

The Atlantic

Review Number:

98

Publish date:

Wednesday, 1 March, 2000

Author:

Paul Butel

ISBN:

041516907

Date of Publication:

1999

Pages:

341pp.

Publisher:

Routledge

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

Andrew Lambert

'From the Sea of Perpetual Gloom to the Holiday Cruise'

With this book Paul Butel, Professor of modern history at the Universite de Michel de Montaigne Bordeaux, launches both a new series, and a new perspective. The series 'Seas in History' edited by Geoffrey Scammell, promise to reverse an age old trend, by taking an oceanic perspective on the relationships between land masses. Further volumes are planned on the Baltic and North Sea, the Mediterranean, the Pacific and the Indian Ocean. For too long history has been written from a land bound, generally national perspective, the seas offer an alternative standpoint, based on contact, exchange and transformation. That said Butel's Atlantic is perceived in a recognisably French light, with all the advantages and pitfalls that necessarily follow. His perspective provides a much needed corrective to the anglo-centric and rather triumphalist nature of so much of the existing literature. Furthermore the methodology is refreshing, and the insights invariably worthy of consideration. Less impressive is the curious omission of Professor Scammell's *The World Encompassed* of 1981, a masterly survey of early European exploration in the Atlantic from the bibliography, and the text.

Butel begins with the mythic Atlantic of the ancient Mediterranean, from Atlantis, Plato's ideal world, through the 'sea of perpetual gloom' that terrified those who feared to pass the Pillars of Hercules, and the early voyages of the Carthaginians to Northern Europe, Morocco and West Africa. These voyages combined serious efforts to expand trading opportunities with the development of new myths. Other mythic traditions in the Celtic areas to the north grew and developed into the Christian era, sending St. Brendan to a new world across the sea, with the Icelandic settlers following. Recent DNA based research has combined these two streams of Atlantic expansion, with the dominant genetic heritage of modern Icelanders being Irish, from prisoners and slaves acquired around Dublin, rather than Norse settlers. This raises a whole new series of questions, concerning Icelandic culture. In addition archaeological research suggests that substantial

changes in climate had a profound effect on the settlements of Ice land and Greenland, the latter failing when the weather worsened, and the former only clinging on to existence because the local fish stocks attracted English traders. This would imply that the Norse Atlantic voyages were undertaken in periods of better weather. Climatic shifts do not feature in this Atlantic.

By contrast the commercial purpose of 'exploration' is well developed, disposing of Victorian conceit that long and hazardous voyages were undertaken to expand knowledge when the search for profit was dominant. The explorers who worked their way down the west coast of Africa and into the Bight of Benin sought gold, slaves and sugar. The Portuguese prince Henry the 'Navigator' used the Canary Islands as a base for further exploration, a source of slaves to sell in Lisbon and a potential kingdom of his own. The cultivation of sugar on the Azores and Canaries provided a new trade, and expanded Atlantic maritime activity. The Portuguese steadily worked their way south, until they left the Atlantic altogether for the real prize, the Indies. Along the way the prevailing winds had taken them to Brazil, founding another empire, and now the largest Portuguese speaking nation.

To avoid Portuguese control of the Atlantic routes, which was maintained by force, Columbus headed due west to find the Indies, but uncovered a new world. Throughout the era of Iberian expansion the importance of the Ocean was the speed of communication, and the value of the luxury trades it permitted. Spices, sugar and precious metals were easily moved by sea. Later the ocean facilitated large scale movements of population over vast distances, a process driven by commercial greed and the particular opportunities of the New World. Having depopulated the West Indies, largely by introducing new diseases, the Spanish and later European colonial powers began the large scale importation of African slaves to work in the torrid conditions. For all the horrors associated with the trade, the ocean enabled the new lands to be populated, and gave them their particular character. Without sea transport the development of the Americas would have been greatly delayed. Slave grown sugar came to dominate the economies of Europe and the North American colonies, until the late 18th century the great wealth of empires lay in the small islands of the Caribbean, with Saint Domingo (modern Haiti) the richest colonial possession of all until the devastating slave revolt of 1791. While the islands drove a burgeoning Atlantic economy, they proved fragile. Over cultivation deforested the islands, changing the micro-climate and ultimately ruining the land. As sugar became ever cheaper other crops took precedence, like indigo and coffee, until the end of the slave economies. Elsewhere the majority of the islands fell to the British, who secured effective command of the seas through their battle-fleet strategy in European waters, cutting the French off from their islands. Seapower also helped secure British control of North America. They were also more successful as colonisers, by the mid 18th century 1.7 million people had come to the British controlled lands, only 150,000 to those of France. Consequently the future of the continent was anglophone, if not British.

