

Maritime History and Its Discontents: A Response to Smith and Chaves

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In recent decades, it has become increasingly common for maritime historians to question where we are, where we are going, what we do and how we fit into the historical profession generally. Such inquiries make sense in an institutional setting, and have resulted in the creation of any number of professional organizations from the Society of Nautical Research (1910) to the International Commission for Maritime History (1960), the North American Society for Oceanic History (1973), and the International Maritime Economic History Association (1986). More recently, lobbying behind the scenes has resulted in maritime history's being added to the American Historical Association's "areas of scholarly interest."

These discussions, together with protestations of the discipline's legitimacy or assertions about whether studying maritime history makes one a maritime historian, have become increasingly public and argumentative. Perhaps our collective hand-wringing is a reflection of the times. We moderns are skeptical at best and at worst anxious and apologetic. Living in a democratic age, we no longer accept the principle of "master under God," but we are likewise insecure about what we are doing and why.

Though assertive in their conclusions, the wide-ranging essays by Joshua Smith and Kelly Chaves fit squarely into this tradition of disputing the nature of maritime history and its discontents. Smith touches squarely on our predisposition to self-doubt when he asks, "Who dares to recall that Alfred Thayer Mahan . . . was once president of the American Historical Association?" To be fair, who recalls any past president of the AHA? But since he brings it up, we should note that in its early years the office was fairly riddled with historians more than a little conscious of the maritime dimension of the human enterprise.

The association's second president, in 1886, was George Bancroft who as secretary of the Navy oversaw the establishment of the U.S. Naval Academy and who later wrote the *History of the Battle of Lake Erie*. The fifth was the wide-ranging Charles Kendall Adams, whose *Christopher Columbus: His Life and Work* appeared in 1890. Mahan followed in 1902, and Theodore Roosevelt, who wrote *The Naval War of 1812* before the founding of the AHA, capped his career with a trick at the wheel a decade later. There ensued something of a dry spell, and the next maritime historian to take the helm was Samuel Eliot Morison in 1950, followed fifteen years later by the historian of Venice and Venetian shipping Frederic C. Lane.

Few "areas of scholarly interest" outside of American and European studies can boast such a visible role within the AHA. But if such a tangible reckoning is worth noting, it is only fair to ask whether the half century without one of our own running the AHA constitutes a worrisome trend. Hardly. And for all the evidence that Smith musters—and rightly dismisses—about maritime history's death rattle, we can detect far more indicators of a healthy and robust field of inquiry.

Since the 1960s, new methodologies and avenues of research in maritime history have multiplied. Underwater archaeology developed as a rigorous field of study and simultaneously

began breaking new ground on research questions from deep antiquity to the present. The burgeoning sail-training movement began providing students with the experience, context and foundation for humanistic and scientific maritime studies starting in the 1970s. And as Chaves observes, all the while maritime historians were keeping pace with broader trends like historical economics, gender studies, ethnic studies and labor history.

Part of Smith's argument draws on a selective reading of the literature to skewer internationalists, Atlanticists and the "new thalassologists." Atlanticists, in particular, would likely take issue with his assertion that they "have in fact failed to break from a national/imperial framework of analysis," and with his selective employment of the table of contents from Greene and Morgan's *Atlantic History: A Critical Appraisal*. One swallow does not a summer make. More to the point, as Bernard Bailyn points out, Atlantic history is neither "simply an expansion of the venerable tradition of 'imperial' history," nor is it "in imitation of Fernand Braudel's concept of Mediterranean history."¹ The latter point is one that many tend to overlook, not least the new thalassologists Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, who nonetheless caution against reflexively translating the "distinctive historical regimes of connectivity" of the Mediterranean paradigm to other ocean basins.²

In fact, to borrow Smith's own typology, his characterization of Atlantic historians as traditionalist academics who rely on "jargon" to challenge "conventional ideas" runs counter to Bailyn's account of Atlantic history's utilitarian origins: "In part . . . the initial impulses lay not within historical study but outside it, in the public world that formed the external context of historians' awareness. The ultimate source may be traced back to 1917 and the writings of . . . Walter Lippmann, then an avid interventionist in the European war and already an extremely influential journalist."

