



Wild Sea: A History of the Southern Ocean

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BOOK REVIEW

Wild Sea: A History of the Southern Ocean, by Joy McCann, Sydney, NSW, NewSouth Books, 2018, 256pp., AUD\$32.99, (paperback), ISBN 9781742235738

The international community of humanities researchers and artistic practitioners considering the changing marine environment as central to their collective concerns has been rapidly growing in recent years: *Wild Sea: A History of the Southern Ocean* by social and environmental historian Joy McCann joins recent publications in the field including *Vast Expanses: A History of the Oceans* by Helen Rozwadowski and *Oceanic Histories*, edited by David Armitage, Alison Bashford and Sujit Sivasundaram. In a point of difference from such other publications, McCann presents her engaging and thoughtful first-hand experiences of the Southern Ocean throughout the book, recounting memories ranging from a childhood playing by the seaside to field notes from voyages across the deep sea and to Antarctica. *Wild Sea* traces a history of the Southern Ocean over deep time. ‘Ultimately,’ McCann explains, ‘this book seeks to create a broader awareness and appreciation of the history and environment of the little-known circumpolar ocean of the Southern Hemisphere, and of its emerging importance as a barometer of planetary climate change’ (p. xiv).

McCann’s scholarly interest in Australian history has long focussed on landscapes and environment of the country, but it was the discovery of the history of contentious boundaries of the Southern Ocean that prompted her own journey into its history. Through thoughtfully crafted prose and a multitude of first-hand accounts, McCann provides a dynamic consideration of the constantly shifting political, scientific and cultural relationships between the ocean and humankind as she works to portray the Southern Ocean as a complex site containing deep and non-hierarchical connections between peoples, animals, plants, land and water.

Wild Sea is divided into seven chapters, each of which describes an element of the Southern Ocean: ‘Ocean,’ ‘Wind,’ ‘Coast,’ ‘Ice,’ ‘Deep,’ ‘Current’ and ‘Convergence.’ Within each chapter, McCann draws on her own experiences travelling in the Southern Ocean and Antarctica, telling a range of stories with direct or tangential relevance to the chapter’s theme, before using a wide range of historical, scientific and literary sources as subject matter. For example, in ‘Ocean,’ which serves as an introduction and background for the book, McCann surveys the geological foundations of the ocean and effectively sets up a background for the enduring myths of the deep south by presenting accounts from early voyages of discovery as explorers sought to encounter the ‘Great Southern Land.’ ‘Ice’ focuses on the hostility and perils that ice posed to explorers, as well as its importance in their voyages, including first-hand descriptions from McCann, early Polynesian explorer Ui-Te-Rangiora and particularly dynamic accounts from Robert Falcon Scott’s *Discovery* voyage in 1901. The following chapter, ‘Deep,’ explores how scientific and technological advances of the twentieth century such as continuous echo sounding and the growth of popular writers such as Jacques-Yves Cousteau and Rachel Carson brought considerations of the deep sea to the wider public.

In the final two chapters, ‘Current’ and ‘Convergence,’ McCann hones in on her stated aim of offering another (non-human) way of seeing the Southern Ocean. In ‘Current,’ she emphasises the connections between the diversity and proliferation of marine life in the Southern Ocean, noting the importance of natural phenomena such as the Antarctic Convergence and upwelling. McCann briefly outlines both historical and contemporary understandings of currents and ocean floor, before detailing the sea creatures that navigate

the circumpolar currents such as whales and microplankton. McCann uses the final chapter, 'Convergence,' as a plea to scholars, researchers and creatives, to join her in finding a way to emphasise the human and non-human life connections of the Southern Ocean, and thus considering its importance in the global web of life. Although classic nineteenth century sea stories such as *Moby Dick* and *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* were written in the context of long-distance ocean voyaging and territorial conquest, McCann questions, 'where are the ocean stories for the twenty-first century? More particularly, where are the Southern Ocean stories?' (p. 199). McCann convincingly suggests that rather than literature, modern natural history films may now be the medium by which a popular imagination of the world's ocean is fostered.

Although McCann aims to cover a wide range of human and non-human stories in the scope of the book, the sheer volume of stories from the Ages of Exploration and Scientific Discovery results in a markedly colonised perspective, with most human stories focussed on white explorers and settlers. The book would have been strengthened with more First Nations and Natural History stories. As it is, such accounts are all too few and when included, are brief and lacking context afforded to the more detailed accounts of sealers and explorers. McCann's heavy reliance on European encounters with the Southern Ocean limits her ability to give adequate attention to the type of multispecies thinking that informs the stated aims of the book: to consider the Southern Ocean as a nexus of connection between water, time, humans and non-humans. Another shortcoming is McCann's prioritisation of ocularcentric stories over other sensorial or bodily experiences, thus excluding a phenomenology of sensory experiences that may have augmented her stated aim (and concluding call to others) to provide a new way of seeing the Southern Ocean in the Anthropocene for the public.

Overall, *Wild Sea* is an accessible read for researchers and public enthusiasts alike and will be an excellent introduction to the often-overlooked Southern Ocean, particularly those interested in the early European exploration of the area. The prose throughout is clear and well crafted, and McCann uses literary, historical and scientific stories accessible to readers with no specialist or prior knowledge of the far south. The book draws attention to the Southern Ocean as a body of water in its own right, treating it as far more than a perilous barrier between continents. Assertions are well supported by extensive endnotes and a comprehensive bibliography, which will be helpful to any reader seeking specialist resources for further study. The major strength of the book is in its well-crafted prose as McCann gently turns the reader's attention towards the interweaving stories of life connections within the ocean.

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