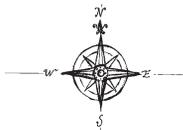


VAST  
EXPANSES  
A HISTORY OF  
THE OCEANS



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The ocean surface: vast, trackless and opaque.

# Introduction: People and Oceans

Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?  
Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,  
in that grey vault. The sea. The sea  
has locked them up. The sea is History.  
– Derek Walcott, 'The Sea is History' (1979)

**T**HE VAST EXPANSE of the world ocean, the dominant feature of planet Earth, has remained at the edges of our histories. Without conscious choice, writers have embedded a terrestrial bias in virtually all stories about the past. Dry land is the presumed norm. Even coasts and coastal dwellers have been viewed as marginal and exceptional, as have swamps, marshes, cays, reefs and other littoral areas that are neither entirely wet nor dry. Ocean basins appear on the fringes of land-based states and actions. Even events that took place at sea are often narrated as though the ocean is a flat, land-like plane without its underlying depths, having two dimensions instead of three. The time has come to put the ocean in the centre of some of our histories, not to replace terrestrial history but to add the history of the ocean itself to the other important histories we tell. Such a shift in perspective will yield rich dividends in our understanding of the past and equally enrich our present world in which ocean issues loom large.

This book attempts to tell the history of the ocean, extending its natural history to encompass its interrelationships with people, and including its depths as well as its surface. People have exploited the ocean for many reasons, starting with food and transportation, but also as the focus of myth and culture. New uses of the ocean emerged over time – science, communication, submarine warfare, mining and

recreation. Alongside new uses, the old ones remain – piracy and naval warfare, shipping and smuggling, whaling and fishing. The ocean has enabled and constrained human activities, but people have also affected the ocean, in some cases dramatically.

Looking across its restless surface and smelling the salt spray, an observer today might imagine that past generations of seafarers or coastal dwellers witnessed the same ocean. Ships, breaching whales and even storms leave no tracks. Differences under the surface are not apparent. Yet the ocean is no less susceptible to natural and historical change than is the land. Just as the history of the land is inextricably intertwined with people, so too is the ocean's history, however hidden that history and however absent people have seemed from the sea itself. The perception of the ocean as timeless is as much a product of history as other cultural, political or economic changes resulting from the mutual relationship between people and ocean.

Far from providing a definitive telling of ocean history, this account offers a model, a starting point, in the hopes of inspiring others to embark on fuller, more inclusive histories. The goal here is to encompass all of the ocean, not just the slices along its coasts, surfaces or productive fishing grounds. The voluminous ocean provides over 99 per cent of the environmental space available for living things and, while people have not (at least so far) colonized the ocean, human activities make both tangible and imaginative use of all of the ocean, although clearly some parts more than others. This book charts a divergence of the history of a single global ocean appearing and changing over the lifetime of our planet into multiple histories of seas and coastal waters experienced by individual communities of people all over the globe. Since the fifteenth-century European discovery that all seas are connected, it is again possible to tell a story about the world ocean, as this book attempts to do. Hopefully, future histories will also investigate plural and individual oceans, defining and enumerating particular seas through physical geography, marine ecosystems, geopolitics, economics and also social and cultural conceptions.

The story related in this book weaves together three threads. First, the long story of the human relationship with the sea – all of it, including its third dimension – stretches to the scale of evolutionary time and extends over millennia to the present and future. Far from the ahistorical place it often seems to be, the ocean is profoundly a part of history. Second, the connections between people and oceans, though ancient, have tightened over time and multiplied with industrialization and globalization. Although we think of it as being starkly different, in this sense the ocean resembles the land. This trajectory runs counter to widespread cultural assumptions of the ocean as a place remote from and immune to human activity. Third, knowledge about the ocean – created through work and play, through scientific investigation and also through the ambitions people harboured for using the sea – has played a central role in mediating the human relationship with this vast, trackless and opaque place. Knowledge has helped people exploit marine resources, control ocean space, extend imperial or national power, and attempt to refashion the sea into a more tractable arena for human activity. Knowledge about the ocean, in short, has animated and strengthened connections between people and their oceans. Writing ocean history, I argue, must involve attention to questions of how, by whom and why knowledge about the ocean was created and used.

