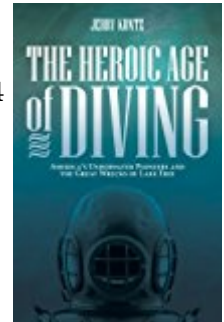


Jerry Kuntz. *The Heroic Age of Diving: America's Underwater Pioneers and the Great Wrecks of Lake Erie.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016. Illustrations. 224 pp. \$19.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4384-5962-2.



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Commissioned by David T. Benac (Western Michigan University)

The history of early human endeavors beneath the water is probably best known thanks to European historians who have documented the adventures and occasional mishaps of pioneering English divers and submariners. More recently, accounts of pioneers from other nations, Spain's Narciso Monturiol being a prime example, have begun to appear in print. Even when more comprehensive accounts have appeared, such as the now-dated standard, Richard Compton-Hall's *The Submarine Pioneers* (1999), one glaring omission, if one knows the history, has been American pioneers and their contributions. Other than addressing (and dismissing) the fabled Revolutionary War *Turtle* and the contributions of Robert Fulton, and then the Civil War's *H. L. Hunley*, Compton-Hall focuses on Simon Lake and John Holland. There are some major gaps in between those pioneers, some of which get a sentence or two. In all fairness, earlier accounts like Compton-Hall's have tried to address a multitude of inventors, adventurers, mechanics, and entrepreneurs who sought to conquer the depths across the globe. Most re-

cently, I worked to address some of this in my book *Misadventures of a Civil War Submarine: Iron, Guns, and Pearls* (2012), the account of one Civil War-era American craft, and then again in my own more encyclopedic *Silent Killers: Submarines and Underwater Warfare* (2011). There, in particular, I was drawn to a largely forgotten cast of submarine pioneers and their interactions. But as my focus was to place one craft in context, and then, like Compton-Hall, to try to address centuries of international effort between the pages of a single volume, I was compelled to limit my focus and hope that others would “dive in” to research and reveal more.

Jerry Kuntz has done a magnificent job of doing just that in *The Heroic Age of Diving*. The book is divided into three parts that examine the lives, careers, and to some degree the personalities of a group of American pioneer divers, ranging from a free-diving (that is, by holding one's breath and swimming down) and “submarine armor” clad divers in suits and with hard hats, to those who employed diving bells and, in time, submersibles.

While the title focuses (as does the book) on wrecks and activities on Lake Erie, it draws in discussion from other lakes, rivers, and oceans, and puts it all in a wider context.

The book's preface begins in the 1820s, but after an introduction, picks up in the 1840s and runs through the 1870s, with an afterword that takes the narrative through 1891. While the technology is ever-present, the narrative focuses on the individual and intertwined lives of six divers, nine engineers and entrepreneurs, two financiers (magnates), a "treasure hunter" pioneer diver, and seven shipwrecks. The wrecks themselves figure prominently in a variety of ways, notably and tragically in the case of the steamer *City of Oswego*: the wife and child of pioneer diver John B. Green drowned when it wrecked on July 9, 1852. Green survived and returned to the wreck throughout his career, driven by guilt, perhaps, as he grappled with competitors, the depths, and his personal demons. In many ways, the strength of Kuntz's narrative is how he merges the personal stories of the various diving pioneers to weave the story of early American endeavors into the deep.

The only fault, and it is not one that could be rectified, is that one wishes for more details on the people the reader meets in the pages of *The Heroic Age of Diving*. Given the passage of time, and the loss of many personal papers, such is not possible. The strength of the book is how masterfully, and with extensive research, Kuntz has filled in the gaps and constructed a powerful narrative. This is a book that could have been bogged down in detailed descriptions of diving equipment and the early submersibles. Instead, it is an insightful tour of human interactions in an evolving frontier of lake and ocean depths, interrelationships, and the costs that come with adopting new technologies, especially in fields driven by jealousy, competition, and personal need. The stories of John Green, Martin Quigley, William Hannis Taylor, Lodner Phillips, and John Tope in par-

ticular spoke powerfully to me. I believe that others will also be moved by these stories, as well as those of the others who appear in the book.

Nicely illustrated with a central portfolio of images, some in color, *The Heroic Age of Diving* includes scenes of the lost ships, diving suits, underwater activities, and portraits of some of these pioneers. Carefully selected, they add to the narrative, especially the photographs and discussion of the author's discovery of diver Charles Pratt's diving helmet. The artistry of the book is apparent even in this, as the details of the helmet are used to speak to, and about, Pratt, who likely had it made to his own specifications.

I highly recommend this book.

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