

A response to Mike Bender, If Maritime Historians Are in Danger of “being left with their journals and not much else” (Lewis Fischer), What Can Those Journals Tell Us About Ourselves? A Ten-Year Study.¹

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There are many questionable assumptions in Mike Bender’s article. It builds on his previous work in the non-peer reviewed annual publication of the South West (England) Maritime History Society, *Maritime South West*, of which he is the current editor, described in the article as a “major” journal (p.5). It is not. Whereas, the other three journals sampled, the double-blind refereed, *The Mariner’s Mirror* and the *International Journal of Maritime History* are leading international journals, the *Journal for Maritime Research* (editor, Robert not ‘Ronald’ Blyth) is getting there. I question the statistical validity of a comparison between a non-peer reviewed annual publication from 2009 to 2018 and three peer reviewed (two quarterly, one twice yearly) academic journals. Further, regarding the *IJMHR*, the editorship has recently passed from the University of Hull to the University of Leiden in the Netherlands, so is no longer “British.”

In his article, Bender does not acknowledge the significance of the centenary issue of *The Mariner’s Mirror* 97, no. 1 (2011), in which I (as hon. editor), published 22 articles in 398 pages from leading scholars (admittedly only one was female, Susan Rose), most of which were surveys of the state of the huge range of disciplines contained in *Mariner’s Mirror* since its inception (including many of the areas Bender states are not published). I set the questions for each individual author and each article was peer reviewed. Of the 22 articles, only six were on naval history. Bender repeats the hoary old cliché that the *Mariner’s Mirror* was too naval. In this he is not alone. My great

¹ *The Northern Mariner/Le Marin du Nord* 32, no. 1 (2022): 1-20.

friend, the late Skip Fischer gave this as a reason for setting up the *International Journal of Maritime History (IJMH)* in 1989. Coincidentally (if you believe in coincidences), “International” disappeared from the front cover of *Mariner’s Mirror*. Perhaps Bender might ask his Exeter colleague, Dr. Michael Duffy, a previous editor, how this came about. I reinstated “International” on the front cover of *Mariner’s Mirror* during my editorship.

The rejection rate of *Mariner’s Mirror* in my eight years as hon. editor was comparable to that of the *IJMH* (eighty-three percent).² Skip and I collaborated on weeding out double submissions during the entire period of my editorship and on maintaining quality above all else. Bender notes (p. 17) that I made a point in an editorial on “substandard submissions.”³ This did not go down well with my editorial board as it implied criticism of their graduate students, which it was, and some members left as a result. These substandard submissions were never sent to referees, they went straight from my desk to a wastebbin, and were not part of the journal’s metrics. Editors are not there to be popular – they are the gatekeepers of academic standards. Moreover, editors can only work with what is submitted to their journals. They can of course solicit articles at conferences, seminars, etc. with no guarantee of publication and when received submit these to double blind referees. By being sticklers on quality, both Skip and I brought our respective journals up to the highest international standard ranked by the European Reference List for the Humanities, which has internationally recognized scholarly significance, with articles regularly cited worldwide.

Of the four journals, *Mariner’s Mirror* is the oldest and most read and cited. It has by far the largest membership, which is growing. The *IJMH* and *Northern Mariner* have always had small memberships in comparison, nor can they financially compete with the *Mirror’s* parent, the Society for Nautical Research. I am unaware of the membership of the South West Maritime History Society or the readership of its journal, *Maritime South West*. The danger of journals with small memberships is that when members’ contributions are rejected by the editor, they cancel their subscriptions.

Bender might have acknowledged in a footnote the *Research in Maritime History* series now at fifty-five publications published by Liverpool University Press and still going strong under my sole editorship. Most of this series was written by economic not maritime historians. Indeed, the previous publisher (and of the *IJMH*), the International Maritime Economic History Association, changed its title to the International Maritime History Association to attract a wider field of authors. I challenged this in an Open Letter in the *IJMH* on the basis that dropping “Economic” would open the door to the approaches to

² During my tenure as hon. editor, I took no payment or expenses.

³ Hugh Murphy, “Editorial,” *The Mariner’s Mirror* 95, no. 4 (2009): 388.

maritime history of Braudel, Foucault, and their disciples, post-modernists, structuralists, and historicists, and asked those who supported it to give their reasons – no-one replied.⁴

Bender's pigeonholing of the discipline into two categories, mercantile and naval, is a false dichotomy. Historically, mercantile has basically encompassed everything that is not naval history, although the two are interlinked. Indeed, as Nicholas Rodger noted, naval and maritime history is widely conceived to be an amalgam of or an uncomfortable hybrid of two distinct subjects, and that not everybody would accept that the connections between the two are or ought to be close."⁵

Bender states (p.11) that "Maritime historians are wont to mourn the separation from archaeology." I don't. *The Mariner's Mirror* was the foundational journal for nautical archaeology, but with the launch of the *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology* in 1972 that began to change. Specialist subjects are best dealt with by specialist journals.

