Bouchard on Roorda, 'The Ocean Reader: History, Culture, Politics'

Review published on Monday, October 10, 2022


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Printable Version: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=58118

Browse the first hundred pages or so of the new *Ocean Reader* and you will have traveled a great distance through time and space. There is the story of Japanese sea gods Izanagi and Izanami, a summary of David Lewis’s pathbreaking work on premodern Polynesian voyaging, a Polish world map from 1512, a speculation on the role of comets bringing water to Earth eons before the rise of humans, an inscription describing the fifteenth-century voyages of Zheng He, and many more glimpses of the history of our planet’s watery spaces. And this is just the first fifth of a book that goes further than any similar work to give a comprehensive impression of what oceans mean to our species and our planet’s history.

Eric Paul Roorda’s *The Ocean Reader: History, Culture, Politics* is a unique addition to the burgeoning field of ocean history. The five-hundred-odd page volume (part of Duke University Press’s The World Readers series) offers a collection of readings organized around the theme of ocean spaces and their human histories. It is meant to provide new resources to scholars and instructors at a moment when we are increasingly recognizing that “the aqueous regions of the earth have been important throughout human history, politics, and culture, but never more so than now.” This is a book that sees the seas united in a capital ‘O’ Ocean and aims to put it back at the center of our historical memory. *The Ocean Reader* is aimed primarily at instruction, but for scholars interested in diving into the field of ocean history the volume offers a useful introduction. Roorda has chosen readings that represent a variety of important themes and methods. They are united by an opposition to "terracentrism" (as acknowledged in the very brief introduction) and a belief that “the Ocean is changeable, and it has a history” (p. 1). This spirit flows through the readings, which convey this sense of a shared history rather than the more common regional or Eurocentric approaches to maritime studies.

The task of *The Ocean Reader* is a thankless one. How could you select readings that represent the scale, complexity, and depth of human interactions with the ocean across time and space? Embracing the difficulty, Roorda has done an admirable job of representing ocean history in a selection of concise documents. Roorda’s selections have largely avoided a few important pitfalls. He has tried to approach the ocean from a global perspective, and most parts of the world are represented to some extent. In a field that is often biased toward the modern period, Roorda has included much premodern material. Some of these texts are well known, or address well-known topics, but others
are more obscure. The collection benefits from that mix. The book as a whole is capped off with a “Suggestions for Further Reading” appendix, organized thematically, emphasizing that this book is meant to be an entry point for ocean history, not the final word.

The selections in The Ocean Reader are organized under broad themes, comprising twelve separate sections. These are, in order: “Creation,” “Ancient Seas,” “Unknown Waters” (which covers exploration), “Saltwater Hunt,” “Watery Highways,” “Battlefields,” “Piracy,” “Shipwrecks and Castaways,” “Innovation,” “Recreation,” “Laboratory,” and “The Endangered Ocean.” Each section contains between seven and eleven individual readings. The texts are prefaced by Roorda’s extensive commentary, which generally does an effective job of contextualizing the reading and its importance. Individual themes tend to juxtapose different perspectives and timelines. The opening section, “Creation,” includes Egyptian and Babylonian myths, nineteenth-century ethnographical reports of Polynesian cosmographies, and recent scientific theories about the origins of life on Earth. This is an effective strategy, which emphasizes the different methodological and epistemological perspectives humans have brought to the ocean seas. It also makes the reading more varied and engaging, an important aspect for its use as a teaching resource.

Roorda is sensitive to the limits of text as a way to understand the history of the ocean, and The Ocean Reader attempts to include substantial imagery. The book includes a series of nine color plates. Most of the readings are accompanied by at least one black-and-white image, and all images include extensive captions with commentary. The use of images is a major strength of this volume and makes clear that “reader” must extend to visual interpretation. The images are drawn from a collection cultivated by Roorda (the Roorda/Doyle Collection). Because of this, many of the images are unique and welcome additions to the historical representation of the ocean. The Roorda/Doyle Collection is supposed to be publicly available through a website, as noted in a special note at the start of the book. My own experiences trying to access it online have not worked, however, which is most unfortunate and will hopefully be rectified so that educators can make use of it.

In a collection like this there will always be choices to disagree with. At times Roorda has chosen a modern source instead of an original account: Why a history of Basque cod fishing instead of a seventeenth-century text? Why a description of Polynesian sailing techniques instead of an original account from Oceania? Though Roorda addresses the role of science, technology, and medicine in ocean history, by and large, The Ocean Reader is concerned with social and cultural histories of the ocean. This may serve some well and sit uncomfortably with others. For those interested in broad, and especially more premodern, perspectives of ocean history, this will be a welcome resource. For those researching and teaching on modern histories of ocean science and related problems, Roorda’s work will be far less useful.

Above all, as a pedagogical resource, The Ocean Reader is potentially invaluable. For those who teach surveys of ocean history there is nothing quite comparable for use in the classroom. Roorda’s book is global in scale, covers the earliest human oceanic forays all the way to the present, and mixes text and images. The readings are not especially dense or difficult to access, so it could be used for introductory courses as well as more advanced seminars. It is particularly useful in that the individual readings are quite short. A given section is typically between thirty and forty pages, making it a useful reading assignment on a weekly class theme. The paperback retails for around thirty dollars, making it reasonably accessible for undergraduates.
The Ocean Reader is a lot, and it takes time to process the amount of material that Roorda has accumulated. Just sitting with the nearly one hundred images can occupy a historian's day. But perhaps that is the point, something the book aims to convey to historians and our students: the ocean is big, with a history as vast and complex as its watery depths, and it deserves a collection that provides some of that scale and majesty. Roorda has done as well as anyone at accomplishing that task.


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