

Ten Years of *The Northern Mariner*: A Decade of Dedicated Nautical Research and the Challenge Ahead

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When I read Dr. Mike Bender's critical article on trends in nautical research in a recent number of the *Northern Mariner*, it struck me that he was writing not just about journals he had selected for analysis but about the field in general. His paper once again raised the question of the current state and the prospects for the future of nautical history.¹ Seeing the numbers that Dr. Bender produced and the inferences that could be drawn from them inspired me to look more closely at how we in the Canadian Nautical Research Society (CNRS) would fare from similar scrutiny.

Dr. Bender has provided an analysis of ten years of articles appearing in four journals: *The Mariner's Mirror*, *Maritime South West*, *the International Journal of Maritime History*, and the *Journal for Maritime Research*.² He examines the articles from a number of perspectives and categorizes them according to authorship, content, identity, and periodization. Based on this, he provides several observations, few of which, unfortunately, should come as a surprise to those working, or interested in the field. Surprises, if any, come from the intensity of the quantification supporting the anecdotal observations which many of us have made.

After looking at 744 papers, Dr. Bender noted that 88.1 percent dealt with either war and naval matters (43.3 percent) or mercantile subjects (44.8 percent). However, if one excludes the papers in his own journal, *Maritime South West*, the situation is even more extreme with 95.7 percent of the articles being either

¹ This seems to be a favourite research topic for nautical scholars and the journals are littered with self examination which speaks to a lack of self-esteem for the profession.

² 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," *The Northern Mariner/Le marin du nord* 32, no. 1 (Spring 2022): 1-20. The *TNM* article expands on a previous study by Bender: "Who Sails the Seaway of Diamonds? The Ten Year Study Revisited," *Maritime South West* 33 (2020): 199-213.

classified as war/naval (50.8 percent) or mercantile (44.9 percent). There is some justification in looking at only three of the four journals as there seems to be major differences between *Maritime South West* and the others – it is not peer reviewed. While the other journals note the high level of rejection of substandard submissions, Dr. Bender (writing as editor of *Marine South West*) notes, “In fact the editor invariably agrees to publish, but then may request changes and/or offer to help with a re-write.” This results in a “more permeable boundary between the researcher and publication.”³

The results of the study are clear cut. For Dr. Bender:

Maritime history journals may claim to be interested in all aspects of humankind’s relationship to the sea, but, in actuality, only papers on navy and mercantile marines are published, with a flavouring of other approaches. ... Alternative representations barely feature even though study of many other ways in which people have related to the sea could so easily show how vast and fascinating the subject area is.⁴

He decries the lack of articles on fishing, on recreational usage of the sea, on the relationship between manufacturers and shipping, on coastal transport, on the participation of marginalized groups, on the relationship between the sea and the arts, on climate change, and by implication many other possible areas of study relating to history and the sea.

This damning indictment of the journals named raises the question of how our own journal, *The Northern Mariner*, might compare when examined in the same light?

The Journal

The Northern Mariner was founded by the CNRS as a peer-reviewed journal in 1991. The society itself has clearly defined objectives: to promote nautical research in Canada, to disseminate the results of such research, and to encourage an awareness of Canada’s maritime heritage. The journal is unusual in that since 2006 it also serves as the publication of another organization with similar but not identical goals – The North American Society for Oceanic History (NASOH). The objectives of this society are: To promote the dissemination of information among individuals within North America who are interested in the history of the sea and inland waterways, and to foster a more general awareness of historical matters pertaining to the sea and its relationship to North America. The society strives to disseminate articles, notes, and documents concerning the history of the sea and inland waterways by means of various publications and to work in cooperation with local, state, regional, and national North American organizations interested in the history of the sea and inland waterways.

In one case the focus is promoting awareness of Canadian research and the

³ Bender, “A Ten-Year Study,” 6.

