Review Essay

Navigating Dangers (Real and Imagined) in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Worlds

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Dane A. Morrison. *Eastward of Good Hope. Early America in a Dangerous World*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, www.jhupbooks. press.jhu.edu, 2021. xv+314 pp., map, notes, index. US $54.95, cloth; ISBN 978-1-4214-4236-5. (E-book available.)

Nicholas Rogers. *Blood Waters. War, Disease and Race in the Eighteenth-Century British Caribbean*. Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, www. boydellandbrewer.com, 2021. viii+ 229 pp., illustrations, notes, appendix, bibliography, index. US $99.00, hardback; ISBN 978-1-78327-623-3.

A.E. Rooks. *The Black Joke. The True Story of One Ship's Battle Against the Slave Trade*. New York, NY: Scribner, www.simonandschuster.com, 2022. x+360+ pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. US $28.00, CDN $37.00, paper; ISBN 978-1-9821-2826-5.

Timothy D. Walker. *Sailing to Freedom. Maritime Dimensions of the Underground Railroad*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, www.umasspress.com, 2021. xvi + 232 pp., illustrations, notes, index. US $27.95, paper; ISBN 978-1-62534-592-9.

    Books about the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries abound. Scholars have covered, often in exhaustive detail, economics, politics, revolutions, slavery, demography, race and racism, liberalism and conservatism, disease, warfare, famine, imperialism, and many, many other topics. These accounts often emphasize how complex, messy, and dangerous life was at the time, filled with

threats, both real and imagined. The four books in this review essay explore some of those perils, how people understood them (real or imagined), and, ultimately, how some defied dangers and seized opportunities.

Blood Waters focuses on war, disease, and race in the eighteenth-century British Caribbean. Nicholas Rogers, currently Distinguished Research Professor Emeritus in History at York University, argues that the Caribbean was a "'marchlands' in which violence was a way of life, and where inter-ethnic solidarities were transitory, volatile and rarely conducive to the forging of more capacious alliances" (9). Rogers avoids romanticizing the region, offering instead, a "dispassionate, perhaps dystopic view of the eighteenth-century Caribbean, but a necessary antidote to the racial binaries and stereotypes that currently pervade contemporary discourse" (10).

