Michel M. du Jourdin *Europe and the Sea*

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The Great World Ocean and all its major and minor seas has, as du Jourdin notes, been rather neglected by historians. They’ve been a landlubberly lot. But from the time the first human put a few logs or planks together and sailed from a bay’s one shore to another, a great potential has existed. In the many subsequent millennia, the isles of the Pacific were settled, the Americas discovered and rediscovered, and Indonesians found a home in distant Madagascar, off the coast of east Africa. Much history has been made at sea: great battles, fierce commercial rivalries, piracy, adventure, and serious exploration. What would Darwin’s place in the history of the West’s intellect have been had he not made a sea voyage?

Michel M. du Jourdin and his translator, Teresa L. Fagan, have given us a rich work on Europe’s multiple intimacies with the sea. The book is in two parts: “Europe and the Sea in Time and Space” with six chapters, and “Europe and the Sea in Human Society,” with five.

The first chapter, rather geographical, has the unusual feature of a comparison-and-contrast between the Sound (hail Copenhagen!) and the Strait of Gibraltar, and between the Baltic and the Mediterranean seas. Chapter Two discusses the Mediterranean from ancient Greece to the medieval Italian cities and the development of the portolan charts. Chapter Three covers the 1100s to the 1400s, as Europe’s seaward focus shifted from south to west. The next two chapters cover The Convergence, as Mediterranean and Atlantic Europe join their commercial networks and share technology. In the final chapter of Part One “The Framework Bursts Apart” from the 1500s to the present.

In these chapters du Jourdin has treated such diverse but related topics as improvements in shipbuilding and mapmaking, the rise of the several seafaring peoples, classical and Hanse tha-
lascocracies, the shift from coastwise to open sea navigation, the stuff of seaborne trade, the familial diasporas of merchant families and the gradual rise of governmental interest in ocean trade and navies.

Part Two begins with the sea as a source of livelihood. Of especial interest is his information on the development of coastal salt evaporation “pans,” the techniques required, the trade in salt, and the poor working conditions of the salt works peasants. This is noteworthy. How many histories (or geographies) have you read that are informative regarding this important commodity? This is followed by a discussion of fishing, early discoveries (the Canary Islands, etc.), arguments over freedom of the seas, and the historical geography of the rise of the European maritime powers. Subsequent chapters deal with further improvements in cartography and shipbuilding, the division of labor aboard ship, the solidarity/individuality of seamen, the sea in literature and art (even music!) and ends noting briefly the gradual shift from royal events at sea to contemporary recreation on seas and seashores.

Du Jourdin’s attention to a wide variety of topics is refreshing and is evident throughout the book. The seventeen maps have a well-chosen sans serif type-face which is exceptionally legible. However, the rendition of the coastlines is marred with dots on the seaward side, which reduces clarity. While it is helpful to have some place-name maps, such provide no information about the landforms, a common failing in history books generally.

Although du Jourdin has paid more attention to geography than is the usual case among historians, and that is certainly to his credit, I expected, in vain as it turned out, a map showing the different ways in which Europe’s land meets Europe’s sea. Are the places named surrounded with mountains, hills, or plains? Are the shores beset with cliffs, or swamps, or what? The reader has no idea of accessibility. And why not a map of watersheds and navigable streams? Certainly the flow of rivers to the sea was an important part of the geography of trade until railroads
and airplanes came along. But all that sort of thing goes unanalyzed.

*Europe and the Sea* is a rewarding contribution to our views of the history of Europe. As to whether any little incorrect factual items crept into the manuscript, I leave that to the historians to comb over. I am pleased to say that M. du Jourdin is to be commended for an excellent effort to attend to a broad clutch of topics in an engaging manner, and to fill a hole in the writing of the history of Europe. Let us now have others writing similarly about the rest of the world! Civilizationists, attend to the sea!

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