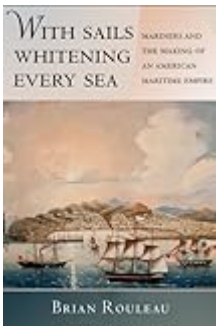
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Brian Rouleau. *With Sails Whitening Every Sea: Mariners and the Making of an American Maritime Empire.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014. 288 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-5233-8.

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Published on H-War (June, 2015)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

Brian Rouleauâs book begins with a map of the world showing the ports most frequently visited by US sailors in the nineteenth century. This geographical reorientation, from land to sea, sets the tone for his book. As Rouleau argues, âhistories of the nineteenth-century United States â¦ remain wedded to decidedly land-based ideas of expansionism and empireâ (p. 2). Rouleau provides an alternative narrative by showing how nineteenth-century Americans espoused expansionist imperial ambitions both on land and at sea.

Countering the common assumption that nineteenth-century sailors were illiterate, Rouleau describes American merchant and whaling vessels as âfloating school houses.â Not only did sailors spend a great deal of time reading while at sea, they also produced âpiles of printâ (p. 23). By the mid-nineteenth century, between 80 to 90 percent of the nationâs citizen-mariners had at least rudimentary reading and writing skills. They were âone of the eraâs most literate cohorts of working peopleâ (p. 26). It was also via sailing vessels that printed information traveled from foreign ports back to the United States, with information moving from ship to shore, where a public hungry for news of the outside world eagerly read it. As conveyors of global information, sailors became both mediators of knowledge and knowledge authorities. American scientific societies might engage sailors to collect curiosities from distant climes, but sailors also provided their own observations in letters home and in published narratives, thus influencing contemporary scientific and social debates. In particular, their observations describing encounters with nonwhites in the wider world had an impact on debates on the issue of racial difference.

In chapter 2 Rouleau argues that while sailors were in the vanguard of cross-cultural encounters abroad, they frequently evaluated native peoples they met from a decidedly âAmericanâ perspective. Thus, in their descriptions of nonwhites, sailors often made reference to the âJim Crowâ black-faced minstrels of antebellum American popular theater. This shaped the dynamics of cross-cultural encounters, as sailors were eager to perform American racial caricatures for the peoples they encountered overseas. As Rouleau explains, âthere are few better examples of the sailorâs role as a connector in multinational webs of cultural exchange than his efforts to spread blackface minstrelsyâs songs and dances throughout the nineteenth-century worldâ (p. 45). Performance was a means of communication with people with whom American sailors did not share a language. However, notes Rouleau, the racial ordering inherent in such performances reinforced imperialist assumptions about the

inferiority of nonwhite people.

In chapter 3, Rouleau demonstrates that the rhetoric of mid-nineteenth-century âManifest Destinyâ was applied equally to the oceans as it was to the continental West. Sailors employed the terms âcivilizationâ and âsavageryâ in order to make sense of the various cultures they encountered abroad, particularly in the Pacific basin. The ideal of âManifest Destinyâ appealed to sailors because it âsuffused their labor abroad with a noble purposeâ (p. 78). But as Rouleau argues, the application of the terms âIndianâ and âsavageâ to nonwhites also became a justification for violence, brute force being understood as the universal means for dealing with âIndiansâ (p. 83).

Following this discussion, chapter 4 opens with a description of the Hawaiian response to the Honolulu riot of 1852. This was not a random act of drunken violence, Rouleau argues, but a political act in which sailors âresisted the imposition of authority and disciplineâ (p. 104). This event, and similar âdiplomatic fisticuffs,â was an opportunity for sailors to assert their national and racial superiority over foreign peoples. Rouleau describes this as a âdistinct, working-class, and masculine foreign relations agendaâ (p. 105). But for politicians, diplomats, and missionaries, the aggressions of American sailors overseas threatened American foreign relations, and these concerns found voice in editorials published in the continental United States. Efforts to reform and improve the âcharacterâ of sailors in American port cities thus had a global dimension–to improve foreign relations and facilitate missionary and commercial interests. Thus, the regulation of various aspects of sailorsâ lives, on the global stage, became increasingly necessary as the United States sought to secure its position abroad.

