



BOOK REVIEW

David Cressy. *Shipwrecks and the Bounty of the Sea* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. Pp. 336. \$41.99 (cloth).

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This is a most welcome book not just due to its delightful use of language, which makes reading it a pleasure, but also because it should be subtitled “Killing the wrecking myths.” David Cressy has produced a book which does just that and builds on the work by Cathryn Pearce who examined wrecking in Cornwall (*Cornish Wrecking, 1700–1860: Reality and Popular Myth* [2010]).

Cressy dives deeply into the 200 years from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-eighteenth centuries and examines the reality of wrecking from all angles: from the supposed perpetrators to the victims. He exposes the limitations of relying on biased reports. *Shipwrecks and the Bounty of the Sea* is divided into twelve chapters each looking at a different perspective of England’s shoreline. It was during this period that England rose to become a commercial maritime power.

Chapter 1 endeavors to establish the number of shipwrecks and estimates that 45% of voyages went amiss. He identifies more than 4,000 wrecks with the warning that “larger ships, foreign owned ships, and vessels with high value cargoes may be overrepresented, especially if owners sought restitution and survivors presented testimony” (27). Chapter 2 looks at representations of wreck disasters and the conflicting accounts both from fiction, early journalism, and witnesses. Shipwrecks happened for many reasons, including the mistaking of the ship’s position pre-longitude, compass variations, inadequate charts, and shifting sand. Drunkenness and ineptitude were often blamed together with unskilled mariners and pilots. Shipowners who did not maintain the vessels or equip them well were another factor.

Maritime law was the first truly international law, and chapter 3 looks at the law relating to wreck, *Wreccum Maris*. There was considerable variation in how the law was both interpreted and experienced, and as Cressy puts it, “the law had varied streams and currents” (54). In discussing wreck, all too often the owners of the goods are the forgotten parties, and there were multiple claimants. “The tension was perdurable between sea and land, between those who sent goods forth and those who picked them up” (55). The legal position was not as clear-cut as previously thought. The legal technicalities were complex, as multiple parties were in dispute. The owners of the goods had great difficulty in finding and reclaiming items from wreck once they dispersed and the practical difficulty of penalizing scavengers.

It is here that this book gets underneath the overblown rhetoric of “barbarous country-folk” luring ships to their doom and attacking wreck survivors. This canard that still persists is undone when Cressy writes firmly “but no English evidence supports the myth of murderous wreckers drawing ships to their doom” (72). He defends the morality of coastal residents who are often depicted as savage when presented with shipwreck opportunities. “Such characterisation and language” he writes “are far from the truth” (73). Language was used by the elite to hide the fact that salvage was collaborative and not simply the acts of an anonymous

mob. “Words such as ravage, pillage, spoil and barbarous were designed to get attention and belongs to a rhetoric of denigration” (78). People at all levels of society were involved in recovering goods from wrecks, but it was convenient to point the finger at the masses to avoid accusations against those in charge while dramatizing the merchants’ losses.

Recovery of goods was a cooperative and collaborative process. Indeed, the Lords of the Manor had a very strong interest in protecting their ancient manorial rights to wreck, there were constant arguments over jurisdiction, and there was plenty of competition. Other interested parties who claimed rights included the Cinque Ports, the Duchies of Lancaster and Cornwall, the Admiralty, Vice Admiralty, and the Crown. Cressy looks at several cases of what he calls a “mosaic of jurisdictions” (86) in the Bristol Channel, Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Sussex, Kent, Norfolk, Yorkshire, and the North. The greatest beneficiaries of the profit from wrecks were the agents of the Crown and particularly so during the Stuart period. Cressy finds that the country people who labored to collect salvage were distinctly worse off as a result of their efforts than the elite parties.

Chapter 7 considers shipwreck tales from sea and shore with the stories told by witnesses in the aftermath of shipwrecks and has specific cases including several from the Goodwin Sands detailing the disputes and witness views. Cressy urges further research into the mobilization of coastal communities from Cornwall to Northumberland in these moments of peril.

Hundreds of mariners drowned in wrecks. Their bodies were checked for identification and then buried. Any money found was put toward funeral expenses. Surviving mariners were helped by the same people who were falsely accused of barbarity. “Letters between shipowners and officials ... more often commend the savers and shoremen than accuse them of cruelty” (182). The goods collected from the shore could be anything from alcohol, wool, or the items on the ship itself such as sails, ropes, nets, beams, timbers, and ordnance. Wine ships were a popular find, although salvors were somewhat economical with the truth. Wine was sometimes described as “brackish” or “very salt and nothing worth,” while recovered pipes and hogsheds were reported “but half full” (199). There were textiles, clothing, and foodstuffs. Timbers, masts, and planking could all be reused while occasionally there was coin and bullion. The latter encouraged underwater wreck recovery by free divers in the sixteenth century who also looked for anchors and cannons. The final chapter examines the changing wreck law in the eighteenth century.

As Cressy underlines, this period between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries saw England rise from a local to a global maritime power. Geography placed England’s shores at the intersection of trade, which expanded massively, and “global and local cultures intersected as items of exotic provenance became godsend, droits, and loot” (261). He points out that the shoreline recovery of goods is part of the ecology of the ocean edge everywhere. Right of wreck is a topic of which there is considerable misunderstanding and where the myths of luring ships onto rocks and violent scavengers on beaches continue to be repeated to this day. This wonderfully researched book helps to put yet another nail in the coffin of those myths.