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# Book Review: “The Rhode Island Campaign: The First French and American Operation in the Revolutionary War,” by Christian McBurney

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ible to invisible resources. Likewise he moves from continents and islands to banks and shelves, establishing (and this is no mean trick) a physical geography of the fisheries that remains clear throughout the narrative. We are *anchored*, rather than *grounded* in place.

Consciously aware of advances in eco-criticism ashore (Bolster's epilogue is titled "Changes in the Sea," echoing the title of William Cronon's paradigm-shifting *Changes in the Land* [1983]), and fulfilling the promise of *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (1998), with *The Mortal Sea* Bolster has earned a place in the front rank of American maritime historians and eco-critics.

Bob Madison is The Nautilus book-review editor.

***The Rhode Island Campaign: The First French and American Operation in the Revolutionary War.*** By Christian M. McBurney. 427 pp. Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2011. \$29.95 cloth. ISBN 978-1594161346.

If history is written by the victors, then it stands to reason that the stories they tell are of their victories. But in his latest monograph, Christian McBurney sets himself a different task: to tell the story of one of the victors' ostensible defeats, and to explain to us why, even so, it still very much matters. *The Rhode Island Campaign* traces the American-French effort to re-take Newport from its British occupiers, during the summer of 1778. In ten tightly-written chapters, McBurney argues that despite the failure of this campaign—at least in its ostensible goal—it nonetheless developed important skills in the young republican army and its French allies that led to the later and better-known battles which won them the war. Testing out their new alliance, both the American and French commanders made mistakes—both tactical and diplomatic—that combined with unlucky weather to leave their armies back on the mainland in September of 1778, with very little to show for their efforts.

Despite this lackluster result, McBurney argues, the Americans became more battle tested, especially during their withdrawal from Aquidneck Island in late August. In this "Battle of Rhode Island" and in the campaign overall, Americans learned that they were capable of fighting stoutly against better-trained British regulars and Hessians, and learned, through a rocky dress rehearsal, to better navigate the shoals of French pride and

complicated sea-land logistics. The French naval squadron, meanwhile, learned from its mistakes, replaced an indecisive commander, and honed a strategy of quick attack which would later—under better weather conditions—prove successful for the Comte de Rochambeau at Yorktown. As McBurney sums up,

the Battle of Rhode Island has been underappreciated by military historians because it arguably ended in a draw, was not part of a larger successful campaign, and did not involve the participants' main armies. But it merits more attention, not only because of the relatively high number of casualties it generated in comparison to other Revolutionary War Battles, but because of the fine performance by [Major General John] Sullivan's army . . . American troops drove attacking enemy regular troops from the field of battle. American forces . . . laid a successful ambush and . . . followed up with a charge of their own. . . . Moreover, the performance of state troops and militia in the battle was notable. American artillery was also effective. Finally, the British navy's destruction of ten of its own warships in response to French moves in Narragansett Bay has been underplayed in Revolutionary War naval histories. (228-229)

To accomplish his task, the author offers us a brief preface, and then gets right down to it, moving briskly through early American efforts to harass British occupiers on Aquidneck, and protect Providence beyond. He is at his best when quoting from a voluminous collection of personal letters, diaries, dispatches and official reports, to show the early missteps in the French-American alliance, but also early advantages for the allies. And he moves easily between the reflections of the impressive array of elite participants and commentators—the Adamses (John and Abigail), Ezra Stiles, Paul Revere, Washington, and Lafayette—and those of lesser known witnesses, including aides-de-camp, privates in both armies, a female tavern keeper in Newport, and a British common sailor who recounted that when the French warships let loose with their guns, "such a peal was rung as never before rent the air intended over the New World" (109).

McBurney also displays enough statistics and logistical data from the various land and sea confrontations to satisfy specialists in military history, augmenting his prose with useful appendices, indicating the order of battle of the several confrontations while leavening the detailed narrative

with piquant anecdotes such as the nighttime capture and transport (in his nightclothes!) of the British commander in Rhode Island, Major General Richard Prescott, by American raiders in 1777.

