

Paul Curtis. *Tales from the Great Passenger Ships: A Jaunt through Time*. Cheltenham, UK: The History Press, www.thehistorypress.co.uk, 2023. 288 pp., illustrations, tables, bibliography. UK £18.99, paper; ISBN: 978-1-80399-211-2.

There is an adage among professional sailors that “anyone who would go to sea for pleasure would go to hell on a lark.” Nonetheless, since Mark Twain recounted his 1869 “cruise” on the *Quaker City* to Europe and the Holy Land – “a picnic on a gigantic scale” – Americans (and others) have been fascinated with going to sea for fun. In 2023 more than thirty-one million people went on such a “lark,” that is, a cruise. Unlike a “voyage” (travel from one place to another) cruising embraces the journey itself. There is no need to worry about the speed of the vessel; it is simply a pleasure to be aboard. Having worked aboard ten ships, including a stint as entertainment director on board Cunard’s RMS *Queen Mary*, few people know more about cruising and shipboard life, below and above decks, than Paul Curtis.

Ships are the largest man-made, movable objects on the planet. We christen and launch them with a great ceremony. In “The Building of a Ship,” the American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow caught the moment when a vessel comes alive:

She starts, she moves, she seems to feel
The thrill of life along her keel,
And, spurning with her foot the ground
With one exulting, joyous bound,
She leaps into the ocean’s arms!

In like fashion, artists have embodied ships with the human experience of life and death. Just as Longfellow above described the first days of a vessel in poetry, in his painting HMS *Temeraire* the British artist J.M.W. Turner depicted the last days of an ancient lady being towed to its last berth.

Following the tradition of Longfellow and Turner, Curtis gives the reader the same sense of life. In 36 vignettes he captures the romance and tragedy of great ships from *Britannia* (1840 / 1154 tons) to the behemoth *Wonder of the Seas* (2022 / 236,857 tons). *Titanic*, *Empress of Ireland*, *Morro Castle*, and other casualties are chronicled, including at least one of recent memory, *Costa Concordia* where, to offer his guests a scenic view of Isola del Giglio, Captain Francesco Schettino took his vessel dangerously close to the island, and in doing so ran aground. Fortunately, as Curtis points out, such behavior is rare. Responsible captains care for the ship, the crew, and the guests.

While disasters at sea make exciting reading, they have been told so often they do not require repeating (*Titanic*, *Lusitania*, etc.). Curtis is at his best recounting personal anecdotes, including the time when, with only two days’

notice, he joined *Stella Polaris* as the ship's photographer. He was assigned to a cabin of six and told not to photograph any passengers unless they made a specific request. Under the circumstances, business was slow. Better times were ahead.

Entertainment officers, Curtis's later role, play a curious role aboard ship. On cruise ships at least four communities sail together. From the bridge, the captain and his officers command the ship. The deck crew keep the vessel neat and tidy and, when necessary, ferry guests ashore in tenders. The engine gang watches over all the ship's machinery, while the hotel staff and entertainment director see to the care and feeding of the guests.

On cruise ships, where pleasure is the goal, aside from a friendly hello or an invitation to sit at an officer's table, most guests are unlikely to have direct contact with the officers, deck, or engine crew. No such separation for the entertainment director. To the guests they are the most visible person on the ship. They stand at the gangway welcoming guests aboard. Later they might give directions to board the tenders and remind guests when they are due back aboard. They manage the evening's entertainment, introducing the various performers. They frequently walk about the ship greeting guests. They listen patiently as guests insist on recounting all their previous cruises. They stand ready to explain why there is not more room around the pool and, in some instances, explaining why tenders cannot be boarded in six-foot seas. For many of the guests aboard, the entertainment director is the "ship."

Curtis's well-chosen subtitle for *Tales from Great Passenger Ships* is *A Jaunt Through Time*. Well informed, Curtis writes with a graceful, sometimes humorous style. The book might have benefited from a proper index and more of Curtis' personal yarns would be welcomed. Nonetheless, when packing your suntan lotion consider bringing along *Tales From Great Passenger Ships*. You may be able to add a story or two yourself.

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Eric Jay Dolin. *Left for Dead: Shipwreck, Treachery and Survival at the Edge of the World*. New York, NY: Liveright Press, www.wwnorton.com, 2024. 320 pp., illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. US \$29.99, cloth, ISBN 978-1-324-09308-4.

Left for Dead is the sixteenth work of maritime non-fiction by Eric Jay Dolin. Once again, he skillfully pilots his readers on an absorbing and sometimes harrowing seafaring adventure. The *Robinson Crusoe*-like tale has multiple disasters, intrigue, and perfidy set against a wild South Atlantic background