⁴ Bender, “A Ten-Year Study,” 15.

maritime heritage of Canada, in the other a major consideration is awareness of the sea and its relationship to North America. The differences are less important than the similarities. Unlike most of the organizations and journals Dr. Bender examined, the combined scope has a geographic limitation in that the area of focus relates almost exclusively to North America and its surrounding waters. *The Northern Mariner* reflects the overlapping areas of interest of the two organizations and is “devoted to the study of maritime affairs and the inland waterways of the nations that touch the seas of the northern hemisphere.” The editorial span is much less limited: “The journal’s content spans the fields of naval, political, diplomatic, social, cultural, gender, Indigenous, economic, and environmental history.” In fact, it may be easier to suggest that it encompasses the full spectrum of historical research.

A previous overview of the history of the CNRS and of the content of *The Northern Mariner* appeared in 2016 and the dominance of war and naval articles in the early days of the journal is evident from that discussion.⁵ To what extent has that emphasis continued during the recent period?

The Approach

While replicating Dr. Bender’s ten-year study exactly posed several problems, I followed the same general approach. I examined all articles appearing in the on-line editions of *The Northern Mariner* between 2011 and 2020, with the exception of one special issue in vol. 24, no. 3-4 (2014) which was dedicated to the history of the Royal Canadian Navy, inclusion of which would have further skewed the results.⁶ Bender’s analysis of the journals also included notes, reports, and documents but excluded book reviews and queries.⁷ Generally, these shorter notes or studies, rather than appearing in *TNM*, are the subject of newsletters such as *Argonauta* and websites of the organizations involved, and I have therefore not included them in the approach taken here. This gave a total of 93 articles.⁸ With this much smaller database, statistical analysis is considerably less precise. In addition, some of the considerations that Bender applied (Euro-centrism, British authorship, pre-1500 subject period) were clearly not applicable in the instant case.

⁵ Alec Douglas, “Of Ships and Sealing Wax,” *The Northern Mariner/Le marin du nord* 16, no. 3 (July 2016): 247-258.

⁶ Depending on the online editions is not without its hazards. The very first article I sought, Rodney P. Carlisle’s “The American *Code Duello*” is indexed as appearing in vol. XXI (2011), but the on-line link takes you to a research note by a different author. The index gives the same page number to both, and the Carlisle essay could not be found, reducing the number of articles examined.

⁷ During the ten-year period, *TNM* published over 1100 book reviews and review articles. This is significant in that the original comment that Dr. Bender responds to is one made by Lewis Fischer suggesting that the reviews in nautical journals seem to command an inordinate amount of coverage compared with other content. Bender, “A Ten-Year Study,” 20.

⁸ One article appeared in three parts over separate issues of the journal but is included here as a single article.

One area that Bender looked at was authorship and here an issue emerged when considering *TNM*. For much of the period *TNM* appears to have provided no identifying information about the article authors in its on-line content. It is only when the index pages began including notes from the editor in 2017 that this is remedied to a limited extent.⁹ While one might argue that the identity of the author is not essential for judging the value of an article, it is useful in assessing their prior experience in the area and for locating additional research. It also might have been instructive, given the joint role as journal for both CNRS and NASOH, to try and ascertain Canadian versus American participation but this was not possible without author identification. I have retained Bender's categorization of author gender for comparative purposes and have added language of publication as the CRNS is an organization inclusive of both English and French writers and *TNM* publishes articles in both languages. Prior to 2021, abstracts of articles appearing in either English or French were published with an abstract in the other language. The current practice is to have abstracts in both languages.

As this examination was precipitated with the observation of the restricted nature of the article coverage noted by Bender, I have retained the war/navy and mercantile categories generally as he has defined them:

War/Navy: Papers focussed on any state navy, plus papers on war, defense, diplomacy, and sovereignty.

Mercantile: Papers concerning the transporting of goods or people by sea and the transportation of goods to and from inland sites to ports, and the building of ships for that purpose.

Bender developed a measure to assess Anglo-centrism. Given the mandates of the two organizations contributing to the *Northern Mariner* I replaced this category with a geographical breakdown for subjects. The areas are broad and are not defined simply by the Atlantic, Pacific, or Arctic coasts but by the oceans themselves. Inland waterways and Great Lakes have been grouped together. Again, some articles in the journal cover a number of these geographic areas while others are not location specific. For that reason, geographical location assignments do not mirror the number of articles in total.

