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Review: “The Edge of the World: How the North Sea Made Us Who We Are” by Michael Pye

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The Edge of the World: How the North Sea Made Us Who We Are

By Michael Pye, London: Viking, 2014. Pp. 394, Hardback
£25, ISBN 978-0-670-92232-1

REVIEWED BY YORIM SPOELDER

Yorim completed an interdisciplinary BA at University College Maastricht and National Taiwan University followed, after a year of travels across Eurasia, by a MA in Global Studies (University of Freiburg, JNU New Delhi, UCT Cape Town). His MA-thesis critically engaged with the problematique of voice in writing a history of Indian Ocean sailors in European employ during the Age of Sail. He is currently pursuing his main research interests in the context of the Global History Program in Berlin (Freie Universität Berlin/Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin). These include the connected histories of the early modern as well as the modern period, the maritime histories of the Indian Ocean realm, the Dutch and British colonial empires, colonial historiography and orientalist scholarship in South Asia, and Indian nationalism.

Ever since the French historian Fernand Braudel brought up the idea that the unity of a geographical and cultural area can also be defined by the movements of people across the water at its centre rather than by the lands around its periphery, the field of maritime history has seen a frantic output of scholarly work that extrapolates Braudel's revolutionary *longue durée* perspective on patterns of long-distance trade and connections across the Mediterranean to other maritime realms.

A bewildering range of themes and typologies has informed the scholarly quest to uncover patterns of cohesion and unity in littoral realms and vast seascapes across the world. Some scholars, such as K.N. Chaudhuri in *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean* (1985) and *Asia Before Europe* (1990) took Braudel as more than an inspiration and excuse to focus on merchant networks, maritime labour or a particular commodity and carefully studied the methodological implications of his multi-volume opus magnum *The Mediterranean in the Age of Phillip II* (1949). Recently however, the Braudelian predilection for abstract, statistical and structural analysis has been overtaken by a historiographical trend to write 'human' histories of the sea and evoke the connections and entanglements across a maritime realm by focusing on the spread of ideas, culture, religious networks etc. Michael Pearson's sweeping and comprehensive account of the Indian Ocean (2008), Amrith's study of migratory flows in the Bay of Bengal (*Crossing the Bay of Bengal*, 2013) and Abulafia's wide-ranging take on the human history of the Mediterranean (*The Great Sea*, 2014) are three excellent recent studies that try to describe (rather than analyze) in exquisite detail the process by which their particular maritime realm became integrated over time into a commercial, cultural and even political zone.

David Kirby and Merja-Liisa Hinkkanen approached in a similar spirit the history of the Baltic and North Sea (2000) and scholars/students familiar with their work might have awaited with excitement the publication of Michael Pye's attempt to distill out of the human trajectories connecting the North Sea an even bolder argument, namely that "the edge of the world", as he calls the wind-swept seascape extending north from the British Isles and the Low Countries, played a crucial role in shaping "our modernity". Notwithstanding the elegant prose and the impressive sample of sources which Pye deploys throughout his labyrinthine narrative, the overall argument is, as I would like to argue, flawed on many levels and a deliverance with gusto cannot conceal or compensate the analytical shortcomings of his project.

Echoing in spirit - although not in substance - the work of David Landes (*The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, 1998), Pye assigns himself the task to bring "light" to the pre-modern era (aptly referred to as the "Dark Ages") by revealing how crucial attributes of our contemporary modern world such as the abstract notion of value (paving the way for capitalism), traditions of learning and scientific inquiry, fashion and the notion of (relative) gender equality were in fact already stirring in the environments surrounding the North Sea realm and help explain the unique subsequent trajectory of the people that were lucky enough to inhabit the littorals on the "edge of the world". Yet even in this summary statement the problems with his approach become already painfully evident.

First of all, Pye does not once define the North Sea realm and his various thematic discussions have a far broader geographical sweep than one would anticipate in a book whose stated aim is to "explain how the North Sea made us who we are". Paris and Burgundy feature regularly and at some point the Hanseatic trade networks are conveniently brought into the orbit of the North Sea as if the Baltic *were* in fact part of North-Sea and Lübeck a North Sea harbor. The whole notion of the North Sea as a particular geographical entity and climatic zone is not once explicated or problematized, although this seems indispensable when the natural environment had supposedly such profound cultural impacts that it catapulted its littoral population onto a unique trajectory to modernity. A short subsection on land-reclamation and peat mining in the Low Lands briefly considers the cultural and administrative legacies of the struggle against the sea, but the unique nature-culture complex it fostered and society it engendered can hardly be extrapolated across the whole North Sea realm. Although the argument hinges on the link between climate, geography and a peculiar human condition supposedly shared to varying degrees by all those living in vicinity of the North Sea environment, many if not all developments described in the book occur in a specific place and do not explain much about the North Sea realm as such.

Secondly, Pye's thesis is informed by a simplistic notion of 'connected history' as he tends to see developments in a dualistic binary that divides Europe into a Northern and Latin modernity, the former which, according to Pye at least, is often

seen as surfing the waves created by the ‘Southern’ Renaissance frenzy of cultural and intellectual efflorescence rather than judged on its own innovative dynamics. These assumptions never make it beyond the occasional polemical one-liner and it remains unclear *why* we should think in terms of these two modernities in the first place. Is it helpful at all to think in terms of a connected history within the North Sea realm while leaving out the entanglements that brought the Renaissance world of Northern Italy to the “edge of the World”? Pye seems to think so but as a result he is incapable of placing ‘innovations’ in the North Sea realm within a proper historical perspective. Did the Irish really invent punctuation, the Vikings the Northern town and Flemish merchants the bourse? It is hard to appreciate these innovations and gauge their impact on the evolution of North Sea societies without doing justice to historical precedents (there were after all Roman towns established in Britain before the Vikings arrived) and placing them in a wider perspective of world-wide trends and developments. This is even further complicated by the lack of a clear (and analytically justified) temporal threshold. Although the book follows more or less a chronological trajectory, it remains unclear why it starts with the Frisians and ends with Golden Century Amsterdam. One also rarely gets a snapshot of the North Sea *as a whole* in a particular time-frame. As a result arguments of synchronicity and causality remain puzzling and vague.

That brings us, thirdly, to the overall structure and style of the book. A certain degree of ornamentation is inevitable and also welcome when writing a human history of so elusive a subject as the sea. Yet the novelist streak is all too visible and the lucidity of the argument compromised by an excess of style. The oddly random thematic approach, labyrinthine narrative trajectory and eclectic succession of short stories makes for nice reading but not for an orderly presentation of argument. Instead of convincingly backing up the bold thesis “that the North Sea made us who we are”, the book lacks substance, the focus drifts too much and the North Sea seems to be used as an excuse for all sorts of digressions about science, the herring trade, Icelandic fashion, the polygamous habits of lusty Vikings, beguines in Flanders, the impact of the Plague laws and so on and on.

Braudel penned in his Mediterranean opus magnum the following cautionary words: “A historical study centered on a stretch of water has all the charms but undoubtedly all the dangers of a new departure”. Those who consider embarking on a journey across the North Sea with Pye’s book should be warned that the dangers sometimes far outweigh the charms.