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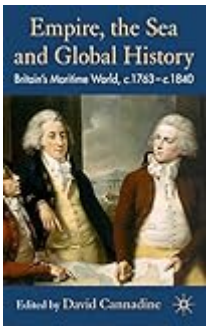

David Cannadine, ed. *Empire, the Sea, and Global History: Britain's Maritime World, c.1763-c.1840.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. viii + 159 pp. $69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-230-00899-1.

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Go with the Flow

Imagine our map of the world with the foreground and background reversed, as you might see it in a photographic negative. The continents recede, appearing only as dim intermediate spaces between the brilliant oceans. Just as certain objects acquire startling clarity in a negative, the reversed map would provoke us to revise our priorities and take notice of subjects and themes which had been present all along, but which only now stand out with the crisp immediacy that commands the eye. Or as David Cannadine puts it, "one of the reasons we need more maritime history is that it helps put imperial history in perspective" (p. 4). This is an intriguing invitation to approach the sea not as the land's antithesis, but as its poorly understood sibling. Cannadine is asking us to adjust our perspective in other ways as well. He observes that Britain's imperial boundaries did not coincide perfectly with her maritime horizons. Simplistic diagrams (like the old-fashioned ones depicting the "triangle" trade) used to treat the Atlantic Ocean as a mercantilist superhighway connecting a prescribed set of colonies in a predictable order, but deep-sea enterprises such as the whaling industry were bigger than any country's political jurisdiction and, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, were not even amenable to labels like "Atlantic" or "Pacific," since a single voyage would traverse both. Cannadine does not clarify, however, why *Empire, the Sea, and Global History* adopted a British focus if the ocean was such a transnational space.

The essays collected in this volume were originally given in London as "Empire Lectures" co-sponsored by the Institute of Historical Research and the National Maritime Museum. The contributors are all extremely distinguished scholars, but many either did not share Cannadine's enthusiasm for maritime matters or chose to speak on other topics. The result is a book that will puzzle readers who sought it out because of the title's reference to the sea. The first chapter, by Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, reflects upon the worldwide diffusion of two British exports, Shakespeare and soccer, with only a passing reference to sailors, who may have communicated their enthusiasm for what became the world's favorite sport. The last chapter, by Catherine Hall, reminds us (in the most cursory way) that gender played a part at sea as well as on land, before moving on to her preferred terrestrial topics. Similarly, Maxine Berg's chapter builds on her im-

portant article in *Past and Present* (2004) on the porcelain industry, but she manages to offer a look at both the production end (in China) and the consumption end (in Europe) without discussing the problem of transportation between those two points. Packing expensive porcelain and then shipping it over rough seas to the other side of the world must have presented some interesting technical challenges, and readers of Peter Linebaugh will wonder about pilferage along the way, but we do not learn about those topics here, although Berg entitled her chapter "Cargoes."

Philip D. Morgan's chapter about "Black Experiences" best fulfills the promise of the volume's title, offering a valuable synthesis of a rapidly changing field, while cleverly evoking the mixture of opportunity and danger that the sea presented to Africans and people of African descent. Both Morgan and Berg take notice of the supercargoes as powerful brokers in port, an insight which could have been profitably paired with Michael Fisher's discussion in his *Counterflows to Colonialism* (2004) of Calcutta's *ghat serangs*, or labor contractors, who were not overawed even by the East India Company. Marcus Rediker initiated one influential approach to oceanic history through his portrait of the adversarial relationship between profit-hungry merchants and the proletarian seamen who crewed their ships; the supercargo presents an intriguing intermediate figure for our consideration, as do the indigenous collaborators such as surveyors and astronomers discussed in Simon Schaffer's chapter. More generally, the middle ground of harbors and coastal spaces offers many openings for revisionist scholarship on maritime topics and the historiography of empire; regrettably, no chapter about port cities appears in this volume. The Royal Navy receives two chapters, one by P. J. Marshall, who focuses on the relationship between British liberty and British sea power, and one by Stephen Conway, who advances the thesis that the empire served the navy rather than the other way round.

Richard Drayton's chapter deserves special attention because it attempts to break new interpretive ground. Indeed, Drayton characterizes his essay as "a polemic against what has become, perhaps, the dominant style of British imperial history" (p. 72). He argues in favor of a "materialist" approach that would replace, or at least precede, any forays into "idealism." Drayton's materialism takes the form of historical geography, on an even grander scale than that adopted by the Annales school. He brings up geological events millions of years in the past and devotes a great deal of space to the "critical material actors in oceanic history [which] are the disposition of landmasses, and the flows of winds and currents" (p. 74). When we put Nature first, in the manner enjoined by Drayton, ships and empires alike appear as little more than passengers who have hitched a ride on the prevailing "energy flows." This kind of materialism may have its uses, particularly in the classroom; we have all encountered the sort of undergraduate who excels when the subject matter is presented in terms of coffee beans or locomotives, but looks blank when the conversation turns to Enlightenment or modernity. Yet in his chapter, "Maritime Networks and the Making of Knowledge," Drayton attempts to deploy this big-picture materialism to address how empire shaped thinking, feeling human beings, with little success. His suggestion that historians should be more humble in the face of "natural facts" (p. 72) is especially odd coming from the author of *Nature's Government* (2000), a fine study of economic botany and the cheerful reshaping of natural facts in the name of the "Adamic prerogative" and the quest for profit. When was empire more imperious than when it willfully misread, renamed, or reworked the environments that it encountered?

The resettlement of London's "Black Poor" to Sierra Leone is mentioned in a number of the chapters in this volume; P. J. Marshall interprets it as evidence that "British freedom … could be transferred to people within the empire who were manifestly not of British origin" (p. 53). Generations of historians (most recently, Simon Schama) have interpreted the Sierra Leone initiative in what Drayton would call idealist terms, as an expression of the humanitarian vision of Granville Sharp, William Wilberforce, and their associates.[1] Is there room for a materialist reading here? Possibly. The philanthropists who first tied the Treasury's purse-strings to the resettlement plan were provoked by the suffering of black mendicants in the streets during the unusually cold winter of 1785-86 (a slightly longer series of frigid days in 1789 gave rise to one of the rare "ice fairs" when the Thames froze solid). Why send them to Sierra Leone, though? It possessed an excellent natural harbor, one of the best in Africa. In addition, the anti-slavery movement did not benefit from free blacks living in, say, Nova Scotia; they needed a tropical location where they could prove that free labor was capable of raising tropical products. The Marquis de Lafayette instituted a similar plantation for emancipated blacks in French Guiana at almost the same time. So far, so materialistic. But what are we to do with the followers of Immanuel Swedenborg, who promoted the Sierra Leone scheme because their teacher proclaimed that the West African interior con-

tained a superhuman, spiritually enlightened race? What of Granville Sharp himself, who was so idealistic that he envisioned an all-Christian settlement in a Muslim-dominated region, and responded to the first settlers' failure (after the rainy season demolished their crops) with a call to prayer? And what, finally, are we to make of the apparently widespread conviction among Sierra Leone's projectors that London's "Black Poor" did not belong in London and certainly should not remain there? The problem with Drayton's injunction to respect a sense of "place" or locality is that place exists as much in the mind as anywhere else; that is to say, it is cultural. A maritime history which reduces our environment (in the words of Hippocrates) to airs, waters, and places, but does not reckon with the human element, is unlikely to resemble a history at all.

Notes

[1]. Simon Schama, *Rough Crossings: Britain, the Slaves, and the American Revolution* (New York: Ecco, 2006).

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