

Eric A. Cheezum. *Chessie: A Cultural History of the Chesapeake Bay Sea Monster*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, www.press.jhu.edu, 2024. xii+274 pp., illustrations, maps, notes, index. US \$22.95, paper; ISBN 978-1-4214-4905-0.

In July 1978, people living in Northern Virginia, on the banks of the Potomac River, reported something unusual moving through the water, heading downstream. It was long, like a giant snake, swimming in such a way that its spine created humps emerging above the surface of the water. It looked like a sea monster! Other sightings followed in that same summer in the lower Potomac and then in the Northern Neck of Chesapeake Bay, around Kent Island.

These events marked the beginning of “the Chessie phenomenon”. Eric Cheezum examines this phenomenon in *Chessie*, a book about how Chesapeake Bay residents, press, and naturalists responded to the presence of a mysterious creature in their waters.

The reported sightings in Chesapeake Bay continued into the mid-1980s. Local news media covered the sightings, naming the creature “Chessie.” The sightings varied. Some described a creature with smooth humps, but some said the humps had spines. The estimated lengths varied. Most witnesses reported a single creature, but one reported four such creatures, each resembling a sea serpent about 30 feet long. One woman described an encounter with an animal that resembled a manatee or large harbour seal.

The varied sightings led to questions from reporters, the public, and marine biologists. Were all the sightings of the same animal? Was Chessie an animal at all? Was the animal dangerous? Should it be caught and studied?, protected?, exterminated?

Some experts were skeptical, often because the reports came from newcomers to Chesapeake Bay, tourists and suburbanites who used the bay for recreation. Some watermen, whose families had worked on the bay for generations, regarded the reports as bogus, produced by people who did not understand the bay and its creatures. Some experts speculated that the sightings may have been otters swimming in single file, rogue waves, a piece of tubing used for containing oil spills, or perhaps floating debris after a storm.

A breakthrough seemed to occur in 1982 when Robert Frew, a resident of Love Point, videotaped the creature. He described it as serpent-like, about 30 feet long. The videotape seemed to be a turning point in Chessie lore. Reporters descended upon Frew and his wife for interviews. The expanding publicity around Chessie and the videotape garnered the attention of the Enigma Group, who arranged a Smithsonian-hosted panel to discuss Chessie sightings and to submit the tape to expert analysis. The conclusion: the tape was authentic, but

of poor quality, and the object was a living animal. The mystery continued.

Nevertheless, as data and publicity grew, locals developed an affection for the creature, whatever it was. The *Bay Times* became a clearinghouse for information about Chessie, offering new subscribers a souvenir coffee cup featuring a cartoon of Chessie. Images of Chessie and the Chessie name became advertising devices. Some saw Chessie as a tourist asset. A charter boat offered an evening on the bay in search of sea monsters. Representations of Chessie constituted a cottage industry. A state senator proposed a bill to protect Chessie; the bill failed because senators did not really know what Chessie was.

The US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) office in Annapolis capitalized on the Chessie craze with a Chessie coloring book for school children to teach about environmentalism. A costumed Chessie represented “Clean the Bay” initiatives at public events. Chessie made its way into two children’s books. Chessie became a part of Chesapeakeiana.

Cheezum presents the Chessie Phenomenon against the backdrop of rising cultural tensions in the Chesapeake Bay area in the 1970s and 80s as suburbia encroached on what had been the quiet, rural domain of farmers and watermen. With residential development came shopping malls, tourist haunts, traffic, increased costs of living, and more pollution in the waters of the bay. Chessie often became the vehicle for expressing and exploring the conflicts and environmental concerns that arose during this period.

By the mid-1980s, Chessie sightings waned, and so did Chessie’s popularity. Then in 1994 a new Chessie emerged. A bull manatee was spotted in the Chesapeake, far from its natural habitat in Florida waters. The FWS caught the animal, named it Chessie, determined it was healthy, tagged it, put a transponder on it, and sent it back to Florida. The manatee reappeared over the next two summers, navigating the eastern seaboard as far north as Narraganset Bay, helping to highlight the dwindling manatee populations in Florida and serving as an indication of successful efforts to clean the bay. A new, caricatured Chessie became a mascot/spokesperson for local businesses, cultural events, and environmental efforts. The manatee visited the bay in 2001 and 2011 and was last identified near Fort Lauderdale in 2022.

This book serves as a reminder that maritime history is not solely about sailors and naval battles. Eric Cheezum has produced a highly informative, readable book that is more than a treatise on cryptozoology. It is a well-written, detailed, sociological study of how a community responded and adapted to a puzzling phenomenon in its midst. Expertly drawing from interviews, manuscript collections, and news reports, Cheezum gives us a portrait of Maryland’s Eastern Shore during the late twentieth century. His narrative shows how public sentiment can coalesce around a single symbol

– a mysterious animal – and how that symbol first serves as a catalyst for local issues and then evolves into a symbol of local culture. The Chessie Phenomenon was sometimes exploited for profit and sometimes to promote a worthy cause. Cheezum does not solve the mystery of what Chessie actually was. Instead, he shows us how Chessie was like a Rorschach Inkblot, showing readers how people and communities interpreted an ambiguous phenomenon in ways that served their needs.

Judith E. Pearson
Burke, Virginia

Theodore Corbett. *The Promise of Freedom for Slaves Escaping in British Ships: The Emancipation Revolution, 1740-1807*. Barnsley, UK: Pen and Sword Books Limited, <https://www.pen-and-sword.co.uk/> 2024. xiii, 242 pp., illustrations, maps, endnotes, index. UK £25.00, US \$34.95, hardcover; ISBN 9781 39904 820 0.

Theodore Corbett claims the emancipation of slaves by the British during the American Revolution was the critical impetus for the British abolition of the slave trade in 1807. He connects the emancipation to the British navy, which provided work for some and carried freedom seekers to new homes in Britain and its colonies. During the War of Independence some 30,000 Blacks left slavery under rebel masters for freedom in exchange for service fighting with the British. The book consists of 28 short chapters and covers the pre-revolutionary period through to the aftermath of the Abolition Act in 1807.

In the pre-war section, Corbett covers the slave trade and the American southern plantation system. The author makes clear the slave owners' fear of insurrections and the brutal suppression of those who rose up.

In chapter four Corbett introduces the role of religion, primarily the evangelical movement, as a significant catalyst for the abolition movement. The evangelical movement resurfaces throughout the text, sparking the thinking and behavior of various central characters in Corbett's narrative. In relation to the navy, while some naval officers were evangelical in their use of religion aboard ship, not all were, as Corbett recounts (p. 211). The evangelicals challenged the slave owners with Christianity's belief that all people were created equal. The evangelicals brought Christianity to the slaves and encouraged some to become ministers, spreading the word among other enslaved people. Both of these trends were resisted by the slave owners.

Five chapters centre around the Royal Navy's place in the freeing of slaves. Corbett notes that free Blacks could find employment aboard merchant and naval ships as seamen, which provided income and potentially a more inclusive