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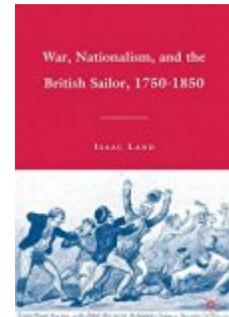
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Isaac Land. *War, Nationalism, and the British Sailor, 1750-1850*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. xiii + 244 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-230-61591-5.

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British Seamen in Contemporary and Modern Perception

In this present age, when the media shapes our perceptions and public persona are crafted to deliver political messages, it is appropriate that we have now a new view of the British seaman over the century when the media, the Royal Navy, and merchant shipping grew in importance to the British nation. Isaac Land provides a view that places the British seaman at the center of the debate, as an actor empowered by his own vital role. It suggests that, as the media developed, so too did the image of the seaman from the third quarter of the eighteenth century. He argues that throughout the period sailors shared common experiences and attitudes to women and impressment that expressed their anxieties and defiance. While the female cross-dressing sailor (perhaps “a whole sub-culture” [p. 75]) challenged and defeated the navy and male dominance by mocking it, the seaman became self-conscious about his image, and learned to project one favorable to himself in petitions and autobiography. From roving, bestial philanderer, by the early nineteenth century, the seaman had recreated himself as a responsible family man, capable of noble feelings and religious convictions, proud of the British Empire and his part in servicing it. The new image was deployed to attract a share of the benefits of empire and to hasten reform of their service conditions, a process that by the 1840s was part of the reaction to mechanization and urbanization. Having begun with a reference to Linda Colley’s argument that patriotism was a commitment made with a view to a return on the investment, Land suggests that, despite his efforts to revise his image, the British sailor did not get a return on his investment in the form of improved

conditions.

Had Land gone beyond 1850 in his survey of images, he might have reached a different conclusion. For, as will be evident, Land’s conclusions are dependent on time-frame, on the availability of impressions, and on subjective assessments. His view of the condition of the sailor, for example, is based on the appearance of pensioners in Greenwich Hospital derived from the reports of visiting Americans. Even so, Land has written a thought-provoking book; his themes are well illustrated and argued with subtlety, although his writing seems sometimes contrived and tails off toward the end. Being a broad survey, precise dating may not be expected, but the issues raised are firmly set within the context of their time. It is, however, a book preoccupied with the significance of meanings for the twenty-first century and therefore consists of a succession of arguments that are, for the most part, refreshing from their novelty and insight. The whole is written with a light touch and a readiness to provoke that both entertains and enlightens.

There is no doubt of Land’s scholarship. The book is replete with references and equipped with a valuable bibliography. Nevertheless some may feel that his methodology is insecure. In the choice of his sources, he has consciously eschewed those traditionally used for writing social history. He pointedly distances himself from N. A. M. Rodger who “urges attention to the naval archives” where seamen might be “understood in their own terms” (pp. 26, 27). Positing Rodger “on the right,” Land argues

that every archival source has its strengths, weaknesses, and source-based bias. As if in defiance, he has gone to the opposite extreme, using few archival sources and preferring the great variety of media representations of “Jack Tar” between 1750 and 1850: caricatures, paintings, photographs, ballads, comic opera, sculpture. While Rodger is cautious of published memoirs, Land employs them as his main verbal source. Land acknowledges that sailors who wrote books were not typical but defends their value as sources for the diversity of their purposes and downbeat credibility. In places the seaman does therefore speak for himself. However, Land’s selection of contemporary voices and depictions does pile one layer of interpretation upon another.

Comprehension of Land’s approach to this challenge

would have been helped had his concluding remarks on “framing”—as opposed to Colley’s “forging”—been part of the introduction. As it is, one reaches full comprehension of his approach only on reaching the conclusion. Until then, a slight uneasiness about where the book is going arises from a title that advertises war, which in fact is but a remote contextual facet of the argument. The mistitling perhaps results from the book being a PhD thesis, much revised—parts added and others removed. However, these are minor matters that are far outweighed by benefits derived from reading the book. On the whole, it contains an interesting collection of views on the changing perception of seamen, which will benefit students of social, cultural, media, and art history, although probably not those of military history or naval warfare.

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