

**THE LIFE AND TIMES OF
CAPTAIN JOHN
LOW**

AN ENGLISHMAN IN THE CONFEDERATE STATES NAVY

Robert Thorp

Series in American History



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For my beloved wife
AILSA

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Acknowledgements

In the mid-nineteenth century, my great-great-great grandfather owned a shipyard in the Toxteth area of Liverpool. During the early period of the American Civil War, he secretly built the famous Confederate gunboat, CSS *Florida*, and enlisted his son-in-law to deliver her to Lieutenant John Newland Maffitt in Nassau, New Providence Island. Accompanying the vessel on her crossing from Liverpool to Nassau was a young Confederate Navy officer named John Low. His role was that of supercargo, acting as representative of the vessel's owners, with responsibility for finding Lieutenant Maffitt and for handing him the ship.

My ancestral connections to CSS *Florida* have given rise to a lifelong interest in the Confederate States Navy in general, and in CSS *Florida* in particular, and of course, it is unthinkable to be interested in both without also taking an interest in John Low.

In recent times, the City of Liverpool was blessed with an energetic and charismatic son named Bob Jones, who, sadly, passed away in 2015. In his lifetime Bob was an avid student of the Confederate agents operating in Liverpool during the American Civil War. He spent much of his time acting as a tour guide, taking tourists to all the places of interest around Liverpool where Confederate heroes had lived, worked, and left their marks on the city's history. In the late 1990s, while researching the CSS *Florida*, I was fortunate enough to be introduced to Bob Jones and corresponded with him from then until his passing. I owe Bob a posthumous vote of thanks for much friendship and shared knowledge during his time with us. Most of all, I owe him my gratitude for introducing me to two people who have been instrumental in assisting me with this book.

In March 2007, Bob Jones invited me to join him in a Confederate grave marking ceremony, which he jointly organised with The United Daughters of the Confederacy (U. D. C.). The U. D. C. is an American organisation that seeks out the graves of fallen Confederate military personnel, wherever in the world they may have ended their days. They visit the graves, carry out any necessary repairs, and place a plaque at the graveside to denote the Confederate status of the deceased. The March 2007 ceremony was to honour the grave of Captain John Low in the cemetery of Golborne Parish Church, where he was laid to rest in 1906. Despite being an Englishman by birth, John Low had been a lieutenant

in the Confederate States Navy during the American Civil War. He was being honoured as such that day. Present at the occasion were two gentlemen, visiting from America – Captain Walter E. Wilson (United States Navy – retired), and Captain James H. (Hal) Hardaway (United States Navy – retired). We struck up lasting friendships at the John Low ceremony, and have shared our various historical research findings ever since. To assist me with this book, Captain Wilson very kindly shared some of the research he had previously undertaken in support of his own book on James Dunwoody Bulloch, written in conjunction with Gary L. McKay. He also provided details of John Low's service in the Georgia Hussars.

In 2009, Bob Jones invited me to a similar ceremony in the Smithdown Road Cemetery, Toxteth, Liverpool. This one was to honour the resting places of Commander James Dunwoody Bulloch and his step-brother, Master Irvine Stephens Bulloch, both of whom had served in the Confederate States Navy. At that ceremony, I met Mr. Stephen Chapin Kinnaman and his charming wife, Maureen, who had come over from America to take part in the proceedings. From that first meeting, we struck up friendships, born of shared interests, and have corresponded on Confederate naval matters ever since. Stephen Chapin Kinnaman has provided support and encouragement throughout the preparation of this book, and was kind enough to read and critique the first draft.

My cousin, Richard Harris, has shared my interest in Confederate naval history for more years than I care to remember. We frequently collaborate on historical fact-finding, which is an activity Richard is particularly skilled at. It was Richard who unmasked John Low's parents and then identified his previously unknown siblings, enabling their birthplace to be positively identified. Together, we uncovered a number of anomalies in the accepted biography of John Low, and discovered a huge amount of information about his life that has not previously been published. Cousin Richard collaborated with me in writing a joint paper to 'correct the history of John Low', which Captain Wilson and Stephen Kinnaman kindly peer-reviewed. After reading the paper, Captain Wilson encouraged me to write the whole history of John Low, not just the corrections to it. It is his encouragement, coupled with that of Stephen Kinnaman, which persuaded me to undertake the creation of this book. Captain Walter E. Wilson is a former head of U.S. Naval Intelligence in Europe. Mr. Stephen Chapin Kinnaman is a retired naval architect. Both gentlemen are residents of Texas, and both are authors of several books about the Civil War navies and related topics. Both have given generously of their time to add detail

to my studies and to assist directly with my research. My heartfelt thanks to them both for their encouragement, support, and assistance.

