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Published on H-Environment (August, 2022)

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*A World History of the Seas: From Harbour to Horizon* is an English-language expansion of Michael North’s German-language book *Zwischen Hafen und Horizont. Weltgeschichte der Meere* (2016), translated by Pamela E. Selwyn. In it, North, a professor of modern history, tackles the roles the sea has served and still does in human history. He opens with the paradox famously pointed out by Benjamin Labaree (though North does not cite him) that the sea serves as both bridge and moat, but North also recognizes that the influence of the maritime is felt throughout societies, even by those who do not engage with it firsthand.

In the book’s early chapters, despite a promise to “try to pay more attention to ‘non-Western agents’ in maritime history,” North’s narrative remains solidly Western in viewpoint (pp. 2-3). There is of course nothing inherently wrong with this approach; the European experience is important to maritime—and world—history. But North is so committed to the language of discovery that neolithic hunter-gatherers “discover” the Mediterranean on page 7. Surely the Mediterranean—along with many other seas—was “discovered” well before the ninth to eighth centuries BCE, by which point humans already inhabited most of the globe?

The maritime networks in these early chapters are standards from the “Western Civ” paradigm: the Phoenicians and Greeks, then the Romans, then the Vikings. Indeed, the first chapter opens with a quote from Homer’s *Odyssey*. Odysseus might be an archetypal sailor, but he is a very Western one (and North relies on A. T. Murray’s 1919 translation.) “The heroes of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*,” North declares, “could rightly claim to have travelled the entire known world of their day” (p. 9). Sure, but there was a lot that they didn’t know, and that North doesn’t consider in the early part of world history.

In part 3, North turns to the Red Sea, Arabian Sea, and South China Sea, but as a maritime Silk Road that still centers Mediterranean actors like Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta (though Zheng He
makes a brief appearance). By part 4, we’re already back to the Mediterranean (“still considered the sea par excellence” according to North) and the rise of maritime republics there, while part 5 extends European coverage north to the Hanseatic League (p. 57). In part 6, “Europe Meets Asia” in the Indian Ocean, where Muslim sailors and Jewish merchants play an important role, though far fewer Asians appear.

These early chapters are largely economic history, a common focus in maritime historiography, and there is little engagement with the many other connections human societies have with the seas, such as their role in religion, diet, migration, warfare, or even as an environment. Fish appear as a commodity, but we get no real sense of how they are gathered, eaten, or understood by fishers or the broader society. An exception is an interesting foray into social history that considers both the daily life and career trajectories of Dutch East India Company personnel, though of course this maintains the European viewpoint. A reader who comes to this text hoping a book on the oceans with “world history” in its title would strike out beyond the known shipping lanes might be disappointed at first. There is nothing here regarding the relationship of Polynesians, Aboriginal Australians, Africans, Native Americans, or anyone else with the ocean before it bore Europeans to their shores.

This begins to change in parts 7 and 8, which cover the Atlantic and Pacific, though they are initially dressed in the familiar robes of European exploration. It is perhaps relevant that, as I pointed out above, North is a modernist, for as the narrative approaches the present he increasingly centers other voices. In the chapter on the Atlantic, for instance, he begins with Euro-centric sections on “crossing the Atlantic Ocean,” “the rivalry between the Spanish and the Portuguese,” and then the Dutch, English, and French, but he notes that in Africa, the Portuguese “colonizers encountered established political and social structures as well as traditional trade networks,” though we get few details (p. 145). He rounds the chapter out with shorter sections on the “Black Atlantic” and “Indigenous Atlantic,” as well as the broader network of Europeans including “seamen, buccaneers and pastors” and their families, occasionally including women.

The chapter on the Pacific is stronger still, though it is again introduced through “exploration,” which “awakened many European longings” (p. 173). The chapter as a whole, though, begins to achieve the ambition to tell a world history; some of the most fascinating sections detail the roles of Pacific Islanders in trade networks around the Pacific and beyond, and North breathes life into the economic histories of sea otters and sandalwood with the stories of individual human beings who traded them. Even when he does stick to Europeans, his emphasis of Dutch, German, and Russian actors and sources makes this section a useful complement to the Anglo-American accounts that are more common in the English-language historiography. Vignettes focusing on individual actors are one of the strengths of this book, especially when North explicates them with primary sources like the Mediterranean periploi, which provided voyage accounts or sailing directions, or the letters between Dutch merchants and their wives. These sources give voice to the historical actors and help the reader better understand the lived experience of their ocean travels.

North’s final two chapters, which focus on changes to oceanic travel, communications, warfare, and scientific exploration that sprang from the Industrial Revolution and on the shift in the human relationship with oceans since World War II, pull back a bit from the focus on individuals, but they remain the strongest in the book as they center a relationship with the oceans that is both richer and more familiar. North begins the final chapter by noting that “while the sea has always presented dangers to humankind, people now present far
more and varied dangers to the sea” (p. 226). This chapter most directly engages the ocean as environment, noting effects from atom bombs to overfishing to the acidification and eutrophication caused by anthropogenic climate change. The overview North provides here would be equally useful to the general reader looking for a summary of how oceans fit into our current situation (and how we got here) or as a reading that could prompt useful discussion in an undergraduate course.

That said, North assumes a certain knowledge of things maritime, especially early on, so nonspecialists, including more terrestrially focused historians as well as undergraduates, might need guidance or a good dictionary to interpret some terminology. And while I would usually hesitate to point out typos (since we all suffer from them) they are occasionally problematic here, as when it is unclear whether Hubert Hugo and Herbert Hugo are the same person on page 127, or more egregiously, when James Cook meets his end in Haiti rather than Hawaii on page 173. (This is later recounted more accurately.) The book includes ten illustrations and sixteen excellent maps, which illustrate North’s story well, and which all deserve poring over.

Note


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Citation: Penelope K. Hardy. Review of North, Michael; Selwyn, Pamela E, A World History of the Seas: From Harbour to Horizon. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. August, 2022.

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