

Book Review

Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *Straits: Beyond the Myth of Magellan*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2022. Pp. xiv + 343. \$29.95 (paper).

Ferdinand Magellan's name is held in high esteem. A documentary streaming service, two galaxies, and a wide assortment of companies and products are named in his honor. By objectively examining his career, Felipe Fernández-Armesto vividly illustrates that Magellan was a spectacular failure who did not meet his voyage's objectives. To make matters worse for the poor man, he also made a series of terrible decisions that resulted in the loss of most of his crew and his own life.

Fernández-Armesto begins in "The Globe Around Magellan" by examining the maritime world just prior to Magellan's voyage. Fernández-Armesto details the trade routes that formed much of the traffic in the Indian Ocean. Commerce required steady and active participation from East Africans, Indians, Chinese, and Arabs who had traded amongst themselves for centuries. Iberian merchants needed to carve out a niche for themselves in that world. He continues with the Pacific Ocean and what European cartographers and navigators knew – and did not know – about the sheer breadth of the Pacific world.

"The Education of an Adventurer" continues with Magellan's early life and upbringing, including the reasons why a naval career would have attracted a young Portuguese man of a middling aristocratic house. A naval career at the time, just like a military career, was imbued with chivalry and romanticism. Like the Spanish *conquistadores*, Magellan came from a modest background and Spain's expansion promised opportunity. This sort of motivation also galvanized other future explorers and navigators who have recently been analyzed such as in Diana Preston and Michael James Preston's *A Pirate of Exquisite Mind. Explorer, Naturalist, and Buccaneer: The Life of William Dampier* (London: Walker Books, 2004) and Richard Zacks' *The Pirate Hunter: The True Story of Captain Kidd* (New York: Hyperion, 2002).

"The Trajectory of a Traitor" details Magellan's short-lived career with the Portuguese navy. The chapter continues with an examination of the circumstances that

compelled him, along with many other mariners and navigators from throughout Europe, to seek opportunity in Spain. Furthermore, this chapter examines what Spain was at this critical time; the kingdom had formed only recently and Spaniards themselves were not entirely sure of their identity. Not only Portuguese, but also Galicians and Catalans thought of themselves as separate peoples with their own traditions. This would come to a head later in the voyage as crewmen from various ethnic groups clashed.

The sheer extravagant cost of funding and outfitting such an expedition is examined in depth in “The Making and Marring of a Fleet.” There was the initial difficulty of convincing the Casa that a new maritime route to the Moluccas was viable. After that came the often tedious task of allocating funds and negotiating with various subcontractors and subordinates to outfit five ships. Fernández-Armesto outlines the major costs in much the same way as Timothy Beattie in his dissertation *The Cruising Voyages of William Dampier, Woodes Rogers and George Shelvocke and their Impact* (University of Exeter, 2013).

“The Cruel Sea” sees the expedition setting out on its voyage and describes some of the key officers who left written accounts. Even at that early stage, Magellan and his captains bickered over their orders and potential routes. The dissension explodes with a mutiny in “The Gibbet at San Julian” and a knife fight between officers in “The Gates of Fame.” “The Unremitting Wind” involves the expedition entering the Pacific and dealing with malnutrition as provisions began to run out. “Death as Advertised” details the circumstances surrounding Magellan’s death. Magellan’s unexpected religious zeal comes into play as he suddenly used Christian symbols as a means to ingratiate himself amongst indigenous groups in the Philippines. “Aftermath and Apotheosis” focuses on the after effects of Magellan’s voyage and how his public image was rehabilitated almost immediately.

Fernández-Armesto is no stranger to incorporating culture into his works, having written the culinary history *Near a Thousand Tables* (New York: Free Press, 2001). In this more recent work, he contextualizes the Age of Expansion as the first truly global intellectual movement. This book is a useful companion to Karel Davids’ *Global Ocean of Knowledge, 1660-1860: Globalization and Maritime Knowledge in the Atlantic World* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), which expands on that movement by tracing it from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century.

One of the key features of Spanish exploration was the wanton violence that followed many meetings with indigenous peoples. Fernández-Armesto explains why the Spanish and Portuguese behaved with such brutality after encountering new cultures. It was not just the religious zeal that had accompanied the end of the *Reconquista*. Rather, it was a calculated decision. The Spanish and Portuguese explorers were constantly outnumbered and could not depend on any reinforcements. According to the Iberian mindset, negotiating their way through a dispute or waiting for indigenous authorities to

finish assessing the situation were simply not options. The Iberians instead quickly resorted to aggressive terror tactics in order to intimidate the indigenous peoples into submission. For Magellan, acts of violence were also useful tools that might impress other indigenous peoples into forming alliances with his expedition. Operating so far from home, Magellan needed any and all assistance possible.

Despite the extreme violence, Magellan's reputation has not diminished even after modern social movements have forced the reassessment of other historical figures. Unlike Hernán Cortés or Francisco Pizarro, he did not pave the way for Spanish imperialism by toppling entire civilizations. Magellan's story had the good fortune to appeal to nineteenth century thinkers who supported the "Superman myth" of extraordinary men doing extraordinary things. Nineteenth century and early twentieth century audiences voraciously consumed literature surrounding such figures and put him on the same level as David Livingstone or Ernest Shackleton. As a result, Magellan is still regarded as an intrepid and relatively benign explorer. That has enabled his fame to withstand typically severe and unforgiving twenty-first century scrutiny.

This is a suitable fit for a maritime history graduate seminar or even an upper-division undergraduate class related to Colonial Latin American history or Renaissance Europe. By incorporating cultural and economic history, *Straits* is a versatile interdisciplinary work as well. Fernández-Armesto has prepared an engaging read that thoroughly dissects the Magellan myth while portraying that ill-fated mariner as a human being.

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