Atlantic Passengers

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Until recently, Atlantic maritime historians could make a credible claim that Atlantic history had, of all things, neglected the Atlantic Ocean itself. Yet, with a host of oceanic works in the past several years, headed by W. Jeffrey Bolster’s award-winning The Mortal Sea: Fishing the Atlantic in the Age of Sail, the Atlantic has reemerged as a central site of Atlantic history.¹ The field is rife with new work on navy and merchant seamen, pirates and privateers, servants and slaves, and, of course, fishermen.² Still, we know relatively little about the seagoing experience of one fundamental Atlantic constituency: passengers. Ordinary travelers—many but not all migrants—numbered in the hundreds of thousands in the early modern era. Atlantic and early American scholars should thus celebrate the arrival of two studies, Stephen R. Berry’s A Path in the Mighty Waters: Shipboard Life and Atlantic Crossings to the New World and Amy Mitchell-Cook’s A Sea of Misadventures: Shipwreck and Survival in Early America, for beginning to address the different meanings of the Atlantic passage.

Berry's work, the longer and more ambitious of the two books, seeks to trace the experience of the Atlantic crossing from embarkation to landing. He uses the well-documented 1735–36 expedition from England to Georgia led by James Oglethorpe to provide a narrative arc for the study. The voyage is most famous for John Wesley's shipboard encounter with German Moravians, which, depending on the source, may or may not have helped to determine the future course of Methodism. Berry avoids the debate in favor of exploring the larger theme of cultural encounter in Atlantic crossings. He makes effective use of anthropologist Mary Louise Pratt's concept of “contact zones” in examining the ship as a site of cultural contact for “people normally divided by geography, religious affiliation, or social protocol” (4). The Georgia expedition, comprising two cargo/passenger ships and a naval escort, brought together Anglicans (traditional and evangelical), Quakers, Moravian Pietists, and Salzburg Lutherans, as well as mostly irre- ligious sailors.

The experience could have resulted in misery for all the parties. Instead, the different groups took a keen interest in one another, evident by the English ministers’ study of German and the Germans’ attempt to learn English. Although the language difference remained a barrier among the groups, it did not prevent communication. Indeed, as Berry explains, there was not much for passengers to do during the Atlantic crossing other than converse. A typical day for the atypical Wesley, who woke at 4:00 a.m., included five hours of religious devotion, three hours of reading and language study, and two hours of public worship and religious instruction. This schedule still left numerous hours for daily conversation with fellow travelers. According to Berry, all that talk persuaded few passengers to alter their beliefs, but it did provide “an intermediary step in the move from mere coexistence to a more equitable inclusion” (258). He encourages scholars searching for the roots of religious tolerance in America to pay more attention to the Atlantic crossing. “The ship accustomed travelers to the religious flexibility and independence that life in America would require of them” (256–57), Berry contends.

Beyond this elegant thesis, *A Path in the Mighty Waters* includes valuable research about the more mundane shipboard experiences of travelers. Berry supplements his treatment of Oglethorpe's Georgia expedition, consisting mostly of families and other free passengers, with extensive samples from other Atlantic voyages, including the Middle Passage. The method can be confusing, as a variety of characters predating and postdating the Georgia voyage march (or sail) through each chapter, but the narrative device compensates for the inherent limitations of Berry's case study. We learn about the struggles of the Atlantic crossing even when things went well, as they generally did for the Georgia voyagers. Oglethorpe's expedition reached the Savannah River from Portsmouth in a respectable eight weeks. Yet many passengers spent an additional eight weeks on one of the
two cargo ships just waiting to depart from England. The delay came from the need to gather supplies, to recruit men for the naval escort (its captain eventually resorted to impressment), and to wait for favorable winds—all common occurrences in the eighteenth century. When the ships finally set sail in the fall of 1735, it came as such a surprise that three passengers visiting Portsmouth were left behind, including a husband whose pregnant wife sailed away.

