BACKGROUND BOOKS

THE MARITIME WORLD

Men first went down to the sea not in ships, or even boats. They used whatever expedients they could find to get themselves across deep water.

Some of these expedients are still in use, historian Lionel Casson notes in **Ships and Seamanship in the Ancient World** (Princeton, 1986). "A New Zealand aborigine today paddles over lakes astride a bundle of reeds, an Iraqi herdsman crosses streams on an inflated goatskin, a Tamil native does his fishing drifting with a log under his arms while a Sindhi does his lying prone over an openmouthed pot."

The movement of goods called for ingenuity. The 5th-century B.C. Greek historian Herodotus, Casson recounts, admired the portable river craft of Assyrian merchants. Made of hides sewn over a frame of willow branches, they carried donkeys as well as cargo. "After arriving at Babylon and disposing of the cargo, the frames of the boat... they auction off, load the hides on the donkeys, and walk back to Armenia."

The intertwined roots of commerce and seafaring are described in Fernand Braudel's magisterial two-volume **The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II** (Harper, rev. 2nd ed., 1977) and his three-volume **Civilization and Capitalism: 15th–18th Century** (Harper, 1985, 1986). Other broad-gauge works are John H. Parry's **Spanish Seaborne Empire** (Knopf, 1966); and C. R. Boxer's **Dutch Seaborne Empire: 1600–1800** (Knopf, 1965) and **The Portuguese Seaborne Empire: 1415–1825** (Knopf, 1970).

G. V. Scammell's **World Encompassed: The First European Maritime Empires, c. 800–1650** (Univ. of Calif., 1981) chronicles—in one volume—the sorties of Norsemen from the "womb of nations" (now Norway, Denmark, and Sweden) into what had been Roman Europe, beginning around 750 A.D., and the English triumphs over the Spanish and Portuguese empires. With Sir Francis Drake's 1577–80 global circumnavigation, Scammell observes, the Europeans "brought together for the first time in enduring association, and with enduring consequences, many of the peoples inhabiting the earth."

In **How the West Grew Rich: The Economic Transformation of the Industrial World** (Basic, 1986), Nathan Rosenberg and L. E. Birdzell, Jr., detail how "maritime trade was at once a major field of economic growth and a field intractably resistant to medieval principles of political control." There was no law at sea. But while many mariners were privateers and some buccaneers, one country's villain was another's hero. "Drake was a pirate to the Spaniards, but when he returned to England from his [circumnavigation], Queen Elizabeth knighted him" on his flagship, *The Golden Hind*. His voyage yielded "a profit of 4700 percent to the holders of shares in the joint stock company that financed his voyage." One was the queen.

The United States' maritime experience is woven into many broad histories, such as Samuel Eliot Morison's **Oxford History of the American People**, 3 vols. (New American Library, 1972) and D. W. Meinig's **Atlantic America, 1492–1800** (Yale, 1986).

Surveys include James M. Morris's **Our Maritime Heritage: Maritime Developments and Their Impact on American Life** (Univ. Press of America, 1979), and **New England and the Sea** (Mystic Seaport Museum, 1972) by Robert G. Albion, William A. Baker, and Benjamin W. Labaree. For other views, there are port histories, such as Robert G. Albion's **Rise of New York Port**

(Northeastern, 1984). Richard C. McKay's **Some Famous Sailing Ships and Their Builder, Donald McKay** (Putnam's, 1928; 7C's Press, 2nd rev. ed., 1969) profiles the clipper designer, as Alan Villiers's **Way of a Ship** (Scribner's, 1975) does life aboard the windjammers.

The functioning of marine transport, and of federal maritime policy, is dealt with in Clinton W. Whitehurst, Jr.'s **U.S. Merchant Marine: In Search of an Enduring Maritime Policy** (Naval Institute Press, 1983) and Lane C. Kendall's **Business of Shipping** (Cornell Maritime Press, 5th ed., 1986). Samuel A. Lawrence's **United States Merchant Shipping Policies and Politics** (Brookings, 1966) examines both the industry's weakness and ill-fated government remedies.

Though now tamed by adversity, maritime unions, as Lawrence recalls, evolved from advocates of seaman's needs during the 1930s into a factor in the industry's slide after the postwar glory days—when, for a time, 60 percent of all shipping tonnage flew the U.S. flag. As late as the mid-1960s, 28 unions were fighting for members and influence in the U.S. foreign-trade fleet, though it represented only 50,000 jobs.

A dozen major strikes over economic issues afflicted the fleet between 1947 and 1964. Then as now, Lawrence notes, shipping was vulnerable, being "the only important segment of U.S. industry which sells virtually its entire product in the international market."

As W. Elliott Brownlee points out in **Dynamics of Ascent: A History of the American Economy** (Knopf, 2nd ed., 1979), the Europeans and the Japanese have long been far more dependent than Americans on foreign trade. The "internal focus" of U.S. commerce was deeply rooted before World War I, when international trade accounted for only 11 percent of the nation's output.