Thanks are also due to David Cole of North Carolina; a great-great-great grandson of John Low's 'uncle' Charles Green. David has generously shared family history and photographs to add to this book. Thanks are also due to John Toler of the Prince William County Public Library, Virginia, and to Jamie Credle of St. John's Episcopal Church, Savannah for permission to use photographs from their respective collections; to Chris Sergi, Education and Programs Manager at the Andrew Low House Museum, Savanna for permission to use photographs of Andrew Low and his family from the museum's collection; to Sarah Starkey and John Moore of the Archives Library at Merseyside Maritime Museum for their assistance in my research of John Low's pre-war service at sea; to Barbara McLean of the Mitchell Library Archives, Glasgow for her assistance with my research of SS *Fingal*; to the team at The Southport Heritage Trust for their information on historic Stockport; to Michelle Hewitt and David Stearn at the Stockport Local Heritage Library for permission to use photographs from their archives; and to Robert D. Hughes for permission to use an image from his book 'Golborne'.

Finally, I must acknowledge the works of William Stanley Hoole (1903 -1990), who was Director of Libraries at the University of Alabama. He was a prolific writer, and three of his books, '*Four Years in the Confederate Navy – The Career of Captain John Low on the C.S.S. Fingal, Florida, Alabama, Tuscaloosa & Ajax*'; '*The Logs of the C.S.S. Alabama and the C.S.S. Tuscaloosa 1862-1863, kept by Lieutenant (Later Captain) John Low C.S.N.*' and '*Confederate Foreign Agent – The European Diary of Major Edward C. Anderson*', have been fundamental in providing the starting point to my work compiling this book.

Preface

On August 1, 1861, a man named James Dunwoody Bulloch placed an order for a gunboat with the firm of John Laird, Sons & Company, shipbuilders of Birkenhead, whose yard was located on the Cheshire bank of the mighty River Mersey. Mr. Bulloch entered into the purchase contract as a private individual backed by a banker's guarantee from the Liverpool firm of Fraser, Trenholm & Company.¹ This was the second gunboat to be purchased by the mysterious Mr. Bulloch. Six weeks earlier, he had entered into a similar arrangement with the engineering firm of Fawcett, Preston & Company of Liverpool. They were to supply the engines and boilers for a vessel to be built under subcontract to them by William Cowley Miller & Sons of Sefton Street.² It would appear that Mr. Bulloch was having a private navy built on Merseyside. Very mysterious indeed.

Peeling back his cloak of secrecy, Mr. James Dunwoody Bulloch can be identified as an American master mariner, actually titled 'Captain James Dunwoody Bulloch'. Peel back a little further, and it is discovered that Captain Bulloch was on official business representing the government of the Confederate States of America. He had been sent to Europe as a civilian secret agent by Stephen Mallory, the Confederacy's Secretary of the Navy. His remit was indeed to build a navy, or at least part of one, to support the South in the American Civil War.

The Miller-built gunboat was CSS *Florida*, and the Lairds' vessel, CSS *Alabama*. They would sail away from the Mersey on March 22 and July 29, 1862, respectively, and would go on to do untold damage to the enemy's mercantile marine. The havoc wrought by these two Mersey-built ships brought an outraged United States of America to the brink of declaring war on Great Britain. In 1872, the British government paid the United States \$15 million in compensation, which, fortunately, was sufficient to ward off the calamity that war would have been.

Fast forward 85 years to January 1957. Another American from the deep south was retracing Bulloch's footsteps with a visit to the Lairds' shipyard. By then, the yard was known as Cammell, Laird & Co. Ltd., following a merger with the famous steel manufacturers, Charles Cammell & Co. of Sheffield in 1903.

