

Book Review

■ Eric Paul Roorda, editor, *The Ocean Reader: History, Culture, Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020. Pp. xix + 523. Bibliography and Index. \$29.95 (paper).

The latest in the series of World Readers published by Duke University Press, *The Ocean Reader* is a rich and valuable addition to anthologies of maritime writings. Editor Roorda early on acknowledges the collection's roots in the Frank C. Munson Institute of American Maritime Studies based at Mystic Seaport and thanks many of that group's participants for their contributions to the work. The influence of this important maritime think tank is demonstrated in the breadth of the entries and expertise of the explanatory paragraphs that introduce each reading and provide essential context.

The anthology differs from many in its treatment of the Ocean as a place in itself. The editor seeks to avoid "terracentrism" and wants to "replace it with a steady focus on the Ocean and on events that take place offshore" (1). "Ocean is capitalized in this book." He writes, "[t]his deviation from conventional style is intended to claim a formal name for that vast place . . . as if it were a country or continent" (3). Human interactions with this place, then, are the core of the work.

Organized around twelve topics (Creation, Ancient Seas, Unknown Waters, Saltwater Hunt, Watery Highways, Battlefields, Piracy, Shipwrecks and Castaways, Inspiration, Recreation, Laboratory, and The Endangered Ocean), the volume includes an impressive array of excerpts from a splendid assortment of sources. Through this topical organization, Roorda attempts to bring order to the multiple ways human beings engage with the Ocean. He does much to broaden our awareness of non-English and non-European writings, including pieces from Asian and African sources as well as entries treating South American and Pacific topics. Within each area, entries are arranged chronologically from ancient times to the modern day, which has the added benefit of often documenting the evolution of thinking about each subject. A review of the contents suggests historians reliant on traditional Western European and North American materials will need to make room for texts that include ancient Egyptian, Pacific Islander, Japanese, Chilean, and Chinese voyagers. Readers discover, for instance, that there was a great deal more seafaring in ancient times than thought possible, and meet a number of explorers outside the Western Civilization canon of discovery.

The *Ocean Reader* is a wonderful supplement for a global or maritime history course or an interdisciplinary course that explores the Ocean on its own terms. Land-based actors, locations, or activities are not far away, but the heart of the book examines human engagement with the watery parts of the planet. One of its strengths—its use of entries from non-Western sources and other countries and cultures—may also be a limitation. The work seems to presuppose in some ways that the reader is familiar with American, English, and/or European sources on these topics and will understand and value how this book’s materials differ. This might make the reader more difficult for introductory courses or K-12 use. However, introducing students to oceanic subjects through non-traditional readings has value in its own right. Conversely, further research into any one of the readings, authors, or the broader topics presented could power any number of upper-level courses or seminars.

So much of recorded history is concerned with mastery and control of land and its attendant flora and fauna. This book demonstrates, time and again, the inability of humans to truly master the Ocean. We may explore, harvest, traverse, ponder, fight, enjoy, and damage it, but thus far, humankind can only attempt to control the seas. Again and again, Roorda shows through these readings the myriad ways humans roll the dice when they go to sea, risking life and limb for its various rewards.

Fascination with Ocean is perhaps best revealed in the “Creation” and “Inspiration” sections. The Ocean plays a pivotal role in many civilizations’ creation myths, and Roorda has captured a range of them: Egyptian, Greek, Japanese, Pacific Islander, Hindu, and Haitian, to name a few. He also includes two modern scientific texts that bring creation accounts full circle as they mirror aspects of Ocean Gods’ narratives from past cultures. The “Inspiration” section highlights new writings or lesser known, Ocean-focused work from very familiar authors. This pattern repeats itself within each section with entries and illustrations that reflect and amplify each other as the reader moves forward in time.

A modern anthology that seeks to be comprehensive as this one does cannot ignore the damage done to the Oceans and the ongoing threats posed. “The Endangered Ocean” touches on a number of the hazards that menace this environment, a “troubling news flash” (463). While chronicling the many ways in which humans continue to harm the Ocean, Roorda calls on readers to act, focusing on Sylvia Earle’s Mission Blue “hope spots” where the Ocean remains relatively unchanged (463). In this final call to action, the *Ocean Reader* shifts from being a kind of historical reader and becomes a blueprint, a work laying out the fundamental way the Ocean has shaped the human experience and now deserves recognition and attention, repair and recovery.

Dr. Patricia B. Bixel is a maritime historian, former tall-ship crewmember and director, and current Dean of the College of Science and Humanities at Husson University in Bangor, ME. She may be reached at bixelp@husson.edu.