

Thomas Blake Earle. *The Liberty to Take Fish. Atlantic Fisheries and Federal Power in Nineteenth-Century America*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. www.cornellpress.cornell.edu, 2023. 294 pp., illustrations, maps, charts, notes, bibliography, index. US \$54.95, cloth; ISBN 978-1-50176-892-7. (E-book available.)

For many years I have had, surely like all my colleagues in fisheries history, to answering that nagging question, “why fish?” It is perpetual. No one ever seems to understand what we understand; the fisheries were central to American foreign policy, economic development, and the emerging nationalism in the decades between the Revolution and the Civil War. In this book, Thomas Blake Earle has presented one of the most articulate answers to that question.

Throughout his book, Earle chronicles the role the fisheries and fishermen played in shaping American foreign policy, as well as their place within the nation’s immature sense of itself, its emerging nationalism. During the Early Republic, especially between the American Revolution and the War of 1812, American statesmen used the fisheries as a principal pillar of American independence; the security of fishermen’s access to fishing grounds outside of the United States was synonymous with independence. It was also a subject that bridged the traditional divide in American politics during the Jefferson-Hamilton debates. Fishermen also proved to be good icons of American identity and were exceptional tools for statesmen in a variety of economic policy debates, from bounties to tariffs to a defense of the power of the federal government itself.

Earle boldly states that, “the economy, commerce, war, sectionalism, nationalism, and domestic politics all met at the fisheries. But it was not the unique position of the fisheries in relation to all these forces that gave the fisheries issue its importance. Instead, it is how the federal government sought to solve the fisheries issue that revealed the limits of state power in a world of competing actors” (4). So much can be told of the young nation’s history by exploring its fisheries. As a student of fisheries history, and one who has written on the intersection between fisheries policy and nationalism in the US and the role the average fishermen played in shaping US foreign policy, I find all of this rather convincing. Yet, I wonder how one not so already committed to these arguments would find Earle’s book.

No doubt, he regularly must answer the question “why fish?” as if to justify his entire scholarship. To answer this, Earle mounts an impressive defense that weaves together a wide variety of subdisciplines, from traditional political history of statecraft and foreign policy to more nuanced discussions of identity and nationalism, while also tackling the environmental history so obviously entwined with any study of a natural resource. This latter subject, that of

environmental history, may be the weakest element of the book, although it is not that weak. Earle does address the idea that as a mobile marine resource, historians today must deal with the environment of the fisheries as much as fishermen and policymakers had to in the nineteenth century. He makes several references to the environmental history of the fisheries and environmental diplomacy (that is how statecraft over access to natural resources had to [yet often failed to] account for the vagrancies of nature), but he never really fleshes out the details of the environmental reality or delves deeply into the environmental ethics of either fishermen or statesmen. *The Liberty to take Fish* is more diplomatic history than environmental history, but it carries enough of both to qualify as an important read for practitioners of either. Perhaps I am being too critical here, or at least I do not have much ground to stand on, as I must admit Earle did a far better job at balancing diplomatic, social (labour), and environmental history than I did in my own book.

In the second half of the book, Earle tracks the declining influence of the fisheries and fishermen in American history. The central role that fishermen once played in both the diplomatic contest over the Northwest Atlantic and their place within America's sense of national identity. Both declined rapidly during the latter half of the nineteenth century. This was the result of two important influential factors; first the fisheries industry became less important to the overall economic health of the nation, and second, the rising influence of natural scientists as the source of expertise on fisheries questions pushed out the testimonial role fishermen once played in policy and diplomacy. Before the Civil War, American, Canadian, and British statesmen all relied on the testimony of fishermen in their diplomatic dealings. Furthermore, it was often the action of fishermen that forced the diplomats' hands. Earle not only places the fisheries at the center of American foreign policy in the Early Republic, but he also places the fishermen at the center of that fisheries diplomacy. Earle writes in his introduction that, "At times, perhaps at most times, the federal policy establishment reacted to the decisions fishermen made on the water," (10) and he carries that argument, on the centrality of fishermen, throughout the whole book. To get at this, Earle relies heavily on the diplomatic documents, which are extensive. Every diplomatic dealing related to the fisheries, of which there were many, produced volumes upon volumes of documents. I have had the pleasure of combing these myself and can attest that Earle does a wonderful job at fleshing out the fishermen's perspectives, presented as they are through diplomatic and legal exchanges. This is the best way to get at the fishermen's voice, and again, based on my own research and writing, I heartily agree with Earle's arguments, but I still wonder how those invested in the history of US foreign policy, and not fisheries historians, would react to such a bold argument.

There are so many good things about this book it is hard to wrap it up. Earle weaves together a history of numerous and complex moving parts that include diplomats and statesmen alongside naval officers and fishermen while also bringing in natural scientist and industry leaders, all while bridging the Atlantic borderlands with Americans, Canadians, and British actors. It's not an economic history of the fisheries (thankfully) nor a labour history. It has fair foundations in environmental history, but its greatest contribution is to diplomatic history and the history of American national identity in the Early Republic. It would be an excellent addition to any reading list for courses on US foreign policy before the American Civil War. It is, I think, the best answer we've seen to why historians need to pay more attention to fisheries history.

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Alan Easton (Michael Whitby, ed.). *50 North: An Atlantic Battleground. Lewin of Greenwich, 2021. (Originally published 1963). Illustrations, endnotes, index, appendices. CDN \$114.89, paper; ISBN 978-0-77010-132-9. (E-book available.)*

A long out-of-print memoir of a Canadian naval officer has been recently republished in electronic format, with a rather substantial twist. The author, Alan Easton, commanded several ships throughout the Battle of the Atlantic and his memoirs, first published in 1963, reflect an honest and forthright account of command at sea over the course of the longest single conflict of the Second World War. A true classic in its original form, however, because the author decided to not refer to ships and individuals by their real names, nor specific dates, the editor, Michael Whitby, has painstakingly researched the facts associated with the narrative that make a huge difference to the original.

A Master Mariner in the merchant navy before the war, as well as a naval reservist, Easton offered the tiny, but burgeoning, Royal Canadian Navy a rarity in an experienced mariner who could quickly be trusted with command at sea. A scarcity the navy quickly exploited, seeing him serve over four years of continuous service at sea, which underscores the reason his narrative is compelling. The stories are not just a true reflection of the events he witnessed but are vividly underpinned by the arduous demands of wartime seagoing command in the North Atlantic, north of 50 degrees latitude—hence the title.

The author tells his story through the lens of the four ships he commanded between May 1941 and August 1944, using a simple playing card analogy. The first ship, HMCS *Baddeck*, was a mechanically troublesome corvette (the Knave), followed by HMCS *Sackville*, a trustworthy corvette (the Queen),