Rogers opens with *Robinson Crusoe* and how Defoe "popularized a genre of imperial adventure that would flourish in the era of British high imperialism with Rudyard Kipling, Rider Haggard and Joseph Conrad" (21). The novel's three narratives are "centered on the Caribbean, the powerhouse of the British imperial economy in the eighteenth century" (33). Following this analysis, Rogers then turns to the Caribbean expeditions of 1741-1742 and other aspects of life in the region. The Caribbean was both an essential component of the British economy as well as a deadly disease zone in which tens of thousands of British soldiers and sailors perished. In this "predatory world" – a world in which the British navy often employed Black people as auxiliaries responsible for manual labour – "the spoils of war were fierce and competitive" (60). Unlike Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh, Rogers does not see a world marked by "interracial harmony or some international fraternity of the dispossessed" (82). Instead, the Caribbean was "more of a dog-eat-dog society whose predatory actions flow from the nature of maritime war, the state conflicts that licensed that predation within very specific international divisions of labour, and the sheer struggle for survival among the marginal and exploited" (82). *Black Prince*, a Bristol slaver that made eight voyages between 1750 and 1769, highlighted the hazards of the
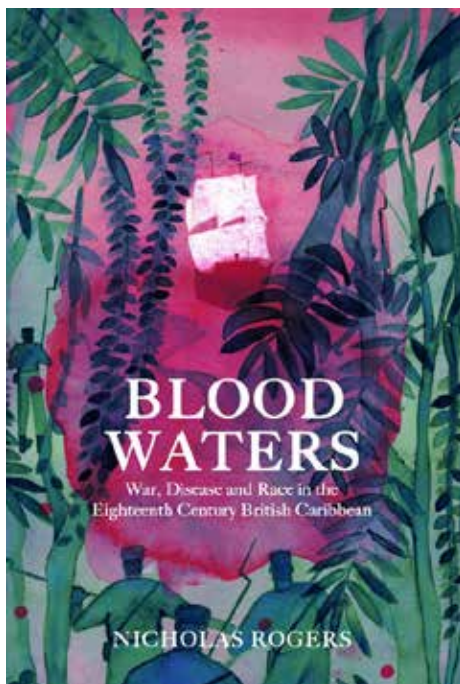
slave trade and the ever-present fear of insurrections among captain and crew. The Jamaican conspiracy of 1776 illustrated that inter-ethnic cooperation could take place and panicked planters on Jamaica "who thought the creoles a buffer to bloody insurrection" (123).
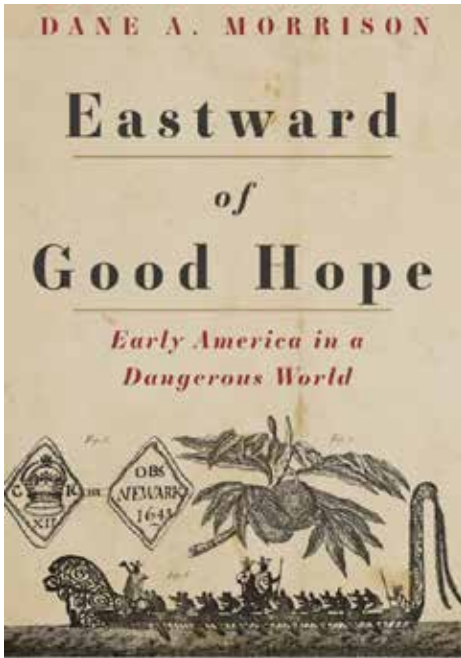
The Mosquito Coast, Rogers contends, "was not central to the plantation complex" (124) but, nevertheless, "was very much a part of the maritime Atlantic" (124). Initially, the British considered the Miskito people "invaluable allies in making accessible the untold treasures of the Spanish empire" (146). This alliance fell apart, however, when the British began to think about "the possibilities of developing the Mosquito Coast, consolidating their logwood settlements and regularizing their trade with the Spanish" (147). At that point, many British perceived the Miskito as an impediment to progress. Even so, the Miskito played an important role during the Nicaraguan Expedition of 1780, when Lord George German, Governor John Dalling of Jamaica, and others recognized their crucial role "in any expeditionary incursions into Spanish territory" (164). Indeed, Germain denounced Dalling for "failing to create a working coalition of settlers and Miskito Indians to destabilize the Spanish settlements and facilitate the army's advance" (163). Rogers concludes with the Black Caribs of Saint Vincent, who detested how the British, after they took over the island from the French in 1763, refused to respect their land claims. The British spent a considerable amount of time and effort to defeat the Black Caribs, and, ultimately, deported them to Honduras. Of all the British deportations of the eighteenth century, Rogers contends, this was the "closest to genocide" (189).

One cannot come away from reading *Blood Waters* without a very detailed understanding of the dangers and perils of life in the eighteenth-century Caribbean. Rogers skillfully illuminates, through extensive research and lively prose, how people tried to do the best they could, albeit in difficult and challenging circumstances.

Where Rogers examines perceptions of the British Caribbean, Dane Morrison, currently Professor of Early American History at Salem State University, analyzes how Americans understood and portrayed the Ottoman Empire, China, India, and the Great South Sea. As he remarks, "even before stepping onto a global stage in the 1780s, Americans had imagined the world as disordered and dangerous, deranged by tyranny or steeped in chaos, often deadly, always uncertain, unpredictable, and unstable, and their encounters after independence reinforced their assumptions" (viii). *Eastward of Good Hope* explores "a dominant theme that emerges in the travelogues of Americans who voyaged to distant lands—the sense of threat to Americans and to their culture and interests across the globe" (viii). Morrison contends that the early United States was "as much a republic of fear as it was a republic of letters" (xi).

