

Interview with Jason Smith of Southern Connecticut State University

By Michael Fischer

Jason Smith, who received his PhD from Temple University, is the author of *To Master the Boundless Sea: The U.S. Navy, the Marine Environment, and the Cartography of Empire*

Q: What in particular pushed you to study what you do?

A: Well, I always came to Temple with the idea of being a military historian. I was always interested in the Navy in particular, even as a young child. I remember I was about nine years old on the fiftieth anniversary of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1991, and I remember all of the media coverage of that as a kid really affected me. I became fascinated with that in particular. I was lucky enough at my undergraduate institution to unknowingly stumble upon two maritime naval historians in this department. When I got here, under the advisement of Dr. Urwin, I began to dig deeper into questions of science and exploration. Just taking classes with different faculty helped to broaden my methods.

Q: What were some of the chief methods that you used in writing this book?

A: I cast a pretty wide net. I began with more traditional questions of military power, of naval power. Then I sort of broadened that to include maritime history, environmental history, and also the history of science and cartography. I tried to bring as many of those approaches as I could.

Q: What type of sources does that involve outside of the more traditional military history type sources?

A: What you find among people who seafare, whether they are naval officers, or merchant mariners, or whalers or whatever is that they have a very visceral relationship with the sea and they write very prolifically about that. Then you have the official navy records. I was also interest with the people's everyday experience with the ocean and context within which these things occur. There is a lot of log keeping that records environmental data and various observations about the ocean.

Q: For those who will either not be able to attend your talk or those who will not be able to read your book before *Strategic Visions* comes out, do you have one or two points that you would like them to take away, either from the talk or from your book?

A: Sure. The first is that the sea matters, to us now in an era of climate change and the sea matters historically. It has been overlooked, up until quite recently, even by naval and environmental historians. We tend to be terrestrially minded, but I would say that the sea matters.

Especially for a military, diplomatic crowd, we should always look at what might otherwise be overlooked in terms of staking claim in the development of a particular American identity. For me in this case it was these naval charts that shed a great deal of light on that.

Q: What were some of the biggest challenges you faced while researching and writing this book?

A: I guess my biggest challenge was in trying to bring together several different subfields that don't really often talk to each other. I had to wrap my head around several different methodologies and several different historiographies in a bunch of different subfields. That was a challenge that requires you to put yourself out there and into a situation where you might be a bit of an outsider where you are not as engaged as other scholars might be. Seeing so many different ways of taking this story and to do justice to all of them in a cohesive way was quite challenging.

Q: On the other hand, what were some of the more enjoyable moments?

A: There are any number of stories in the archives, in reading these people. Some of the wonderful ways in which the journals of these explores took me to places I've never been to or could never dream of going was a delight. Getting into the journals of people that I thought were incredibly influential was amazing. To page through and see a signed letter from Theodore Roosevelt or George Dewey or something like that was really wonderful. But also in taking me to places to do research in places like the Naval War College at Newport was a nice experience.

Q: What is next for you?

A: I'm thinking that my second book is going to be a cultural history of American navalism at the turn of the twentieth century, particularly focusing on the Navy and political officials, navalists, who tried to relate and sell the idea of a big navy to the public. There are interesting ways that the Navy tried to use new advertising techniques, relatively new motion pictures, festivals and fairs, the Great White Fleet and things like that to make this idea appeal to the public.