

these men had the education needed for accurate astronomical observations for determining position and making a triangulated survey from a measured baseline. His insistence of “scientific” men provided the foundation for the reliability of the resulting charts and the reputation of the future service. Many of the men he selected had been masters appointed by Navy Board warrants. Some achieved commissioned rank but few rose to the level of Principal Officers, the cut-off used by Dawson in his *Memoirs of Hydrography* that was continued by Day. Consequently, Barritt’s book is the first time the work of most of them (by my comparison with Dawson) has been brought to wider attention. The local admiral wanting the survey appointment had to make vessel and manpower resources available.

Barritt first provides a vignette of Hurd surveying off Brest. This is followed by a discussion of the state of hydrography, a review of Hurd’s early career, and a discussion of the relationship of hydrography and the expanding trade. Barritt then turns to the Napoleonic War.

Chapters are focused on individual stations and problems are carefully reviewed. This theatre-arrangement will facilitate the book’s use. Barritt’s research is both extensive and new; it “draws on largely untapped sources” (12). In addition to extensive use of the archive of the UK Hydrographic Office (Taunton, Somerset), he has used the collections of the National Maritime Museum and The National Archives at Kew. This is supplemented by memoirs written by many of his subjects and more recent secondary sources.

In sum, this excellent book breaks important new ground. The 1965 *Admiralty Manual of Hydrographic Surveying* says that amongst “the principal qualifications of an efficient surveyor are probably an unlimited capacity for taking pains and conscientious devotion to the accuracy of detail in his work” (1:2). That Barritt satisfied his superiors of his ability on that point is obvious in his selection to be Hydrographer. It is ably demonstrated in this book. One could only wish all historians more widely emulated his standard.

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Black, Dan. *Oceans of Fate: Peace and Peril Aboard the Steamship Empress of Asia*

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434 pp., illustrations

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Dan Black reveals for us in personable detail, as though in a fireside chat,

the conception, life, survival through one war and the start of a second, and painful death of this historic holder of the trans-Pacific speed record: *Empress of Asia*. His book took innumerable interviews over more than half a decade and *Oceans of Fate* is worth the wait. Subtitled “Peace and Peril aboard the Steamship *Empress of Asia*” and covering 1911 to 1942 and beyond, Black focuses more on humans than the metal parts they built, operated, or were bombed by. The ship was built quickly to replace the parent company’s lost tonnage. As it took shape on the River Clyde in Scotland, the *Titanic* sank, and so the ship had double hulls and was launched in only 18 months. *Empress of Asia* was just shy of 18,000 GRT, 570 feet long, 68 feet wide, and 42 feet deep. Capable of 19 knots on four propellers, the vessel could carry 200 first class, 100 second class and 800 third class passengers. Its specialty cargo was high-value Asian silk. The steamship was owned by the Canadian Pacific Steamship Company (part of a larger railway conglomerate) with its home port in Vancouver, British Columbia.

The book is very well laid out and illustrated, with engaging chapter titles and eight highly informative and clear large-scale custom charts showing the ship’s movements in the Red Sea, the South China Sea, along the Panama Canal, in the Mediterranean, and beyond. There are a reassuring series of 80 mostly black and white photographs with everything from crew and naval gunners recreating on deck, to cabins, the wheelhouse, passengers and primarily officers and crew, sometimes mixed in with passengers. There are details of the deck and wheelhouse, and rare photos of the ship during sea trials near the Fairfield Shipbuilding and Engineering yard on the River Clyde, notably with the bridge incomplete.

In reading this thick softcover research gem, one has a sense of being in good hands all the time, starting with a foreword by museum curator, author, and documentary presenter Dr. James Delgado, lately of Vancouver. There are an impressive 60 pages of addenda, indices, an innovative time-line, and illustration credits. If one did not know of the grand tradition of Canadian *Empress* line passenger ships and their role in national security of not only the Dominion of Canada but the British Empire as well, then you will after having read this diamond of a book.

During her varied global career *Empress of Asia* carried Pashtun Indian troops to British Aden in World War I, was heavily armed and fired in anger, came across the wreck of the German raider *Emden*, and transported troops from Bombay to Singapore the same week the colony fell to the Japanese. The ship was sunk with fairly light loss of life off the Sultan Shoal which is ironically all but land locked in modern Singapore. The safety of land was illusory to them, as patients were bayoneted in their beds and 20 nurses were

marched into shallow waters and mown down.

Overall, towards the end and despite nearly catching the SMS *Emden* off Ceylon in World War I, the officers and crew of this fast mail-carrying RMS *Empress of Asia* suffered their share of sadness and mishap. The first appendix, for example, lists over 40 deaths including causes – Chinese and other Asian crew, drowning, suicide, three Japanese air attacks in as many years ... they died of beriberi, pneumonia, forced labor in Thailand as prisoners of war, and swept overboard by a huge wave, as was Leona Kearns, a young American softball player who was exercising on deck during a storm.

For one voyage of delivery there was only a single female nurse on board, and Dan Black uses various perspectives to tell the story, including that of the Olivers and other families who had served aboard. Characters included colorful singing captains, many military personnel moved into Singapore or out of Palestine, a chief hair dresser named Phyllis Williams, and a sewage engineer who tried to save the ship in the Bangka Straits and Singapore Straits when the vessel was strafed by Japanese bombers.

In 1921 and 1924 the ship set new records for crossing the Pacific, a feat it accomplished 307 times by 1941 when it was converted to a troop ship for a second time. In 1940 it had the ignoble distinction of being bombed by Japanese aircraft on approach to Kobe as a civilian ship. Among those who served as a cadet on board was Prince Philip of Greece, later consort to Queen Elizabeth and father to King Charles.

As a highly readable and informative epilogue we realize that a very large anchor from the *Empress of Asia* was found and salvaged in Singapore in 1998. It so happens that this review writer was living in the Mitre Hotel with many divers, most of them young South Africans, at the time in Singapore and heard talk of this find and salvage. The wreck was apparently relocated in 2010, and now the site is enveloped by the Jurong industrial complex and port. The anchor is on display at the National Museum of Singapore, where graves of nurses killed in the war and the crisis room at Fort Canning can still be seen. Overall, Dan Black has done admirably well conveying a compelling series of human interest, military and civilian stories under one – albeit large – cover in his latest book, *Oceans of Fate*. He details a story with as many heaving variants as the North Pacific in winter and makes them memorable through the humanistic telling of eye-witness accounts.

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