In chapter 5 Rouleau shifts focus to sailorsâ sexual encounters in foreign ports, explaining that, âAmerican foreign relations were often indistinguishable from sexual relationsâ (p. 134). The observations sailors made of the sexual behaviors of foreign peoples became yet another marker of the perceived differences between American civility and foreign perversity. However, as âcontact zones,â port cities were spaces where seafarers âcreated boundaries even as they crossed boundariesâ (p. 139). In the maritime working world of transient and impoverished sailors, women in port cities provided more than sex. They also offered temporary stability. Brothels functioned as âhotels, clothiers, pharmaciesâ and âmoneylenders for sailorsâ (p. 142). And the women that sailors took up with while in port, they frequently referred to as their âwives,â a term laden with social meaning. But sex, Rouleau argues, was a âconnective link that sustained longer-term relations on which American maritime empire was builtâ (p. 145). The regulation of sailorsâ sexual behavior, like the regulation of their violence, was believed important for maintaining American political and commercial interests overseas.

In the final chapter Rouleau examines the macroeconomics of sailorsâ bartering in overseas ports, explaining that these âtransactions were not measured in terms of tonnage or GDP.â Yet, sailorsâ dealings assured âAmerican assimilation into alternative sub-economies that thrived just below the surface of mercantile capitalismâ (pp. 166-167). Sailorsâ bartering was embedded in local economies. Both sailors and locals understood which exchange goods were most desirable and the protocols of trade. Barter economies also provided a niche for brokers able to negotiate cultural and language barriers. However, if shipboard trade relationships became sullied, as they increasingly did over the course of the nineteenth century, these relationships also threatened the nationâs access to foreign ports and larger international markets.

By the end of the nineteenth century, and in the wake of the Civil War, the American maritime empire had shrunk dramatically and the sailors who shipped out on American ships were largely foreign-born. With improving industrial working conditions at home and little economic incentive or opportunity for advancement at sea, maritime labor became less attractive for white American males hoping to improve their lives. The American oceanic frontier had finally closed. By then, American nationals traveling abroad did so primarily as tourists rather than as members of a global workforce.

The major strength of Rouleauâs work is that he does not limit his scope to either the Pacific or Atlantic. Instead he sets out to examine a global maritime empire. Yet, his claim that the âreigning paradigmâ in histories of US empire is of the United States as a âbounded terrestrialâ unit may be overstated (p. 2). Attention to Americaâs expansionist ambitions in the Pacific world can be traced at least as far back as 1932, when Foster Rhea Dulles published *America in the Pacific: A Century of Expansion.* In recent years, many other scholars have tackled the role of America in the Pacific as the model of a âPacific world,â adapted from the Atlantic world model. The works of Jean Heffer, David Igler, Matt Matsuda, David Lyons, and Walter McDougal are some recent examples of this approach. Nevertheless, Rouleauâs focus on sailors provides a valuable contribution to a body of scholarship

which has focused primarily on naval and foreign policy history. Rouleauâs approach paints a more complex picture of American overseas expansion, one which reveals a much broader cast of characters–sailors, naval officers, diplomats, and missionaries–who at times held competing agendas.

If there is a weakness in Rouleauâs work, it is that we are not given a clear picture of the competing colonial geography of this empire afloat. Fiji, Japan, and Hawaii feature prominently in Rouleauâs discussion, yet he does not explain precisely how these island groups should be understood in the context of competing Western colonial interests in the Pacific basin. He provides us with tantalizing clues, but we are left with more questions than answers. How should we interpret British explorers performing American-styled blackface minstrelsy in Antarctica? And what was the British response to American sailors rioting in South Africa? Did the French colonial government seek to regulate the behavior of American sailors in the Society Islands? Presumably the United States was not the only nation with expansionist ambitions in the nineteenth century, so we should also ask what role sailors played in maintaining or negotiating *those* boundaries. But these are relatively minor issues that should not detract from recognizing that *With Sails Whitening Every Sea* is an ambitious achievement that will provide further stimulus to a growing body of scholarship on the nineteenth-century American maritime empire.

Citation: Antony Adler. Review of Rouleau, Brian, *With Sails Whitening Every Sea: Mariners and the Making of an American Maritime Empire*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. June, 2015.

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