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BOOKSHELF

'Barons of the Sea' Review: Rigging the Market

The race to import tea to the U.S.—and smuggle opium to China—gave rise to a technological marvel: the clipper ship.



The Sea Witch, launched in 1846, set speed records on the route from New York to China and back. PHOTO: KELTON FOUNDATION, LOS ANGELES

By Randall Fuller

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Before the rise of the internet in the 1990s, the period of greatest technological innovation in the U.S. occurred during the first half of the 19th century. The railroad, the telegraph and the photograph conspired to shrink time and space in this era and, in the process, to knit together an increasingly far-flung people in the expanding nation. In “Barons of the Sea,” the nautical historian Steven Ujifusa chronicles another invention—the clipper ship—and the immense fortunes that both propelled and resulted from its development.

Clipper ships—generally schooners with three masts—were in many ways like the high-speed aircraft chronicled by the late Tom Wolfe in “The Right Stuff.” Fast, dangerous and attractive to risk takers, they took existing naval technology to the limits—and sometimes past it. With their sharp hulls and flat bottoms, their towering masts and tens of thousands of square yards of sails, the clippers sliced through the water at unprecedented speeds. But time and again, the ships were dismasted or otherwise disabled when the wind blew too hard or they encountered rough waters.

Mr. Ujifusa’s story begins less than a year after American independence, when New England traders first penetrated the insular Chinese tea market and began competing with the British to deliver tea in the shortest possible time. This portion of the book is especially good at providing character sketches of early American captain-entrepreneurs—men who left their families and homes for years at a time to live in Canton (modern-day Guangzhou). The goal was to become independently wealthy—to “make a competence,” as the phrase went—before the age of 30. Some of these men bear names that continue to reverberate through American history, including Warren Delano II (grandfather of President Franklin D. Roosevelt) and Robert Bennet

and John Murray Forbes, originators of the Forbes fortune. In Mr. Ujifusa's telling, these men were daredevils, shrewd businessmen and dynasty builders all at once.

BARONS OF THE SEA

By Steven Ujifusa

Simon & Schuster, 427 pages, \$29.99

Delano, the son of a successful New Bedford, Mass., whaling captain, was a "tough man to the core" who started as a shipping clerk at 16. He poured his eventual wealth into a 60-acre Hudson River estate inspired by a palace he had seen in China. The Forbes brothers had more austere but

still refined taste and were patrons of cultural and philanthropic causes. John Murray's son married Ralph Waldo Emerson's daughter.

But there is a dark side to the story. The Delanos, Forbeses and other American shipping fortunes were made not simply by importing tea to the U.S. but by smuggling opium from India into China. While there were no legal restrictions on opium in the U.S. at the time, the drug had been banned in China by imperial edict in the late 18th century on account of its disastrous social consequences. Addiction was rampant, having spread from the wealthy to every stratum of Chinese society. "The Chinese government was nervous about using force to crack down on the trade," Mr. Ujifusa writes. "Craving for the drug had overwhelmed all means of enforcement. So had bribery." For British and American traders, however, the profits to be made by smuggling far outweighed any moral considerations; a single shipload of opium was worth tens of millions of dollars in today's currency. Mr. Ujifusa's "barons of the sea" were, in essence, America's first drug cartel.

Mr. Ujifusa is ultimately less interested in this aspect of his story than in the ships of "lithe, angelic beauty" that were soon developed to deliver tea and opium across vast stretches of water. The bulk of his book is taken up with recounting the competition among shipbuilders to construct vessels that would sail more quickly than ever before and yet remain durable enough to traverse the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian oceans. We learn in detail of the experimentation in design and materials, as well as the costs it took to build each ship. At some point in the book, the ships themselves, rather than the owners and captains, become the main characters.

In the 1840s, opium ceased to be the primary driver of clipper-ship design, replaced by gold. When the precious metal was discovered in Northern California, a stampede of transcontinental migrants headed west, effectively closing the American frontier. At the height of the Gold Rush, when thousands of Americans raced to California each month, supplies were so scarce in the new boomtown of San Francisco that a pair of boots sold for \$1,400 in today's money, while barrels of flour and beef cost even more. To capitalize on these prices, shipping magnates abruptly turned their attention from China to the West Coast, funding larger and faster ships to make the run from Boston or New York to San Francisco. This trip, which included a dash around South America's dangerous Cape Horn, prompted the clippers' most daring designs—taller masts, many more sails, sleeker bodies. The first clipper to make the trip was the *Memnon*, commissioned by Warren Delano. On July 28, 1849, it arrived in the "sprawling shantytown" of San Francisco from the East Coast in just 123 sailing days—some 80 days faster than a typical trip on the route. "In a betting country gone mad about money and speed," Mr. Ujifusa writes, "the California clippers became an obsession."

The *Flying Cloud*, while not the largest clipper ever built, may be taken for the apogee of this trend. Designed by the brilliant (if improvident) Donald McKay, the ship was 235 feet long with a main mast nearly 100 feet tall. More interestingly, it was navigated by a woman, Eleanor Prentiss Creesy, wife of the captain and one of the first persons to use Matthew Fontaine Maury's charts of ocean currents to devise speedier routes around South America. In a race around Cape Horn against another clipper, the *Hornet*, Josiah and Eleanor Creesy made the trip in 89 days and eight hours—a record that would stand for another 140 years.

The era of the clippers ended as quickly as it began, terminated by the Civil War, the transcontinental railroad, the Panama Canal and other developments. Among the pleasures of “Barons of the Sea” is the author’s extensive knowledge of ship design and nautical history; the book is almost a beginner’s manual in sailing and is infused by a clear love for the regal triple-masters of the past. But while it is filled with vivid portraits of the key players in America’s sailing dynasties, the focus on the ships themselves sometimes squeezes out more human stories. More attention could have been spent, for instance, on the remarkable Eleanor Creesy, whose knowledge of astronomy and oceanic currents rivaled those of her male peers. About the crews of the clippers we learn very little.

But these are small flaws. Mr. Ujifusa’s subject ultimately is a handful of vessels, as ephemeral as they were fast, that nonetheless produced fortunes still with us to this day.

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