

Book Reviews

David Abulafia. *The Boundless Sea: A Human History of the Oceans*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, www.oup.com, 2019. xxxii+1050 pp., 32 pp., illustrations, maps, notes, index. US \$39.95, cloth. ISBN 978-0-19993-498-0.

There is a particular pleasure in a good, big book—one that will carry the reader through the weeks, months, and seasons—even a pandemic—with the turning of its pages. Its very ungainliness and heft become assets, harbingers of the delights in store. Its breadth and depth is tonic in a distracted and noisy media landscape. Its vastness and sweep hold the makings of an unforgettable intellectual experience, and the reader genuinely regrets finishing it. Of such is David Abulafia's *The Boundless Sea*. Much acclaimed in the U.K. and the United States, it bids fair to stand as definitive for many years.

Abulafia, emeritus professor of Mediterranean history at Cambridge University, was already a figure of considerable scholarly consequence before the publication of this latest effort, thanks to his 1988 biography of Frederick II and his award-winning 2011

The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean, which *The Guardian* called “stunningly compendious.” In *The Boundless Sea*, Abulafia casts his net much wider, attempting nothing less than a balanced, or “rounded” (xxiii) as he calls it, study of how humankind developed along the shores of the world's great oceans and then connected them through travel and trade. Smaller seas, bays, and rivers figure only incidentally, and the over-emphasized Mediterranean “lurks mostly offstage.” (xxv)

Abulafia's heroes are not the oft-lauded explorers who first discovered distant lands and revealed the possibility of long-distance travel, but rather those who came after, the merchants who developed the trade networks that shaped the world. These people took significant risks, including foul weather, pirates, and political hostility, in order to deliver their cargoes and bring back coveted wares. It seems that from earliest times, people have yearned for far-away products and contrived the means to supply them. Medieval Europeans were desperate for spices like cloves and pepper; Red Sea denizens imported coconuts, sesame, mung beans, and gooseberries from India; and the Chi-

nese amassed Peruvian silver while their junks awaiting Spanish buyers in Manila harbour were the “equivalent of a floating department store” with “fresh and preserved fruits, decorated writing cases, gilded benches, live birds and pack animals.” (624)

Unfortunately, not all trade was so benign, as evidenced by the horrific centuries-long traffic in enslaved Africans to the Americas, where sugar and later cotton plantations required prodigious labour.

Given the vast stretches of time and sea that are his subject, Abulafia abjures original research, rightly noting that a book like his simply “cannot be based on close reading of the millions of archival sources that exist.” (909) Rather he sticks to secondary sources, books mostly, the majority published post-2000, “quite a few even while this book was being written” (913). This is convincing evidence that the early twenty-first century is indeed a Golden Age for maritime research and writing. Clear maps and four colour gathers enhance the text.

Abulafia begins with the Pacific, which he calls the “oldest ocean,” (3) and the early Polynesian seafarers who performed astonishing feats of navigation. This was “a largely interconnected world,” he writes, “consisting of atolls, coral reefs and volcanic islands: a very diverse world, offering very different opportunities to those who settled, and thereby providing a great stimulus to local and even long-distance exchange.” (5) By reading subtle variations in light, clouds, waves, water colour, and bird flight, Polynesian sailors comfortably steered their outriggers across awesome seascapes “without any technology at all, just the super-computer of the human brain.” (17) During his Pacific voyages, Captain James Cook marveled at the navigational ability of

Tupaia, a Tahitian native he befriended and took on board the *Endeavour*. Even far from land, Tupaia seemed to have an “almost instinctive awareness” (17) of the vessel’s location and relation to dozens of distant islands.

