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Sons of the Waves: The Common Seaman in the Heroic Age of Sail

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After all, McMaster's battlegrounds are not only overseas but also here, in the United States in a civil society currently too partisan and polarized to rally effectively against the forces massed against the free world.

The Roman author Tacitus wrote that one of the foremost functions of history is to ensure that no worthy deed or person goes unmentioned—or unstudied. He also believed that we honor those deeds and individuals best through emulation. Perhaps *Battlegrounds* is most instructive in the example McMaster sets as a soldier, scholar, and citizen in a republic. Even when he vigorously disagreed with the policies of administrations of both political parties, McMaster nevertheless discharged his duties to the best of his abilities. He has devoted his life to study and service for the good of his country. If more citizens and servicemembers follow his example, we yet may turn the tide.

JEFFREY P. ROGG



Sons of the Waves: The Common Seaman in the Heroic Age of Sail, by Stephen Taylor. New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2020. 416 pages. \$30.

Are sea stories true? Landsmen never really know. Without direct experience of life at sea it is impossible to separate fact from fiction. Sailors have their own vocabulary and they forge strong bonds with each other. Sailors tell sea stories to bridge the gap between their world and the terrestrial world, but when they do so they are unbound by the constraints of commonly shared experiences that limit imaginations when two landsmen speak. At sea there are dragons, sailors say, and landsmen

have no way of disproving their claims; sailors exploit that uncertainty.

For all these reasons, naval historians always have treated sailors' memoirs with a great deal of caution. All memoirs require careful handling because the events being described often took place decades earlier, and the pressures of publishing provide incentives for exaggeration and sensationalism—and sailors hardly need encouragement on that front. Yet Stephen Taylor bases his new book almost entirely on sailors' memoirs, and argues that they provide a better window into the world of British sailors in the age of sail than historians have admitted previously. For Taylor, sea stories are mostly true, and he has done enough double-checking of the facts available to show that we should take seriously what they say about life at sea.

The central character in Taylor's book is Jack Tar. Most naval historians treat Jack Tar as a caricature, but Taylor argues that the popular perception of the common British seaman is not far off base. Taylor develops his character by narrating the experiences of dozens of sailors from 1740 through 1840. Jack circumnavigates the globe with Anson and endures deadly slaving voyages; he fights in major fleet battles and small-boat actions; and he returns home to earn his reputation for profligacy in port.

Throughout, Taylor maintains a healthy skepticism of his sources, but that does not stop him from repeating some of the more implausible stories, such as that of William Swallow. Taylor relishes such capers, but he also examined the available archival records to verify what could be verified in Swallow's story. *Sons of the Waves* is a compendium of sea stories, woven together in Taylor's

breezy, informal writing style. The result is easy to read and engagingly illustrated.

In addition to the usual reasons to treat sea stories skeptically, historians have tended to be wary of them as sources because of an argument put forward most prominently by N. A. M. Rodger: that many of the memoirs published in the nineteenth century were thinly disguised political polemics aimed at ending the practice of impressment and improving conditions on the lower deck. In Rodger's view, historians should not fall into the trap of perpetuating the myths of ships as floating jails and press-gangs running rampant, because so much of the source material is unreliable. Taylor addresses this view directly and argues, on the contrary, that most of the memoirs he uses were published well after the debates about impressment and corporal punishment had passed.

By taking sea stories seriously, then, Taylor has brought together a range of valuable sources for the social history of the lower deck. All of Taylor's memoirs were readily available to naval historians before, but his great accomplishment is to have synthesized their perspectives in one volume and demonstrated the value in analyzing them. There is some irony here, in that Taylor provides plenty of evidence to support Rodger's depiction of the lower deck, despite using sources that Rodger avoids. But there is plenty of fuel for alternative interpretations as well; Taylor repeatedly shows the social and emotional cost of impressment, the range of shipboard disciplinary regimes, and the uncertainties of naval pay and pensions. Taylor has not settled the debate, but he has made a useful intervention in it.

A number of points emerge from Taylor's retelling of sailors' experiences.

The most important is that they were not victims but rather rational assessors of the maritime labor market who sought competent captains and comfortable cruises. That is not to say that they did not suffer in the age of impressment, but rather that they did not accept their fate passively. They voted with their feet, deserting unhappy ships and volunteering for happy ones. That brought them into conflict with the Admiralty's need to maintain ever-larger naval forces on ever-more-distant stations, so what held them together in difficult conditions was teamwork. Sailors who were pressed together stayed together—or, in the words of Robert Hay, one of Taylor's key witnesses, "they bec[a]me endeared to each other by a similarity of sufferings" (p. 383). Sailors also had a voice, and Taylor has helped us hear it more clearly. As Taylor puts it, "One characteristic stands out above all others in [Jack's] storytelling, and it is self-respect" (p. xv).

There was not one singular experience of life on the lower deck, but the more we can learn about that experience from the men themselves, the closer we can get to understanding their shared experiences. Whether or not all of Taylor's sea stories are true, they provide a vivid account of life at sea in the age of sail.

EVAN WILSON



Putin's People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took On the West, by Catherine Belton. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2020. 640 pages. \$35.

Catherine Belton's *Putin's People* has received positive acclaim from most reviewers, and with good reason. It is a brave and impressive work of