

John McALEER

Atlantic Voyages: The East India Company and the British Route to the East in the Age of Sail

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John McAleer is Associate Professor of History at the University of Southampton. He was previously Curator of Imperial and Naval History at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich. His interest focuses on the history of the English East India Company and British influence in the world in the 18th and 19th centuries. Until now, he has become known primarily as the author of dozens of studies mapping the global and maritime context of the history of the British Empire, but also as the editor of the *Worlds of the East India Company* series by Boydell & Brewer and co-editor of the *Maritime Humanities* series of studies by Amsterdam University Press.

His latest monograph is focused on a specific type of “everyday life”, the life of passengers aboard East Indiamen, ships that carried thousands of passengers to the new colonies in Asia. The book is focused on the lesser-known, Atlantic part of the journey. In the end, he places these experiences in the broader history of the English East India Company and the British Empire in the period under review.

In the first chapter, the author introduces the reader to the concept of

the work, the main types of sources and the dominant types of creators of them, the development of historiography to date, the methodology and structure of the work. In the second chapter, the author is interested in what happened in the “wooden world” of ships. In the center of attention is not only the material culture on board, daily practice, food and drink, but also the feelings and concerns of the passengers, the ways they coped with the difficulties of the journey, weather fluctuations, diseases and cramped living conditions. The author’s crosshairs include problematic food and extremely limited privacy. The author is also interested in how these small and internally differentiated groups of people lived together and how they celebrated the rituals of long journeys.

The third chapter examines in more detail the conditions under which people experienced long-term sailing, how they dealt with boredom, separation from their home communities, how they recorded these experiences in their diaries and correspondence, and what books they read.

The fourth and fifth chapters are devoted to observation, investigation,

evaluation and research. The fourth chapter concerns the sea, the fifth the land. At the same time, the author focuses on the contradictions between subjective perception and real observation. In the fourth chapter, you can find knowledge about the sea, underwater life, climate, celestial phenomena and changes in the starry sky. The author does not neglect the collecting passion of many passengers. The fifth chapter, on the other hand, reflects on the stops on the way, on the Atlantic islands and in Atlantic ports. These stops not only allowed travelers to gain strength and replenish supplies, they also brought confrontation with other European and non-European cultures, other religions, other inhabitants, sometimes causing cultural disorientation. The author is interested not only in the interaction with this environment, but also in the way the findings are presented to the domestic audience. Last but not least, he is interested in the relationship with representatives of competing colonial empires.

In the end, the author states that the journeys from Europe to Asia cannot be dismissed as simply moving from one place to another. He states

that the travelers were usually thrown into realities regarding the size of the globe, climate and natural phenomena with which they had no previous experience and their knowledge, captured in the sources of a personal nature, usually reflects this. For the passengers, the journeys were a source of many insights, broadening horizons and bringing initial ideas closer to reality. In many cases, it was only during the journey that travelers discovered Britain's true place in the modern world.

The value of McAleer's book is in its innovative approach. Until now, most historians have examined the findings of East India Company travelers and employees in their Asian destinations. They generally focused on the end of the journey, not the journey itself. How ship passengers were affected by the experience of transatlantic voyages has been virtually neglected. The author's emphasis on historical sources should also be appreciated. John McAleer has conveyed to the reader a wealth of information obtained through careful study in many British and South African archives.

Michal Wanner

