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The Oceanic Frontier: *A Review of Imagining Sea Power in 19th-Century America: James Fenimore Cooper's Sea Writing*

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For anyone familiar with the frontier thesis proposed by Frederick Turner in 1893, the sea writing and oceanic imagination of James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851) will be an interesting topic to pursue and investigate. While the narration of the nation had gone rampant with the dominant discourse of westward expansion that had swept the United States in the nineteenth century—from the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 to the Last Indian War at Wounded Knee in 1890—the literary representations of the oceanic expansion of the republic received scant attention. Little is known of the fact or little is recognized that Cooper devoted 10 of his 32 novels to the theme of oceanic adventures in both the colonial and post-revolutionary periods of United States history. Paralleling the territorial expansion of the nation from the Lewis and Clark Expedition to the Oregon Trail, the oceanic expenditures of the United States Navy and the maritime trade in both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans certainly deserve our critical attention. And that is exactly the contribution of Duan Po's monograph, *Imagining Sea Power in 19th-Century America: James (Fenimore) Cooper's Sea Writing*, which was published in 2019 by Science Publishing Company in Beijing, China.

Divided into six chapters, this single-authored volume provides an in-depth and richly contextualized close reading of the corpus of Cooper's sea writings. Placing Cooper in the context of the nineteenth-century formation of nationalism of the United States, Duan analyzes Cooper's sea writings in relation to topics such as national consciousness, national identity, maritime imagination, imperial expansionism, aesthetic effect, and reception histories. In other words, this book provides us with a much needed examination of Cooper's works in the context of nineteenth-century nationalism in the United States. In the introductory chapter, Duan gives a general overview of the motif of the ocean in American literature. He highlights the voyages across the Atlantic as the founding journeys of the United States, underlining that the careers of Christopher Columbus, William Bradford, John Winthrop, and so forth, were inseparable from their adventures on the sea. In addition to the Puritan tradition of maritime narratives such as "A Model of Christian Charity," it is important to consider, as Duan points out, the oral traditions of Indigenous Native American people and their whaling and fishing experiences on the perilous seas (3). Mapping the location of the nation, which is "geographically bordered with the Arctic in the north, the Pacific in the west, the Atlantic in the east, and the Caribbean in the south," Duan observes that the United States is "bound to have a formative relationship with the seas" (1).

The merits of the book are fourfold. First, Duan places Cooper's sea novels in the context of nineteenth-century American nationalism. He divides Cooper's sea fiction into three periods—the early and middle novels focusing on the Atlantic and the late ones turning to the Pacific (33). The change from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, according to Duan, follows the course of westward expansion (34). With a clear plot summary of each novel, he argues that the sea novels illustrate Cooper's major concern with the "maritime nationalism" of the United States (57). He gives detailed and convincing textual readings in particular of the three novels in the early period—*The Pilot* (1824,) *The Red Rover* (1827,) and W*ater Witch* (1834.)

Second, Duan is able to make avail of Cooper's non-fiction writings, which supplemented Cooper's investment in imaginative sea literature. Duan provides a historical genealogy of the nationalist mentality based on Cooper's essays published in *The Literary and Scientific Repository* and *Critical Review* in the 1820s. Most importantly, he points out that Cooper's *The History of the Navy of the United States of America* (1839) is the first important work on United States maritime treatises and appeared forty years before Alfred T. Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783* (1890). Duan argues for Cooper's influence well before Mahan: If Mahan investigates the sea power and the

formation of the maritime empire of the United States, Cooper is truly the pioneer who realizes the significance of the sea in the formation of the United States' maritime empire.

Third, Cooper gives an in-depth and cogent reading of Cooper's most important Pacific fiction, *The Crater* (1847). Published at the same time as Melville's *Typee: A Peep at the Polynesian Life* (1846) and *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas* (1847), *The Crater* has not received its due attention. Duan points out that it should be placed along with both *Typee* and *Omoo* as a representative sea fiction of the maritime frontier (154). Advancing into the oceanic "wilderness" in the Pacific, *The Crater* is noteworthy due to its similarity to *Robinson Crusoe* (155). Duan argues that the protagonist in *The Crater* "colonizes" the island as Crusoe does (155). He notes how Cooper compares himself to Don Columbus or James Cook, which evidences Cooper's vision of the United States' maritime empire. Moreover, Duan contends that *The Crater* is related to the United States' annexation of the Hawaii islands, which makes the novel an important text in United States sea fiction, South Seas narratives, and fictions of the maritime frontier (162).

Finally, Duan points out Cooper's influence on both Herman Melville and Joseph Conrad. Citing original sources from these two authors, Duan is able to show that both Melville and Conrad not only benefited from Cooper, but also acknowledged the artistic achievements of Cooper's sea fiction. Melville writes that "Cooper's works were my earliest memories of literature. They were conducive to a living and awakening power in my childhood" (qtd. in Duan 184). Likewise, Conrad notes that "Cooper creates sea fiction out of his genuine instinct in arts" (qtd. in Duan 185). Rather than following the tradition of social realism represented by Mark Twain, Conrad's writing was shaped by the power and sensation of Cooper's sea fiction (186.)

To sum up, the importance of Duan's book is three-fold. First, it highlights the expansion of the frontier thesis to include the ocean. In addition to the territorial frontier, the oceanic frontier "gave the US the access to the Pacific" (Duan 169), thus paving the way for the imperial expansion of the United States toward the end of the nineteenth century. Second, Duan's book underscores Cooper's sea fiction as the foundation of the sea power. As previously mentioned, Duan points out the close relation between Cooper's sea fiction and Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783*. Third, Duan's study explains the relationships in the literary genealogy of Cooper, Melville, and Conrad. Despite some dependence on the work of Thomas Philbrick and some repetition of major points, Duan's book will prove to be helpful to readers and scholars of nineteenth-century American sea literature.