Rather than impose a specific uniform periodization or those periods used by Bender, I have tried to group the papers into spans which relate more closely to North American history. The period of exploration and development ending about 1800 includes the American Revolutionary War years and may be slightly swelled by those events. A second grouping covers the first half of the nineteenth century up to about the period of the Civil War and Confederation and again may have

⁹ If this information is provided earlier, it must have been only in the printed edition. Researchers using online editions are not able to access such information. On a personal note, on wishing to contact the author of an article relevant to my own research I was unable to find any information on Google Scholar (which included *TNM* articles) nor did I have enough identifying information about the individual to narrow down an online search of a relatively common name.

somewhat of a “bump” in numbers owing to the activities during the 1812-1814 and Civil War periods. The remainder of the periods span the First and Second World Wars, the period between them, and the post-war or Cold War era. I have been reminded by the *Argonauta* editor that these periods are all bounded by conflicts so that even while trying to move beyond a military perspective it retains a certain dominance.

Subject categorization is not always simple and the degree of specialization is to a very great extent subjective, especially when there are overlapping identifications. This, however, can be a strength as articles which are not easily dumped into convenient groupings can sometimes be the ones which stretch the boundaries and stimulate fresh thinking. Several articles examined had relevance in several fields and were double or triple coded – accordingly, totals do not always tally 100 percent. Some articles are not subject to this sort of classification analysis at all. For example, John Hattendorf’s 2017 article on the state of nautical history, and Alec Douglas’s 2016 contribution on the history of Canadian nautical research are both generalist approaches spanning the whole field of nautical research – a kind of meta-history.¹⁰ Again, not every article can be subject to geographical or temporal assignment either because they are more generalist approaches or are on topics which are not easily identified with specific geographical areas or periods.

Given that the sample size is less than one-seventh of that used by Bender, no attempt has been made to exhaustively create categories when a single article does not fall into a more general classification.

Results

	Subcategory	Number	%
Number of papers		93	
Number of authors		97	
Single author papers		89	95.6
Female author		3	3.2
French language		6	6.5
Area	Atlantic	17	18.3
	Arctic	4	4.3
	Pacific	6	6.5

¹⁰ John B. Hattendorff, “*Ubi Sumus? Twenty-five years later,*” *The Northern Mariner/Le marin du nord* 27, no. 1 (January 2017): 1-13; and Alec Douglas, “Of Ships and Sealing Wax,” *The Northern Mariner/Le marin du nord* 16, no. 3 (July 2016): 247-258.

	Great Lakes & inland	8	8.6
	Outside N.A.	12	12.9
Content	War/ Navy	53	57.0
	Mercantile / economic	30	32.3
	Fishing	5	5.4
	Exploration & travel	6	6.6
	Science & Technology	8	8.6
	Shipyards and Shipbuilding	9	9.7
	Crewing and Labour	7	7.5
	Piracy and Privateering	5	5.4
Period	16 th – 18 th century	10	10.8
	19 th century to 1860s	24	26.0
	1860s - 1914	9	9.7
	WW1	9	9.7
	Interwar	6	6.6
	WW2	7	7.5
	Post war / cold war	9	9.7

Observations

For anyone who has followed *TNM* over the decade these results should not come as a great surprise. In fact, these results, in general, differ only slightly from those found by Dr. Bender in his study of the four British journals. Certainly, the *Northern Mariner's* 89.3 percent dominance of two primary subject areas – naval and mercantile – resembles the pattern found in Bender's study, although with the Canadian volumes this pattern is even more skewed with the number featuring war and navy topics being close to double that of mercantile subjects. The remaining 10.7 percent of the articles are lightly spread and, while it may seem as if some of the other themes such as science and shipyard post reasonable numbers, it is primarily because these areas are also counted amongst the two dominant ones. For example, the importance of naval construction in the shipbuilding and technology areas puts many articles in more than one of the boxes.

This survey of the contents published in *TNM* confirms Bender's central

conclusion: "These two aspects are so dominant – ninety percent of all articles – that, despite the protestations to the contrary, little space or interest is left over for other approaches."¹¹ Bender goes on to suggest that areas which are conspicuous in their lack of coverage are significant in British nautical history, such as fishing, yachting, port development, infrastructure, participation by marginalized groups, the sea in the arts and culture. These same areas are also important, if under-represented, components of North American nautical research and history.