By 1815, if not earlier, the British dominated the Atlantic, a development that was reflected in a variety of areas, from the independence of Latin America, supported by British capital, and protected by British seapower, to the ending of the slave trade by the Royal Navy in the mid century. Throughout the century vast numbers of European peoples voluntarily crossed the Atlantic, in search of a new life, most reinforced the existing Anglophone nations of the north, but Butel reminds us that significant numbers of Spanish and Italian emigrants went to Argentina and other South American states.

It could be argued that Butel underplays the strategic value of the Atlantic, an area where it proved critical to the development of the modern world. While he correctly stresses the origins of naval power lay in the defence of trade, he does not develop this to show how naval power in the Atlantic could determine the fate of empires, and alter the balance of power in Europe. It did not even have to operate in the Atlantic. The key to British success in the long 18th century lay in the ability to blockade the French fleets in their home ports. In the twentieth century the Atlantic witnessed two major wars, and provided the key to allied victory in both. Here Butel's French perspective has little to offer. His section dealing with the Second World War has more to say about Mers-el-Kebir than Operation Bolero, the vast North American build up in Britain for D-Day. The treatment of Mers-el-Kebir, dominated by the words 'appalling brutality', cannot be sustained. The British government ordered the operation with great reluctance, but in a war for survival they could take the risk of leaving this powerful force under the control of a country occupied by their enemy. Butel also

conflates Nelson's attack on Copenhagen in 1801 with the seizure of the Danish Navy in 1807, the real model for the operation. In essence the role of the Atlantic in the world wars was to connect the alliance that won both wars, dominated by Britain and America, with the decisive theatre of operations, Europe. In brought back to the old continent the descendants of those who had left over the past three hundred years, both as voluntary emigrants, and as unwilling slaves, to fight for the freedom of the world. While the allies had effective control of the Atlantic, and they never lost this priceless asset, despite coming close in early 1917, they were always going to defeat German attempts to secure European hegemony. In this respect the world wars repeated the strategic pattern of the long 18th century, when Britain used her command of the Atlantic to defeat French ambitions. From 1941 to 1945 Atlantic shipping went further afield, to northern Russia to support the Soviet war effort, to the Indian Ocean, the Pacific and the Mediterranean to support British and American strategy. This global flexibility, only possible with sea based transport, enabled the allies to shift their resources from theatre to theatre faster and more effectively than the axis. Little wonder that the post-war security architecture of the northern hemisphere was dominated by NATO, an organisation defined by the ocean that linked its members, and carried the memory of victory in two world wars. In time NATO would win the last great war of the 20th century, defeating the Soviet bloc, and then redefined itself as the protector of 'western values' in the European region with a leading role in ending ethnic conflict in former Yugoslavia. Since 1941 the Atlantic has been the lifeline of western liberal values, connecting the United States with its allies and partners, rather than the barrier that facilitated American isolationism in the 1920s and 1930s. As we enter the new millennium it is to be hoped that this connection will be maintained.

