
Beyond the Terracentric: Maritime Ruminations

JOHN CURTIS PERRY

Mars is the Red Planet; we are the Blue, today unique in the universe insofar as we know it. The World Ocean, connected in its vastness unlike the continents, covers nearly three-quarters of our global surface. We might more aptly be called *Ocean* than *Earth*. The sea envelops us both outside and in, for our bodies contain a large percentage of salty fluids. Swimming in our mother's womb, we first take form. As President Kennedy said in 1962, toasting the Australian winners of the America's Cup race, "we have salt in our blood, salt in our sweat, salt in our tears."¹

Socrates in Plato's *Phaedo* points out that "we inhabit a small portion of the earth, living round the sea like ants and frogs around a pond."

We are drawn to the sea; nearly one-half of the world's people live within one hundred miles of salt water, and that proportion is growing. Eight in ten of the world's largest cities lie on the ocean. And yet most Americans are unfamiliar with the sea and are largely indifferent to its vital role in many dimensions of their lives.

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This situation is not entirely new, for the sea, fearsome in its moods, has always seemed a perilous and exotic space. The esoteric and highly specialized skills of the seaman were unfamiliar to the landsman: the farmer wielding his hoe, the smith shoeing a horse, or the clerk poring over a ledger. To say that sailors were simply “working men who got wet” is inadequate. These people lived in danger and isolation from shore-side life; for them the ship formed its own little world. Sailors had their own dress, speech, and distinctive behavior. Unlike landsmen their experience was cosmopolitan. Maritime trade was traditionally the most international of economic activities. Moving around, sailors formed a multi-cultural, multi-national community quite unlike those who never left the land.

Today a separate maritime culture scarcely exists. Megaships spend little time in port, their tiny crews interact with few on shore, and ports are physically removed from cities. Today’s travelers—unless they are smugglers, illegal immigrants, or cruise passengers—barely perceive the ocean, moving above but not upon it. Only maritime disasters and the assault of great storms remind the general public of the sea’s power. With climate change we are learning through bitter experience that all too frequently

“the mighty ocean deep” may not “its own appointed limits keep.”²

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The World Ocean contains ninety-seven percent of the planet’s biosphere. Its functions in that realm, and the ways in which we use or abuse this major part of the planetary surface, are essential to our continuing existence. As Rachel Carson observed in *The Sea Around Us*,³ we require the ocean for our own vitality. A new sense of the fragility of the ocean is one reason that a big change has occurred in the way in which scholars are now

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Scholars now see maritime studies as touching a hugely comprehensive area, embracing the international and comparative, beyond the nation-state, drawing on history while sprawling across the social sciences and the humanities. Indeed, defining its untidy limits challenges us. We can’t very well call the global impact of maritime activities a “field” of enquiry, a term so often applied to the terrestrial, with the clearly defined boundaries

that word implies. Rather maritime history is amorphous, a body of study offering an oceanic perspective of the global experience. Its breadth and its depth challenge practitioners to navigate the delicate arts of choice and distillation in forming their syntheses.

Harvard's Robert G. Albion, at mid twentieth century the "dean of maritime historians," fused the economic with the strategic, the merchant marine with the naval. Yet his perspective remained heavily Atlantic, reflecting the focus of American academics at the time. A *festschrift* for him was aptly entitled *The Atlantic World of Robert G. Albion*.⁴ For him the United States and an expanding Europe comprised the maritime world that mattered. The rest existed only to be manipulated by the peoples of the Atlantic in a tale of European triumphalism.

European global domination of the World Ocean unfolded only gradually over the centuries, but after World War II the collapse came suddenly and swiftly, in a matter of decades. A revolution in the technology of oceanic transport, with the introduction of bulk carriers and the shipping container, dramatically lowered transport costs, enabling an explosive growth in world trade.

Simultaneously, reflecting the influence of globalization, historians began to broaden and enrich their approach to the maritime domain both geographically and functionally, adding social concerns to the economic and strategic, and more recently including the environmental. On shore, maritime concerns have moved beyond docks and ports, the narrow urban waterfront, to embrace the office, the factory, and the beach as ancillary parts of the salt water experience. This extends to the maritime industries, what they make and how they serve, covering a wide gamut of activities. And, like other branches of academic inquiry, the maritime is expressing new awareness of "otherness," the inarticulate, hitherto neglected and anonymous individuals and groups: the lives of women, for example, not simply the cross-dressers who went to sea but those on shore who mended the nets and sustained the family during the frequently lengthy absence of the men.

Three broad categories might conveniently cover the uses that humankind makes of the sea: avenue, arena, and source.

From ancient times, water with its low-friction surface has served as a fluid avenue for the movement of materials and goods. Intrepid Europeans in the sixteenth century made trade global, with silver being mined and exchanged worldwide. By the twentieth century the world reached global economic interdependence with at least eighty percent of traded goods moving by sea. People too figure in the process. Chinese, Lebanese, Jews,

Greeks, and Indians, some streaming in great numbers and some scattering globally, formed seaborne diasporas. Millions of enslaved Africans suffered forced movement westward across the Atlantic and northward on the Indian Ocean. Migrants from Europe transformed hitherto remote, thinly populated places. And now that particular pattern continues in reverse; immigrants are coming into Europe, often illegally, often by sea.

Geographies of contact and exchange have steadily grown, greatly accelerating in the past fifty years, illustrating that the ocean is more important today than ever before. As in the past it serves as a medium for the transport of information and ideas, now doing so instantly, cheaply, and dependably via fiber optic cables strung along the ocean floor carrying light signals pulsing through copper sleeves, providing what has been called “the fundamental medium of the global village.”

Ocean also functions as an arena. National rivalries have long driven a desire to protect, to acquire, and to extract as a means of increasing national wealth by violence, be it through commerce-raiding or combat. This led to navies, power at sea becoming a determinant of victory in war; naval blockade figured prominently in the Napoleonic Wars and the two world wars of the twentieth century. Strategic and tactical needs continue to drive technology, with nuclear propulsion furnishing a prime example, making possible a boat that can stay underwater indefinitely for the first time in history.

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A third category of maritime study is ocean as source. Extracting salt and fishing have always been important to human life. New tools make possible a variety of other extractive activities, both non-renewable and renewable. The ocean serves also as a source of physical and spiritual regeneration, of

Nowhere is this heritage more important than here in New England. Even Medford can boast a rich maritime experience, although its physical remnants are now scarcely to be seen. I would argue that the pervasive nature of the sea in our lives, as avenue, arena, and source, calls for our attention and provides an ideal subject for Fletcher, with its interdisciplinary approach to a “global perspective.” Let’s make it a “global **salt water** perspective.” *f*

ENDNOTES

- 1 John F. Kennedy, "Remarks on Australian Ambassador's dinner for America's Cup race, Newport, Rhode Island, 14 September 1962," Papers of John F. Kennedy, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, available at: <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKPOF-040-005.aspx#>.
- 2 These lines appear in the Navy Hymn, also known as "Eternal Father, Strong to Save." *The Episcopal Hymnal*, #512, 1940.
- 3 Rachel Carson, *The Sea Around Us* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951).
- 4 *The Atlantic World of Robert G. Albion*, Benjamin W. Labaree, ed. Wesleyan University Press; 1st Edition (Jan 1975).