

# BOOK REVIEW

**Jane Hooper. *Yankees in the Indian Ocean World: American Commerce and Whaling, 1786–1860*.** Athens: Ohio University Press, 2022. 1 Illustration. 247 pp. \$90.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780821425084

As the newly formed United States announced its arrival on the world stage after 1783, so, too, did a new cultural persona—the Yankee—appear in Mediterranean, Indian, Chinese, and Oceanic waters. In this well researched study, Jane Hooper adds the western Indian Ocean to an emerging historiography of early America and the world. In the ports of Madagascar, Zanzibar, Mauritius, and elsewhere, Hooper reveals what drew Yankee whalers and traders, how they chose to describe the places and peoples they encountered, and the cultural and environmental effects of these encounters.

Drawing on a plethora of ship logs, mariners' journals, newspaper articles, and published narratives, *Yankees in the Indian Ocean World: American Commerce and Whaling, 1786–1860* “argues that New Englanders had common perspectives on foreign ports in the Indian Ocean” (12). These patterns tend to follow the trends of other regions observed by scholars such as Brian Rouleau (*With Sails Whitening Every Sea: Mariners and the Making of an American Maritime Empire* [Cornell University Press, 2014]), (Roulou, 2014; Morrison, 2014, 2021; Conroy-Krutz, 2015; Norwood, 2022), who trace themes of optimism, opportunism, danger, struggle, racism, and sexual exoticism in Americans' overseas encounters. Throughout the book, the author shows that information gained through print and word of mouth was a precondition for success (60). Americans learned to develop close partnerships with preferred traders and officials, as they also did in areas such as India and China. These accounts exerted a powerful influence on the perceptions of American readers of the [region] and its people. Like other scholars, she laments the erasure of indigenous voices, as “we see only brief glimpses of the humanity of those who greeted Americans on the shoreline” (82).

Drawing on the voyages of two Salem merchant ships in the 1790s, the first chapter examines the ways in which American mariners explored the routes and ports of the southwestern Indian Ocean, encountering, mapping, and sharing news of the region's people and environment. When trouble

struck, they were on their own; the nascent federal government did not intervene to stabilize trade in the region.

Chapter Two examines “the first non-western economic networks that Americans accessed” (15) in the early 1800s, developing a vibrant trade exchanging New England cotton for Malagasy hides. Hooper shows how a vanguard of Americans used Mahajanga as a foothold for establishing regional commercial connections with African, Indian, and Arab traders.

In Chapter Three, Hooper brings the readers to Saint Augustine Bay in the 1830s, where the captains of nearly two hundred American whale ships negotiated with a Malagasy prince for food, and crews bartered for provisions and turtle shells from the canoes that approached the ships. These cross-cultural exchanges did not enlighten the visitors’ attitudes toward Malagasy people, however; rather, “[r]acist and misogynist attitudes distorted the reports that Americans brought back, . . . creating a feedback loop for growing negativity towards [the Other]” (61).

Chapter Four explores the phenomenon of “sailor tourism” in the 1840s, as American mariners visited sites in the mountains, beaches, and gardens throughout the western Indian Ocean. The Botanic Garden and Mount Pouce on Mauritius and Brown’s Garden on Ndzuwani were featured prominently in Yankee accounts which praised their capacity for moral uplift and economic opportunity.

By mid-century, the effects of American voyages in East African waters were becoming clearer—nowhere more than on the environment, as described in Chapter Five. Hooper documents in the western Indian Ocean what other scholars have observed for populations of whale, otter, beaver, and seal in the South Atlantic, Pacific, and northwest coast of America. Unrelenting hunting of whales along the coast of East Africa and seals on Amsterdam and St. Paul’s islands and provisioning throughout the region by European and then Yankee voyagers “irrevocably altered [pelagic and littoral] ecosystems.” The Americans’ pursuit of whales carried them farther into these waters, “a recipe for environmental degradation writ large” (102).

In a brief Chapter Six, Hooper introduces the topic of American involvement in illegal activities, especially in the East African slave trade in the 1840s and 1850s. Noting the scant evidence available, she concludes that American participation was not extensive, but it was complicit in a larger system of local, Asian, and European exchange. For its part, the US government “refused to take a strong stance against American involvement in illegal slaving in East Africa.” Yet, within this story was an interesting twist, as American voyagers “used the issue of the slave trade to distinguish themselves from European colonial powers,” (16) a narrative we see in occasional Yankee accounts in India and China.

Hooper concludes her excellent study with this observation: “The American presence in the western Indian Ocean was a complicated, disorganized mess... Americans expressed an array of feelings in their writings” (138). Although she does not clarify the significance of the American presence in

the southwestern Indian Ocean, her study contributes to the growing historiography of early America and the world.

doi:10.1017/asr.2023.63

Dane Morrison   
Salem State University  
Salem, Massachusetts, USA  
[dmorrison@salemstate.edu](mailto:dmorrison@salemstate.edu)