Butel underplays the role of NATO, perhaps reflecting France's on-off relationship with the organisation. Despite this Gallic uncertainty NATO is among the most durable and effective security organisations ever created, it won a major war without overt conflict, and waited over fifty years before engaging in hostilities for the first time. More immediately NATO was the key to the post-war reconstruction of western Europe, providing a security architecture that gave confidence to the Europeans, that encouraged investment and regeneration. In this sense NATO, Marshall Aid and the sustained American commitment to Europe after 1945 were a wise investment, particularly when set against the alternative adopted after 1918. America used her wealth and strength to regenerate her allies, politically, militarily, and most significantly economically. The cultural impact of American hegemony is not addressed.

After 1945 Atlantic trade and passenger activity resumed, growing steadily until the arrival of the jet airliner killed off the passenger trade, and with it the romance of the great liners that so fascinate Butel. However, as he observes, all is not lost, for the last of these great liners were converted into the first cruise ships, reflecting a new era of unprecedented safety and affluence in man's relationship with the ocean. Now large numbers of people chose to go on board ships and experience what was, for their ancestors, a kind of living hell. It is an irony that the latest giant cruise hotel should be named *Sovereign of the Seas*, like the prestige flagship of the English King Charles I. Both vessels were temples to the ideas of their age, the first celebrated divine right and royal power, the more recent ship marks the final triumph of free market capitalism. Just as Charles's ship would outlast his regime, so the new vessel has entered seas that are increasingly feeling the strain of ever-increasing human activity, from pollution to over-fishing, with a measure of drug smuggling and illegal immigration thrown in. The ocean is open, providing both an opportunity and a danger. For the future the world needs to regulate more effectively the use of the sea, to control the threat posed by incompetently run ships, illegal fishing, dumping and trafficking. Here is a truly Atlantic role for NATO in the new century.

The Atlantic, like all seas, has connected human society from the mythic visions and ideal worlds of ancient Atlantis to the limitless opportunities of a 'New World' which included its own measure of myths, to the renewal of European society, at all levels in time of crisis by the return of peoples and ideas that had been transplanted across the ocean. Here Butel's vision of America's role should be complemented by the higher per capita participation of Canada in both world wars.

The greatest omission from the book is an adequate range of maps and other visual evidence. The single map provides the directions of the prevailing winds, which is useful in the first two thirds of the book, but there were opportunities to display so much more information, major fisheries, a subject much neglected in the

modern era, hydrographic information, continental shelves, ice movements, telegraph cables, and routes, along with a range of primary source material like early maps, charts, rutters, the sailing rigs of early vessels, icons, and other related material. The sea is not only distinct from the land, it is also distant from most people today. Few of us make our living at sea, or use it for anything other than recreation, so the harsh, and often lethal quality of the broad ocean, as experienced by mariners since the first voyages, is missing. Additional benefit would be derived from a closer study of the link between the sea, ports and the hinterland they served. Once again maps would be a powerful tool in explaining why some ports develop, and others do not.

The value of this important book can be found in its ambition, breadth of learning and distinct perspective. It will serve a wide community of historians who touch on the ocean as a corrective to the prevailing literature, a check on Anglo-centric assumptions. France may have lost the Atlantic wars of the long 18th century, but her perspective remains important, and she remains an Atlantic nation, with the legacy of her ambitions to be seen on both sides of the ocean. The launch of this series promises a similar challenge to the land-bound imaginations of the wider historical community. The sea has been at the heart of human progress since the dawn of organised societies, it has had a greater impact on the modern world than almost any other element, and yet its history has been marginalised. This series deserves well, the ambition alone is a credit to all concerned, while Butel's opening volume has provided a fine maiden voyage.

In concluding Butel foreshadows the emergence of the Pacific as the ocean of 21st century, a prediction already rendered doubtful by recent events. It seems the Atlantic has a little way to go before it will surrender the primacy it has maintained as the 'ocean' since ancient times.

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <http://history.ac.uk/reviews/review/98b#comment-0>

Links

[1] <http://history.ac.uk/reviews/item/4484>

[2] <http://history.ac.uk/reviews>