

REVIEW: THE SCOTS AT SEA

Eberhard Bort

Jim Hewitson (compiler), **The Scots at Sea: Celebrating Scotland's Maritime History**, Edinburgh: Saint Andrews Press, 2004, 176 + xiv pp, hb, £19.99, ISBN 0 7152 0811 X.

Writing the first draft of this review while 124 mph gales battered the coastline of Scotland, this volume on Scotland's maritime history took on added poignancy, particularly as the frontispiece depicts 'The Rising Wind', a painting by Montague Dawson featuring a vessel in high seas. But, oddly enough, the dramatic weather the close proximity of the sea has always inflicted upon Scotland and its people does not figure prominently in the book, apart from actual disasters at sea.

With 18,500 kilometres of coastline, and the sea lochs and firths cutting deep into the land, no Scot lives further than 45 miles from a tidal shore. Making a living from the sea, seafaring adventures, emigration, shipbuilding, foreign trade (legal and illegal) and tourism have played their part in shaping the history of the Scottish people. Jim Hewitson's book – a tie-in with the eponymous BBC television series of early 2004 – is subtitled 'Celebrating Scotland's Maritime History'. That is what it does. Using the narratives, stories and memories of sailors, fishermen, shipbuilders, etc. – and lavishly illustrated – the book brings the story of **The Scots at Sea** vividly alive.

Whaling, now widely outlawed and under attack where it is still practised was, for centuries, an important Scottish industry, and a way of life along the east coast of Scotland from Leith, where the first whaler left port in 1610, to Keith Inch near Peterhead, and up to Shetland. The link from whaling to Polar exploration, already an important section in Norman Watson's **The Dundee Whalers** (Tuckwell, 2004), is sketched out towards the end of the

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whaling chapter. And we learn that some of the most ardent and enthusiastic fans of the late Jimmy Shand's 'soulful accordion' music can be found among the Inuit – a legacy of their exposure to the music and dances of the Dundee whalers in the nineteenth century.

Another iconic Scottish industry has been (or was) shipbuilding, particularly on the Clyde in the West, and in and around Aberdeen in the North-East. After the American War of Independence, Scottish merchants began to order ships from local yards, and Scottish clippers became the foremost trading vessels, from the Far East tea trade (with the famous tea races) to the Australian wool trade. Soon steam replaced sail, and the Clyde became one of the world centres of industrial shipbuilding, in its heyday launching liners like the 'Mauritania', the 'Aquitania' or the ill-fated 'Lusitania'. 1913 saw the Clyde shipyards launch 365 ships, one for every day of the year. While shipbuilding on the Clyde flourished in wartime, the twentieth century saw its nigh-terminal decline. Oddly enough, there is nothing on 'Red Clydeside' in the book, but space is given to Jimmy Reid recalling the heady days of the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders' work-in of 1971-72.

Shipbuilding, whaling and fishing have shaped Scottish communities. The skills-based work with long apprenticeships and the dangers lurking in the workplace created a sense of identity and solidarity. The price of fish was always high – in terms of human life lost at sea. The trawlers and crewmen lost in storms and wrecked on rocks are legion. But the chase for the 'silver darlings' made Scotland one of leading providers of herring all over Europe. The herring gutters of Peterhead, Newhaven, Fisherrow – thousands of Scottish 'fishwives' or 'fisher lassies' – followed the herring landings from Wick down to Great Yarmouth, a migrant workforce of highly-skilled women, working with incredible speed – excruciatingly hard work, but at the same time giving the women self-confidence and a sense of liberation.

While the Darien expedition is only mentioned in passing, emigration is highlighted with the story of the 'Hector' which, in 1773, brought the first Scottish settlers to Nova Scotia. Odd, then, that the clearances are only alluded to in passing. Worse, Scotland's involvement in plantations and the slave trade is completely ignored.

Broad space is given to the role of the sea in warfare, from the 'veerie monstrous great ship', the 'Michael', and other men o' war, to the equipment of the Royal Navy 'ruling the waves', and the sea as a defence against potential invaders. The story of the nuclear base at Faslane is briefly told, but

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anti-Polaris protests merit barely a sentence. Finally, the puffers and paddle steamers are affectionately recalled, lamenting their demise as a means of transportation, 'consigned to history and the pages of fiction.'

There are strange gaps in this 'celebration' of Scotland and its relationship with the surrounding sea. Nothing on lighthouses, despite the Lighthouse Stevensons! Nothing on smuggling – theme of a recent book by Gavin D. Smith, **The Scottish Smuggler** (Birlinn, 2003) – or 'wrecking' as a Scottish way of life. The controversies about British and EU fishing policies are touched upon, but barely beyond mentioning that fishing has increasingly faced a serious, existential crisis. The growing importance of wave and tidal power escapes the interest of the compiler. Nothing either on maritime research (as for example at the Centre for Marine and Coastal Zone Management at the University of Aberdeen). Or the Seabird Centre at North Berwick. Or surfing in Thurso. And while whaling is termed the 'North-East's first oil boom', the second, 'real' one since the 1970s, and its economic and political impact, remains merely an allusion.

Writing the final draft of this review, there are stories in the press that the storms of January 2005 have led to mass escapes from Scottish fish farms around the Western Isles which, according to the Scottish Wildlife Trust and WWF Scotland, could have a 'potentially disastrous' impact on the country's wild salmon stocks. In 2004, the Food Standards Agency had set upper limits for consumption of oily fish, including salmon, because it was found full of polluting chemicals. The contamination of the marine environment and the food products that come from it is yet another area which does, apparently, sit uneasily with the book's intention of 'celebrating Scotland's maritime history' and is, consequently, left out.

The Scots at Sea is a pleasant and informative coffee-table book, containing great stories and lots of memories well worth preserving. There are bits and pieces which contribute to the history of important Scottish industries. And the book will certainly kindle further interest in Scotland's maritime history. But you would be seriously at sea if you went to it looking for a critical, in-depth treatment of the more controversial issues surrounding it.

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