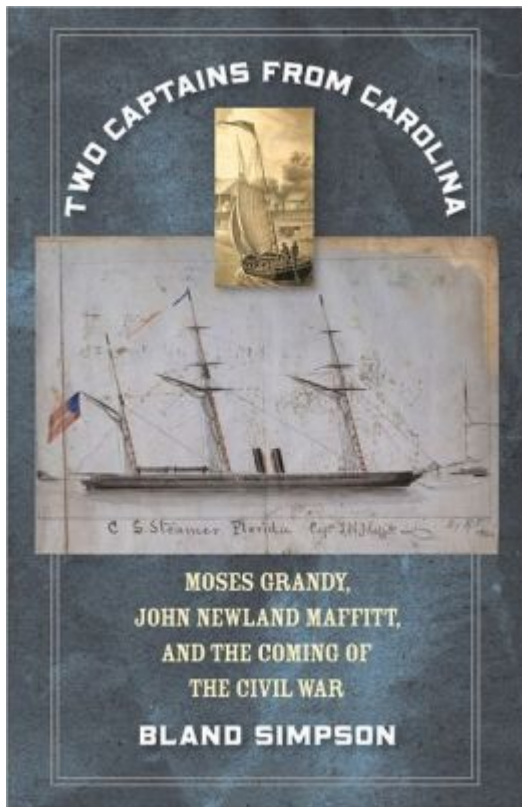


# Men of Great Skill on Many Waters



Bland Simpson's nonfiction novel *Two Captains from Carolina* is a far more ambitious project than its slender 187 pages would suggest. At its best, it is a slim but sweeping history of the United States through the Civil War as seen through the lives and worlds of Moses Grandy and John Newland Maffitt, two "men of great skill on many waters" (168). Simpson weaves together a scrupulously researched and only lightly imagined twin narrative for his dual protagonists—one black and one white—as they lead lives that touch in profoundly different ways on the great issues of the United States' first century. He uses material from each man's contemporary narrative, making use primarily of Grandy's 1842 *Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy; Late a Slave in the United States of America* and Maffitt's autobiographical novel *Nautilus: Or, Cruising under Canvas*, published in 1871, to craft a pair of starkly juxtaposed biographical vignettes with much to tell the reader about race, identity, family, and the call of the sea for these very different men.

Indeed, Simpson does have an amazing pair of stories to tell as he charts the lives of these two Carolina-bred watermen, and some of *Two Captains'* most successful sections track his subjects' adventures ashore and on the water. Born a slave in the 1780s, Moses Grandy twice raised the sum of \$600 to purchase his freedom, only to be deceived and resold by treacherous masters. It took still more years of hard work on the ferries and small craft along the Pasquotank River before he finally succeeded in purchasing his freedom in the 1820s and began working the Atlantic packet ships. Later, he purchased the

freedom of his son and wife, and became an important figure in New England's growing abolitionist circles, before finally telling his life story in London to renowned abolitionist activist George Thompson for publication.



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Maffitt's career was incredible by any measure. Literally born at sea in 1819, he sailed on the storied *USS Constitution* as a young midshipman, served as second in a fatal duel between fellow midshipmen on a Menorca hillock, danced with Queen Amalie of Greece, charted much of the Atlantic coast for the U.S. Coast Survey, was vindicated after a political dismissal from the Navy, "chase[d] slavers and pirates" as commander of the *USS Dolphin*, defected to the Confederacy, and became one of the most successful blockade runners, raiders, and the "Prince of Privateers" at the helm of the *CSS Florida* during the rebellion.

In charting these two exceptional lives spent largely on the water, Simpson keeps a delicate balance between the larger themes and the deeply personal loves and losses of these two very humanly rendered men. His prose at its best is poetical and searching, and he breathes considerable life into even what on their face are unimportant details and anecdotes. At times, however, his penchant for grandness tumbles toward the purple, as when he introduces the reader to Maffitt's pregnant mother as "Ann Carnic Maffitt, a gravid young woman whose time was nigh" (31).

The greatest blessing of Simpson's project—weaving together men from the same place but starkly different worlds who both find a measure of success and freedom at sea—is also the novel's greatest shortcoming. Although the two men would "circle each other for years afloat and afield, crossing each other's tracks in ports both great and small," the stories of Grandy and Maffitt do not always align in coherent or interesting ways (167). At times, these feel like *too* different lives for all the back-and-forth between them to make much sense, especially since Simpson moves chronologically rather than pairing phases or events in the lives of the two subjects. Maffitt is more than two decades younger than Grandy, so the reader knows Grandy as a man before Maffitt is packed off to boarding school at age nine. Moreover, while Grandy disappears maddeningly from known records around 1844, Maffitt survives until 1881 (although Simpson chooses to close the curtain on his subject in 1869). These differences, plus the stylistic variations of the underlying source documents, mean the two lives often feel as though they are not in sufficient conversation for Simpson's grand synthesis to cohere. Simpson has opted for close fealty to his sources and, although he does imagine a few scenes in more detail than his sources provide, as far as nonfiction novels go, he is unusually careful not to wander too imaginatively from the known or likely into the wished or fanciful. Instead, he seeks to plug any narrative holes by widening the scope to examine

the larger sweep of American history.

At times, the author works so hard to make these connections to the wider world and to contextualize his subjects' lives for readers that the bonds feel stretched. When such links come organically, as with Maffitt's childhood brush with Lafayette and prewar meetings with Jefferson Davis, or Grandy's involvement with William Lloyd Garrison and his attendance of the Antislavery Convention in London in 1844, these narrative connections to larger events give context and gravitas to the project. For example, Simpson's description of a brief meeting between Maffitt and his father, the famous itinerant preacher Rev. John Newland Maffitt Sr., the "Methodist Meteor," weaves the aftermath of the Second Great Awakening nicely into the narrative.

In other places, however, superfluous background shading betrays an anxious need to link Grandy and Maffitt to bigger things. The most unsuccessful segments are the brief stand-alone chapters, each titled "The Wind that Blows" and each covering a different encapsulated moment in time. These disjointed mini-lessons see Simpson name-check everything from the Missouri Compromise to the *Amistad* case to Thoreau to minstrelsy, and leave the reader less, rather than more, engaged with the significance of the project.

In the final analysis, Simpson's compact, potent volume succeeds more than it stumbles. If the book fosters new interest in these men and their memoirs, it is a worthy project. But *Two Captains* accomplishes far more than just to bring two nineteenth-century texts back into view. Simpson successfully captures the delicate balance of his witchy and unstable genre. The nonfiction novel, done well, both tells and evokes, and *Two Captains* powerfully melds intimate portraits and the human power of the particular with the context of a grand survey. By braiding together the strands of Grandy and Maffitt's lives, Simpson offers the reader a strong rope in which is bound up not just his protagonists but also the larger histories of the nation.