

of Russian poachers seeking caviar-rich salmon and the protected kaluga sturgeon (which can grow up to 18 feet long). They zipped along in a “tough, 25-foot sloop, whose four wonky seats have been torn from somewhere else” (241). Two policemen in a patrol boat overtook them, but they were easygoing compared to those elsewhere along the route. The officers knew the locals needed the fish to live, and they were happy to joke and sip a little vodka before departing. Away from the bonhomie on the water, however, Thubron found dire poverty, isolation, and a history of catastrophic floods. One of the poacher’s wives was blunt: “I scream every day. I forget human language. We have no television, no telephone, no radio.” She continued: “If your wife was out here, she’d be gone in two days. I’ve been here eleven years” (262).

The Amur’s mouth is largely to blame for its dearth of commerce. Thubron found it an underwhelming “labyrinth of shoals, shallows and dead ends” (267) that is iced over seven months of the year. Nonetheless, during the mid-nineteenth century, the Russians seized the area from China and established the port town of Nikolaevsk-on-Amur in hopes of developing it into a busy eastern entrepot to rival San Francisco. But the new lighthouse, log trading houses, shops selling fancy wares, and chuffing steamboats failed to overcome its natural disadvantages. A century and a half later, Thubron rambled a declining burg whose less than 30,000 people had “nobody to trade with and nothing to trade” (268).

Colin Thubron does what a good travel writer should do in this highly readable book – he introduces the reader to a little-known and less-frequented place, unfolds its eventful history as well as its stunning natural beauty, and introduces some remarkable people who inspire both fear and hope for the future. And all that with two fractured ribs and a broken ankle!

John S. Sledge
Fairhope, Alabama

Steven Ujifusa. *Barons of the Sea, and Their Race to Build the World’s Fastest Clipper Ship*. New York: Simon & Schuster, www.simonandschuster.ca, 2021 426 pp., appendix, notes, index, \$29.99, paper; ISBN 978-1-47674-598-5. (E-book available.)

Before the space entrepreneurs of the twenty-first century, the railroad magnates of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, there were the barons of the nineteenth-century Industrial Age – some involved with ships as well as roads. A unique group of competitors spanning the years from the 1840s through 1860s in the United States sought to outdo each other in building the fastest, finest, and most profitable clipper ships to carry cargo from Canton, China

(modern day Guangzhou, China) to the United States. By the twentieth century, the maritime quest for speed often focused on the transatlantic luxury liners and the Blue Riband. Decades earlier, the focus of American industrialists was on clipper ships and China. It is the latter quest that Steven Ujifusa, author of *A Man and His Ship* (2012) presents in an engaging, fast-moving, and well-written book, *Barons of the Sea*.

Telling the story of personalities such as Warren Delano (grandfather of Franklin Delano Roosevelt), Abiel Abbot Low, Moses Grinnell, John Murray Forbes, and Donald McKay, the author tells not only the story of ships, but also of families that would dominate Boston and New York business for almost a hundred years. Not unlike the rulers of city-state of Venice in previous centuries with its families whose wealth derived from maritime trade, American families of the clipper ship trade created their own aristocracy of power built upon trade with China of porcelain, tea, silk, lacquer, jades, and other goods desired in the West. To be sure, there also was an underlying competitiveness with Great Britain that was both national and financial. Ironically, it was crates of Chinese hyson tea that had been dumped into Boston Harbor in 1773.

American clippers ships doubled the speed with which British ships could bring the same goods to market. Under American sailing masters and American clipper ships, return voyage times dropped from six months to just over three months duration from Canton to New York or Canton to London. America was being transformed from an agrarian society to an international maritime nation long before the sail-to-steam maritime revolution. The rise of the clipper barons was also set against the backdrop of Britain's two Opium Wars with China, from which the United States benefitted diplomatically and economically.

Ujifusa weaves an engaging narrative that begins in 1839 with a young Warren Delano at his estate, Algonac, north of New York City, thinking back twenty years to his time in China and his business relationship with Houqua (Wu Ping-Chien), a great Chinese merchant, who helped Delano prosper. A story within a story is the leisure and competitive sailing of Westerners in Canton during the hours not spent in the counting houses known as "Factories." Also interesting, though not unusual, is the way in which friendships made among the "Canton bachelors" in the mid-1840s would develop into the later intertwining of families through marriage.

Timed to the seasons, including the monsoon season and prevailing winds, ships of many nations vied for the best tea, especially the first picking of hyson, with hopes great fortunes to be made at auction. American merchants and ships were the last to arrive in then-200-year-old market. Once around Cape Horn, they diverged to major ports of their respective nations. For the United States, it was the docks of Boston and New York City. While many merchants and

mariners sought and made fortunes in whaling and whale oil, others turned to tea and some to both. It was tea that was to prove to be the more profitable of the two commodities.

The author's eighteen chapters present an aspect of nineteenth-century history that is only touched upon in most histories, if at all. Chapter 3 is especially informative as it deals with American merchants' the unspoken commodity in the 1800s – opium. Made possible, in part, by small and fast British and American schooners known as “opium clippers,” the illegal opium trade undergirded much of the legal Western trade.

Replacing the first-generation Baltimore clippers, the ships developed during and after the 1840s became the standard clipper ship of the China trade. A chapter is devoted to each of two designers without whom the clipper ship story would be incomplete – Nathaniel Brown Palmer, known as “Captain Nat” and Donald McKay. It was McKay's second clipper ship, the *Flying Cloud*, sold to shipping magnate Moses Grinnell by Enoch Train in 1851 for \$90,000 that is probably the most iconic of the clipper ships (along with McKay's *Sovereign of the Seas*).

The author recounts not only the history of American maritime fortunes, family dynasties, and economic rivalries, he tells also of the human cost in the quest for speed and profit. The loss of ships and crews was an ever-present threat that was realized by far too many sailors. Clipper ship sailors faced all the hardships written described by Herman Melville in his 1850 work *White-Jacket*.

Ujifusa helpfully reminds readers that clipper ship routes were not limited to the China trade. The discovery of gold in California in January 1848 brought enthusiasm, desire, and clamouring demand for rapid passage from America's eastern seaboard to the California goldfields. With the discovery of gold in California and American national expansion westward, the China to San Francisco voyage became lucrative. Carrying cheap Chinese labour for the building of railroad and other enterprises, the clipper ships enlarged their manifests of valuable cargo.

The author chronicles well the transition from “Indiaman” to “clipper ship” in an interesting narrative. He contextualizes details and gives readers a work that flows easily. Especially helpful is the appendix that provides line drawings and sail configurations of clipper ships, also showing their design development. Readers will not be disappointed.

Timothy J. Demy
Newport, Rhode Island