

Jason Smith. *To Master the Boundless Sea: The US Navy, the Marine Environment, and the Cartography of Empire*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press: 2018 Pp. 280.

Jason Smith's 2018 monograph, *To Master the Boundless Sea: The U.S. Navy, the Marine Environment, and the Cartography of Empire*, puts the high seas at the center of American empire. Merging the environmental history of hydrography with the military history of the United States Navy, Smith successfully contends that the evolution of nineteenth century American imperial thought can be best described through the "interplay among science, environment, and military power" (5). This book interrogates the navy's struggle to control nature through various delineations of exploration, combat, naval officers, and most prominently, the marine environment. By blending the historical narratives of naval doctrine and seafaring with the science of hydrography, the U.S. Navy's efforts to control "the great common" are treated with wider cultural context (209). In so doing, Smith adds a fresh and insightful perspective on the rise of an American maritime empire.

Ultimately, *To Master the Boundless Sea* argues that a thirst for maritime knowledge erupted as the United States became a commercial power during the nineteenth century. This yearning for knowledge facilitated a comprehensive charting of the seas for the purposes of American commercial and military preponderance. As Smith notes throughout the book, this aim was attained through hydrographic charts. These charts, which originated as the tracking of winds and documentation of aquatic resources, came to represent the harnessing of nature and were deemed as "a better representation" of oceanic science "than reality itself" (190). Smith's argument coalesces with his interpretation that American naval officerscoopted maritime charting to suit expansionist Mahanian naval doctrine.

As the U.S. Navy grew, and ultimately came into conflict with other seafaring powers, the maritime knowledge that had once served the interests of scientists and capitalists became the focus of the nation's military minds. Naval surveying of strategic waters led to an explosion of maritime knowledge that allowed the U.S. Navy to effectively operate in both the Pacific and the Caribbean during the rise of the U.S. empire. Smith contends this "hydrography of empire" replaced many of the pre-existing incomplete charts with accurate detailed surveys that professionalized strategic charting and legitimated naval science. Beyond geographic proximity alone, intimate knowledge of the maritime environment contributed greatly to the Caribbean becoming the linchpin of American empire. This cartographic conquering of the seas allows the reader to clearly see the centrality of hydrography to American naval development and imperialism.

Impressively written and meticulously researched, *To Master the Boundless Sea* brings together naval diaries, government documents, and a wealth of academic scholarship to tell the story of the relationship between U.S. naval science and overseas power projection. Smith also takes the story forward to the Pacific Theater of World War II and beyond, showing that despite their many achievements, the U.S. Navy has not been able to completely harness the sea. Hydrography has bridged the gap between humans and the physical and abstract environment of the ocean (13). The U.S. Navy used this technology to propound its influence and power both domestically and abroad. However, as Smith notes, the inability to comprehensively chart the majority of marine environments makes the sea a continued force "for which the navy must reckon" (208). By presenting this contemporaneous issue within the larger historical discussion, Smith makes a relevant and thought-provoking argument.

This book contains several omissions that would be beneficial additions to any future scholarship on the subject. Primarily, Smith does not compare American naval science and maritime empire with the aspirations and pursuits of other powers. With the study being primarily focused on nineteenth century hydrography,

an appropriate treatment of American practices with those of the British, German, or French navies would have contextualized U.S. actions during an era of great naval competition. In addition, Smith does not address the role of public discourse in the development of naval science and maritime empire. Although his analysis of the discourse between naval officers, scientists, and politicians is compelling, the inclusion of U.S. public voices in both naval practise and hydrographic science would have buttressed the links made between oceanic charting and American conceptions of the sea.

Smith's *To Master the Boundless Sea* provides historians with an illuminating study of the relationship between naval science and the establishment of U.S. empire. Using hydrography as the primary vehicle, Smith successfully moves beyond more traditional histories of early American imperialism that tend to focus on the broader geopolitical and social motivators of nineteenth century U.S. expansion. Its accessible prose and concise arguments makes this book suitable for popular audiences while the inclusion of detailed research notes and historiographical discussion appeals to the more inquisitive academic consumer. Consequently, this book is a rewarding read for anybody interested in either the history of the U.S. Navy or the development of American empire.

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