

12 January 1899.

The illustration of a large thirty-four-foot, twenty-ton lifeboat parked before the Blue Ball Inn to repair a wheel, is captioned: “So that’s 114 pints, 300 packets of chips, 200 pies, a dry sherry for the vicar... and who is the Diet Coke?” In the following pages, we learn that shovelers cleared the way for the boat, shaving the corner off a house, knocking down walls, and widening roads. Although the boat made it to the ship, there were no rewards. Fortunately, the shipowner “shelled out twenty-seven pounds five shillings and sixpence to repair all the damage to walls and buildings. Sadly, four horses died during the event.” (35-36)

This book is highly entertaining and the information is easily accessible. There are no indices, only a half-dozen short footnotes. Geographically, the reach is vast – two nodes being the UK, with northern Europe, and the Antipodes and southeast Asia. South America and the polar regions receive less coverage. Thankfully, the reader is provided with five colourful maps, several original documents like the original plans for D-Day which were to have been destroyed, and even one photograph. There are three inset boxes with sub-stories. The autobiographical portions are light and generally sweet, often referring to a star-struck boy or boys staring at nautical ephemera.

Eliciting a chuckle from readers is not usually achieved by staying safely within the lines of convention, and few would accuse Quirky of being boring! Despite covering serious topics like disastrous ship and air wrecks, brutal battles, and seaborne hardships, the author retains the buoyancy of a kapok life vest, keeping us feeling safe and dry, though his humour is neither.

If this enjoyable book had a central theme, I feel it would be “laugh and learn.” A pleasant adjunct to Quirk’s frivolity is his modesty. He encourages readers: “Keep reading this book—you will always learn something useless” (50). And that is really the joy of this book – it is like a fortune-cookie that feels deliciously naughty, but has wisdom inside of it.

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**J. W. Richardson. *In The Treacle Mine, the Life of a Marine Engineer*. Dunbeath, Scotland: Whittles Publishing, [www.whittlespublishing.com](http://www.whittlespublishing.com), 2021. 256 pp., illustrations, appendices. UK £16.99, paper; ISBN 978-184995-488-4.**

*In the Treacle Mine: The Life of a Marine Engineer* is the professional autobiography of J.W. Richardson in which he describes his career as a marine engineer from his early beginnings as a junior grade engineer to his time as Chief Engineer. Considering the number of such memoirs or autobiographies

published in recent years, is this necessary? Is there something that makes this book different and therefore, worth reading either by a professional maritime historian, or even someone interested in maritime history in the post-Second World War period?

Firstly, this book is written by an engineer rather than a nautical officer, and thus sheds light on the daily life, work and experiences of engine crews rather than the numerous naval officers who have published their autobiographies recently. Secondly, and equally important, J.W. Richardson's perspective is a strictly personal one. He does not attempt to provide a history of marine engineering, but rather shares with the reader his personal experiences, regardless of whether or not they are typical for the profession at large.

Arranged chronologically, the autobiography accompanies the author not only on his way up through the ranks, but also over the various ships in which he served. These vessels range from a large steam turbine ship, to the next one equipped with a traditional triple-expansion steam engine. Technical details of the various engine plants are discussed in great detail, mainly from the standpoint of what different technology meant for the people tending and handling the various plants. Richardson fills substantial space with an in-depth discussion of the equipment. While some readers might find it boring, those who are interested in marine engineering and machinery will definitely appreciate his highly detailed descriptions that provide a much better picture of the actual handling of the equipment than any technical jargon. Most importantly, the author explains why engine crews preferred certain types of machinery over other, sometimes more modern, types of equipment. Living conditions aboard the ship are discussed in comparable detail, providing an insight into a time when going to the crew mess still required changing from a boiler-suit to a more or less complete uniform. Richardson describes the meals provided by the respective shipping companies as well as offerings from the crew bar to illustrate the important role food and drink played in the daily life of a marine engineer. Most intriguing are the descriptions of his various ship mates. Even while admitting that he often cannot even remember the name of a particular crewman, Richardson describes them in such detail that their personalities come alive, a feature understood by anybody who has served on board a ship. Finally, having mainly sailed aboard tankers, his descriptions of ports like Kargh Island in the Persian Gulf offer a unique glimpse of places few sailors outside the enclosed world of tanker shipping have ever visited. A marine historian will appreciate these details as they demonstrate how and why the experience of crews on oil-tankers was completely different from other merchant marine crews in the post-Second World War period.

A selection of private black and white photographs accompanies the text and adds another layer to the world of the modern merchant marine crew. The

photos are useful not only for what they illustrate, but for what they indicate was important (or not) to the owner. The presence of many photos of off-watch situations and shore liberty indicates that, while brief, these moments were often more memorable than the actual work.

Having spent some of his younger years as a professional mariner, this reviewer recognized many aspects of life at sea from his own experience, making the review particularly interesting. Even though Richardson tells his own unique and authentic story as a marine engineer, at the same time, his history is the story of all merchant marine engine crews during the second half of the twentieth century.

*In The Treacle Mine* reads like the transcript of an extended oral history interview, making it an authentic primary source for maritime social and labour history research. It can be easily recommended to any historian interested this topic for the post-Second World War period. It would also appeal to anybody who served in the maritime industries during that time. Many would find their own memories fitting into a broader perspective shared by fellow mariners throughout the industry. With a comparably modest retail price, the book might even be considered as additional reading for a university class studying the maritime history of the second half of the last century, if only to provide students with access to an authentic set of experiences by a professional mariner during that period.

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**Ray Solly. *The Development of Crude Oil Tankers. A Historical Miscellany.* Barnsley, S. Yorks: Pen and Sword, [www.pen-and-sword.co.uk](http://www.pen-and-sword.co.uk), 2021. 186 pp., illustrations, ship index, general index. UK £30, US \$60.00, cloth; ISBN 978-1-52679-241-9.**

This richly illustrated history compiled by a recognized tanker-ship officer, educator, and author, vividly informs us about 160 years of specifically the tanker ships carrying the basic feedstock of our petroleum-reliant world: crude oil. Unlike most other ships, tankers are limited to only those ports globally with the complex technology and storage to handle that volatile and valuable liquid petroleum. Crude oil is the building block for those many other products it can be refined into—motor gasoline (mogas), aviation fuel (avgas), jet fuel, diesel, kerosene, and myriad other products. Under the tanker umbrella there are many variants, from products to chemical, edible oils and gas carriers. Crude is the thick, sandy sludge from the bowels of the earth; the ultimate raw