Lippmann argued for American intervention on the grounds that "Britain, France, Italy, even Spain, Belgium, Holland, the Scandinavian nations, and Pan-America are in the main one community in their deepest needs and their deepest purposes. . . ."³

While some historians "who wrote on topics that touched on Atlantic history . . . were simply pursuing narrow, parochial interests that proved to have wider boundaries than they expected," they constitute only one of the many groups who have contributed to the stone stoup of Atlantic history.⁴ And the utilitarian vision seems alive and well, for example in the description of the conference "More Atlantic Crossings? Europe's Role in an Entangled History of the Atlantic World, 1950s-1970s" to be held next year at Georgetown:

As Americans recognized the limitations of the American Dream, what elements of European social policy did they consider? . . . As American commercial culture became ubiquitous, did European notions of culture and style disappear completely from the transatlantic scene? In many areas, European social or economic models failed to gain traction and cases of outright imports are far and few between. Still, such exchanges should be considered a vital element of the entangled history of the postwar Atlantic world, complementing our increasingly refined understanding of European reflections about and adaptations of American models.⁵

As Chaves notes, “not everyone in the academy accepts the conclusions” of the Atlantic perspective. However, most objections hinge not on Atlantic history’s debt to imperial history but on its perpetuation of Western privilege in world history. Either way, these are methodological and historiographical considerations of Atlantic history that Smith keeps from us.

But everything comes to those who wait, and the recently published *Oxford Handbook of the Atlantic World* addresses Chaves’s and Smith’s most pressing criticisms. N.A.M. Rodger’s chapter on “Atlantic Seafaring” addresses the central problem of Atlantic history, which he describes as “history with the Atlantic left out.”⁶ Nor is his contribution a token effort to address Atlanticists’ ineffective engagement with the ocean itself. Just as he deplores the treatment of the ocean as a “pre-defined, self-evident space,” Matthew Edney observes that “The Atlantic has never been a natural, predefined stage on which humans have acted.”⁷ These efforts to reify the ocean are part and parcel of the editors’ mission to remove the Eurocentric bias from Atlantic history and its emphasis on “teleological delineations of transitions from ‘colony to nation.’” In a similar vein, other contributions confirm Chaves’s view of the active role of Native Americans in the Atlantic world by demonstrating “the persistent influence over their destinies exercised by Native Americans and Africans until well into the eighteenth century.”⁸

What of those who assert the internationalist dimension of maritime history? By and large they do so as international maritime historians writing, as often as not, from their base in the International Maritime Economic History Association, or at least in the pages of the *International Journal of Maritime History*.⁹

A look at other publications reveals ample research by historians unfazed about the primacy of international perspectives or whether their work fits into a totalizing scheme of maritime history. Such has been the case for a long time. In the 1980s, *Sea History* (the saltwater bias of its title notwithstanding) published at least four thematic issues covering domestic, inland and coastal trades: The Lordly Hudson, Islands in the Stream of History (about Martha’s Vineyard and Nantucket), Rivers of America, and the Great Lakes. They have continued to explore similar themes in the quarter century since then.

Closer to home, in the inaugural issue of *Coriolis* John Hattendorf introduces the journal as a necessity if we are to “broaden the scholarly perspective on maritime affairs beyond the single nationalistic outlook that has been traditional in the past,” the implication being that historians still have not fully embraced the internationalist approach.¹⁰ Even so, the lead articles—Susan Lebo’s “A Local Perspective of Hawaii’s Whaling Economy: Whale Traditions and Government Regulation of the Kingdom’s Native Seamen and Whale Fishery” and Ross Harper’s “Providence Brings to our Doors, the Delicious Treasures of the Sea’: Household Use of Maritime Resources in 18th-Century Connecticut”—are domestic in their orientation. Indeed, the *International Journal of Maritime History* is not as unconditionally worldly as its name suggests. The June 2011 issue includes two articles whose subjects are explicitly riverine and short-sea, one that deals with a national deep-sea fishing fleet (and therefore straddles a grey area between international and domestic concerns), and two about companies within the context of national maritime policy. Only two articles focus explicitly on a national merchant marine’s international orientation.¹¹

While Smith plays up one historian's apologia for seasickness in *Maritime History as World History*, he relegates his reference to John Armstrong's "valiant effort . . . to call attention to shorter trade routes and inland waters" to a footnote. What should be celebrated is the editor's decision to include Armstrong's "The Role of Short-Sea, Coastal, and Riverine Traffic in Economic Development since 1750" in the same volume.