In **Foreign Trade and the National Economy** (Yale, 1968), Charles P. Kindelberger argues that the U.S. trade problem is, to an extent, a "question of horizon." Businessmen, he observes, are inclined to consider that "domestic trade is among 'us'; foreign trade is between 'us' and 'them.' As communication improves in breadth and speed, the scope of 'us' expands. But 'they' will probably continue to exist." Of necessity, to merchants in smaller nations—Belgium or Japan, say—the commercial horizon is wider than it is for large-nation traders such as Americans.

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Richard Rosecrance traces America's trade difficulties to other causes. In **Rise of the Trading State: Commerce and Conquest in the Modern World** (Basic, 1986), he argues that the Industrial Revolution broke "the link between territory and power," enabling nations "to gain economic strength without conquering new lands," i.e. via trade. But since 1945 the world has been poised between two approaches to international relations: "a territorial system which hearkens back to the world of Louis XIV and which is presided over by the USSR and to some extent the United States, and an oceanic or trading system." The trading system, a legacy of maritime Britain, is today "organized around the Atlantic and Pacific basins."

The leaders of Japan and the Western European nations, seeing that "self-sufficiency is an illusion," emphasize trade. The Soviets, consumed by territorial concerns, are fated to decline, according to Rosecrance. With more flexibility, America may, if its leaders are wise, follow "the Japanese model."

In **Ships' Cargo/Cargo Ships** (MacGregor, 1979), an illustrated series of essays on the maritime scene edited by Henri Kummerman and Robert Jacquinet, Captain F. S. G. Frota, Brazil's leading private shipowner, fears for the "beautiful" freedom-of-the-seas prin-

ciple. To build up their own fleets, many Third World governments have adopted cargo-preference rules, endorsed by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development in 1974, limiting the trade moved by "third flag" ships.

Biographies also mirror the shifting fortunes of maritime enterprise. James Dugan's **American Viking** (Harper, 1963) notes how Danish-born Hans Isbrandtsen (1891–1953), a foe of federal meddling and champion of individual enterprise ("When the devil wanted nothing to happen, he appointed a committee"), ran Isbrandtsen Lines without subsidies but lost money only once in 38 years. Lawrence A. Clayton's **Grace** (Jameson, 1986) focuses on another rugged individualist, an Irish-born New Yorker, William R. Grace (1832–1904), who started as a chandler in Peru.

Aristotle Onassis (Times Books, 1978) by Nicholas Fraser and other London *Times*men, and Jerry Shields's **Invisible Billionaire** (Houghton, 1986) tell how two later empire-builders, the Golden Greek and his reclusive U.S. rival, Daniel K. Ludwig, prospered by capitalizing on both U.S. maritime policy and flag-of-convenience ownership.

As it has in shipping company boardrooms, life at sea has changed. In **The Atlantic Crossing** (Time-Life Books, 1981), Melvin Maddocks recalls Herman Melville's tales of the terrors crewmen faced on 19th-century packets: Reefing sails aloft meant hovering "like a judgment angel between heaven and earth, both hands free, with one foot in the rigging and one somewhere behind you in the air." If such perils are history, so is much of the romance of seafaring.

Noël Mostert's **Supership** (Warner, 1978) tells of life aboard *Ardsheil*, a 214,000-ton British tanker that hardly quivers at sea, with a crew of 43—British deck and engineering officers, Indian, Pakistani, and Chinese seamen and stewards. The living quarters in the superstructure have a "sealed-in mood." On deck, "only at the few wooden rails aboard did one touch something of the old fabric of ships."

Romance of a sort surfaces in **Steaming to Bamboola: The World of a Tramp Freighter** (Congdon & Weed, 1983), which Christopher Buckley spun out of a classic experience: a young man's voyage on an old freighter.

As crotchety as *Ardshiel* is efficient, Buckley's *Columbianna* has sailed "more or less everywhere in the small world of tramps." A 523-foot converted World War II troopship, her "history was written into her hull, a patchwork of dings and cicatrices from 35 years of banging into things on the watery hither-and-yon." Buckley joined the crew of 37 in Charleston for a trip to Bremerhaven (*not* "Bamboola," which was a Chinese steward's name for Bermuda), with military supplies.

In 100-plus voyages "across the pond," *Columbianna*'s captain had seen myriad cargoes—tanks, cannon, cork, coal, coke, laxatives ("in bottles which the crew mistook for booze, and drank"), tin ingots, flour, corn, locomotives, missiles. But for all its hard use, the ship "had a battered, queenly aspect missing in the new streamlined containerships, supertankers, and certainly the Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) carriers."

Indeed, "surrounded by Portuguese men-of-war when she broke down and floated in mid-ocean, or coming up the Mississippi out of a fog bank, or nudged by Dutch tugs into a lock, she looked like what she was, an old tramp steamer, ready, as one of the crew said, to take on any port in the world, [even if] living on borrowed time."