Shifting focus to the Indian Ocean, Abulafia paints more settled shorelines and sophisticated trade networks. Mariners there first had to master the seasonal monsoon winds before they could safely sail, but once they learned those patterns, even distant empires managed to make connections and establish reliable trade routes. This led to some exotic scenes, such as African elephants delivered to the shores of the third-century Red Sea by special “short, broad, deep, sailing ships called *elepantegoi*.” (111) Throughout his text, Abulafia uses contemporary archaeology to buttress his arguments, especially shipwreck finds. These intriguing time capsules bear remarkable witness to the extent and nature of maritime trade. For example, Roman wine amphorae have been found in India, and a Chinese wreck off the coast of Java yielded “55,000 ceramic objects” as well as coins and a mirror. Interestingly, medieval Chinese coins, which had a hole in the center, were strung together in large bunches, since they were of so little individual value.

Abulafia’s treatment of the long European and northern African Atlantic shores and their peoples will be more familiar to Western historians. He pays particularly close attention to the Vikings and their bold forays into the north Atlantic and Baltic, but notes that these shores were the “the outer edge of the known world, whereas the Indian Ocean was already functioning as the link between the Mediterranean and the South China Sea, between the high cultures of the Roman Empire and those of the Far East.” (338) But even during the

primitive days, Abulafia demonstrates connections revealed by archaeology. These include Mediterranean artifacts on the Portuguese coast and an Atlantic roasting spit in faraway Cyprus.

After 1492 the Portuguese and Spanish, followed by the English and Dutch, rose to a startling reach and influence throughout the world. This is nowhere better demonstrated than by Spain's Manila galleons. These hulking ships linked the Philippines "to China and Japan, but also to Mexico and Peru; goods transported across Central America reached Veracruz on the Gulf of Mexico, were ferried to Havana, and were then carried across the Atlantic to Seville and Cádiz." (617) Again and again throughout this extraordinary book, the reader is treated to such staggering achievements, as well as to the diverse peoples who made them happen. Then as now, folks got around.

The book's final chapters build to a crescendo of sorts with the completion of the Suez and Panama Canals, containerization, the cruise industry, and air travel, all of which served to flatten barriers and make what were once dangerous, arduous enterprises seem routine. With a flourish worthy of Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*, Abulafia contends that "the ocean world of the last four millennia" has "ceased to exist." (908)

John S. Sledge
Fairhope, Alabama

Sebastian Bruns and Sarandis Papadopoulos (eds.) *Conceptualizing Maritime & Naval Strategy: Festschrift for Captain Peter M. Swartz, United States Navy (ret.)*. Baden-Baden, Germany: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, www.nomos-elibrary.de, 2020. 373 pp., ISBN 978-3-8487-5753-4. (E-book ISBN 978-3-8452-9915-0.)

This *Festschrift*, besides offering a well-deserved homage to Captain Peter Swartz, highlights the importance of strategic thinking for naval and maritime strategy, bringing together important authors from several backgrounds and nationalities for this exercise.

To create a new national maritime strategy is a herculean work. Strategy lies both in the political and military dimension, being a congregation of political objectives by means of the disposition of military forces. Therefore, a "Maritime Strategy" must follow a country's national defense objectives, but also its naval policies regarding the budget and the needs of the navy. Naval officers, strategists, analysts, researchers, and decision-makers directly face the difficulties and the pressure surrounding the process of creation, and every step must be justified logically through a comprehensive analysis. There are two tools/exercises that can be used as part of this effort: to resort to works and sources about "making Maritime Strategy" or to review past errors in history. What *Conceptualizing Maritime & Naval Strategy* does is invite the reader to take part in these exercises, reinforcing the need to create more documentation around the essentials of maritime strategy; and this correlates directly with the life of Captain Peter Swartz and his importance to the field.

Swartz is famous not only for his naval career, but also for his career post-retirement. During his time in the US Navy, Swartz was an advisor for the South Vietnamese Navy during the Vietnam War. He also worked on the staff of the Rear Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, Jr, who was later designated CNO (Chief of Naval Operations) of the US Navy. Captain Swartz also played a crucial role in elaborating a new maritime strategy for the navy during the 1980s, one of the hardest times for the United