As a maritime history, *The Rhode Island Campaign* holds an interesting position. In keeping with the events of this campaign, the book explores the interdependence of sea and shore, and the many aspects of coastal support for troop movement and supply rather better than offering us heroic accounts of conflict on the high seas. Only when the French commander, Vice-Admiral Comte d'Estaing, pursues the British Vice Admiral Richard Howe out into the Atlantic (a questionable decision as McBurney points out) do we really consider the sea as an actor in the drama. Even here the problematic "Great Storm" — a hurricane which deviled the French squadron at sea and the American and British on land — takes a more prominent role. But if we hardly smell the salt in the air, McBurney's account is nonetheless replete with the small and important details of maritime communities and how their seamen, pilots, sawmills and flatboats (or lack thereof) proved critical to the course of events. In this sense, he gives us a sophisticated maritime history that cannot be detached from events on land. And his discussion reflects, more realistically, the activities of men, living on shore, caulking by candlelight to produce the boats needed to transport men into battle. There are also enough broken masts, severed bowsprits, torn canvas, and fire ships to stir the passions of maritime enthusiasts. Impressively, McBurney also manages to maintain suspense, even as we know the ultimate outcome. He often does this through the well-placed final line of a chapter, which foreshadows the drama of the next.

In all, Christian McBurney does a deft and thorough job of examining this significant theater of the revolutionary war, and of making his case that it *was* significant. Scholars will appreciate his extensive notes and bibliography, as well as useful maps and black and white illustrations. Historians of Rhode Island and of the Revolution will find it an invaluable addition to their libraries. Students of the French-American alliance should also find it useful. For where other works have looked exhaustively at the political complexities of the French-American relationship in this war — the ideological challenge of a republican government enlisting monarchical aid to defeat monarchism — McBurney here dissects the practical realities on the ground and at sea that made the alliance difficult to forge, but ultimately successful.

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*Pitcairn Island as a Port of Call: A Record, 1790 - 2010.* 2d ed. By Herbert Ford. 371 pp. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012. \$75 paper. ISBN 978-0786466047.

I was ten years old the first time I sailed to Pitcairn Island. Our visit as recorded in Ford's compilation reads: "April 1, 1972: Thirty-eight-foot ketch *Natasha* . . . Skipper Sean Bercaw, with the skipper's parents and two sisters aboard" (223). Home to the descendants of Fletcher Christian and the mutineers of the famous *Mutiny on the Bounty*, Pitcairn Island has always held a fascination, for mariners and "landsmen" alike. Add to this the extreme isolation of the island, literally more difficult to reach than the South Pole, and you have the makings of a fascinating tale. In *Pitcairn Island as a Port of Call: A Record, 1790-2010*, Herbert Ford has compiled a chronological listing of the vessels visiting Pitcairn from its discovery in 1767 (by Midshipman Robert Pitcairn) through the present day. Although at first glance merely a list, upon closer inspection this document is not only a porthole through which to glimpse the history of Pitcairn itself, but also the changing world within which this island community existed. Assessing the evolving nature of eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century maritime technologies as well as the world's political transformations, this book is a valuable resource. The facts are balanced with amusing vignettes and anecdotes that give intimate insights into this remote community and make the book a delightful read.

The mutineers had Pitcairn to themselves for eighteen years until their "discovery" in 1808 by the American sealer *Topaz*. As word spread of this new island community, there was a steady increase in ships visiting Pitcairn, the predominance of which were American whale ships. Relatively near the Pacific whaling grounds, Pitcairn was popular with whaling captains as a place to stock up on fruits, vegetables, and fresh water without the risk of their crews abandoning ship because of the island's tiny size. Popular as well with the wives of numerous captains, Pitcairn offered a refuge where several of the women had babies, another went ashore to recover from illness, and, most importantly, they could enjoy the company of other women. The entries in the Island Register note how long the whale ships had been away from their home ports and how many barrels of whale oil were aboard. In reading these entries one quickly becomes aware of "greasy luck," readily apparent for some of the vessels and distinctly absent in others.

