

Featured Reviews

Christian Buchet – The Sea in History Quartet

In March 2012, Océanides, a five-year-old research entity, was established with the objective of providing scientific evidence of the role of maritime affairs in political, military, economic and cultural dimensions and, most particularly, as a driver of history and as a porthole into the globe's future. Achieving this objective involved an overview of maritime history over the past five millennia. Océanides is based in Paris, with the independent Scientific Committee, chaired by Christian Buchet, presiding over the work of no less than 260 scholars from forty countries. Buchet is a professor of history and Director of CETMER Maritime Studies Centre at the Catholic University of Paris. The five years mandated by Océanides to do its work was indeed required with the Boydell Press publishing in 2017 a set of four volumes with the overarching title of "The Sea in History". The set included a volume on Ancient, Medieval, Early Modern and the Modern World periods, with the declared ambition of replicating the aim of the Enlightenment's first Encyclopaedists of the mid-eighteenth century. The objective of Denis Diderot and his stable of contributors in Paris at that time was to craft a compendium of the world's knowledge in a single set of volumes for the benefit of humankind. A similar lofty aim is present here, albeit with full acknowledgement that only a *souçon* of that history can be explored in a mere four volumes of short essays. The rationale for this endeavour is, of course, the assumption that the maritime dimension of history is oft overlooked in favour of a traditional, terrestrial bias and either the downplaying or ignoring the influence of the sea in the conduct of human affairs.

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What follows this brief introductory note, is the four reviews of the individual volumes of the set by three different reviewers (I completed two—the bookend volumes addressing the Ancient and Modern World, with Romney David Smith doing the volume on the Medieval period, and Margaret Schotte exploring the Early Modern volume). Of interest is that the reaction embodied in all the reviews is that the effort has been commendable, albeit uneven, and that inevitably there are gaps and omissions. All noted the lack of an index or bibliography (outside the inconsistent provision of footnotes), and all noted the rather hefty price tag (each volume is priced at \$220 US) making it essentially unaffordable for any casual buyer who might wish to dip into the offerings from a wide range of scholars in each separate period. Yet, all also noted that there is much of interest and value in the books notwithstanding the reservations, with one, Smith, arguing that the set absolutely should be in any serious scholarly library.

In general, there are some common observations that can be made here. First, despite the global pretensions of the project, the bulk of the scholars and the bulk of the material is weighted to Europe and its intersections with the sea throughout history. Of the 40 countries that have provided scholars, Europe has contributed 22, with the heirs of Europe a further four (e.g. United States, Canada). Africa has provided six, Asia five and Latin America three. The absence of Micronesia is surprising, given the epic nature of Polynesian voyaging, and peopling of the Pacific islands, and the relative lack of Asian scholars' unfortunate given the prominence of that vast region on global history. In contrast, discourse on the Mediterranean world is significantly overrepresented. The influence of Fernand Braudel looms over the entire effort as is perhaps inevitable, given his pioneering work a generation ago on *la longue durée* and the vital role of societies, geography and the sea to any understanding of history. While not directly intended by the general editor and his individual volume colleagues, there is more than a hint of homage to this highly influential French historian.

The second point to make is that while devotees of maritime history can be counted on to grumble at the relative lack of interest in their specialty amongst their peers, there has been a recent flowering of general, global histories on the subject. Notable amongst these are David Abulafia's *The Boundless Sea: A Human History of the Oceans* (London, 2019); Lincoln Paine's *The Sea and Civilization* (New York, 2013); and, Barry Cunliffe's *On the Ocean: The Mediterranean and the Atlantic from Prehistory to AD 1500* (Oxford, 2017). The first, of course, postdates Buchet's volumes, but all serve to illustrate that there is activity in the maritime history world that goes well beyond narrow national narratives.

A third point is the lack of unity to the essays incorporated into each volume. Individually, the essays have their audience, but there is a lack of glue between them that fails to bring the topics addressed together. The introductory and concluding essays in each volume attempt to do this, but the eclectic nature of the material provided argues against any overarching theme, save for the link to the world's oceans. This is partly deliberate in that the sheer range of topics inherent in the global exploration of maritime history is an objective that was fostered by Buchet

and his sub-editors. Whether this approach to the essays works for individual readers is a matter of taste, but the scope inherent in each volume is such that most will only find a few of compelling interest. The general histories touched on above do not suffer from this difficulty as a single author provides the unity and theme as an essential element to their work.

Buchet's summary is a relatively extensive paper—more than twice the average length of the papers included in the four volumes—that expounds on three key findings inherent in the entire project. The first is the claim that maritime factors are the most significant influence on political and economic development of individual states, a powerful force that leads to predominance and drives expansion and is consequently a primary driver of history. For practitioners of maritime history, broadly defined, this conclusion can certainly bring comfort to what might be perceived as a somewhat unfashionable corner of the profession. There is, thus, much to agree with in the sum of the papers that underscores this relationship between humankind and the seas. But it may be more correct to observe that all human endeavour is driven by a myriad of influences, working together in complex ways that makes causality inherently difficult to determine and nearly always contingent on further reflection, analysis and new evidence. Surely that is what makes the profession of history such a fascinating and compelling field of study.

From a Canadian perspective, this series is a powerful reminder of the role of the sea, of commerce, of naval power, and of our own reliance on maritime trade. Buchet may well have been considering the general 'sea blindness' of Canadians and their government as he set about to rectify matters with this set of volumes on 'The Sea in History'. Anything that can encourage young scholars' understandings of these broader matters and to open eyes to worlds far from home yet with significant influence on local prosperity is to be welcomed. Buchet's work accomplishes this aim without doubt to those willing to dip into these volumes and seek to learn, to reflect and increase their understanding of the globe which we all inhabit.

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Christian Buchet, Philip de Souza and Pascal Arnaud (eds.). *The Sea in History: The Ancient World – La mer dans l'histoire: L'Antiquité*. Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, www.boydelandbrewer.com, 2017. 730 pp., illustrations. ISBN 978-1-78327-157-3. (E-book available)

This is the first of four volumes that address the question posed by General Editor, Christian Buchet,

