University of New Brunswick historian Greg Marquis presents a fascinating and riveting account of the role of the Canadian Maritimes in the American Civil War. While most Americans, especially those from the South, are familiar with the details of military engagements between Union and Confederate troops, large scale ignorance about the role of foreign powers in the conflict abounds.

A central precept of United States military strategy during the war was the naval blockade of Southern ports from Virginia to Texas. During the time period blockade runners gained much notoriety and were romanticized by writers such as Margaret Mitchell in the postwar years. Unlike Mitchell’s fictitious Rhett Butler, Marquis enlightens us as to who the real blockade runners were and to the perilous realities of running the Union blockade.

Readers familiar with Canadian history may be surprised to learn that prominent members of the pro-Confederation forces were also Confederate sympathizers. Alexander Keith, Jr., nephew of the Nova Scotia statesman, was among the most prominent in the province. Halifax, during the American Civil War, was a hotbed of Confederate sympathy. On the arrival of one United States Navy warship to Halifax Harbour, the town band quickly assembled and greeted the arriving vessel by playing “Dixie”. Confederate military officers, diplomats and businessmen were welcomed with open arms by Haligonians. Marquis writes: “A Confederate courier to France, in a letter to Atlanta, described Halifax as ‘a hot Southern town – they hate the Yank as bad as we do.’” (p. 35) These descriptions shed unexpected light on the character of British North America that is widely unheard of in modern historic circles.

Marquis is thorough not only in his examination of the underlying causes of sympathetic feelings toward the slave-holding South (something the Maritimers wholeheartedly disavowed) but examines the contemptuous nature of disagreement among Bluenoses about who was “right” in the conflict. Marquis also reminds the reader that the American Civil War was a modern conflict not limited to the confines of the Southern United States. Military engagements took place from Atlantic Canada (one skirmish on the Maine-New Brunswick border is of particular interest) and at sea in ships flagged in...
Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island.

While the political, economic and social considerations of Atlantic Canada’s involvement in the Civil War are closely examined, Marquis manages to balance out the facts and figures of engagement with the actual human costs. Bluenoses sympathetic to both sides of the conflict left their homes to come south and fight for the cause they believed in. Atlantic Canadians were sympathetic to Confederate dreams of independence from the United States due to their own highly evolved sense of independence and self-determination. Other Bluenoses were appalled that anyone would support a “civilized” nation that advocated the ownership of another human being.

While the author does devote an entire chapter to the issue of race, and several others to the political, commercial and espionage issues surrounding the war, the majority of the text is devoted to the naval actions in which Atlantic Canada, its citizens or interests were involved. Of particular interest are the actions of the CSS Tallahassee and the seizure of the steamer Chesapeake by Bluenose pirates. Marquis is able to bring the reader into the actions of major players in all naval incidents with the skill and talent of any novelist on the subject. His narratives are engaging and his attention to detail supplements his desire to inform the reader of the actual events in each occurrence.

The diplomatic question of the involvement of Maritimes in matters of the conflict is an important consideration as well. Given the provinces were still British and not technically part of Canada at the time of the war, the difficult issue of Martimers violating London’s official stance cannot be ignored. American consular agents from Halifax to Charlottetown reported “troubling” provincial acts from rallies of Confederate support to actual militia drills to Secretary of State William Seward in Washington, who in turn protested to British Prime Minister Lord Palmerston in London.

Marquis’ examination of this turbulent time period goes beyond the political and military aspects of the situation and reveals the heart of Bluenoses in the affair. The reader is able to attain a sense of authenticity regarding the circumstances of the Maritimes’ participation in the Civil War. This account is a valuable tome not only for Canadian Studies scholars but also for historians of the American Civil War and 19th century diplomacy. Marquis’ work in this area should be a primary source of information to those interested in understanding more about the involvement of foreign powers in the conflict.