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American Sea Literature—
on the Sea

Abstract: This chapter gives an outline of the study of sea literature in the past, arguing that the traditional maritime literary studies and maritime cultural history haven’t looked at the oceanic environment as a whole, which resulted in too much an emphasis on fishing, trading, voyages, explorations on the ocean. Such a slant view to maritime activities might have to do with: first, humans’ existence as terrestrial beings, who have tended to look at the ocean as a plane figure; and second, the view that the land (terrestrial) and the sea (oceanic) are rigidly separated and opposed. As a new way to better look at sea literature, the author reinterprets some representative sea literature by finding how we can find oceanic experience embedded in some of the terrestrial experience. The authors to be mainly discussed are William Bradford, Olaudah Equiano, Washington Irving, Richard Henry Dana, Jr., Joshua Slocum, and Peter Matthiessen.

The ocean which, although surrounding this earth, the home of the human race, with the ebb and flow of its tides, can be neither seized nor inclosed; nay, which rather possesse the earth than is by it possessed.¹

Hugo Grotius. *The Freedom of the Seas*

Sea literature on the sea

When people speak of sea literature, they often have in mind maritime literature that concerns fishing, shipwrecks, voyages of exploration or emigration, commercial transport, or naval wartime vessels. Today, within that narrow framework, sea literature is either anachronistic or scarcely exists for the reason that most of those maritime activities have dwindled away or have radically changed. For instance, except for commercial fishermen, or for islanders who routinely commute across the waters, or for funded researchers and explorers and accompanying journalists, the idea of travelling by boat or ship has come to mean a luxurious cruise or the recreational activities of the wealthy, such as sport fishing and yacht racing, or perhaps the smuggling of prohibited substances and illegal immigrants. In recent decades, maritime trade has become the global business of mass transport, human labor having been reduced by usage of enormous tankers and specialized container-transporting cargo ships. Military waterborne craft have undergone even greater changes, much of which is kept under wraps. The spread and dominance of time-saving and cost-effective commercial aviation for transport of both humans and commodities has altered people’s attitudes toward the ocean, especially the people of urban, industrialized nations. Except for people living in areas vulnerable to typhoons and tsunamis, or to engulfment by waves of tourists, even the oceans’ contribution to weather and rainfall appears to be of scarce interest. With all those issues cast aside, for many people the oceans of today appear to have value primarily for recreation and tourism, for providing food and mineral resources, and for disposal of unwanted substances.

But such a radical alteration of people’s attitude does not mean that there is no longer a place for the ocean in literature and culture. On the contrary, precisely because of these fundamental changes in the roles and interrelationships of the ocean and human society, there is an even