Traditional narratives of US empire have centered the 1890s, the Spanish-Cuban-American War, and the annexation of Hawai‘i and other territories. For decades prior, however, Americans had been expanding influence in the Pacific Ocean (with a particular eye on East Asia), Cuba, and other Caribbean islands. By the middle of the nineteenth century, American whalers found themselves on voyages that took them away from their New England homes for as long as four or five years. After decades of overfishing in the North Atlantic and technological developments that turned whaling ships into floating factories capable of processing whales on board, they ventured into the Pacific and Indian Oceans in search of hunting opportunities. Between 1830 and 1840, nearly two hundred American vessels had dropped anchor off the southwest coast of Madagascar in St. Augustine Bay.

Despite the significant American presence and commercial connections in the Indian Ocean at the time, they have largely been forgotten in the histories of US imperialism. The primary reason for this absence is that the United States was never able to make formal claims in the region and its presence was temporary. Jane Hooper argues, “The reasons for this American ‘failure’ are worthy of attention as they cast doubt on teleological narratives of imperial expansion” (p. 6). Even though the nation’s imperial ambitions in the region were cut short, that does not mean they were without impact or significance. *Yankees in the Indian Ocean: American Commerce and Whaling, 1786–1860* explores not only how the short-lived American merchant trade and whaling in the Indian Ocean affected the region, but also how they contributed to the ideological foundation of US expansion and imperialism in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries more broadly.

American commercial activity in the Indian Ocean, Hooper argues, is marked by three distinct periods of engagement. The first was in the 1790s, the years of early contact. The next was marked by stable relations with non-Western merchants in the 1820s, and the third (the 1840s) was one with much struggle due to increased European compet-
ition. Rather than separate the histories by industry (merchant trade and whaling), as is common in maritime studies, Hooper instead frames them as a collective New Englander perspective, suggesting that their origin point had a greater impact on their views on places like Zanzibar, Mauritius, and Madagascar than did the types of ships they arrived on.

Organized chronologically, *Yankees in the Indian Ocean* is composed of six chapters that explore how sailors provisioned their ships, extracted wealth, entertained themselves, and interacted with local populations. Chapter 2 focuses primarily on the Salem, Massachusetts, merchants and the commercial connections they made. For example, they developed economic relationships with prominent merchants like Khalfan bin Ali. Despite the control that the French claimed in Nosy Be, a small island off the northwest coast of Madagascar, Zanzibari traders like Khalfan still held significant power. Yankee sailors needed food, and they particularly desired beef. Merchants purchased cattle in exchange for goods like paint, cloth, furniture, guns, and powder. They then built processing buildings and hired local workers to kill and butcher the beef and process the hides. It was dirty and hard work that led many to complain about the smell. It also increasingly connected New England sailors and merchants to the interior of the island as the demand for cattle grew. In a later chapter, Hooper also demonstrates the destructive and even devastating environmental consequences of these industries.

Even though Americans’ primary motivations in the area were economic, there were also “hints of personal relationships forged between Arab, African, and Indian merchants” (p. 45). By the 1830s and ‘40s, a Massachusetts man named Vincent Marks controlled most of Salem’s commerce in Mahajanga, after becoming the exclusive representative for Salem’s merchants in the region. He owned a swath of farmland and lived in a two-story stone house that was supported by the labor of both free and enslaved workers. Marks went on to marry a Betsileo woman from the interior region of Madagascar, whose name is absent from available records. Marks’s marriage also drew harsh criticism from other New Englanders, who saw Malagasy people as inferior.

The attitudes of white sailors were informed by sensationalized accounts depicting communities near Mahajanga as “insular and hostile to outsiders on the basis of little evidence” (p. 49). Racist and misogynistic descriptions of Malagasy people were circulated back in New England through publications like the *Whalemen’s Shipping List and Merchants’ Transcript*, a weekly newspaper based out of New Bedford, Massachusetts. In their journals, sailors describing the people in Mauritius often stressed the beauty of the female population. The result of this exoticizing and romanticizing language was to reinforce racial hierarchies. Hooper remarks that while class had an impact on how sailors wrote about the peoples they encountered (namely, that common sailors were more likely to be overt and vulgar in their descriptions and prejudices than their officer counterparts), New England mariners shared belief in “White, masculine power” (p. 13).

Perhaps no section of the book more clearly demonstrates the centrality of white supremacy to American imperial ambitions than chapter 6, which explores mariners’ involvement in and connections to the illegal slave trade. The physical expansion and economic growth of the United States could not have been possible without the enslaved labor of African Americans. Following the 1807 passage of a law that prohibited the importation of slaves, American involvement in the slave trade took new shapes. Despite the law, the importation of enslaved people continued throughout the first half of the nineteenth century through smuggling and extralegal means. On US soil, it also gave rise to a robust, legal, and profitable internal slave trade.
While US participants in the East African slave trade were outnumbered by their European competitors, especially the Portuguese, Hooper describes their efforts in the horrifying business as “tenacious” (p. 124). Sources make the scale of American engagement in illegal slave trade difficult to evaluate, but it permeated all activity in the region. Those not directly involved, and even those who may themselves have been abolitionists and have been bothered by the conditions of the enslaved Africans they saw, expressed little discomfort or opposition in working with enslavers and slave traders. Additionally, the illegal activity became “a potent, if almost untraceable, means by which Americans learned about and engaged with African populations on the shores of the Indian Ocean” (pp. 37-38). The silences in mariners’ accounts on the issue of slavery reinforce the lack of historical attention to the issue as well as the ambivalence that many Americans felt toward the institution itself.

Mariners in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were highly literate and existed in a world in which information moved quickly through regular networking and gamming (when two or more vessels get together for social and informational purposes). In the book, Hooper mines a collection of traditional maritime history sources—mainly ship logbooks, sailors’ letters and journals, and newspapers. She also includes consul records, maps, and more.

These sources open a window into a world in which power was unstable and in constant flux. Hooper borrows terminology from Richard White’s *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republicans in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (1991) to describe Indian Ocean port cities as a sort of “middle ground” in which peoples and cultures met, made accommodations, and came into conflict with each other. The implication of such a framework makes sense, and Hooper is generally successful in demonstrating a world of competing power. However, her analysis and argument could have been strengthened with greater integration of non-white and non-American voices and historiography.

While Hooper’s methodology may not be particularly innovative, she adds a new chapter and new stories to the historiography of the region and US imperialism. Most nineteenth-century Indian Ocean narratives have emphasized growing British imperialism, especially on the Indian subcontinent, with some emphasis on Muslim and Indian trade. Far less attention, however, has focused on East African and Malagasy power (whom the Americans mostly relied on). Increasingly historians of the nineteenth-century United States have worked to decenter the national framework through transnational methodologies, global histories, and the methodologies of ethnohistory, Native studies, and more to dismantle American exceptionalism and the idea that the United States was not an imperial nation. *Yankees in the Indian Ocean* adds to recent scholarship that challenges the chronology of westward expansion as first over land and then over sea; Hooper instead suggests that they were “contemporaneous” and “far messier than often described” (p. 6).

Overall, *Yankees in the Indian Ocean* is a clearly written and compelling read that would make a solid addition to graduate syllabi in maritime history and the histories of American empire. It is concise, accessible, and vibrant enough for undergraduate readers as well. Even though American presence in the Indian Ocean was transient, they formed significant and lasting relationships in the region worthy of public and scholarly attention. Hooper effectively challenges the reader to think about the histories of failure and their absence from our academic spaces.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
https://networks.h-net.org/h-nationalism


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=58405

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.