

David Armitage, Alison Bashford  
Sujit Sivasundaram (eds.)

*Oceanic Histories*

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About 70% of the earth's surface is covered by water and only the remaining 30% of it is dry land. In spite of this, even in recent times, attempts to describe human events in a global and deep historical perspective have had the hard and walkable surface of the world as a privileged object, or at least as a favoured framework. *Oceanic Histories* represents the first attempt ever made in contemporary historiography to counterbalance this intellectual bias with a comprehensive global history focused on the earth's waters. The book's structure is made of chapters dealing with the main seas, and all the oceans covering the earth<sup>1</sup>. In this review I will not expand on the contents of each chapter to end up with a simple descriptive summary, but I shall leave to the reader the pleasure of discovering the historical peculiarities of each sea and ocean. What is more interesting, faced with such a significant book, is to understand what kind of historiographic operation we are facing, and how *Oceanic Histories* dialogues with contemporary academic debate.

It is not surprising, in this sense, that the editors of the book come from important universities located at the antipodes of the world, all overlooking, or at least close to the seas that are described in *Oceanic Histories*, and in countries that played a leading role in the history of the oceans. In order to understand the book, it is also worth noting the different and complementary academic interests of the editors. David Armitage (Harvard University) is a political historian dealing with global circulation of ideas, with a particular focus on the Atlantic area and the role played by England and

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<sup>1</sup> The structure of the book is organized in three part: Oceans (Indian Ocean, Pacific Ocean, Atlantic Ocean), Seas (South China Sea, Mediterranean, Red Sea, Sea of Japan and East Korea, Baltic Sea, Black Sea), and Poles (Arctic and Southern Oceans).

the United States; Alison Bashford (University of New South Wales) is a historian of global science focusing on gender history and colonialism, while Sujit Sivasundaram (University of Cambridge) is mainly a political historian of the Pacific and Indian Oceans during the 18th and 19th centuries. The three historians' perspective thus can merge and intertwine to portray a comprehensive history of the world's liquid surface.

The overall approach and narrative of the book, which can be found in various gradations in all chapters, deal with the historiographical and historical issues of maritime history. The historiographic dimension is critical to the understanding of the oceans and the seas because of their peculiar nature. They are uninhabited places, yet they have been home for thousands of years to a community without proximity, that of the seafarers. In other words, an oceanic history can be made only starting from a history of the idea and conceptualization of what oceans are. The goal of the book is made more ambitious by the fact that such historiographical operations are made for each single ocean and sea, requiring a huge variety of expertise for such a global description. Subjects such as environmental and natural history, anthropology, cultural and literary studies, political history, just to mention a few, are all required, and this is why in *Oceanic Histories* we find broad hermeneutical categories. In the pages of the book, words such as porosity, permeability, connection, flexibility, cosmopolitanism, openness and closeness of spatial and temporal boundaries stand out, highlighting the complexity of maritime history, depending also on the huge variety of perspectives of different peoples that lived throughout history on the sea and ocean shores on the four corners of the globe.

An important aspect addressed in the book is the evolution in the mental and cartographic representation of the oceans from ancient models (for instance, the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic one for the West) to an increasingly detailed empirical knowledge. The Indian Ocean, for example, had been considered until the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century a sea enclosed between the southern tip of America and East Asia. The same concepts of 'closed' and 'open' have changed over the centuries. From physical concepts they became political. The Indian Ocean itself has been called a British Lake because of the extensive English colonial presence on its shores. At the same time, the variety of cultures and religions of the populations that faced it made its nature open and porous. The categories of porosity, meeting and trading zones, apply well to the narrative of the oceans, but even more to the seas, because of their smaller size. Think of the Mediterranean Sea, on whose shores, since ancient times, opposing and

complementary cultures have met and clashed: Phoenicians, Egyptians, Greeks, Persians, Romans, and later Christian and Muslim worlds, up to the most recent, tragic events which have seen mass migrations of African populations from the southern to the northern shores labelling undoubtedly the Mediterranean as a long-term trade-migration place. Extremely similar accounts may be given for the Red Sea, the South China Sea, and the Black Sea, on whose shores men and cultures have dialogued and clashed, discovering and culturally constructing these spaces, using them as tools for projecting economic or political influence, or to find shelter with regard to other maritime worlds. Eventually, the seas have become symbols. Just think of the Red Sea for Judaism.

If, in general, the approach to the narrative of the seas and the oceans that we find in the book is based on the most classic Braudelian *Long Durée*, *Oceanic Histories* employs the most advanced research ideas from the field of the Deep History too, using interpretation tools from geology and paleontology in order to understand the deep history of the formation of the oceans. From the most ancient geological formation to the most recent political tensions for global dominance, however, the step can be truly short, as demonstrated by the case of the Arctic and Antarctic Seas. In these cases, human history begins recently, only from the 19th century, mainly for geopolitical, scientific, and economic reasons. Another characteristic feature of the book lies in the attention given to the present and possible future developments in the history of the oceans. In this sense, there are issues that represent important challenges. Among these are the rapid development of geopolitical situations; the future role of traders, labourers, and migrants; the re-emergence of cultural and religious tensions which in the 20th century seemed to have been definitively supplanted by political ideologies and the return of economic and political entities such as city states, in competition with the more traditional form of nation state, are all. In this context, the environmental challenge relating to the pollution of the seas will also play an important role in the future balance between maritime powers, in terms of economic development and international legitimacy. In any case, if only one common element for the understanding of the seas is to be found in this book, it is that they will always escape univocal categorisation. *Oceanic Histories* takes seriously the appeal launched by one of the editors of the volume, David Armitage, who a few years ago in his work *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge, 2014), called for a new type of historiography, more focused on

long term studies for a better understanding of historical transformations and a better response to the crises of the present.

In conclusion, if one limitation of this important book had to be noted, I think it would be the persistent Anglo-Saxon monopoly, at least from an institutional point of view, of global historical narratives. The promising future that *Oceanic Histories* shows for future perspectives in global-maritime history, makes desirable a greater involvement of other academic traditions. For instance, Latin countries in Europe and the Americas on the shores of both the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans, played a key role in maritime history. To their institutions should be added universities from both northern and southern Mediterranean coasts, not to mention the increasingly important worldwide role of universities in the Arab world and in South and East Asia in India, Vietnam, Indonesia, China, Japan and Korea. Academic institutions in all these cultural areas should be more involved in editorial activities of this kind. A more symphonic institutional approach would be even more consistent with the message of plurality expressed by this beautiful book. With this goal in view, *Oceanic Histories* represents an important research model from which new themes should be deepened and developed.

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