When discussing historiographical matters, it is incumbent on the author to cite all relevant publications. Among the many landmark pieces that Bender failed to cite are: Ralph Davis, "Maritime History: Progress and Problems," in *Businesses and Businessmen: Studies in Business, Economic and Accounting History*, ed. in S. Marriner (University of Liverpool Press, 1978); David M. Williams, "The Progress of Maritime History, 1953-1993," *Journal of Transport History* 14, no. 2 (1993): 126-141; J.B. Hattendorf (ed.), *Ubi Sumus? The State of Naval and Maritime History* (Newport, Rhode Island, 1994); Frank Broeze, *Maritime History at the Crossroads. A Critical Review of Recent Historiography* (Liverpool University Press, 1995); Lewis Johnman and Hugh Murphy, "Maritime and Business History in Britain. Past, Present and Future?" *IJMHS* 19, no. 1 (2007): 239-270 (an attempt to involve more business historians in maritime history). He also failed to mention his colleague at Exeter, Maria Fusaro, "Maritime History between the Public and Academia," *IJMHS* 24, no. 2 (2012): 239-250. There are many more but suffice it to say there has been a long-running debate on the future of maritime history, with Bender's contribution the latest in the field.

Great Britain was the epicentre of maritime history *per se*, but that is changing, not least with the transfer of the editorship of the *IJMHS* to Leiden. The loss of internationally acclaimed scholars such as John Armstrong (University of West London), Peter Neville Davies (University of Liverpool), and David M. Williams (University of Leicester) is irreplaceable. All three were trained

⁴ Hugh Murphy, "Communication. An Open Letter to the International Maritime Economic History Association," *IJMHS* 24, no. 2 (2012): 251.

⁵ N.A.M. Rodger, "Great Britain," in *Ubi Sumus? The State of Naval and Maritime History*, ed. J.B. Hattendorf (Newport, Rhode Island, 1994), 50.

as economic historians. I too am trained in law, politics, and business and economic history and have never called myself a maritime historian. However, I have contributed twelve articles to the *IJMH*, twelve articles to the *Mariner's Mirror*, five to *The Northern Mariner*, and two books in the *Research in Maritime History Series*, with a more than equal amount elsewhere, so I have more than supported maritime history. Other academics take note.

Overall, however, Bender is of course correct at the dire state of maritime history in British universities. It is lamentable that so few PhD students go on to full time jobs in our universities and the tiny amount who do are usually on precarious short-term contracts. When one looks at the Discovery channel, for example, on maritime subjects there is no shortage of contributors who identify as maritime historians. In the university sector, however, it is extremely rare as maritime history is still seen in certain quarters as an amateur pursuit not worthy of serious academic study. This is, of course, nonsense as the sea was the original progenitor of globalisation and ninety percent of the world's trade is carried in ships. There are exceptions, Exeter University for naval history and for a long-running series of annual conferences, King's College London, again for naval history as part of its War Studies degrees, and also host to the long-running British Commission for Maritime History Seminar series, with mercantile outliers at Hull, which also has its own seminar series, Portsmouth and Plymouth universities. Professor Sarah Palmer's Greenwich Maritime History Institute barely survived her retirement and is now known as the Greenwich Maritime Centre. Glasgow University remains pre-eminent in shipbuilding history.⁶

What then is a maritime historian? To my mind, anyone or anybody who calls themselves a maritime historian and has published on a maritime topic is entitled to call themselves maritime historians. Nevertheless, we should not get too hung up on descriptive titles. Authors of all academic disciplines who engage with humankind's relationship with the sea and wish to publish in our journals are welcome to do so. However, academics, naturally write for their own specialist journals. Moreover, there is a vast constituency for maritime history outside academia, which is largely untapped. Many are derided by academics as enthusiasts, but in the publications of the World Ship Society, these enthusiasts have built up a vast knowledge bank on shipping companies.

⁶ There have been four major books emanating from the Centre for Business History in Scotland over the past two decades. L. Johnman and H. Murphy, *British Shipbuilding and the State since 1918: a political economy of decline* (Liverpool University Press, 2002); A. Slaven, *British Shipbuilding. 1500-2010. A History* (Crucible Books, Lancaster, 2013); A. Slaven and H. Murphy, *Crossing the Bar. An Oral History of British Shipbuilding, Ship Repair and Marine Engine Building Industries in the Age of Decline, 1956-1990* (University of Liverpool Press, 2013), and H. Murphy, *Shipbuilding in the United Kingdom. A History of the British Shipbuilders Corporation* (Routledge, London, 2021).

