Facing the Sea: Essays in Swedish maritime studies
by S. Ekström and L. Müller (eds), Nordic Academic Press, 2021, £34.50 (hb),
292 pages, photographs, ISBN 9789189361034

Adam Grimshaw

To cite this article: Adam Grimshaw (2023) Facing the Sea: Essays in Swedish maritime studies,
To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00253359.2023.2260259

At first glance, Simon Ekström and Leos Müller’s edited collection Facing the Sea: Essays in Swedish Maritime History comprises a selection of ten relatively disparate studies with a central thread that is seemingly only united in their geographical focus. In reality, it is a collection of ten expert articles from some of the principal academics in their respective fields. Combined they represent the forefront of Swedish maritime historical research, encapsulating the ethos of CEMAS (Centre for Maritime Studies) which is the main research body behind this publication. CEMAS is a collaboration between researchers at Stockholm University and the Swedish National Maritime and Transport Museums. Founded in 2010, CEMAS aims to pursue all aspects of study regarding maritime history, maritime ethnology and maritime archaeology.

Facing the Sea is the second edited collection produced by CEMAS. The first, entitled Angöringar: Berättelser och kunskap från havet [Docking: Narratives and knowledge from the sea], came in 2017 and was published in Swedish. It was intended more for a domestic Swedish audience but likewise featured a broad and expansive set of articles from CEMAS researchers. Now CEMAS is setting its sights wider by delivering its first publication in English. In coordination with copyeditor Charlotte Merton, the result is a consistent, authoritative and crisp collection of scholarly prose.

It is an ambitious undertaking spanning a millennium of maritime history but there are some common themes that are mirrored and explored throughout. Some of these themes cover the relationship between borders and borderlands; the relationship between life and death; between legal and illegal activity and the interplay between land and sea. Aspects of the nation, nationality, and national identity are presented through a variety of maritime related focuses. These wider topics, in part, are reflective of some of the current trends being explored by such historians.

The book opens with Niklas Eriksson charting maritime topography or ‘The architecture of the early modern sea routes into Stockholm’. It not only provides the international reader with much needed context into Sweden’s largest port, and capital, but demonstrates how the Swedish state at various points in history has shaped the landscape to control waterways. Eriksson traces the routes taken by medieval and then early modern seafarers. He demonstrates the importance of such shifts in contemporary power politics by emphasizing how advances in seafaring technology impacted the Swedish state’s decisions to build and maintain fortresses and which waterways they used to position their fleet in times of war. Eriksson connects these processes through three key phases making an explicit connection between his study and the development of Sweden from a fiscal-military to a modern state.

It follows on with the paper of Henrik Arnstad and Abigail Christine Parkes, ‘Maritime Military Archery: Bowmen on European warships, 1000–1600’. The authors seek to fill a significant gap in maritime research on the naval use of bowmen which they argue was a feature of human history for over three millennia. With this extensive article, they aim to bridge the gap between naval warfare studies, which have sidestepped the role of archery, and military archery studies that limit their scope to land-based activities. The article introduces and states the case for the importance of archery in naval warfare by first
charting naval archery in the high Middle Ages to the Mediterranean theatre of warfare and then going on to discuss tools and technological developments. The authors then anchor the role of archery in several case studies ranging from the battle of Sluys in the fourteenth century to the Mary Rose, before moving on to discuss archaeological findings from Kalmar Castle dated to the sixteenth century. The article is ambitious and successful in furthering knowledge of its intended subject, though it perhaps lacks tight focus on Sweden itself.

Those who have recently visited the Vasa Museum in Stockholm will be familiar with the expansion of their exhibits detailing the artefacts uncovered from the Vasa that seek to shed light on the ordinary people related to the ship. Anna Maria Forsberg’s article ‘The Human Factor: The ship Vasa and its people’ expertly advances our perceptions and knowledge of these people by consulting a combination of sources and methods of enquiry. Forsberg considers the contemporary sources surrounding the floundering of the ship and then juxtaposes these sources with the post-salvage historiography of the ship. The author also analyses recovered artefacts as well as bringing the reconstruction of human remains from the shipwreck into the debate. An additional strength of this article is that the author seeks to understand why we know so little about this subject to date with a number of theories advanced. Forsberg has favoured an ambitious scope of inquiry rooted in empiricism, which proves successful in furthering our understanding of the people involved with the Vasa.

