

his previous collaborator, helped immeasurably, in that regard. The book is recommended as an essential one-stop warship reference for historians interested in the French navy and its rivals before the First World War, ship scale modellers and hobbyists, as well as naval wargamers.

Chris Madsen

North Vancouver, British Columbia

A. E. Rooks. *The Black Joke: The True Story of One Ship's Battle against the Slave Trade*. New York, NY: Scribner, www.simonandschuster.com, 2022. 382 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. US \$29.00, cloth; ISBN 978-1-98212-826-5. (E-book available.)

Prepare to encounter more than you may have bargained for: Rooks wields her quill like a scalpel, keeping us up to speed on all facets of the setting, including backstories both personal and political. The tableau of this masterful feast of information is admirably laid out and kept within a 52-month period from September 1827, when the swift, Baltimore-built slave ship *Henriquetta* was intercepted enroute from West Africa to Brazil, to when forces as high as they get – to the Sailor King, William IV himself – turn against the West African Squadron's (WAS) anti-slavery efforts. At that point, the dreaded *Black Joke*, former slaver turned tender then brig, was burned to the water line to cover the bottoms of Admiralty overseers in their base in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

The geographic epicentre of the book is Freetown, British West Africa, where the WAS was conducting its slave-ship-interdiction from the island of Fernando Po, the Gulf of Benin, Biafra, Togo, Guinea, even south to Angola, yet not all the way to Cape Town, South Africa. At that time, Liberia was being checked by US Navy ships like *Java*. At a British outpost known as Bathurst, now Banjul (in the Gambia), are sad reminders of how Africa and much of the imperial world was regarded primarily for what could be stripped from it. Hence the Gold Coast, the Ivory Coast (still the name of a country), and the wrenching name, "Slave Coast."

Palm oil and other cargoes were pulled from many rivers in the region, and slave entrepôts proliferated, including Gallinas (Sierra Leone). The focus, however, was on how wretched this harsh environment could be, and the extreme depths of depravity and inhumanity that played out there from the late 1700s to the mid-1800s in the name of profits, empire, and markets. As the frontispiece warns: "Beware, beware, the Bight of Benin, there's one comes out where fifty went in."

Into this rich, disease-ridden sea of connivance sailed both commercial and naval ships carrying the flags of half-a-dozen countries in the event that

false colours were needed. Bearing in mind that *Black Joke* had been a slaver (and could easily be taken for one again by other slavers), Rooks introduces us to a cast of characters as colourful, strong-willed, and ambitious as one could imagine. Most are Admiralty officers in the British navy in the middle to high end of their careers – one had commanded a ship at Trafalgar under Nelson some 25 years before. Others were the heavyweight traders and leaders of slave-trading cities, owners of slave ship fleets in Brazil or Cuba, and political wranglers.

In one enchanting scene, a slave ship is becalmed at night, while the young British commander is so determined to catch it that his men are rowing the big ship from small boats. The Spanish slavers taunt the British while firing at them, screaming “Come aboard, ye English blackguards!” to which the captain calmly replied from the wheel of his small ship, *Black Joke*, “I’m coming, mon! ... as fast as I can!” (262).

Several portraits and many informative etchings of actual vessels and ports, as well as lists of slaves released, are highly helpful and illuminating. One shortfall, however, is the absence of maps – of the rivers, the coasts, and the proximity to places described. There is a great deal of naval action as we follow the *Black Joke* into battles, chases or interceptions with fourteen ships. These result in the capture and release of 3000 or so persons, meaning they might serve 18 years of indentured (unpaid) labour in the British empire. The ships include *Christina*, *Dos Amigos*, *El Almirante*, *Fraquita*, *Gertrudis*, *Henriquetta*, *Presidente*, *Primero*, *Providencia*, *Rapido*, *Regulus*, *Vengador*, and *Zepharina*. Among the Royal Navy vessels in the WAS from 1827 to 1832 were HMS *Athol*, *Dryad*, *Sybille*, *Fair Rosamond*, *Conflict*, *Plumper*, *Seaflower*, *Brisk*, *Charybdis*, and *Favourite*; one of them designed by the commodore himself. There were arguments whether to even absorb captured slavers like *Black Joke* into the navy.

This is a thoroughly researched, well-written and painstakingly-told book, laying bare some of the most horrific atrocities in humankind. The *Black Joke* headlines this book because it became such a symbol of the successful fight against slavery; so much so, in fact, that in 1832 the black citizens of Freetown attempted to buy and preserve it. As Rooks eulogizes, “The ship had ‘done more towards putting an end towards the vile traffic in slaves than all the ships of the station put together,’ and arguably more than any other single ship ever would” (293-294). For example, it freed more slaves as a naval tender than it had transported as a Brazilian slaver.

Many of the events recorded were handwritten in ink by candlelight by young naval officers at the stern of a torpid, humid warship surrounded by hostile forces ashore and afloat. Their needs were often unmet and all segments of the population seemed to be dying of pestilence and imprisonment at depressing

rates. The author has also toiled through musty Admiralty dispatches from two centuries ago in order to find and share kernels of colour and truth revealed in tattered shreds of paper. These naval officers and men stemmed the tides of rivers to stand like sieves against slavery. Their adversary was an extremely profitable, multinational industry which put sugar in Britain's omnipresent teacups: the pro-slavery lobby had allies at the highest levels. Rooks' dramatic storytelling is anchored by seventy-five pages of references, making this a rare and rich jewel of a book.

Eric Wiberg
Boston, Massachusetts

Gene Eric Salecker. *Destruction of the Steamboat Sultana: The Worst Maritime Disaster in American History*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, www.usni.org, 2022. xii+497 pp., illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. US \$39.95, cloth; ISBN 978-1-68247-743-4. (E-book available.)

In his book, Gene Eric Salecker paints a picture of the events before, during, and after the destruction of the steamboat *Sultana*. His comprehensive work provides something useful to both students of maritime history, as well as readers interested in other aspects of history, and their interaction with the events discussed.

The author opens with a brief history of previous steamboats named *Sultana*, and the situation regarding the use of steamboats at the end of the American Civil War. He then proceeds to explore the conditions that prisoners of war, the bulk of the passengers on the ship, found themselves in as the conflict ended. Next follows a discussion of the financial motivations that influenced the contracts which were used to pay operators to repatriate prisoners after the war. Students of economic and financial history will find something of interest in Salecker's in-depth explanation of how the contracts were written, as well as how all parties involved were paid. He also explores the nature of corruption that often surrounded these contracts, as operators were driven by operating costs and profit motives, rather than a desire to get prisoners back to their homes.

Salecker vividly traces the entire length of the *Sultana*'s final trip down the river, from her loading to her fiery destruction, and the aftermath. He paints a harrowing picture of passengers confronted by a ship on fire and the days and nights that followed. Readers will find a thorough and comprehensive exploration of these events both before and after the sinking, including follow-up investigations, trials, scapegoating and blame sharing. One of the author's expressed reasons for writing the book was to fill in gaps in his previous work