

BOOK REVIEW: SEA OF GLORY

By kilroy, 2 February 2008;

Sea of Glory: America's Voyage of Discovery. The U.S. Exploring Expedition. By Nathaniel Philbrick. Penguin Books 2003.

Throughout all of my years attending school, watching the history channel and reading books I have encountered the names of many great explorers, such as Lewis and Clark, Shackleton among others, but never have I heard of the U.S. Exploring Expedition of 1838- 1842 (Ex. Ex. For short) and its leader, Lieutenant Wilkes until I picked up Nathaniel Philbrick's *Sea of Glory*. Even better, I probably would never have heard of the Ex Ex have I not picked up Philbrick's *Into the Heart of the Sea* on a whim.

The Ex Ex of 1838 is arguably one of the greatest scientific expeditions of all time that no one has heard of. Depending on who's account you read, Wilkes and his fleet of six ships, along with 346 men, were the first to discover the continent of Antarctica. The fleet brought home over 40 tons of specimens which eventually became the groundwork for the famed Smithsonian Institution. The Ex Ex also explored and charted more than 800 miles of America's West Coast (including the dangerous Colombia River) and surveyed well over 200 islands, including the Fiji islands.

The very breadth of the drama that unfolded during voyage is hard to comprehend. The very fact that this expedition ever got underway was a minor miracle. The logistical problems facing the commander of the expedition daunted many of the navy's finest commanders, and they eventually had to settle for a mere Lieutenant In the form of Wilkes, an appointment which sent the officers community into a near rabid state.

The expedition itself was fraught with more peril than just the high seas. The men of the Ex Ex had to compete with explorers from other nations, fight hostile natives, face some of the most fierce places known to sailors, notably the Colombia River. Not only that, Wilkes was a very vain man at best. He was paranoid and isolated himself from his crew and officers. He used his power to embarrass those whom he felt was threatening his position, and even sent many packing for home. He frequently indulged himself in lashing his men. Others that he felt were stealing his thunder were hammered down and as shown in the crews logs, they went from a very optimistic view on their commander, to a view that is filled with hate and loathing. These flaws would cost him the expeditions well deserved fame. Upon arrival, Wilkes was court marshaled. The proceedings lasted for weeks and became increasingly messy. The affair was one in which the navy would promptly sweep under the rugs and never look back on. But Philbrick is careful to note that there was no other commander that cared for the duty he was assigned to as much as Wilkes. He was a very cruel man, but he constantly pushed himself and his crew and took great care when recording his, and his scientists finds (although, Wilkes finds often took priority over the scientists). His charts were incredibly accurate, and many are

still used to this day.

As I had noted in my review of Philbrick's *Into the Heart of the Sea*, his writing style is very fluid. He is a masterful storyteller and the book is never a bore. Although the book lacks the details of the day to day operations of the expedition, he focuses on the characters involved, and the drama that unfolds between them. There is a comprehensive Selected Bibliography at the end of the book, separated by chapter which is a help when doing follow up research of your own. Also, the book contains a narrative Notes section, also separated by chapter which I find is more entertaining than the usual lists you find at the end of many books.

This book is a journey into a very under researched and under appreciated era of United States history. A must read for any lover of exploration as well.

4.5/5