Fredrik Kämpe’s chapter ‘On the Honour of the Naval Ensign: The Swedish navy and the symbolism of naval and merchant flags, c. 1700–1950’ considers the example of the naval ensign, specifically taking into account the symbolism of Swedish naval and merchants flags spanning an ambitious three century timespan over 1750 to 1900. In particular, it emphasizes the importance of honour as a central, cohesive theme in the development and use of naval ensigns, specifically ‘the language of honour’. The author traces the birth of the Swedish national flag before connecting this subject to discussions surrounding the naval ensign in specific focus. This chapter is a rich, comparative study which truly excels by tying in concepts of pragmatism and honour.

The collection moves on to consider maritime archaeology when co-editor Simon Ekström delivers ‘Out of the Water: Wrecks and salvage at the intersection of death, time past, and national glory.’ This article continues the theme of the nation and nationalism with three case studies of salvage wrecks and connects them to cultural heritage and levels of perception to demonstrate how they formed part of collective, national memory. Ekström ties in the salvage operation itself into ideas of public display and contrasts the level of criticism connected to each individual case. The result is an informative study that emphasizes themes of national glory and honour, particularly in terms of royal visitation and recognition. It demonstrates the importance of how salvage and display contribute to a nation’s collective cultural heritage.

Anders Linderoth considers how national identities can be analysed as discursive constructions in ‘Swedish Naval Officers and the Nation: The discourse of national identity in the magazine Vår Flotta, 1905–1920.’ Linderoth concludes through his research of
this publication in wider maritime notions of nationality and how maritime factors came into play when reporting on Sweden and the notions of being Swedish. The author briefly contrasts this experience using comparisons with the United Kingdom and Germany. There is a distinctive emphasis on the importance of external threats which richly contextualizes the article as the founding principles of promoting the sea and shipping being central to the national interest. The article expertly weaves through a variety of central arguments found in Vår Flotta that emphasize important though previously overlooked concepts of identity in early twentieth-century Sweden.

Mirja Arnshav continues exploring a particular aspect of her research into Baltic refugees in ‘Tommi the Sea Dog: Maritime collections and the material culture of Baltic boat children’. The article revisits themes of material culture and collective, public display found in earlier chapters. It highlights the importance of seemingly innocuous possessions such as children’s toys which in fact allow us to deepen our knowledge of a particular event or time period. This is exactly what Arnshav sets out to do, drawing in the story of Tommi the soft dog, which becomes the torch bearer for those refugee children fleeing war in the Baltic states during the Second World War. The author furthers this line of enquiry by considering other belongings to demonstrate what was prioritized in such itinerant lives. Through Tommi, Arnshav brings about the question of what should be placed and prioritized in museum collections focusing on maritime history and finds that Tommi the children’s toy is just as relevant as in revealing unique histories as anything that might be salvaged from a shipwreck.

‘How to break the rules just right: Åland smugglers, 1920–1950’ by Ida Hughes Tidlund, diverges on a separate path to focus on illicit trade. Tidlund places the example of the Åland islands, a collection of over 6,000 islands, rocks and skerries nestled between mainland Finland and Sweden in full focus to demonstrate just how extensive smuggling was between the two countries. The author finds that smuggling was an endemic part of life, readily taken up by some Ålanders. That alcohol took pride of place is no surprise, but cigarettes, foodstuffs and an array of other items also featured heavily. The article covers a great deal, delving into specific cases studies to show that Åland was not just special for its association with the League of Nations.

Hanna Jansson aptly provides the closing contribution with ‘Here, There and Everywhere: Ash disposal at sea and the construction of a maritime memory landscape’. The article considers how the scattering of ashes of the deceased has become a growing trend and charts the history of this process back to 1957. In this way Jansson finds that it is a relatively new phenomenon and first considers the motivations behind this act before connecting this process to other established rituals such as prior funerals or memorials. The author places oral history in the forefront of the investigation, discussing with those related to the process of scattering ashes in an illuminating take that finds there are often varied and sometimes contradictory motivations why people have chosen, and are choosing, to scatter their ashes at sea in a specifically Swedish context.

All told, Facing the Sea represents an impressive collection of essays that demonstrates the wealth, breadth, and ambition of Swedish maritime research. That ambition shines through in each chapter with every author providing insightful and unique research while also remaining forward facing. Not only is ground-breaking research plain to see but many of the contributors rightly seek to answer as many questions in their present studies as they do posing potential research for the future.

ADAM GRIMSHAW
STOCKHOLM

http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00253359.2023.2260259
© Adam Grimshaw

A Mighty Fleet and the King’s Power: The Isle of Man, AD 400 to 1265 by T. Clarkson
John Donald, 2023, £14.99 (pb)
256 pages
ISBN 9781910900802

Over the last 15 years Tim Clarkson, who holds a PhD in early medieval history from the University of Manchester, has produced a steady stream of affordable books introducing