Popular perceptions of US history, despite the best efforts of scholars, often contain numerous misunderstandings and mythologies. Morrison brushes

aside "our modern, compartmentalized mythologies that make no connection between American colonial development and awareness of the world beyond the Atlantic Ocean" (4). In fact, Americans spent a lot of time thinking about other corners of the globe, often fueled by their consumption of the published travel narratives of contemporaries. Travelers frequently portrayed the world as a dangerous and troubling place, threatening to both individual US citizens as well as to the fragile republic itself. These ideas grew so pervasive that the "trope of 'Asian despotism'" appeared in "sermons, almanacs, newspapers, travelogues, music, and even a protest against the poor dormitory meals served to Harvard College undergraduates" (43). Indeed, "the Orient became so much a part of the consciousness of ordinary Americans that they commonly referenced it in the mundane run of everyday life" (44).

Morrison offers specific case studies of American perceptions of the "East." Apprehensions about the Ottomans ran deep. Many argued that "the 'wretched Turks' had transformed the Mediterranean into a danger zone" (55). Contemporary accounts emphasized "a vision of an anarchic, lawless Ottoman Empire" (56) and "a backwards domain where tyranny and enslavement thrived" (60). Some people feared Islam would seduce unwary Christians, while others fretted about disease. Ultimately, "the tension between luxury and poverty, power and submission, beauty and cruelty challenged the order that Americans sought to bring or impose" (85). In China, contemporaries tended to emphasize "extended voyages, navigational perils, tropical diseases, the vagaries of the monsoon seasons, more serious threat of domain piracy, and, especially, the specter of commercial corruption" (87). Many resented being drawn into what they considered a befuddling system and, consequently, becoming enmeshed in "corrupt Chinese ways" (116). Just like the travelers to the Ottoman Empire, anyone who went to China had to keep a sharp lookout for the dangers posed by "a corrupt commercial system and a tyrannical bureaucracy" (131). As Morrison notes throughout the book, American travelers could "justify their belligerence by representing themselves as victims" (135). Like China, India offered enticing opportunities, but Yankee traders still felt

vulnerable and threatened, especially when contemporaries sent home reports denouncing corruption. Furthermore, just like the Ottoman Empire, "merchant accounts warned of the spiritual dangers of contact with India's many sects" (167). In India, China, and the Ottoman Empire, American traders assumed the role of victims and evinced concerns about "cultural contamination and religious pollution" (174).

One particularly riveting image from the Great South Sea was that of a cannibal "clutching an enormous, menacing war club" (178). Morrison argues that Americans viewed this region as a "series of harrowing challenges" (190) and a place beset by frequent calamities. Pirates certainly prowled other corners of the world, but the pirates in the Great South Sea became notorious for "wanton, almost maniacal cruelty" (214). Unsurprisingly, "tales of massacred crews and lost ships poured into their public sphere" (223) and Yankee traders yet again assumed the status of victims. American voyagers, Morrison concludes, "did not so much encounter the world as create it—or, their version of it, as a world of fear" (237).
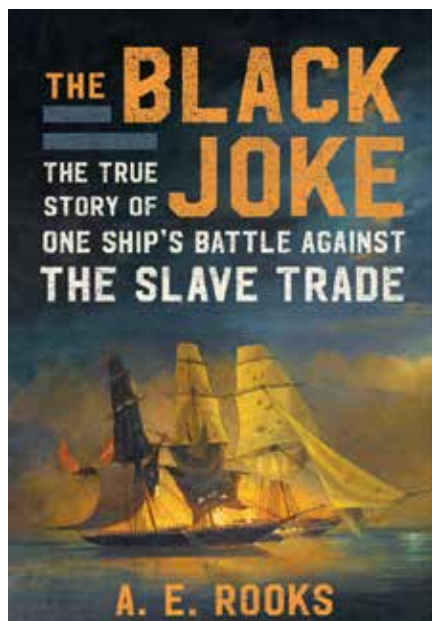
Eastward of Good Hope, a deeply researched and well-written book, does an excellent job exploring how early American travelers understood their world. Morrison illuminates the many ways in which travel accounts emphasized, exaggerated, or manufactured dangers. Morrison's deft analysis of the construction of US victimhood through encounters in the Ottoman Empire, India, China, and the Great South Sea deserves to be read alongside the work of other scholars who have explored how constructions of US victimhood occurred domestically.

