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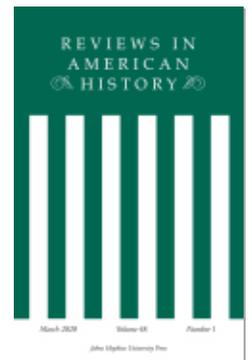
A Bounded and Boundless Sea

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Jason W. Smith, *To Master the Boundless Sea: The U.S. Navy, Marine Environment, and the Cartography of Empire*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020. 280 pp. Figures, maps, notes, bibliography, and index. \$35.00.

Historians have long examined the mechanisms by which the United States extended territory, but territorial extent has often been delineated in terrestrial terms—land, soil, and bedrock. Scholars who hew closely to conventional notions of territory have struggled to retain focus on the watery expanses betwixt and between, the oceans, which make up more than seventy percent of the planet. This is not to say that oceans have been overlooked as a realm of significance to U.S. power, a point evident in the longstanding attention in historical works to naval power encapsulated by Alfred Thayer Mahan's theories or oceanic commerce conforming to Grotius's principle for the law of the seas. While oceanic battles and treaties have been investigated, less attention has been paid to the marine environment itself in setting crucial conditions that at times enabled and at times constrained U.S. action. This is a point that Kurkpatrick Dorsey—a diplomatic and environmental historian whose work on oceans is an exception to the above trend—made in his field-spanning 2005 Bernath Lecture in *Diplomatic History*. In his remarks, Dorsey insisted that much work remained for historians in order to effectively foreground the material environment in histories of American militarism and foreign relations.¹

Jason W. Smith skillfully takes up this call in *To Master the Boundless Sea: The U.S. Navy, the Marine Environment, and the Cartography of Empire*. In the process, Smith brings the marine environment, as well as the scientific knowledge generated around it, into the center of his analytic viewfinder. He shifts perspective from an exclusive focus on strategists and decision-makers to the hydrographers who made sense of marine assemblages, “from the ocean surface to the sea floor, from the atmosphere above to the tidal zones, shifting sandbars, and reefs” (p. 9).

Using hydrography—the science of measuring the physical elements of oceans and other bodies of water—as a lens, Smith manages to retain focus on U.S. institutions, particularly the U.S. Navy, and the seas simultaneously. Smith draws upon a combination of state and naval archives, papers at pri-

vate collections, scientific publications, and canonical literary works to weave together what are often treated as separate strands of U.S. history. He offers an expedient route between literatures in military, naval, and maritime history on the one hand and histories of science and technology and environment on the other. This juxtaposition, in turn, allows for a critical reflection on numerous historical debates that pour far beyond the explicit subject of hydrography. However, despite an admirable and expressed commitment to historicize knowledge and to situate it in a broader cultural context, *To Master the Boundless Sea* struggles to move beyond the experiences and insights of elite, white men so central to the business of exploration. This narrow field of vision seems ill-suited to assessing oceanic thought in a period marked by mass migrations over the seas: those of enslaved peoples, coolie laborers, and competing imperial agents, to name a few. Smith also misses opportunities to connect the history of naval hydrography with richly documented processes of gendered and racialized ideologies suffusing naval and scientific professionalization. The result is that this work on the boundless oceans at times feels unnecessarily contained.

First, Smith's work intersects with a growing literature in US history concerning the role of knowledge production in facilitating U.S. expansionism in continental contest, hemispheric pacification, and Cold War hegemony.² Such histories build, implicitly or explicitly, from insight in political theory and postcolonial studies that situate knowledge as inextricable from power, including Michel Foucault's "governmentality," Edward Said's "Orientalism," and James Scott's "simplification."³

In the case of nineteenth-century hydrography, Smith indexes a process by which Americans aimed to know the ocean and constructed—even in the absence of a clearly articulated imperial politics—a springboard from which imperial projects could launch. The impulse to make the ocean legible stemmed in part from practical concerns, namely that it was ubiquitous and bountiful but also elusive and dangerous. Since the Age of Exploration, sailors had stared down an inhospitable marine environment that threatened their lives at every turn, from wretched storms to malnutrition.⁴ Smith notes that the threat continued for those disembarking from ports in Salem and Nantucket in the early 1800s; an estimated 30 percent of sailors lost their lives at sea. Facing this uncertainty, Smith shows ample evidence that individuals sought to make sense of the abyss. This meaning-making, Smith observes, unfolded in the realm of "folkloric" accounts of the seas—for example, in Samuel Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798)—but such vernacular understandings gave way to (if never disappeared from) more scientific understandings under the umbrella of hydrography, first, as a more generalized compilation of oceanic knowledge and later, as a much more specialized version tailored to narrowly defined strategic interests.