The American gentleman in question was William Stanley Hoole, director of libraries at the University of Alabama.³ He had been awarded a Fulbright Scholarship in 1956 which funded an extended visit to Great Britain to survey a number of small British college libraries. He based himself in New Malden, Surrey to carry out that study, but also used some of his spare time to indulge his other passion – the history of the Confederate States of America. Hoole was a prolific writer. He produced more than 50 books, more than 100 articles, and 100s of book reviews during his lifetime. He helped establish the Alabama Historical Association in 1947 and edited its journal *The Alabama Review*, from 1948 to 1967. Among other things, he edited the *Confederate Centennial Studies* – a series of monographs focusing on the American Civil War period.⁴ On this January day of 1957 he had driven up from New Malden to Birkenhead, having previously arranged a guided tour of the shipyard with a Mr. E. H. Dodd, an employee at the yard⁵. The purpose of Hoole's visit was to glean primary-source information about CSS *Alabama* for a book he was planning on the Confederate commerce raiders. After his visit to the Cammell, Laird yard, he would go on to visit the Fawcett, Preston & Co. works to research CSS *Florida*.

While viewing the model of CSS *Alabama* and the documentation pertinent to her purchase order, Hoole's guide, Mr. Dodd, passed a chance remark about another person who had visited earlier in the month on a similar quest. This was a young local man by the name of Roger Clarke. Concerned that he might be a rival author, Hoole tracked down the young man, telephoned him, and arranged a meeting. To his surprise, Roger Clarke turned out to be a 17-year old student who was just researching for a term paper he had to write for a history class at his school. He was not a rival at all and was only too willing to help with Hoole's research. But to Hoole's greater surprise, Roger Clarke revealed that he was the great-great-grandson of John Low, who had served in the Confederate States Navy under James Dunwoody Bulloch, and had sailed on CSS *Alabama*. Moreover, Roger had other relatives in the area who owned actual relics of John Low's service during the Civil War.⁶

The young man quickly introduced Hoole to his uncle Malcolm Low from Birkenhead, and aunt Kathleen Crippen of Blundellsands. Further afield were Doreen Low from Ascot, and Alec Low from Tasmania. These four were all grandchildren of John Low, and gave William Stanley Hoole their enthusiastic assistance as he compiled a biography entitled *Four Years in the Confederate Navy – The Career of Captain John Low on the C.S.S. Fingal, Florida, Alabama, Tuscaloosa and Ajax*. The book, completed in 1964, was published by the University of Georgia Press and has been widely recognised as the definitive

biography of Captain John Low ever since. It has been frequently cited as a reference source by many authors mentioning John Low in their writings about the Confederate States Navy.

John Low's grandchildren were able to furnish William Stanley Hoole with a number of priceless primary-source documents, including John Low's personal logs of his time on CSS *Alabama* and CSS *Tuscaloosa*, along with letters to Low from James Dunwoody Bulloch and Captain Raphael Semmes, his commanding officer on CSS *Alabama*. There were also a number of newspaper cuttings reporting on John Low's death and funeral in 1906. These, and other existing sources, such as the memoirs of Bulloch, Semmes and some of *Alabama's* junior officers, all written post-war, provided Hoole with the data he needed to produce a unique work of significant historical importance in *Four Years in the Confederate Navy*. Of course, the biography of John Low would not be complete without reference to the man's life prior to and after the Civil War. For these periods, which Hoole wrote as a prologue and epilogue respectively, he was forced to rely on the memories of family history held in the heads of John Low's grandchildren. In the preface to his book, Hoole wrote:

Happily, in putting the many scattered pieces of John Low's life together, I have continued for seven years to receive the enthusiastic co-operation of his kind and generous descendants. They have read and wholeheartedly approved the Prologue and the Epilogue as being genealogically correct, so far as they can determine.⁷

That phrase ...so far as they can determine... gives a broad hint that Hoole was not one hundred percent certain of the correctness of his Prologue and Epilogue. He had good reason to be unsure. John Low's grandchildren were trying to recall memories of events, relationships and timelines, which had been handed down verbally from a century earlier. It was perhaps inevitable that they completely missed some of the important events and relationships of their grandfather's life, and that those they did recall were at times a little muddled.

Fast forward again another 61 years to 2025. The world has emerged from the 'machine age' of the twentieth century into the 'information age' of the new millennium. The majority of homes now have computers, many times more powerful than those of the Apollo spacecraft that took men to the moon in Hoole's lifetime. Creation of the Internet facilitates almost instantaneous worldwide communications. Huge quantities of old written records have been

digitised and made easily searchable. Thousands of rare and out-of-print books and journals have been scanned and made accessible. This digital revolution has spawned an upsurge in interest in genealogy. Anyone with a computer or a smartphone can now interrogate huge data banks of information from the comfort of their own home. They can uncover with ease facts and figures about ancestors and others who lived centuries ago.

