

Confederates Afloat

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A review of

Elaine Murphy, *Ireland and the War at Sea, 1641-1653.*

(Royal Historical Society, The Boydell Press: Woodbridge, 2012). ISBN 978-0-86193-318-1, Hardback, 253pp+xii, 3 maps. 4 figures and tables, £50.

As Elaine Murphy points out in her introduction, ‘Naval affairs do not feature prominently in the historiography of early modern Ireland’ (6), and the maritime dimension of the Wars of the Three Kingdoms has likewise received comparatively little attention from scholars. Murphy’s new monograph addresses both of these lacunae in providing a coherent and richly detailed account of the struggle for control which engulfed the eastern Irish seaboard during the 1640s and early 1650s. This study demonstrates not only that naval conflict was a substantial part of the civil wars, but that its real significance lies in how maritime warfare interacted with, and shaped, the combat raging ashore in Ireland, Scotland and England.

This is the main focus in the first of the book’s two sections, which lays out a narrative of the naval and privateer campaigns carried out in the Irish Sea by the English parliament, Charles I, and the Irish Confederate Council. In four well-paced chapters divided into concise chronological sections, Murphy describes the course of the seafaring war. From the outbreak of the Irish rebellion in 1641, control of the Irish Sea became a critical issue. Initially, the challenge was to gather sufficient forces: parliament and king tussled for control of the royal navy, and though parliament won and went on to set out squadrons this delayed English preparations, while the confederates primarily recruited vessels and crews from European ports with which Ireland already had connections, most importantly Dunkirk. During the mid-1640s, the parliamentary navy ‘did enough to

weather the storm' (35) of Irish and royalist attacks, until 'an escalation of naval activity took place on both the confederate and parliamentary sides' from 1646 (53). Ultimately, after the execution of Charles I and the establishment of the Commonwealth, and despite a royalist naval resurgence in 1648-9, England's substantially expanded navy suppressed confederate activity and supported Oliver Cromwell's invasion. Murphy interweaves the naval story with political and military events ashore, showing convincingly that these were not separate conflicts but must be understood as an integrated whole. Moreover, her evaluation of this struggle for seapower – each of these chapters concludes with a 'reckoning' (33-4, 51-2, 68, 85-6) of prizes seized and lost on each side – recognises its impact but also its limits. While the naval presence influenced the land conflict particularly in strategic and economic ways, in some engagements, such as the sieges of St John's Castle in 1642 (24-5) and Duncannon in 1644 (42-3), the immediate role played by warships was much less important.

In the second half of the book, Murphy moves to a broader analytical perspective to consider the forces mustered by both sides and the experience of the war at sea. In chapter five, she discusses the Irish Sea squadron of the parliamentary navy, which 'In many years...was the largest or second largest individual squadron' (92), revealing the importance of this theatre of war. Although initially employing many privately-owned ships hired by parliament, some of them belonging to a coterie of merchants involved in both parliamentary naval administration and Atlantic trade (perhaps explaining their concern for control of the Irish coast), a programme of shipbuilding resulted in an increasing proportion of state vessels. Parliamentary prize-taking, Murphy points out, peaked in 1649 and was most effective with the blockade of specific ports like Limerick

and Kinsale (103-4). In the next chapter, examining the confederate forces, Murphy shows that confederate prize-taking also peaked in 1649, but was considerably broader than the parliamentary campaign, seizing some European as well as English and Scottish ships. Despite this, and the use of frigates 'representing the height of mid seventeenth-century naval sophistication' (123), the confederate fleet was unable to seriously damage the economy of pivotal English ports like London. The book's final chapter explores the nature and tactics of this maritime warfare, emphasising that although there were no large fleet encounters there was a considerable degree of maritime warfare, and that it was tactically directed. Fast confederate frigates prowled trade routes and targeted merchant ships but fled the slower and more powerful parliamentary vessels, which consequently focused on seizing vessels in or near ports.

One of the most impressive aspects of the book is the depth of Murphy's research, presented in seventy pages of appendices and drawing from a range of complicated material, principally the High Court of Admiralty papers but drawing in numerous other manuscripts and published sources. Here Murphy has brought together data, never before compiled, on identified Irish vessels (172-8) and on prizes taken by both sides (179-218). This underpins and enriches the argument of the book, presented accessibly in charts in chapter six (108, 111). More attention could perhaps have been given to the polemical aspect of the conflict, considering the publication by all sides of official and unofficial propaganda, and Murphy's use throughout of the term 'privateer', which did not emerge until later during the century, also raises questions which she does not address about the language used by contemporaries to describe their activities, and the political resonances

of such language. These are, however, minor queries: this book presents, in a very readable fashion, thorough and useful research on a previously neglected topic.