This is by no means an isolated example of historians situating local developments in a comparative global framework. Of particular interest is Pål Nymoen's effort to wrest the history of Norway's "primitive" inland logboats from the "technological evolutionary perspective . . . which is repeatedly used to explain the invention of the lapstrake (clinker) technique" and to see them, rather, "within the context of the terrain and climate as well as the transport and storage possibilities of the region."¹² This is an invaluable corrective, and confirms Smith's belief that "local and national histories can be just as academically rigorous and important as those that are international in scope." Assembling the tools for comparative analysis of local and regional phenomena on a global scale will require considerable imagination and coordination.

As important, a good deal of maritime historical research appears in non-maritime journals, which puts it before people other than maritime historians. If it complicates our research agenda somewhat, in compensation it forces us to contemplate new vistas we would never glimpse from the pages of an *IJMH* or *Northern Mariner*. As Richard Harding writes in a recent issue of *Mariner's Mirror*, "The sea may not feature in the forefront of the minds of many historians, but nor is maritime history an exclusive study of a few specialists. It finds its way into general histories and the works of other specialists that now stretch as far as cultural and environmental historians."¹³ A book that brings this discussion of inland waters and multidisciplinary approaches full circle is *Rivers in History*, whose contributors comprise not only historians but geographers, engineers, environmentalists and urban policy specialists.¹⁴ The fact remains that there is an awful lot of scholastic anxiety that in itself does little to advance maritime history. Particularly curious is Smith's homage to Daniel Vickers, whose claims in "Beyond Jack Tar," published eighteen years ago, are in need of substantial revision. We can debate whether scholars are correct in asserting that, in Chaves's words, the "sheer multiplicities of genders, races, and ethnicities present in maritime activity . . . created a communal culture that, to a certain degree, accepted diversity and promoted social equality." But as she documents at length, the almost exclusively male and "white-washed maritime world" has yielded to a more comprehensive, nuanced and complex set of interpretations since Vickers' article appeared.

A milestone in the effort to integrate scholars from a variety of disciplines is the four-volume *Oxford Encyclopedia of Maritime History*.¹⁵ Beyond that there are innumerable conferences and essay collections on maritime historical themes whose contributors are not necessarily "maritime historians" but students of naval history, the slave trade and migration studies, economic history, social history, literary criticism, political theory, the many sub-disciplines that fall within the orbit of the Columbian Exchange, art history, religious history, linguistics, and so on. Another work that has done much to draw new voices into the discussion and thus widen and enliven the closed circle bemoaned by Vickers is *Voyages*, the excellent two-volume primary sourcebook of American maritime history compiled by the curiously querulous Smith himself.¹⁶

While pausing to assess the validity or utility of one's work is often worthwhile for an individual or a cohesive group, the efforts to define maritime history divert energy from more productive avenues of research and are fated to being inconclusive because our taxonomy is wrong.

For whatever reason, we labor under the misapprehension that maritime history is a class or phylum of history rather than its own kingdom. That is, we continue to accept it as subordinate rather than equal to an (unnamed) terrestrial history. In his introduction to *Maritime History as World History*, Daniel Finamore nails it when he asserts that "Human interaction with the sea is a fundamental factor of world history, not a dissociated force of particularist concern."¹⁷ Ignoring this fundamental truth compels us to proclaim our discipline's legitimacy. Small wonder that, as Smith writes, "some scholars do not consider themselves maritime historians." We drive them away.

Yet one of our great achievements is our conscious embrace of the amphibious nature of the project. Maritime history, most would now agree, is not just about saltwater pursuits. It must and does involve coastal and inland waters as well as the shoreside dimension of the mariner's world and the merchant's and diplomat's hinterland. In this, as Smith and Chaves clearly demonstrate, maritime historians have been far more open to the potential of their research than have their land-bound counterparts, including most Atlanticists.

Where, then, does this leave us? Even if this alternative taxonomy proves a helpful course correction, Josh Smith's and Kelly Chaves's articles remain relevant and worthwhile for their insights into the way we look at history and our fellow historians, and especially Smith's injunction that we "practice humility and good manners." But, I am not certain that any of these characterizations of maritime history will satisfy everyone.

