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Book Reviews

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BOOK REVIEWS

Sea Struck. By W.H. Bunting (Gardiner, Maine: Tilbury House, 2004. Pp. xvi+366. Maps, photographs, notes, index. \$30.00).

John Masefield in his famous poem, "Sea Fever," describes the special attraction that the sea holds for some people. Perhaps this fascination explains why three young men of education and affluence would actively pursue berths on square-rigged sailing vessels at the end of the nineteenth century. W. H. Bunting, no stranger to the sea, has discovered a treasury of material, namely, the diaries of three young men, Frank Besse, Carleton Allen, and Rodman "Tod" Swift. The diaries describe the daily activities and events that occurred on board four square-rigged sailing vessels. The recorded entries reflect "the good, the bad and the ugly" while at sea and in port, for it was a time of "bully captains and bucko mates." The strength of the stories lies in the fact that the men served in different capacities on each ship.

Frank Besse records his reactions from the cabin as a passenger on board the full-rigged ship *William J. Rotch*, from July 2, 1881, to January 19, 1883, on a voyage from New York to Dublin by way of Yokohama, Hawaii, and San Francisco with case oil, Chinese passengers, and grain respectively. Early in the first voyage Besse observed the ill treatment of one of the crew simply because he "did not move quick enough" to suit the second mate (page 82). Besse was assigned special duty on board the vessel: "the captain has appointed me as a kind of overseer of the Chinese passengers, and I am to keep account of all the provisions they use on the passage" (page 111).

Carleton Allen embarked on his adventure from the cabin as a passenger on board the three-masted wooden bark *Guy C. Goss*, from March 18, 1898, to August 20, 1898, bound for New York from Puget Sound with a cargo of spars. After finishing college Allen served as second mate on the four-masted steel bark *Hawaiian Isles* in 1904, bound for Melbourne and Sydney with a cargo of general merchandise. Allen's diary is complemented by photos he took during the voyage. His initial reaction to the world of sail was indeed one of fascination, as he observed the process of getting underway and recorded his pride in climbing the rigging: "made my first voyage to the end of the jibboom...."

Made my first trip to the top of the main top, Vessel looks narrow and the top is higher up there than it is from down here” (page 166).

Rodman “Tod” Swift speaks from the forecandle as an ordinary seaman on board the four-masted steel bark *Astral* on a voyage from Philadelphia with a cargo of case oil to Kobe, Japan, and then to San Francisco by way of Hawaii with a cargo of sugar. His diary reflects the highs and lows of the voyage and instances where his sense of accomplishment was hard to contain: “I am getting to know the ropes and where each one belays. I think in a week I can lay my hand on any one in the dark. There are hundreds” (page 250). The shipping articles stipulated that the crew was to receive their “daily whack” (food allowance). This, however, was a source of frustration: “food very bad today. Salt meat hardly cooked at all. Potatoes rotten and bread very sour. Yesterday we got our whacks of butter” (pages 264-265). *Sea Struck* is a story of sweeping adventure on the high seas, yet Bunting offers a wealth of integrating material on such topics as trade, shipbuilding, and whaling and suggestions for further research in his comprehensive endnotes. The book contains personal letters and correspondence that shed light on the concerns and fears expressed by ship’s agents, captains, and family members. The author has assembled an excellent collection of photographs.

Maine shipbuilders have a long and distinguished tradition of building vessels of a high quality, and this is no more true than in the case of the *Astral*, the *William J. Rotch*, and the *Guy C. Goss*. The *Astral* was built by Arthur Sewall and launched on December 8, 1900; the *William J. Rotch* was built in the Goss, Sawyer, and Packard yard and launched on April 26, 1881; and the *Guy C. Goss* was built by Goss and Sawyer and launched on Thanksgiving Day in 1879. The newspaper accounts of the launchings emphasized the high quality of workmanship.

In preparation for these round-the-world voyages, some readers would do well to equip themselves with an atlas of the world, a nautical glossary, and the sail plan for a four-masted bark. The author offers the following advice: “the successful reader will have remembered who was who, minded the sailing directions, and kept an eye on the compass” (page xv). Bunting, an award-winning author, has written several other books, including the classic *Portrait of a Port: Boston 1852-1914*.

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