Although we may grumble that the best articles are siphoned off and published in other journals dedicated to transportation history, economic history, cultural and arts studies, or social history, to what extent do we have ourselves to blame? How welcoming are we as nautical historians – noted by Bender as an aging and marginalized group whose structures of research and scholarship are much weakened – to new approaches or including new areas of research within a definition of history which seems, at least from an analysis of article and book publication, to be scarcely changed from the 1970s.

While we may consider peer review as the holy grail of publishing, it is not without its drawbacks. If the peer group consists of individuals with a narrow appreciation of the field, then articles selected or approved will tend to follow this direction. Should an article be rejected because it does not accord with the preconception that nautical research should be about either naval or mercantile concerns? Perhaps we should be engaging more with other scholars and re-defining the peer group?

While institutions and programs dedicated solely to nautical history appear to be disappearing, one cannot say that nautical history is following the same path. There is new and exciting work being done in the field by many who do not choose to call themselves nautical historians. They may be social historians or economic historians – or perhaps not historians at all. They may be historical geographers, cartographers, or climate scientists, or even citizen scholars. More and more frequently they wear the hat of environmental historians. If the environment does not include the sea, it is a strange study indeed – so yes, environmental history can be nautical history. Today the work in historical research is becoming dominated by environmental studies. More than simply the flavour of the week, it is an area that is attracting attention, funding, students, and publication. And yet, like nautical history, the subject matter is defined in the widest terms. Deciding what is *not* environmental history is perhaps a more difficult task.

Let me demonstrate this shift by moving from the general to the particular. My own research concerns deal primarily with Atlantic coast matters and I am conscious that *The Northern Mariner* is often not considered as a potential publisher by writers whose work lies outside the traditional subject preferences of the journal. This was most striking for me with the recent publication of

¹¹ Bender, "A Ten-Year Study," 15.

The Greater Gulf, a collection of eleven essays collected under the umbrella description of environmental history.¹² The volume advances the construct of a separate geographic area of interest with shared interests and characteristics, all related to the sea in some way, shape, or form. The chapters all concern the Gulf of St. Lawrence and while a few might ordinarily have been candidates for publication in *The Northern Mariner*, other papers do not accord with what has been the traditional approach of the journal.

The essays include chapters exploring the relationships between Indigenous groups and sixteenth century fishers in the Gulf, coastal resource control in the time of eighteenth century conflict, resource development and exploitation of sea-based industry, the perception of the sea of the Gulf area in nineteenth century travel literature, and the environmental basis of regional identity in popular fiction. This volume is not unique and surveys of recent publications and journals reveal several books and articles which show how authors have chosen to highlight environmental history rather than define the subject as nautical.¹³ All these essays could – and should – be considered as both environmental history *and* as nautical history but the popular view of *The Northern Mariner* is that communicated by our publishing history. Naval and mercantile history welcome, all others not wanted on voyage. The public perception of *The Northern Mariner* is not what we would like to *think* it is, or what we *say* it is – but rather what readers *see* that it is.

We have a choice as to whether we continue to define nautical history narrowly by filling the *TNM* pages with more of the same military and mercantile content or we can look beyond our existing peer-driven biases and embrace what we say we will do in our description of the journal – provide content that truly “spans the fields of naval, political, diplomatic, social, cultural, gender, Indigenous, economic, and environmental history.”¹⁴ There lies our challenge – not just for the journal and its editorial board, but for the entire field of nautical history in Canada.

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¹² Claire E. Campbell, Edward MacDonald and Brian Payne eds., *The Greater Gulf: Essays in the Environmental History of the Gulf of St. Lawrence* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2019).

¹³ Other examples include Jamin Wells, *Shipwrecked: Coastal Disasters and the Making of the American Beach* (Chapel Hill NC: University of North Carolina Press 2020); and several chapters in Claire Campbell and Robert Summerby-Murray eds., *Land and Sea: Environmental History in Atlantic Canada* (Fredericton: Acadiansis Press, 2013).

¹⁴ [Canadian Nautical Research Society - The Northern Mariner \(cnrs-scrn.org\)](http://www.canadian-nautical-research-society.org)