For my own part, if called upon to define maritime history, I would borrow Justice Potter Stewart's celebrated opinion (à propos a topic more salacious than our own): "I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description, and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it. . . ."¹⁸

NOTES

¹ Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History: Concepts and Contours* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 4. One should note Bailyn's "devastating" critique in "Braudel's Geohistory—A Reconsideration," *Journal of Economic History* 11 (1951): 277-82.

² Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, "AHR Forum—The Mediterranean and 'The New Thalassology,'" *American Historical Review* 111:3 (2006): 722-40; 737-38.

³ Bailyn, *Atlantic History*, 5. In the introduction to *Atlantic History: A Critical Appraisal*, Morgan and Greene also note that while the concept of Atlantic history is "fairly new," its practical origins can be detected as far back as the work of Herbert Baxter Adams in the 1870s.

⁴ Bailyn, *Atlantic History*, 54.

⁵ <http://www.transatlanticperspectives.org/article.php?rec=11>

⁶ N.A.M. Rodger, "Atlantic Seafaring," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Atlantic World, c. 1450-c. 1850*, edited by Nicholas Canny and Philip Morgan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 71.

⁷ Matthew Edney, "Knowledge and Cartography in the Early Atlantic," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Atlantic World*, 87.

⁸ Nicholas Canny and Philip Morgan, "Introduction," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Atlantic World*, 2.

⁹ In addition to *Maritime History at the Crossroads: A Critical Review of Recent Historiography* (Research in Maritime History No. 9), the collection of essays edited by Frank Broeze noted by Smith, see Maria Fusaro and Amélia Polónia, eds., *Maritime History as Global History*, Research in Maritime History No. 43 (St. John's: IMEHA, 2010).

¹⁰ John Hattendorf, "Here's for a Coriolis Effect in Maritime History," *Coriolis*, <http://ijms.nmdl.org/article/view/5806>.

¹¹ Coastal and riverine articles: Constantin Ardeleanu, "The European Commission of the Danube and the Results of Its Technical and Administrative Activity on the Safety of Navigation, 1856-1914," and G. Alan Metters, "Corn, Coal and Commerce: Merchants and Coastal Trading in Early Jacobean King's Lynn." Deep-sea fishing: Ingo Heidbrink, "A Second Industrial Revolution in the Distant-Water Fisheries? Factory-Freezer Trawlers in the 1950s and 1960s." National firms: Anthony J. Arnold, "National Strategic Objectives, the Interests of the 'Armaments Ring' and the Failure of Thames Ironworks in 1912" and Hubert Bonin, "The Complementarities between Merchant Shipping and Ancillary Activities: The Case of Two French Firms, SCAC and SAGA (1880s-1990s)." International: Gordon Boyce, "Edward Bates and Sons, 1897-1915: Tramping Operations in Recession and Recovery," and Werner Scheltjens, "The Influence of Spatial Change on Operational Strategies in Early Modern Dutch Shipping: A Case Study of Dutch Shipping in the Gulf of Finland and Archangel, 1703-1740."

¹² Pål Nymo, "Boats for Rivers and Mountains: Sources for New Narratives about River Travel?" *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology* 37:1 (2008): 3-16, p. 8.

¹³ Harding, Richard. "Organizational Life Cycles, the SNR and Maritime History." *Mariner's Mirror* 97:2 (2011): 5-20, p. 19. See for example, "Oceans Connect," ed. Kären Wigen and Jessica Harland-Jacobs, special issue, *Geographical Review* 89:2 (1999), and "AHR Forum: Oceans of History" in *American Historical Review* 111:3 (2006).

¹⁴ Christof Mauch and Thomas Zeller, eds., *Rivers in History: Perspectives on Waterways in Europe and North America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008).

¹⁵ John Hattendorf, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Maritime History*, 4 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁶ Joshua M. Smith, ed., *Voyages*, vol. 1, *The Age of Sail*, vol. 2, *The Age of Engines* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009).

¹⁷ Daniel Finamore, in *Maritime History as World History* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004), 1.

¹⁸ *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, 378 U.S. 184 (1964).