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John McAleer’s *Atlantic Voyages* is a richly detailed new study of shipboard life on East India Company vessels in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The book provides an absorbing insight into the material realities, quotidian challenges, and personal experiences of the inhabitants of these “wooden worlds” (p. 18). Drawing on an extensive array of both published and unpublished accounts—including a truly impressive collection of manuscript sources—it follows an eclectic range of Anglophone travelers as they traversed the first stage of the long voyage to India. Moving away from previous studies of East India Company shipping that have focused primarily on “the ships, their cargoes, and patterns of trade they traced” (p. 5), McAleer emphasizes the varied ways in which passengers encountered the voyage, both in its physicality—the varied accommodation, constant noise and motion, familiar and unfamiliar sights, sounds, smells, and tastes—and the emotional impact of the individual “hopes and expectations, and fears and regrets” (p. 4) that accompanied their passage across the ocean.[1]

As McAleer is at pains to make clear, while later ocean voyages might be associated with glamor and luxury (at least for those who could afford it), in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the risks and hardships involved in traversing the seas were very real. While the maritime route east was comparatively well established by this point, the twelve-thousand-mile journey was fraught with dangers and discomforts, ranging from the tedium of being becalmed to the very serious threats posed by passage on the high seas. It was a journey of significant, if uncertain duration, with the usual four to five months being heavily dependent upon weather conditions. Though McAleer reminds us that lives were far from put on hold during the voyage, for many it also represented a liminal space between old lives and new, between the familiar and the unknown, or between exile, adventure, opportunity,
and the comforts of home. As a result, travelers often approached shipboard experiences with trepidation, paid close attention to the quotidian details that could make their onboard experience more bearable, and reflected on the personal meaning of their passage. *Atlantic Voyages* provides an account of these concerns that is at once empirically detailed and thoughtfully empathetic as it seeks to “understand the maritime space of the Atlantic as it was experienced by the people who traversed its waters” (p. 8) on the way to even more unfamiliar destinations.

The book is divided into four main chapters, dealing with different aspects of the experience of the voyage through the Atlantic from north to south. The first chapter—“Embarking”—deals with the “physical confines of the ship, the daily rhythm and routine of shipboard life, and the material culture of its interior” (p. 32) as a way of better understanding the lived experience of the passengers who shared that space—sometimes in closer quarters than they would have liked. We get a sense of the varying range of ship’s accommodation, from reasonably spacious cabins decked out with chintz and mahogany, to much more cramped and uncomfortable spaces that were short on fresh air, light, privacy, or all three. Though this chapter covers some of the same ground as traditional histories of the voyage (of food, dress, technical specifications, etiquette, etc.), it provides a range of fascinating examples and combines empirical information with a sense of how these things affected passengers’ state of mind. The spatiality of the ship is sometimes difficult to visualize amidst the wealth of detail, so it is a shame that no images are included—we are told, for example, about a sketch by Henry Abbott detailing how he maximized the limited space in his cabin, which it would have been nice to see. The chapter gives a richly textured account of how passengers experienced the confines of the ship. This includes details about how they went about personalizing their spaces, the cultures of food and drink on board, and the problems posed by disease, discomfort, and physical danger—seasickness, storms, the threat of fire, and the problems of maintaining order on board.

It is with the next three chapters that we get a more intimate insight into passengers’ lived experience of the voyage. “Voyaging” shifts the focus from physical conditions to emotional ones, exploring passengers’ responses to their journey—trepidation, homesickness, anxiety, and boredom—as well some of the strategies they used to keep such feelings at bay. Individual pursuits like reading and writing offered space for reflection as well as a means of passing time, but they were not the only outlet. The communal space of the vessel allowed for different forms of sociability and collective activities, rituals, and rites of passage. Examples are drawn from numerous different voyages across almost a hundred years. This provides depth of valuable insight into the wide range of possible experiences—as well as some of the things that largely remained the same—but this comes at the expense of a more connected understanding of the social dynamics of individual voyages. It would be interesting to know more about how onboard sociability contributed to developing affinities on individual voyages—the friendships, romances, and personal and professional networks that had the potential to impact life on shore. Moving beyond the ship, “Observing” considers the maritime world through which it passed, and the array of people, places, cultures, habitats, sea creatures, birds, animals, and natural phenomena that travelers encountered on their voyage. Exploring the ocean as a living space, it considers how passengers interacted with these new experiences and how this broadened their horizons and shaped their attitudes to the wider world. Finally, “Stopping Off” focuses on the islands and ports that punctuated the monotonous long sea voyage, exploring how “the route to Asia shaped the British imaginative response to and physical engagement with the lands, islands, ports, and harbours of the region” (p. 179). These two chapters give a fascinating insight into the en-
counter with the Atlantic Ocean, both as a space to be passed through and—more importantly—as a living space within which the ships and their passengers were ultimate only a transitory presence.

*Atlantic Voyages* is a carefully conceptualized, diligently researched, and engagingly written study that provides both a wealth of information about the shipboard life and a nuanced exploration of its impacts on those who undertook it. As such, it reflects several interlocking developments in imperial, colonial, and maritime history. In focusing on the “patterns of behaviour, and attitudes of mind” (p. 5) of the passengers over the technicalities of the ships' equipment, or the contents of its cargo, it privileges the lived experience over political and economic imperatives to “illuminate and ‘humanize’ larger historical themes and vectors” (p. 14). It treats the Atlantic Ocean itself as both “a physical obstacle to be negotiated and overcome” (p. 14) and as “a space of orientation, acclimatization, reorientation, preparation, experimentation, speculation, and deliberation” (p. 12), contributing to a recent wave of maritime histories that place seas and oceans at the center of analysis not just as a scenic backdrop to human events, but as a space that actively shapes them. It also contributes in a very literal way to recent attempts to connect the Indian Ocean and Atlantic worlds, and to (re)connect East India Company-controlled India to Atlantic spaces, events, and issues. As a historian of British India, I would have liked to know a little more about the Indian Ocean leg of the journey and how passengers related to the different sights, sounds, and weather conditions there compared to those of the better-known Atlantic leg of the trip. It would also have been interesting to know a little more about the other occupants of the ship—the Africans, Indians, and others whom McAleer refers to in passing but does not discuss at length. More consideration of their experiences, though admittedly difficult to uncover, would add texture to the predominantly Anglophone study offered. Both these things are outside the stated remit of the book, of course, so I mention them more as questions I was left with rather than shortcomings of what is presented. Overall, this engaging, enjoyable, and informative book has much to recommend it. It will certainly be of great value to students, researchers and all those who are interested in maritime histories, in the social and cultural history of empire, and the human and nonhuman history of the Atlantic World.

**Note**


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