

OFF THE DEEP END: A history of madness at sea – Nic Compton. Published in hard covers by Adlard Coles Nautical [www.adlardcoles.com] at £16.99. 264 153mm x 224mm pages including eight pages of colour photos. ISBN 978-1-4729- 4112-1 Also available for Kindle

This book tells of tragedies at sea and attempts, through these accounts, to explore how madness relates to seafaring. In some instances there is an obvious cause for mental problems aboard, such as alcoholism, delirium tremens, scurvy or syphilis. Among survivors of shipwreck, starvation, thirst and drinking salt water might send men mad. But in many cases the sea did not send these poor souls mad, it simply magnified their problems. It has been suggested that people with poor social integration – the misfits – may be more likely to go to sea, and so explain the incidence of mental issues in some sailors.

Among those who emigrated or were transported to the colonies, the incidence of mental illness was high. But it was not necessarily the sea or the voyage that caused this. It was easier for the authorities to send their ‘pauper lunatics’ away than to care and pay for them at home. Some even went straight from the docked ship to a mental asylum. In 1873 the New Zealand Imbecile Passenger Act (no euphemisms here) allowed for immediate repatriation of such cases.

Starvation leading to death and, on occasion, cannibalism is unendurably awful, but is it madness? In 1884 three men drifting in a 13ft dinghy murdered the fourth, a young deckhand, to save themselves. The court dismissed their plea of insanity and found them guilty of murder.

There is so much suffering, gore and death in these pages that it is a book to dip into, not to read at a sitting. The gruesome statistics keep mounting. On the *Cospatrick* 470 drowned, in *HMS Defence* 900 were lost, from the *Medusa* only 15 survived from 146 seeking to escape on a raft, in one year 838 British ships were lost – and so on and so on and more. One can only take so much.

Despite the title, the theme running through the pages seems thin. The madness here is often just a peg on which to hang another tale of dreadful disaster at sea. Many celebrated maritime stories and their famous vessels are recruited to illustrate this ghoulish theme of madness at sea. Names include *Bounty*, *Beagle*, *Sharon*, *Medusa*, *Essex*, *Titanic*, *Spray*, *Grimalkin* – the list goes on. For several, such as *Grimalkin*, it is difficult to see what role madness played, and yet *Grimalkin*’s story takes six pages to tell.

Some good came of all this misery when caring and empathetic people recognised the desperate state of seamen and sought to help. The Royal Navy recognised the problem and in 1818 moved sailors with mental issues from appalling asylums to purpose-built facilities at Haslar Hospital. This was a decade before the Madhouses Act for civilians. The Marine Society was founded in 1756, followed by the Sailor’s Society, the Seamen’s

Hospital Society and, in 1856, the Mission to Seamen – still going strong as the Mission to Seafarers, as is also the Shipwrecked Fishermen and Mariners' Royal Benevolent Society. Although these charities dealt then – and still do now – with poor and destitute sailors, a significant part of their work has been with sailors suffering mental health issues.

Off the Deep End is well written, Nic Compton's prose embracing the reader's attention and clipping along at a pace. Although some of the stories are well-known and even well-worn, there is new and fascinating material. If considering it as a stocking filler at Christmas be sure the recipient is robust, however, as much misery resides in these pages.

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