

THE BOUNDLESS SEA: A Human History of the Oceans, by David Abulafia

Publishers: Allen Lane, hardback 2019, now c.£24.
Penguin Books, October 2020, paperback, still in
print, £12.76

Paperback: 1088 pages.
Dimensions: 19.8 x 12.9 x 4.8 cms
ISBN-10 0241956277
ISBN-13 978-0241956274

Book Review by Bill Jones

AS DINGHY CRUISERS WE INHABIT a parallel world to that of cruising yachts and larger vessels. Our boats are small, and our sailing waters correspondingly modest in scale. We celebrate those passages and ports of call which are denied to deep keel vessels, such as Newtown Harbour (Isle of Wight), Chichester Harbour, the upper reaches of rivers, or lakes. All the intricacies and satisfactions of passage planning and landfalls can be realised in our modest voyages. Of course there are notable exceptions: the epic voyages of Frank Dye's *Wayfarer* in the North Sea and America, or of Howard Rice's *Scamp* in the southern ocean, but the above description generally holds good.

David Abulafia's *The Boundless Sea* takes an entirely different perspective. It is nothing less than a complete history and pre-history of seafaring in all the seas and oceans of the world. It is an astonishing achievement of scholarship, in which almost literally every line reveals a fact or interpretation. The book tells the story, ocean by ocean, of human exploration, navigation, migration, conquest, trade and piracy over thousands of years of history, built up from countless sources of documents, charts and archaeological discoveries.

As early people gradually ventured offshore they slowly learned to navigate the oceans, and of course equally gradually learned the true scale of the Earth and the shape (and existence) of continents, trade winds and sea routes.

The first section, 'The Oldest Ocean', tells the story of the largest of the oceans – the Pacific. It is a story of exploration and migration from mainland Southern Asia to the very many islands and archipelagos of the Pacific. It is the 'oldest ocean' by a long way – the history of its sea travel goes back thousands of years and is a story of the endless urge to find and settle more and more islands over the horizon. The seagoing canoes and seemingly magical powers of navigation of the Polynesian sailors are well known, and modern DNA analysis reveals the details of this ages-long dispersal of humans across this vast ocean, long before the early European ships were seen in their searches for gold and spices.

The Indian Ocean was quite different from the Pacific. This ocean has less in the way of islands and island groups, is smaller, and has coastal lands round most of it. Here the pattern was not migration to islands but connections between the mainland coasts, though there were significant settlements on uninhabited islands such as Madagascar (whose inhabitants have now been traced to Indonesia).

Much more recent – oddly in a way – is the history of the Atlantic 'the Young Ocean' as the author puts it. Nevertheless, its history, like the others, covers thousands of years, but the significant history is from the Middle Ages, driven by national and imperial expansion, and competition between Italy, Spain, Portugal, England and northern Europe. And of course, there was the

According to the author pirates did wear knotted bandanas for solar protection (and drank lots of rum), in line with the stories
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A Spanish engagement with Barbary Pirates

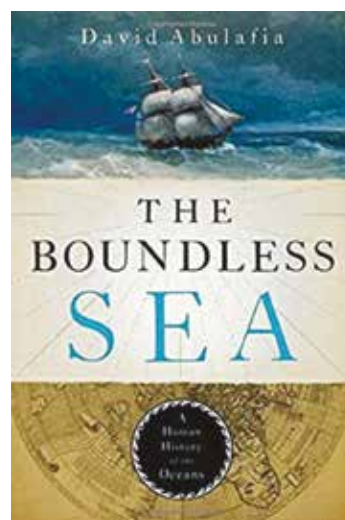
huge impulse to find a route to China and India, which avoided the perils of the Cape of Good Hope and the many pirates infesting the route. It was also driven by the possibility of avoiding the equally perilous overland Silk Route to the East. Miscalculations of the true size of the Earth, as is well known, led to Columbus and contemporaries, unaware of a vast continent yet to be discovered, believing a westward route to China and the Indies was feasible.

This book builds, in great and fascinating detail, a huge panorama of maritime human history, which leaves a number of powerful overriding impressions on the reader. The first is of the indomitable spirit which endlessly drove people to courageous enterprises and to high levels of new skills in shipbuilding, navigation and cartography.

The second impression is of the far less honourable motives and behaviour of these explorers, traders, navies, pirates and exploiters of the native inhabitants of colonised lands. The current popular focus on the Atlantic slave trade is shown here as only one example of the ubiquitous enslavement of native or conquered people throughout this history.

A third impression is of the sheer volume and interlocking lattice of worldwide maritime trade from the earliest historical periods. Archaeologists have uncovered pottery shards, coins and other identifiable artefacts showing that from very early periods goods from, say, India were traded with east Africa and as far as northern Europe. On many pages there are wonderful nuggets of detail – for example, that the name of Venezuela originated from European sailors in 1499 who, seeing native villages built on piles above the water, were reminded of Venice.

Inevitably this is a big book. My copy is the paperback; I would recommend the more expensive hardback for ease of reading. Every page is densely detailed, but the whole is a compelling read, weaving a vast tapestry of the exploration and eventual mastery of the world's oceans by gallant if opportunistic seafarers whose canoes, boats and ships were small and fragile. Above all *The Boundless Sea* lets us stand back and take in the vast scale of human maritime endeavour, and be aware that as we land on an island in Derwentwater or Coniston, or Chichester Harbour, and colonise it even if only for a lunch break, we are in our small way responding to the impulse which for tens of millennia has urged humanity ever outward, and which is the subject of this magnificent book. *WJ*



The paperback cover (see previous page) includes part of a painting: *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (1560s), the one that inspired W H Auden. Although the subjects are omitted from the cover, we recall it as a portrayal of humanity's ingenuity, but also its failure when it concentrates on means, not ends – in line with a message presented in this book