The last two books covered in this review essay continue the discussion of dangerous worlds, with the addition of new actors – specifically, members of the British Navy's West Africa Squadron, enslaved people, and fugitives who escaped from slavery. Both books pose important questions about how people – both white and Black – resisted perils and seized opportunities amidst danger and despair.

Independent scholar A.E. Rooks examines the career of HMS *Black Joke*, one of the most feared ships in the Royal Navy's West Africa Squadron. "Despite its short tenure in the service," she argues, "the journey of what would eventually become His Majesty's Brig *Black Joke* and its crew touched on nearly every aspect of this frequently overlooked chapter in the popular history of the abolition of slavery" (3). Indeed, the *Black Joke* "demonstrates that battles for freedom have never been short, uncomplicated, or without sacrifice—though they are, conversely, easily forgotten" (4). In a dangerous world, the officers and crew of *Black Joke* participated in dangerous work – the suppression of the slave trade – and experienced both successes and failures.

Over the course of 13 chapters and a valediction, Rooks analyzes HMS *Black Joke*'s transformation from *Henriqueta*, a slave ship, to a member of the West

Africa Squadron. The transition from slaver to liberator, she observes, "would pace Britain's larger struggle to abolish the trade in the face of a cavalcade of obstacles and obstruction from within and without the empire" (29). Rooks rejects the uncomplicated analysis that Britain ruled the waves and illustrates that slavers were often dangerous quarries, not easily captured. In fact, "the attention given to their speed and armament ensured that purpose-built slavers were, as a rule, simply better suited to the theater of conflict in which they and the West Africa Squadron found themselves" (43). That said, beginning life as a slaver may have given *Black Joke* an advantage over other anti-slaving vessels. As Rooks notes, it was "unmistakably a purpose-built slaving vessel; it was the size of a slaver, rigged like a slaver, gunned like a slaver, and moved like a slaver. More akin to a racing yacht than an English frigate, nothing about the craft would have seemed out of place in the waters of the Gallinas" (58).

   Black Joke's job, not to mention the work of everyone involved with the Royal Navy's antislavery efforts, was not easy. The vision for the West Africa Squadron was "less than clear" (76), domestic enthusiasm for antislavery effort was "complicated," (76) and foreign enthusiasm "practically nonexistent" (76). Furthermore, as other scholars have shown, "the reality of service on the coast was discouraging, as circumstances constantly conspired against success" (102). Even in the face of all these obstacles, over the course of its short career, *Black Joke* captured many different slavers and gained a reputation among slave traders as "*the* ship to avoid" (143). Rooks also offers fascinating glimpses into the lives, actions, and beliefs of the crew. For instance, the crew, after capturing the slaver *Marinerito* and witnessing the suffering the captives endured, agreed to "imprison the surviving crew of the *Marinerito* at Fernando Pó for a few weeks" (264). This allowed another vessel from the West Africa Squadron, "to set them 'adrift,' which in this case meant abandonment on an island, Anabona (modern day Annobón), without any seacraft whatsoever" (264).

   Despite the ship's successes (or, perhaps, because of its origins and successes), *Black Joke* was not universally appreciated, and the navy eventually had it decommissioned and burned. The *Black Joke*, Rooks concludes, "is a symbol without a legacy. There was never the drive to make it more than that

because its story, and by extension the story of slavery, does not come down to the impossibility of the mission, nor the attitudes of the age. It comes down to the political will to do the right, hard thing" (300). There were several points where Rooks might have said more about the enslaved people that *Black Joke* rescued. They were classified as recaptured Africans and, as she comments, faced "a very limited set of options for future employment (some of which bore more than a passing resemblance to slavery)" (189). Since scholars have begun to pay much more attention to what life looked like for recaptives, Rooks might have said more about what happened to them after their encounter with *Black Joke*.

