and made the success of the Perry expedition in 1853 problematical at best. Finally, he served with distinction during the war with Mexico as commodore of naval forces off the coast of California.

The reasons for Biddle's comparative obscurity are attributable in part to the fact that during much of his naval career the nation was at peace. Equally important, however, is the personality of the man himself. As a member of one of Philadelphia's first families, Biddle's own social position was secure. If unable to obtain command at sea, he was content to remain on inactive status. His only significant shore assignments were as commander of the Philadelphia Navy Yard (1824-1825) and the Philadelphia Naval Asylum, a forerunner of the United States Naval Academy, for several years in the 1830s. His sense of self made him sensitive to slights apparent or real; he was not always on the best of terms with his equals in the navy or the diplomatic corps. Biddle also was an extremely private person; only in the family circle, it appears, was he truly relaxed and at ease. If there is a flaw in an otherwise excellent work, it is Long's failure to deal with Biddle in the family setting. Yet far more important, the author has rescued the commodore from an undeserved oblivion.