

to look back at events to see how they developed, a perspective that is vitally important. I would recommend this book, without hesitation, to anyone with an interest in the Battle of the Atlantic, because first and foremost it was written by a Canadian, commanding Canadians, who was continuously at sea throughout the conflict – this makes it refreshingly different from almost all other accounts.

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Mary K. Bercaw Edwards. *Sailor Talk. Labor, Utterance, and Meaning in the Works of Melville, Conrad, and London*. Liverpool University Press, Studies in Port and Maritime History, www.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk, 2021. xii+283 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. UK £90.00, hardback; ISBN 978-1-80085-965-4.

Sailor Talk: Labor, Utterance, and Meaning in the Works of Melville, Conrad, and London (hereafter *Sailor Talk*) by Mary K. Bercaw Edwards is an academic literary analysis written for others within that field and makes use of its theory, much of which may be unfamiliar to most maritime historians and archaeologists.

Bercaw Edwards prefaces her work with an introduction of the character of the sailor as storyteller in history and literature. She specifically focuses on the language of sailors as a medium of cultural exchange, including examples of words that have entered the general lexicon and have persisted to the present, often divorced in memory from their origin.

The fundamental goal of the book is stated in Chapter 1: to determine the identity of nineteenth-century British and American sailors and what defined them, to examine the origins, nature, and peculiar functions of the language they spoke. There are few archival records of sailor talk, so literary sources may provide some of the best contemporary analogs to analyze. Bercaw Edwards chose to focus on the language of sailors in the works of Melville, Conrad, and London because all three were sailors before they were storytellers.

The author also dives into the “Are sailors serving aboard ships exceptional?” debate. As sailor is both a type of labour and a social identity in the nineteenth century, I believe the author is on the NO side [as am I]. Chapter 1 also discusses the juxtaposition between the ephemeral nature of sailor talk with the necessary precision of nautical language and terminology; slang, swearing, and cursing; and work songs.

Chapter 2 is a discussion of the concept of orality as independent of literacy (something I would say can lead to fluidity in language, thus supporting the author’s argument of the ephemerality of sailor talk). Bercaw Edwards cites Walter J. Ong: “Written words are residue. Oral tradition has no such residue or

deposit.” The chapter then goes into a long discussion of orality and cultural violence, and it is here where the use of literary theory becomes rather opaque for me. If, however, it is premised on the idea that oral traditions have no material “deposit,” then as an anthropologist/archaeologist, I would say that is a false premise. All non-literate cultures, including ones in the present, record history, stories, maps, etc. within landscapes, material culture, etc., including within liminal spaces, say, on a ship during a voyage, using sailor talk to demarcate space, tasks, to talk about officers in shared space without their understanding, etc.

The remainder of *Sailor Talk* is a discussion of the language of sailors via dialogue in representative passages in the works of Melville, Conrad, and London. A chapter is given to each author. Bercaw Edwards presents the maritime experience of each author and briefly the historical context in which it took place for the purpose of ascribing authority to the production of sailor talk within their works. Each chapter contains an overarching argument. For Melville, Bercaw Edwards argues that the performative quality of sailor talk defines Melville’s work. For Conrad, because he learned English from sailors while at sea, his “grounding in the language of seafaring shaped his use of language.” The argument associated with London, however, is more generalized; that language of maritime labour is tied to experience and technical competency. [I would argue it is because by the turn of the twentieth century, the combined labour/social identity of sailor is disentangling as the age of sail ends]. Each chapter discusses several passages of dialogue from the works of each author; however, as someone who has read few of these works, I found it difficult to fully understand the discussion, without the greater context of the novels.

Unfortunately, there is no concluding discussion that returns to the overall goal of the book – to define nineteenth-century British and American sailors in the context of their language, sailor talk, and the function of this language as a medium of technical and cultural exchange as expressed in the work of Melville, Conrad, and London. Did it accomplish this? From the perspective of an archaeologist/historian, I’m not sure. Bercaw Edwards does pose a very interesting question in the afterward, whether a novel with highly technical and/or ephemeral and/or culture-specific language can be enjoyed by a lay readership. She doesn’t explore this, but from a historical perspective, one would assume that as time passes, the language continues to become ever more obscure, yet these novels are still read today.

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