The first two chapters cover most of the time explored in this book, emphasizing the enormity of the ocean's past in the planet's history. 'A Long Sea Story', the first chapter, begins four billion years ago. It relates a deliberately ocean-centric story of Earth's development, in which dinosaurs appear in passing during the 'Age of Oysters', when molluscs dominated. Humans make their appearance as part of nature, within the natural history of the planet rather than separate from it, and ocean-oriented activities of early hominids and of *Homo sapiens* appear to have played an important role in the evolution of our species. 'Imagined Oceans', Chapter Two, continues the long story of people and oceans, finding that some cultures understood the sea as part of their worlds and territories, while others consciously turned away from

the ocean. Before the fifteenth century, seas were known only locally or, at most, out to the boundaries of a usable basin. Specialist traders and navigators had experience of connections to an adjacent basin, but none knew the ocean as a global feature.

Although people across the globe lived by and with the sea for aeons, new knowledge of the ocean forged from the fifteenth through to the nineteenth centuries set new precedents for human use and perception of the sea, as chapters Three and Four explore. The era of geographic discovery by European powers, narrated in the third chapter, ‘Seas Connect’, etched water routes between all the Earth’s known lands and laid the foundation for the doctrine of the freedom of the seas. Trade networks that criss-crossed the world provided the underpinning for an imperialism whose logic strongly promoted the exploitation of oceanic resources, especially the storied cod fisheries. Knowledge acquired through the work of navigation, warfare and fishing expanded with the Scientific Revolution to include discoveries made by practitioners of modern science that, in turn, enabled more intensive use of the ocean. Investigation of the vertical dimension of the seas, long a part of the work of some navigators and most fishers, began in earnest in the nineteenth century, as Chapter Four, ‘Fathoming All the Ocean’, recounts. New uses for the ocean, including the distant blue waters not previously exploited by people, expanded far beyond the traditional ones. The ocean transformed into a site for science, an industrial setting for transoceanic communications cables and a cultural reference that resonated with a generation fascinated by the sea.

Multiplication of new uses for the sea, alongside dramatic intensification of traditional maritime activities, has characterized the twentieth century, as chapters Five and Six show. Chapter Five, ‘Industrial Ocean’, examines the intensification of traditional maritime activities with industrialization. Expanding fisheries linked people with oceanic resources that were consumed far from where they were caught. Steam and iron quickened the tempo of development and also of everyday life, affecting the sea as much as the land. Beginning during the First World War, submarine

warfare enmeshed the ocean's third dimension in global geopolitics. The Second World War involved unprecedented scientific investigation of the ocean to support undersea warfare, amphibious landings and sea-based aviation. In the wake of hostilities, the ocean emerged as a promising site for science- and technology-based economic development. As Chapter Six, 'Ocean Frontier', chronicles, inventors, entrepreneurs and officials transferred the metaphor of the American western frontier onto the sea to express their optimism for the growth potential of ocean-based industry. The scramble to claim oceanic resources led to the erosion of the centuries-long agreement regarding freedom of the seas. Extension of Exclusive Economic Zones may have ended the fiction of the ocean as a limitless frontier but did not appreciably curb intensive use of the sea.

As the final chapter and epilogue explain, a new posture towards the sea had its origins in post-war recreational access to the ocean. As Chapter Seven, 'Accessible Ocean', explains, the technology of scuba opened the undersea realm equally to frogmen, oil industry workers, scientists, casual divers, film-makers and others. The 1970s concern for the great whales and about the dangers posed by major oil spills drew attention seawards but did not translate into worry about the ocean itself, only its coasts and a handful of its more charismatic inhabitants. The accessible ocean, increasingly made visible through recreation as well as film, began a process of cultural transformation from robust frontier to fragile environment. Concern for the ocean as a whole gained traction only recently, however, as the Epilogue argues, with the belated awareness of overfishing and climate change and the extent to which these human interventions have remade the ocean.

The time to write ocean history is now. Recent scholarship from many fields has laid a promising foundation, revealing the underappreciated importance of the ocean and its depths, in both the past and the present. The fundamental quandary of the sea's apparent timelessness makes it difficult for us to accept the unfamiliar view of the ocean as a place of dynamic change. The humanities remind us that we know the ocean as much through imagination as through the knowledge

systems of those who worked, or work, at sea. The opacity of the ocean guarantees that we see reflected back from its surface our fears and desires. Human motives, then, matter as much as biological interactions or chemical reactions. While present issues may seem to call for scientific and technological solutions, there remains a central and critical role for the humanities. Our understanding of the past will be revolutionized by an oceanic perspective that drives home the relevance of deep time and demonstrates the profound connectedness between people and the entire planet. The connection forged between people and oceans has changed both and tied their fates together. Our future may depend on acknowledging the ocean as part of – not outside of – history.