Indeed, in shipbuilding, the British Shipbuilding Database at the Department of Marine Transport of Newcastle University, although not yet searchable online, is the most comprehensive source for ships built in Great Britain and Ireland. Moreover, the four great shipbuilding rivers, Clyde, Tyne, Tees, and Wear are all covered online regarding ships built on these rivers and are run by volunteers.

The move to Leiden University of the *IJMH* presages not only a changing of the guard, from initially, Memorial University and then to Hull University, but a new approach to maritime history, with the journal's first female editor in chief, Catia Antunes (Leiden) and Michiel van Groesen as editor (Leiden), and five assistant editors, two of which are based in the Netherlands, one in England, one in India, and one in Mexico. None of the seven are English nationals or have English as their first language and are thus likely to view maritime history differently from what was previously mainstream.⁷ That maritime history in this journal may move from a predominantly Anglo-centric viewpoint to a more inclusive continental and international one is likely. Indeed, in the November 2022 issue of the *IJMH*, none of the 21 authors and co-authors are English, Irish, Scots, or Welsh, or for that matter, Scandinavian authors who tend to follow the British empirical tradition. Moreover, in the editorial, the editors appear to be attempting to "enlarge the future scope of the journal towards earlier periods."⁸

My particular *bête noire* with maritime history is with what I consider, setting aside that it publishes the *IJMH*, the International Maritime History Association. None of the Association's former executive turned up at its recent Congress in Porto and with two fully costed bids already tabled for the next congress from Estonia and the Aland Islands, a bid from the floor at the general meeting of IMHA members was taken and the next congress will take place in Busan in South Korea in two years' time. Quite what the Estonians and the Aland Islanders thought of this, and who both went through the proper channels in their bids, is not known. There was nothing in the IMHA bylaws to prevent this occurring, showing a remarkable lack of foresight in those who drafted them. As usual we got the usual stitch-up of a new executive decided in advance of the congress and voted in *nem con*. In a letter from the new President of the IMHA, Ingo Heidbrink, he admitted that the new executive committee would be able to prepare necessary amendments and changes to the bylaws of the IMHA - thereby closing the stable door after the horse has

⁷ Assistant editors are: Pepijn Brandon, International Institute of Social History, Netherlands, Marten Boon, University of Utrecht, Netherlands, Remi Dewiere, Northumbria University, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Radhika Seshan, University of Pune, India and Ivan Valdez-Bubnov, Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico.

⁸ *International Journal of Maritime History* 34, no. 4 November (2022): Editorial.

bolted! Heidbrink went on to state that the IMHA is, “a comparatively small organisation considering that it is the global umbrella organisation for a whole historical subdiscipline.”⁹ I relate this to highlight what a small coterie of academics with an equally small membership who purport to be the guardians of international maritime history, and in reality, only involve the university sector are doing. It is a self-perpetuating clique, and one that does the wider maritime community no favours whatsoever.

Contrast this with the Society for Nautical Research (SNR) who have published *Mariner’s Mirror* since 1911, who on an annual basis support conferences, offer grants to students, help to maintain HMS *Victory* at Portsmouth Dockyard through its Save the Victory Fund and contribute to the purchase of marine paintings to the National Maritime Museum through its MacPherson Fund. The Society has an online newsletter, *Topmasts*, a series of online blogs, and offers its quarterly journal to students at half price. It has an online members forum, which is very popular and where queries are posted, and answers (mostly) given. Like the *Northern Mariner* and the *IJMH* it has digitised its entire content, which is free to members, who in total by far outnumber all other maritime societies.¹⁰ Moreover, the publisher of *Northern Mariner*, the SNR’s sister society, the Canadian Nautical Research Society (CNRS) also supports conferences, offers prizes to students and authors, and does much more besides.

Perhaps, if the IMHA reached out to the SNR and CNRS and other societies we may move towards a more global network of maritime history. However, this is unlikely due to misplaced academic arrogance.

There is also a danger, to my mind, that we move from the British empirical tradition to what I would term post-history. Are we in for academic waffle on “contested spaces” or “Otherness,” or God forbid, “post modernism,” and its academic cheerleaders, to whom no fad could be ignored so long as it aided their career chances. The idea that there was no objective truth, only a series of relative, subjective, and competing narratives is anathema to me. If this turns out to be the direction of travel of maritime history, then the discipline is on a one-way ticket to Palookaville. Count me out! As Bender states, he fears for the future of maritime history, and on this he is correct, so should we all.

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⁹ “Letter of the President of the Executive Board of the International Maritime History Association,” *IJMH* 34, no. 4 (2022): 521-523.

¹⁰ For a history of the SNR, see, H. Murphy and D.J. Oddy, *Mirror of the Seas: A Centenary History of the Society for Nautical Research* (London, 2011).