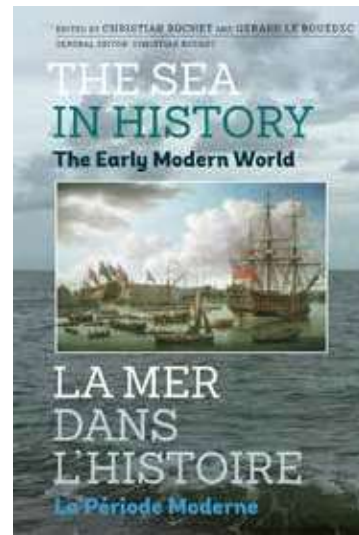


Christian Buchet (gen. ed.), N.A.M Rodger (ed.)
The Sea in History: The Modern World – La mer dans l'histoire: La Période Contemporaine.
 Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, www.boydelandbrewer.com, 2017. 848 pp., ISBN 978-1-78327-160-3. (E-book available)



This is the fourth volume in a set that previously addressed the same question implied in the title with respect to the Ancient, the Medieval, and the Early Modern worlds. This final volume of the four covers the late-nineteenth century to the present day, and seeks to tackle the question of whether the sea is a differentiating factor in world history and what advantages, if any, did the sea provide to those who engaged in maritime activities. The objective, in brief, is to re-examine universal or global history through the maritime lens. Importantly, the scholarship embedded in this volume (and the series), is to bring together disparate disciplines that otherwise might not intersect given the tendency of the historical profession to specialisation and isolation. The Western world's approach to analysis, assumptions, and common perspectives has in this work specifically been nuanced by differing views from around the globe so as to provide balance and universality. The importance of the sea, according to Buchet in his introduction, is that it is the key to history, the thread that links the globe together and permits insights that explains our contemporary geopolitical scene.

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Accomplishing this enormous task has involved no less than 260 researchers from all historical disciplines that have addressed a multitude of perspectives on this ambitious endeavour, with some 68 involved in this particular volume. The ambition of the series is vast. Buchet, in his introduction, indicates that the range and scope of the topics addressed by the individual contributors has its antecedents from no less an endeavour than that of the writers of the first *Encyclopædia* in the eighteenth century. Notwithstanding this notional pedigree, the focus has been on research over the past decade-and-a-half, say from the turn of the present century. Indeed, this period, and arguably a good decade prior, has witnessed a sea change in approach to maritime history from one of battles, of biography, of exploration, of war to a more comprehensive analysis of finance, of economics, of trade, of maritime societies and the broader societies from which they sprung, of ports, of shipbuilding, of navigation, of hydrography, of gender and of race. Consequently, this series of impressive volumes is timely given trends in recent scholarship.

N.A.M. Rodger in his introduction to this fourth volume in the series, in support of the theme, notes that the contributors were tasked not with delving into new research but rather to answer the question “what difference did the sea make?” in their fields of expertise. The intent is a broader consideration of the contributors’

subject than is typically provided in conventional scholarship. Rodger concedes the underlying assumption that the sea indeed matters, but the expectation of a more reflective examination of various topics will generate the unity sought in the book notwithstanding the broad range of expertise represented by the many scholars involved.

The essays in the book are short, most in the range of 10-15 pages. The individual scholars are largely from the Western tradition and represent a wide range of European and North American historians, including luminaries such as Paul Kennedy, Andrew Lambert, John Beeler, Jon Sumida, Avner Offer, Christopher Bell, Norman Friedman, Jeremy Black and many others. Scholars outside the English-speaking world include Gunnar Åselius, Anita M.C. van Dissel, Francesco Zampieri, Jesús M. Valdaliso, Anders Mønrad Møller, Yoichi Hiramata to name but a few. Most of the essays are written in English, but there is a significant minority in French. In a short review of this nature, it is neither fair nor feasible to examine meaningfully the individual articles. It can be noted, however, that the brevity of the essays has obliged the contributors to focus their thinking and deliver their insights within a small compass. By and large, the scholars have accomplished their objectives. Rodgers concludes the volume with a contribution of his own to sum up what has been provided and to offer his own thoughts on the relevance of the sea to history. Buchet then summarises the series in a similar fashion. All the introductory and concluding essays provided by the editors are in both French and English.

Does this particular volume deliver on its promise? I think it does so very well. The opportunity to bring together such a wide range of scholars to consider a single premise as it relates to their areas of expertise is rare. As the question posed (does the sea matter?) is broad it permits a response across an equally broad range of scholarship. The conclusion is that the sea indeed matters—Buchet notes that it has accelerated political and economic development, it has driven political dominance and expansion, and it has driven history in general terms—all of which is evident in these essays. Importantly, the volume illustrates the richness and strength of maritime history in relation to the general subject of history where it has languished as a forgotten or, perhaps worse, as an antiquarian pursuit of little relevance or interest to ‘real’ historians. That cavil has never been right and this book (and series) demonstrates the vibrancy, range and depth of maritime history well.

Four criticisms. First, it is a pity that scholars from Asia are not represented. Asia certainly features in a number of the essays, but there are no scholars from China or India and but one from Japan. The same can be said for Africa and Latin America. Consequently, there exist gaps in perspective that are important to the very subject of global history. Perhaps this is inevitable with the logistics of corraling such a range of scholars being overwhelming. Second, the book lacks an index. This is unfortunate as there is significant difficulty in finding nuggets of information scattered amongst the papers. The third is the uneven provision of footnotes and bibliographies for the individual papers. This complicates efforts to

follow up on ideas or conclusions reached in the paper. This point is not applicable to all papers and some have the normal academic apparatus. The absence of same in a fair number of cases is unfortunate. The fourth is that the book is quite expensive. At \$220 US the price will be well beyond ordinary budgets, which is most unfortunate. Nevertheless, if one is prepared to swallow the cost, the reward of dipping into the various essays provided by this collection of top-notch scholars and writers is well worth it.

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