The California Gold Rush brought a change in the types of vessels stopping at Pitcairn, as there was a decided increase in the number of passen-

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ger ships heading home to New York from San Francisco. This rhythm of world events being captured by the type and nature of ships visiting Pitcairn created a complementary rhythm to life on the island. The advent of steam and iron vessels, the opening of the Panama Canal, World Wars I and II: all these events influenced the Pitcairn community. A 1901 visiting mariner noted: "The people came out in their boats and brought with them fruits, vegetables, and a friendly humor" (84). The Pitcairners were consummate traders and began making carvings and weaving baskets to sell to visiting ships: "After this they visited us crew members to do some bartering with souvenirs, especially the ship's carpenter, to obtain nails" (May 1938, *Tairoa*, 147). In the 1940s, vessels routinely visiting the island on their trans-Pacific voyages suddenly began disappearing, victims of German torpedoes and bombs. Islanders themselves served and died in the European and African fields of battle. But throughout, the essential nature of life on an isolated island comes through, as Captain Barkness wrote as he sailed away in May 1947: "Very soon the island was astern and a few hours later, dipping below the horizon. Once again we and the Pitcairn islanders were alone in the Pacific Ocean" (163).

Getting to the island was the easy part of the equation; getting ashore through the surf at Bounty Bay was, and continues to be to this day, always thrilling, extremely dangerous, and sometimes even deadly. Even with the Pitcairners' tremendous skill, accidents happened. Steamer *Knight Templar's* visit on December 30, 1914, notes: "In efforts to reach the ship in stormy weather, the longboat in which Walter Young is a crew member overturns in Bounty Bay. Walter is thrown from the boat and then smashed against the rocks by the wave-driven boat. His back is broken in the accident and he dies within hours" (101). A more humorous Bounty Bay event occurred when a ship arrived with supplies for the island in May 1963: "The second boat, though, is capsized by a huge wave. The precious cement all went to the bottom and was lost. A refrigerator and other cargo, including a hive of bees, went floating off in the turbulent seas. Men swam in all directions and managed to drag these items ashore. In the process, they were severely stung by the angry bees which escaped from the hive when its lid was knocked off in the accident" (203).

The second edition of this book, albeit not a court document and with some minor factual errors, is a much more powerful research tool than the first edition because of the addition of a comprehensive index created by Ford's daughters. This is a book that one not so much reads as peruses. One becomes intimately aware of the vagaries of ship visits (none for months and then two on the same day), the shipwrecks, including a May

1991 wreck of a yacht with the loss of life (276), that have occurred on all four of the Pitcairn Islands (Henderson, Ducie, Oeno, and Pitcairn), and the harsh reality of the isolated nature of Pitcairn (e.g., when an islander was asked by a cruise ship passenger on Christmas Day 2008, "What happens when someone on the island has a serious medical problem. The answer was, 'Well, we have a really nice graveyard'" [315]). In de-mythologizing the realities of Pitcairn and its visiting ships, Ford's book has in an odd way created a more mystical setting. A mother who sailed to Pitcairn on a yacht with her family in 1978 summed it up most beautifully: "In harmonious voices the Pitcairners sang their special goodbye songs to us, traditionally sung as the longboats pull away from the visiting ships. In the songs I could sense the isolation and loneliness that lay behind their cheery exterior, a sadness that one of their rare contacts with the outside world had come to an end" (237).

*Captain Sean S. Bercau has traveled to Pitcairn twice during his 160,000-plus nautical miles under sail and lectures on the Pitcairners' incorporation of technology into their island community.*

***Steam Coffin: Captain Moses Rogers and the Steamship Savannah Break the Barrier.*** By John Laurence Busch. 736 pp. \$35.00 cloth. HodosHistoria LLC, 2010. ISBN 978-1893616004.

In *Steam Coffin*, John Laurence Busch offers us an elegantly written, deeply researched account of the steamship *Savannah*, its innovating captain, Moses Rogers, and the effort to create the first transatlantic steam-powered commercial packet service. Busch constructs his history in the traditional narrative form, not revealing the outcome of these efforts up front, leaving the reader to speculate on the nature of the broken barrier referred to in the title. Is it the physical barrier of successful steam travel across the Atlantic, or a psychological one—overcoming the fear of travelling on the open, invulnerable ocean on the novel and very dangerous technology of the steam engine?

From the moment Robert Fulton and Robert Livingston established the first successful commercial river steamboat service along the Hudson, via their steamboat the *North River* (more popularly known as the *Cler-*