

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Brian Rouleau.** *With Sails Whitening Every Sea: Mariners and the Making of an American Maritime Empire.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014. 288 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-5233-8.



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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

Brian Rouleau's book begins with a map of the world showing the ports most frequently visited by US sailors in the nineteenth century. This geographical reorientation, from land to sea, sets the tone for his book. As Rouleau argues, "histories of the nineteenth-century United States ... remain wedded to decidedly land-based ideas of expansionism and empire" (p. 2). Rouleau provides an alternative narrative by showing how nineteenth-century Americans espoused expansionist imperial ambitions both on land and at sea.

Countering the common assumption that nineteenth-century sailors were illiterate, Rouleau describes American merchant and whaling vessels as "floating school houses." Not only did sailors spend a great deal of time reading while at sea, they also produced "piles of print" (p. 23). By the mid-nineteenth century, between 80 to 90 percent of the nation's citizen-mariners had at least rudimentary reading and writing skills. They were "one of the era's most literate cohorts of working people" (p. 26). It was also via sailing vessels that printed information traveled from foreign ports back to the United States, with information moving from ship to shore, where a public hungry for news of the outside world eagerly read it. As conveyors of global information, sailors became both mediators of knowledge and knowledge authorities.

American scientific societies might engage sailors to collect curiosities from distant climes, but sailors also provided their own observations in letters home and in published narratives, thus influencing contemporary scientific and social debates. In particular, their observations describing encounters with nonwhites in the wider world had an impact on debates on the issue of racial difference.

In chapter 2 Rouleau argues that while sailors were in the vanguard of cross-cultural encounters abroad, they frequently evaluated native peoples they met from a decidedly "American" perspective. Thus, in their descriptions of nonwhites, sailors often made reference to the "Jim Crow" black-faced minstrels of antebellum American popular theater. This shaped the dynamics of cross-cultural encounters, as sailors were eager to perform American racial caricatures for the peoples they encountered overseas. As Rouleau explains, "there are few better examples of the sailor's role as a connector in multinational webs of cultural exchange than his efforts to spread blackface minstrelsy's songs and dances throughout the nineteenth-century world" (p. 45). Performance was a means of communication with people with whom American sailors did not share a language. However, notes Rouleau, the racial ordering inherent in such performances reinforced imperialist assumptions about the

inferiority of nonwhite people.

In chapter 3, Rouleau demonstrates that the rhetoric of mid-nineteenth-century “Manifest Destiny” was applied equally to the oceans as it was to the continental West. Sailors employed the terms “civilization” and “savagery” in order to make sense of the various cultures they encountered abroad, particularly in the Pacific basin. The ideal of “Manifest Destiny” appealed to sailors because it “suffused their labor abroad with a noble purpose” (p. 78). But as Rouleau argues, the application of the terms “Indian” and “savage” to nonwhites also became a justification for violence, brute force being understood as the universal means for dealing with “Indians” (p. 83).

Following this discussion, chapter 4 opens with a description of the Hawaiian response to the Honolulu riot of 1852. This was not a random act of drunken violence, Rouleau argues, but a political act in which sailors “resisted the imposition of authority and discipline” (p. 104). This event, and similar “diplomatic fisticuffs,” was an opportunity for sailors to assert their national and racial superiority over foreign peoples. Rouleau describes this as a “distinct, working-class, and masculine foreign relations agenda” (p. 105). But for politicians, diplomats, and missionaries, the aggressions of American sailors overseas threatened American foreign relations, and these concerns found voice in editorials published in the continental United States. Efforts to reform and improve the “character” of sailors in American port cities thus had a global dimension—to improve foreign relations and facilitate missionary and commercial interests. Thus, the regulation of various aspects of sailors’ lives, on the global stage, became increasingly necessary as the United States sought to secure its position abroad.