Similar details enrich Berry’s discussions of each stage of the Atlantic crossing. Chapters on the wonders of the natural world at sea (“Unbroken Horizons”), the seamen’s rite of baptism in crossing the Tropic of Cancer for the first time (“Crossing Lines”), boredom at sea (“Tedium”), and the terror of storms (“Tempests”) all stand out for their exceptional descriptions of shipboard life through the eyes of passengers. Berry avoids the trap of many maritime studies by not overly romanticizing his subject. He includes a discussion of the terrifying threat of rape faced by seaborne women, especially enslaved Africans, even though there is no evidence of sexual violence during the Georgia expedition (which did not include slaves). When the Georgia voyagers finally reached their destination in early 1736, they credited divine guidance for their safe passage. One cannot end Berry’s narrative, fully cognizant of the perils of crossing the Atlantic for the free and unfree, without sharing in their joy.

Mitchell-Cook’s study focuses on Atlantic passengers who were not so fortunate. From the late seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century, an estimated 4 to 5 percent of Atlantic voyages ended in disaster, a figure that does not account for all the torn sails, leaky hulls, and other mechanical and human failures that could make even the most routine journey a perilous affair. In A Sea of Misadventures, Mitchell-Cook gleans the lessons from more than one hundred (mostly published) British and early American shipwreck narratives from the 1660s to 1840. Contrary to her expectation that during shipwrecks “societal and cultural standards fell apart and all hell broke loose” (viii), disaster victims—at least as presented in these narratives—maintained social norms. “The printed accounts transformed the chaos of shipwreck into an ordered and understandable event,” according to Mitchell-Cook, “in which aspects of gender, status, and religion remained solid” (4).

A Sea of Misadventures provides persuasive evidence that shipwreck narratives reflected dominant social conditions. In the seventeenth century, chroniclers generally understood shipwrecks through the lens of religion. “Theologically shipwreck made sense as retribution for sin, a chance for redemption, or a reminder of God’s power” (52), writes Mitchell-Cook. The accounts became secularized over time, evoking increasing emotional sympathy for victims in the eighteenth century. In the realm of gender, the sailing ship tended to reinforce existing expectations of the proper roles for men and women. Rather than acting as independents, female travelers
remained confined to traditional, dependent roles as wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters. As for men, “shipwreck narratives emphasized a specific definition of masculinity, one that tied together civility, self-restraint, and strength” (84).

Mitchell-Cook’s chapter on cannibalism provides the strongest support for her thesis of order and hierarchy triumphing over chaos even in the most chaotic situations at sea. As a last resort, starving shipwreck victims first feasted on people of another race, followed by strangers, friends, and, finally, kin. Mitchell-Cook observes, “To be an ‘other’ in any shape, way, or form singled out a person ahead of the remaining passengers and crew” (117). Young men without families were consumed before older individuals, men before women and children, passengers before crew members, and crews before officers. Few practices rivaled cannibalism in exposing the life-and-death consequences of racial and economic inequities in the early modern period.

Ironically, because of her limited evidentiary base, the one thing largely unexplained in Mitchell-Cook’s rich analysis is shipwrecks themselves—where, when, and why they happened. Shipwreck survivors tailored their narratives to satisfy multiple agendas, from the requirements of marine insurance and admiralty law to their own reputations. Mitchell-Cook admits these limitations but does not provide archival research that might balance the narratives. A closing chapter on Portuguese shipwreck narratives helps to highlight commonalities with the Anglo-American cases, particularly a similar religious emphasis on salvation and redemption, as well as important differences. “Unlike the Anglo-American stories,” Mitchell-Cook explains, “the Portuguese narratives cite greed, laziness, and duplicity as reasons for shipwreck” (135). Yet here it still remains difficult to separate fact from agenda. Portuguese writers used shipwrecks to assign blame for the decline, by the mid-seventeenth century, of the lucrative trade in silks and spices connected to the carreira da India (the voyage between Lisbon and Goa).

The limitations of Mitchell-Cook’s work do not take away from its achievement. She, like Berry, is not content with producing a specialized study. Both A Sea of Misadventures and A Path in the Mighty Waters invite nonmaritime historians to see the Atlantic crossing as much more than meaningless travel time, an event in between more significant happenings on land. For Atlantic passengers, the drama of life did not pause but often accelerated at sea. Berry and Mitchell-Cook have hardly written the last word on this subject, but they deserve appreciation for providing some of the first words.