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**London and the Eighteenth-Century Maritime World**

The maritime districts of eighteenth-century London possessed a kind of Dickensian duality. Clinging to the serpentine curves of the River Thames east of the Tower of London, neighborhoods that thrived on connection to the maritime world were places of patriotism and radicalism, of excitement and anxiety, inhabited by the rich and the poor, contested by capital and labor. For some it was the best of times, for others, the worst. In *Trading in War: London’s Maritime World in the Age of Cook and Nelson*, author Margarette Lincoln carefully reconstructs the social, economic, and political world of Londoners who owed their lives and livelihoods to the steady stream of maritime traffic coming in and out of the imperial capital. Lincoln looks to tell a fine-grained story of how ordinary residents of these Thames-side districts responded to and coped with the monumental changes that rocked Britain’s global empire during the second half of the eighteenth century.

Geographically, Lincoln’s focus is strikingly narrow. The tall-masted ships that set out for the far corners of the empire were unable to pass beneath the low clearance offered by London Bridge. Thus, both the northern and southern banks of the Thames east of the span became home to the city’s maritime districts. “On the north bank,” Lincoln notes, “stretched Wapping, Shadwell, Ratcliff and Limehouse. To the south lay the wharves of Southwark and Bermondsey, then Rotherhithe, Deptford and Greenwich” (p. 1). These places became home to the docks, shipyards, sailmakers, ropewalks, and victualling yards that served the dizzying array of ships that made berths in London. Lincoln tracks changes in these maritime neighborhoods over the second half of the eighteenth century from “the radical 1760s” to the “short-lived Peace of Amiens in 1802” (p. 3). These decades saw the empire twice mobilize for war—once with her North American colonies and again with her cross-channel rival, France—and constantly send commercial and scientific expeditions around the globe.

Given the importance of the Royal Navy and long-distance commerce to the British Empire, this section of London, unlike other, more insular places, ebbed and flowed with the empire. A recurrent theme through Lincoln’s book is how major processes of Atlantic history—from colonization to warfare to international commerce—actually shaped specific places and the lives of ordinary people in the metropole. Lincoln’s book thrives on reconstructing how the varied citizenry
of these maritime districts conceived of and responded to changes that seemed to unfold on national and international levels. For stevedores and shipwrights, for example, even something as grand as the Napoleonic Wars were intensely local as Britain’s wartime needs presented both demands and opportunities for maritime places and their people.

By drawing tight connections between what happened on the river’s banks, what was debated in Parliament, and what transpired across the globe, Lincoln’s reconstruction of the lost world of maritime London embodies David Armitage’s concept of “cis-Atlantic history.” As Armitage explains, this approach to Atlantic history “studies particular places as unique locations within an Atlantic world and seeks to define that uniqueness as the result of the interaction between local particularity and a wide web of connections.”[1] By building, outfitting, and repairing the warships and trading vessels that made the British Empire possible, there was perhaps nowhere else in London—or Great Britain for that matter—that was so deeply ensnared in these wide webs of connection as the maritime districts.

Lincoln opens with a walking tour of sorts, giving readers the lay of the land (and water) and a sense of the sights and sounds of the maritime districts stretching along the Thames from Wapping to Greenwich. While the many docks and shipyards no doubt gave these neighborhoods their imperial importance, this was not solely a landscape of labor. One of Lincoln’s greatest contributions is her careful reconstruction of the maritime districts in all their complexity. Far more than a home for “transient, seafaring populations,” these places “were also home to close-knit communities” (p. 15). Churches, schools, charity hospitals, workhouses, masonic lodges, theaters, shops, and public houses provided for the full social lives of a “mixed population [that] resulted in pockets of poor-quality and slum housing but also large fine houses owned by the ‘middling sort’” (p. 22).

War, unsurprisingly, looms large in Lincoln’s work as a central theme. The period under study was bookended by two monumental conflicts that changed the maritime districts, if not world history. Waging war in America ensured that the maritime districts of London would be pressed to provide the resources necessary to carry out the fighting an ocean away. For working men, war brought both opportunity and danger. Government contracts for ships and supplies ensured that shipyards would not be idle. Given the vital importance of these facilities for the war effort, shipwrights saw an opportunity to improve their lots. Shipwrights striking for high wages in Portsmouth, Chatham, and Woolwich sparked a national conversation about these maritime industries, and soon opponents painted these workers as lazy and unpatriotic. The war also exposed political divides that ran through the maritime districts, as plenty of Londoners sympathized with the talk of liberty that colonists used, a kind of rhetoric Englishmen were predisposed to accepting. Press gangs scouring the maritime districts for able-bodied men and the constant sight of soldiers disembarking and returning maimed further stoked opposition. The war’s end brought little relief to the tension as work slackened and unemployment grew. “The American War,” Lincoln concludes, “had helped to bring about a fractured society” (p. 96).

A decade later, Britain was at war again. This time the foe was revolutionary France. Again, prosecuting an overseas war placed great demands on maritime London. Like never before, these districts were riven by political conflict and became sites of both patriotic fervor and radical calls for change. As Lincoln observes, “all Britons bore a heavy burden … during bitter struggles that inevitably raised questions about who held power in society” (p. 184). When the French Revolution broke out, British public opinion supported
France's attempt to throw off the yoke of tyrannical rule. Yet the revolution's increasing radicalism turned public opinion against what was now seen as a violent anarchy. Conservatives in London feared such radical sentiment finding purchase at home. They looked with suspicion and anxiety at workers with questionable patriotism. Maritime laborers had a reputation for advocating for reform and agitating for better working conditions, thus making them, in the minds of conservatives, prime candidates to be infected with the contagion of anarchy emanating from across the Channel. Over the course of the war, the conflict between status quo and radicalism descended into violence and rioting. For maritime London, war had brought conflict, violence, militarism, and suspicion home, in the process aggravating preexisting tensions between capital and labor, stasis and change.

Lincoln has given us a valuable portrait of maritime London, one populated by plebeians and patricians alike. By carefully reconstructing the world of Thames-side neighborhoods of eighteenth-century London, Lincoln reveals that the “rarely acknowledged ... efforts of ordinary people made sure that London remained a global trading metropolis while playing a vital role in successive conflicts” (p. 257). What Trading in War lacks in argumentative verve or historiographical intervention is more than compensated for with rich storytelling and the recreation of a highly textured setting in which the most consequential developments in the late eighteenth-century British Empire played out at a micro level. Given this approach, Lincoln's work should draw interest beyond scholars working on the British Empire, the Atlantic world, or maritime studies. Anyone who has walked the Highway though Wapping, tracked the diurnal rise and fall of the Thames, or wondered how Britain created and maintained the ships that waged war and carried trade the world over will find this book a welcome addition.

Note