Doubts about the veracity of Hoole's account of John Low's early life first arose when I read an article about Charles Green. This was the same Charles Green who was described by Hoole as John Low's brother-in-law...John, having allegedly married Charles's sister, Eliza Green.⁸ Given Charles Green's birth year of 1807 and John Low's of 1836, it was obvious that Charles Green was a generation older than John Low. If Eliza's age was anything similar to her brother's, she would have been old enough to be John Low's mother. Theirs seemed a very unlikely union, unless Eliza Green was significantly younger than her brother Charles.

An evening spent researching the Green family genealogy quickly revealed that, far from being younger than her brother, Eliza was Charles' senior by five years. A little more research revealed that Eliza Green had indeed married John Low, but that was in 1831, five years before Captain John Low was born.⁹ The John Low married to Eliza Green was, in fact, Captain John Low's uncle. It would appear that the information given to William Stanley Hoole had confused the generations. In researching the Low family tree, it quickly became apparent that the forenames John and Andrew were frequently repeated, both across and within generations of the family. It would have been very easy for someone, working from memory alone, to become confused about which John, or which Andrew belonged to which time period.

The discovery of this rather fundamental error inspired me to research the life of Captain John Low (1836 – 1906) in detail. Many authors, myself included, have quoted from Hoole's book in the past and have inadvertently perpetuated the historical inaccuracies contained in his Prologue and Epilogue chapters. This book is an attempt to correct those errors, and to share the wealth of additional information that has come to light since Hoole wrote the first biography of John Low back in 1964. For specific evidence correcting the Hoole inaccuracies, the reader should refer to Appendix 2 of this book.

The forenames John and Andrew were used by multiple members of the Low family, which may lead to confusion as to which John or which Andrew is being referred to in the text of this book. To help the reader avoid possible confusion of who was who and exactly what the important relationships were among the

Low and the Green families, some simplified family trees may be found in Appendix 1. Within the text, I show the family relationships from Captain John Low's perspective by using family titles. For example, there are great-uncle Andrew, 'uncle' Andrew, father Andrew, brother Andrew and cousin Andrew. 'Uncle' Andrew is shown with inverted commas as he was not Captain John Low's true uncle. He was a cousin of the captain's father, and hence, was a cousin-once-removed to Captain John Low. Given the family ties, he would have been addressed by Captain John as 'uncle'. Similarly, 'uncle' Charles Green was the brother of Captain John Low's aunt Eliza, so was not a true uncle, although they appear to have enjoyed a close, familiar relationship.

In researching the seventy years of Captain John Low's life, I have discovered snippets of evidence of him from a wide range of different sources. Some lines of enquiry have led to dead ends, but in most cases, I have been able to assemble small pieces of hard evidence, like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle to complete a clear picture of various aspects of his life. At times, the evidence has not been completely clear, requiring me to place my own interpretation on what I believe to be the truth. At times, I have had to simply speculate on what seems to be the most likely explanation of events. Throughout the book, I make clear what is hard fact and what is speculation.

Captain John Low's origins and what little is known of his childhood have been uncovered in baptism and burial records of St. Mary's and St. Thomas's parish churches in Stockport, Cheshire. In the background, details of Captain John's wider genealogy and his relationships with other members of the Low and Green families, especially the super-rich of Savannah, Georgia, have been gleaned from the excellent work of Jennifer Guthrie Ryan and Hugh Stiles Golson in their 2011 book, *Andrew Low and the Sign of the Buck – Trade, Triumph, Tragedy at the House of Low*.

Little detail is known about his early career at sea, but from his application for examination to be certified, first as second mate, then later as master mariner, we have, from his own hand, a list of the ships on which he served and the dates of his voyages. Supplementing that information with shipping details published in Lloyd's Register of Shipping for the relevant years, along with information in the marine intelligence sections published in various newspapers of the time, it has been possible to paint a fair picture of his early career at sea.