Smith's claims about the connections between empire and science also dovetail with exciting debates in literatures between studies of empire, science, and medicine. While works in this vein have established how fact-finding enterprises functioned as laboratories furthering imperial methods,⁵ Smith points out that some of these laboratories were at sea. Although the impulse to know the sea stemmed from less overtly coercive intentions, hydrographic knowledge production nonetheless became a lifeline to spur the even-farther-flung presence of the United States. This was especially evident in the journey of the US Navy-led Exploring Expedition (1838–1842), known colloquially as the "Ex. Ex." Under the leadership of Lieutenant Charles Wilkes, a man heralded in his time as "another Columbus" (p. 73), the naval office-surveyors of the Ex. Ex. undertook scientific work to know the waters of Oceania—especially Fiji—in search of strategic strongholds and reliable sources of international commodities, including sandalwood, bêche-de-mer sea cucumbers, and sea slugs. Some historians might hope for these commodities to be placed in richer context for the reader, though Smith does note the latter two were much desired for alleged aphrodisiac qualities.

The investigations supporting commercial interests across the islands entailed complex trigonometric work—measuring angles by sextant, sounding depths with measured lines, and fixing distances with cannon fire (p. 50). These instruments resembled terrestrial ones that also furthered colonial agendas, such as the cadastral survey.⁶ By the 1850s, the hydrographer Matthew Fontaine Maury attempted to systematically chart the deep ocean. Here, Smith marshals compelling examples of how technologically forward scientists and common sailors ("dregs") converged to institute key methodologies for delineating patterns on the high seas, including shorthand for recording fog, snow, or gloomy conditions that would irrevocably alter the ways seafarers passed through this "common highway" (p. 85). In this way, Maury's *Wind and Current Charts* (1852), hastened voyages and underwrote U.S. imperialism in familiar zones after the Guano Act of 1856, including islands like Midway Atoll, Pearl Harbor in Honolulu, and Guantanamo Bay in Cuba. In this history, we see the substance to Smith's claim, "At sea, the empirical was inextricably imperial" (p. 2).

Smith makes a somewhat-less-well-executed methodological argument about the importance of connecting scientific knowledge production to the broader cultural wellspring from which contemporaries drew. There is much potential and value in this line of reasoning, and indeed, Smith invokes numerous texts of the era that engage with the project of knowing water. Herman Melville's cultural touchstone, *Moby-Dick* (1851), for example, preceded the publication of Maury's own influential charts by just one year. Citing works from the literary canon by James Fenimore Cooper, Edgar Allen Poe, and Henry David Thoreau, Smith observes that ideas about nature, and specifically ideas about "ocean wilderness," helped to authorize exploratory action. American

environmental historians have long investigated the scope and consequences of notions of “wilderness,” often understood to be a pristine nature extricable from human experience, and national policies, including those calling forth expansion across the continent in an attempt to subjugate unruly and supposedly unpeopled terrains.⁷ Whereas attempts in terrestrial contexts to mitigate wilderness entailed grooming landscapes, attempts in aqueous ones could hardly, in most cases, reorder watery worlds. Smith observes, “[T]he sea could not be improved—its environment could not be visibly altered—in the ways Americans transformed land” (p. 38). Notable exceptions came in the form of the coral reefs that shrouded alluring coastlines, and thus the Navy’s scientists ignited explosive charges to clear coral.

Although Smith endeavors to show that the moment of the professionalization of hydrography coincided with, influenced, and built upon widespread cultural understandings of watery depths, he misses a chance to populate the canvas with the many vibrant and oppositional forms of meaning-making around the marine environment in the nineteenth century. For Smith, cultural understanding encompasses a regrettably narrow and elite field, which does not hold water in relation to the recent upwelling of literature on the sheer volume and diversity of oceanic migration, including scholarship on the Chinese diaspora, maritime traditions of foreign and indigenous peoples in the Pacific and Indian Ocean, and Middle Passage of the Transatlantic slave trade.⁸ Regarding the latter, scholars have shown how water was an important analytic frame for negotiating the visceral hold of slave ships and imagining the boundlessness of emancipation, a point evident in slave narratives, for example, Frederick Douglass’s reflections on an escape aided by his literacy with ships and seas in *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845). Moreover, when hydrography includes continental rivers, real and imagined figures surface, embodying knowledge for navigating waters in service of resistance, including Harriet Tubman on a ferry on the Combahee River and Margaret Garner crossing the Ohio River to freedom and the fictional Huck and Jim on a raft in the Mississippi River in Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884).⁹ Consequently, a work with the aim and potential to situate knowledge in a broader cultural field elides literary figures and historical actors with particular, even traumatic experiences with water as knowledge-producers in their own right.