In chapter 5 Rouleau shifts focus to sailors’ sexual encounters in foreign ports, explaining that, “American foreign relations were often indistinguishable from sexual relations” (p. 134). The observations sailors made of the sexual behaviors of foreign peoples became yet another marker of the perceived differences between American civility and foreign perversity. However, as “contact zones,” port cities were spaces where seafarers “created boundaries even as they crossed boundaries” (p. 139). In the maritime working world of transient and impoverished sailors, women in port cities provided more than sex. They also offered temporary stability. Brothels functioned as “hotels, clothiers, pharmacies” and “moneylenders for sailors” (p. 142). And the women that sailors took up with while in port, they frequently referred to as their “wives,” a term laden with social meaning. But sex,

Rouleau argues, was a “connective link that sustained longer-term relations on which American maritime empire was built” (p. 145). The regulation of sailors’ sexual behavior, like the regulation of their violence, was believed important for maintaining American political and commercial interests overseas.

In the final chapter Rouleau examines the macroeconomics of sailors’ bartering in overseas ports, explaining that these “transactions were not measured in terms of tonnage or GDP.” Yet, sailors’ dealings assured “American assimilation into alternative sub-economies that thrived just below the surface of mercantile capitalism” (pp. 166-167). Sailors’ bartering was embedded in local economies. Both sailors and locals understood which exchange goods were most desirable and the protocols of trade. Barter economies also provided a niche for brokers able to negotiate cultural and language barriers. However, if shipboard trade relationships became sullied, as they increasingly did over the course of the nineteenth century, these relationships also threatened the nation’s access to foreign ports and larger international markets.

By the end of the nineteenth century, and in the wake of the Civil War, the American maritime empire had shrunk dramatically and the sailors who shipped out on American ships were largely foreign-born. With improving industrial working conditions at home and little economic incentive or opportunity for advancement at sea, maritime labor became less attractive for white American males hoping to improve their lives. The American oceanic frontier had finally closed. By then, American nationals traveling abroad did so primarily as tourists rather than as members of a global workforce.

The major strength of Rouleau’s work is that he does not limit his scope to either the Pacific or Atlantic. Instead he sets out to examine a global maritime empire. Yet, his claim that the “reigning paradigm” in histories of US empire is of the United States as a “bounded terrestrial” unit may be overstated (p. 2). Attention to America’s expansionist ambitions in the Pacific world can be traced at least as far back as 1932, when Foster Rhea Dulles published *America in the Pacific: A Century of Expansion*. In recent years, many other scholars have tackled the role of America in the Pacific as the model of a “Pacific world,” adapted from the Atlantic world model. The works of Jean Heffer, David Iglar, Matt Matsuda, David Lyons, and Walter McDougal are some recent examples of this approach. Nevertheless, Rouleau’s focus on sailors provides a valuable contribution to a body of

scholarship which has focused primarily on naval and foreign policy history. Rouleau's approach paints a more complex picture of American overseas expansion, one which reveals a much broader cast of characters—sailors, naval officers, diplomats, and missionaries—who at times held competing agendas.

If there is a weakness in Rouleau's work, it is that we are not given a clear picture of the competing colonial geography of this empire afloat. Fiji, Japan, and Hawaii feature prominently in Rouleau's discussion, yet he does not explain precisely how these island groups should be understood in the context of competing Western colonial interests in the Pacific basin. He provides us with tantalizing clues, but we are left with more questions

than answers. How should we interpret British explorers performing American-styled blackface minstrelsy in Antarctica? And what was the British response to American sailors rioting in South Africa? Did the French colonial government seek to regulate the behavior of American sailors in the Society Islands? Presumably the United States was not the only nation with expansionist ambitions in the nineteenth century, so we should also ask what role sailors played in maintaining or negotiating *those* boundaries. But these are relatively minor issues that should not detract from recognizing that *With Sails Whitening Every Sea* is an ambitious achievement that will provide further stimulus to a growing body of scholarship on the nineteenth-century American maritime empire.

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