For his career in the Confederate Navy during the American Civil War, and his service on CSS *Alabama*, CSS *Tuscaloosa* we have his personal log books, transcribed and published by William Stanley Hoole in *The Logs of the C.S.S.*

Alabama and the C.S.S. Tuscaloosa 1862-1863, Kept by Lieutenant (Later Captain) John Low CSN, published in limited edition in 1972. The logs, by themselves, make rather dry reading, being largely records of daily weather conditions and the ship's position, interspersed with somewhat understated descriptions of particularly important events. To do justice to the man in this biography of him, I have referenced a number of other primary sources, alongside his log books, from which I have been able to distil a clear picture of the service he gave. These other primary sources referenced are: Bulloch, *The Secret Service of the Confederate States in Europe*; Semmes, *Memoirs of Service Afloat*; Sinclair, *Two Years on the Alabama*; and The Treaty of Washington (The Alabama Claims) Part VI – *Statement of Facts Relative to the Alabama*. In addition, other more modern texts have been referenced to provide fill-in details, as shown in the endnotes to the chapters.

For his brief service on CSS *Ajax*, I have used information distilled from Bulloch's *Secret Service*, mentioned above, from William Stanley Hoole's *Four Years in the Confederate Navy*, and from marine intelligence on the ship's progress gleaned from a number of different newspapers.

John Low's post-war life as a cotton mill manager at Golborne and Leigh, and later as a multi-faceted businessman and philanthropist in Liverpool, has been pieced together almost entirely from newspaper articles that mention him. This has, inevitably, required my interpretation of events in stringing these articles together into a coherent account of his life.

In compiling this full-life biography of Captain John Low, I have made every endeavour to provide as accurate an account of the man as I possibly can. Any inadvertent misinterpretations contained in this book are solely my responsibility, and hopefully may be corrected by future researchers.

PAGES MISSING
FROM THIS FREE SAMPLE

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Ship names are shown in italics. The abbreviations following ship's names have the following meanings:

SS = Screw Steamer (civilian)

PS = Paddle Steamer (civilian)

CSS = Confederate States Steamship (military)

USS = United States Steamship (military)

HMS = Her Majesty's Ship (military)

HBM = His Britannic Majesty's (military, in use prior to the reign of Queen Victoria)

The abbreviations following names of military personnel have the following meanings:

CSA = Confederate States Army

CSN = Confederate States Navy

USA = United States Army

USN = United States Navy

RN = Royal Navy (British)

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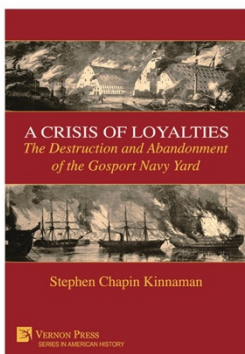
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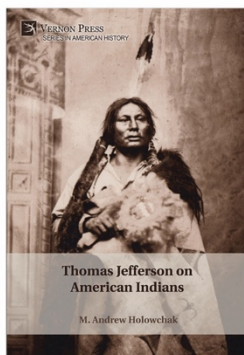
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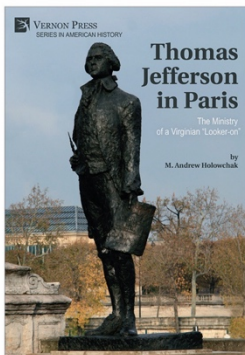
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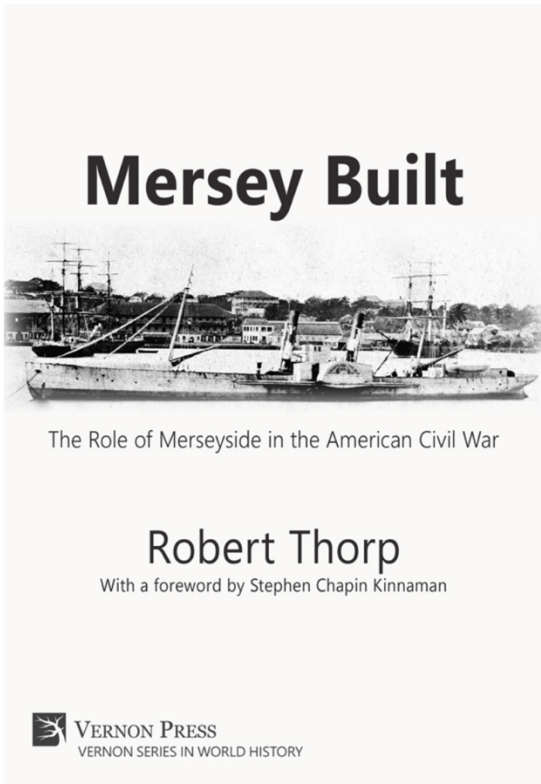
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