Aside from highlighting more polyvocal sources, there are other approaches Smith might have taken to move beyond and richly contextualize official hydrography, including engaging with scholarship that critically interrogates the whiteness, masculinity, and “muscularity,” of the U.S. Navy or scientific expeditions.¹⁰ The unintentional effect of this lack of critical framing is the lionization of the very figures Smith aims to implicate in the violence of U.S. empire.

Smith does make a solid effort to query the knowledge and agency of those peoples with ancestral claims to lands newly targeted by U.S. scientists and naval officers. Much like in continental exploration, the civilian and naval scientists linked surveying with the field of ethnology and documented—through lenses of religious and racial superiority—the behaviors of indigenous populations.¹¹ Hydrographers in the nineteenth century spilled copious ink to craft sensationalized accounts of cannibalism in islands like Fiji, a point largely dismissed in recent accounts by anthropologists and placed in a deeply skeptical light by Smith. As the *Ex. Ex.* encroached gradually with their devices of cartography, Fijians staged meaningful and telling resistances—they “removed signal flags” and “stole a surveying boat” (p. 66). Such moments of localized resistance, itself predicated on superior and vernacular understandings of particular environments, have been increasingly important to environmental historians of warfare in particular, even as environmental damage has been highlighted as part of the slower moving violence therein.¹² Smith’s work also reveals the ways in which the efforts of Fijians to evade the watchful eye of these prototypical operatives of gunboat diplomacy did little to stem the tide of violence. After Fijians murdered two prying midshipmen, the *Ex. Ex.* officers responded with disproportionate reprisals, razing a village and killing 100 Fijians. Despite such asymmetries, reports circulating back in the mainland underscored the foreign dangers and apparent necessity of increased naval power.

With more consistency and energy, Smith makes a strong case for the importance of centralizing and analyzing the agency of nonhuman nature in the history of empire. Earlier works debating agency in environmental history drew upon actor-network theory and notions of hybridity to decenter human actants that had claimed, especially through Western Enlightenment rationality, a privileged position in a hierarchical natural world. Rather than viewing humans as separable from some nonhuman outside, this scholarship has underlined the interconnectedness, reciprocity, and embeddedness of human and nonhuman assemblages.¹³ Some scholars have built from this work to reveal the dynamism of the relationship between scientists (as agents of U.S. power) and nonhuman nature (as agents within ecological webs).¹⁴ Smith similarly showcases moments of friction between scientists who would be “imperial agents” in response to the physical realities of the dynamic marine environment. Some representatives of U.S. power in the Pacific admitted humility in the face of all-too-powerful natural forces of “Old Neptune” (p. 119). The noted failures of expeditions into the polar seas left behind wreckage and casualties, challenging hubristic ambitions. The difficulty of actually containing the whims of the ocean on the page by lithographers and seamen alike also hints at the agency of nature—the evasive, elusive elements. And Smith contends, “an uncharted rock...inflicted the navy’s largest material loss of the entire Spanish-American-Philippine conflict” (p. 160).

If Smith showcases the agency of nonhuman assemblages, then he also pushes into gray zones of environment straddling a status as national and global. Put differently, he illuminates tension between cooperation and nationalism central to zones of shared use, such as the oceans and the Arctic. Smith observes that while Maury framed the seas as a “common highway,” a sign of the cooperative ethos undergirding his scientific enterprise, many contemporaries wondered about the extent to which science should instead advantage specifically American maritime enterprises, for example, the forcible extension of Southern cotton investments into Brazil (p. 101). Numerous works in environmental history and the history of science have shed light on the choice U.S. officials needed to make, whether in the context of nineteenth-century geopolitics and empire-building, between pooling together a wider set of international data that served a wider humanity or withholding national data to affirm a singular advantage.¹⁵ This tension also expressed itself in debates about the extent to which the ocean was a commons versus a national enclosure. The tension between enclosure and commons is one that scholars must continue to untangle as nation-states and the international community grapple with how to respond to anthropogenic climate change that cannot be contained by national borders.

In sum, Smith makes important points about marine environments, knowledge production, enclosure, indigenous resistance, and nonhuman agency. Yet at other times his work seems to pursue a narrow course and even participate in the boosterism of naval science that it aims to historicize and problematize for its part in imperial projection. This is hardly a problem confined to Smith’s generative and well-written work. Rather, it reflects a bigger challenge in post-Anthropocene environmental scholarship, as historians and others struggle to balance an imperative to incorporate nonhuman actants into the frame and an imperative to avoid universalizing human experience to the extent that unofficial, marginalized people equally enmeshed in the web of life fall from view.

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