Nevertheless, this volume, a life and times biography of a ship and its crew, does a nice job illuminating some of the Royal Navy's antislavery work, as well as the constraints such efforts faced in Great Britain and abroad. Rooks joins a growing list of scholars who make compelling arguments about setting aside triumphal narratives about abolitionism in Great Britain and about the country's role in ending slavery and the slave trade in favour of more nuanced analysis.

The final book, *Sailing to Freedom*, also examines some of the dangerous contours of the eighteenth and nineteenth century worlds as well as how people resisted dangers and took their lives into their own hands. The essays in this volume explore the maritime dimensions of the Underground Railroad. As editor Timothy D. Walker correctly contends, scholars usually focus on fugitives who traveled by land. In neglecting the sea, however, scholars have overlooked "the great number of enslaved persons who made their way to freedom by using coastal water routes (and sometimes inland waterways), mainly along the Atlantic seaboard but also by fleeing southward from regions adjacent to the Gulf of Mexico" (4). Walker, currently Professor of History at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, and the other contributors to this volume, offer a more well-rounded portrayal of the Underground Railroad by foregrounding maritime aspects and by successfully illuminating the stories of fugitives who traveled by sea.

Michael D. Thompson analyzes dockworkers in Charleston, South Carolina, and explores the advantages of working on the waterfront, noting
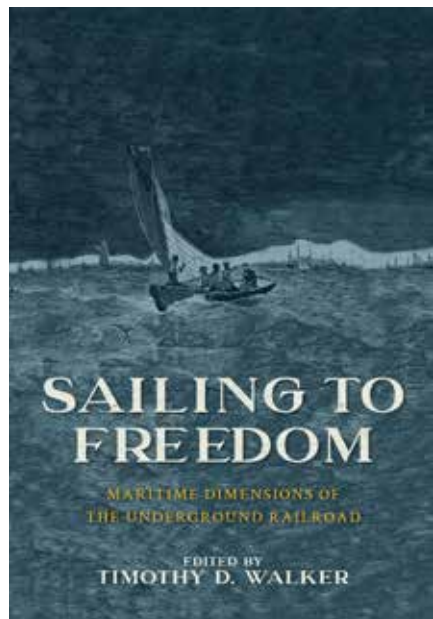
that enslaved dock labourers "were daily subject to outside influences and presented with remarkable opportunities and enticements not available to most plantation slaves or even other urban bondsmen" (38). David S. Cecelski illuminates "the crucial agency of enslaved men and women that was vital to successful escapes through North Carolina's coastal waterways and swamps" (55). Cassandra Newby-Alexander examines how the Underground Railroad networks in Hampton Roads and Norfolk, Virginia, "worked in concert with northern operations to transport fugitives via steamships, schooners, and other coastal vessels to freedom" (82). Cheryl Janifer Laroche's analysis of Maryland reveals "the importance of the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal to escapees" (105). Mirelle Luecke considers how "enslaved African Americans took advantage of New York City's position as a burgeoning port city to chart their routes to freedom" (124). Elysa Engelman contends that a "broad interconnected maritime culture" (149) in port cities "provided the sea links of northern to southern harbors, thus creating the conditions that allowed safe havens for shipping to be conduits for seaborne refugees as well" (149). Kathryn Grover also posits the importance of commercial maritime connections and notes how they helped make Boston and New Bedford Underground Railroad entrepôts. Len Travers continues this analysis by explaining how fugitives found in New Bedford "a community of color ready to help them on their journey to freedom and many whites holding sincere sympathy for their plight" (194). Finally, Megan Jeffreys discusses the "Freedom on the Move" database, a rich resource containing runaway slave advertisements that offers "a window into an era when escape from enslavement by seaborne means was common and frequent" (214).

The contributors to *Sailing to Freedom* successfully illuminate some of the maritime dimensions of the Underground Railroad and the volume should push scholars to spend more time thinking about the role of the sea in fugitive escapes from slavery.

The four volumes analyzed demonstrate how the worlds of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were indeed dangerous, filled with threats (both real and imaginary). In spite of this, many seized whatever opportunities they encountered and worked to mitigate these dangers. Each of these volumes contribute to our understanding of how people in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries tackled the complexities of commerce, race, and fear. They are well worth reading.

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