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### An Introduction to Marjorie Nicolson's Memoir, "Phattie Morris"

There is no treatment of the impact of the seas on the literary imagination to match Marjorie Nicolson's *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory*.<sup>1</sup> a study of how and why Western man turned his gaze towards mountains and from them, towards infinity. Marjorie Nicolson had intended to write about attitudes towards the sea, but in the Preface to her book on mountains, she explained why she abandoned that project. She wrote, "I found. . . that there is comparatively little 'ocean literature' in comparison with 'mountain literature', for reasons that are obvious enough." This explanation has always puzzled me, not only because the obvious reasons are, logically enough, not stated, but also because the two statements following this explanation appear to contradict it: first, the English "never seem to feel the same distaste for the sea as for the 'hook-shouldered hills' ", and second, during "the eighteenth century oceans came to share with mountains the 'sublime' ".<sup>2</sup> On both counts, therefore, one could expect to find poetry, essays and fiction inspired by views of and experiences upon oceans in numbers and quality approximately equal to if not surpassing items referring to mountains. Yet Marjorie Nicolson's observation that the range of maritime literature is far narrower than that of mountain literature is correct. So what are those "obvious reasons" which account for this phenomenon?

I wrote to Marjorie Nicolson in 1975 to ask her about this, and her answer came in the form of an unpublished memoir about her mother, Phattie Morris Nicolson. Marjorie Nicolson had written most of it shortly before her mother died (in the early 1950s), and she had promised her mother that it would be published. Now the author herself is aged and ill, and has asked me to help her keep that promise. Phattie Morris grew up in Nova Scotia, the daughter of a sailing ship captain on whose vessel she often travelled, and told stories of nineteenth-century Atlantic life to her children. Marjorie Nicolson knows, but does not explicitly say, that this oral tradition partly explains why literate seafaring peoples have but the barest written record of their collective experiences:

she might have cited Homer's epics *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeniad* to demonstrate that the amount that is written about maritime affairs is not proportional to the benefits a civilization derives from seafaring.<sup>3</sup> This introduction deals more directly than Marjorie Nicolson did with the response of writers to a past maritime age; it is not so much about the memoir which follows as it is an explanation of what Marjorie Nicolson's experiences as Phattie Morris' daughter may have contributed to her insights into "ocean literature". "Phattie Morris" should be read on its own terms, for it transcends the different special interests its readers can bring to it.

In the early modern era a typology of the sea associated seafaring with terror. This fear of the sea had a theological foundation which has since been largely lost: to early modern Western Christian man, the sea was a part of the original matter of the world, and its storms could still be the judging work of God just as in the days of Jonah. This fear of the sea was physical and spiritual and was very real; most sailors, even those engaged in long-distance traffic, stayed close to the shoreline whenever possible. The theological, aesthetic and philosophical meanings which the Christian man of the sixteenth century derived from the sea have not yet been explicated in the way Marjorie Nicolson has treated the meanings of mountains. Nevertheless it is possible to identify an important shift in the attitudes of the English (and the French, the Dutch and the Scandinavians as well) at the start of the seventeenth century.<sup>4</sup> The Spanish-Dutch Wars, which had culminated in the sailing of the Armada (1588), made Northern Europeans understand that greater reliance upon and control over sea power might become critical to their commercial, political and cultural development. The establishment of stock companies, trading companies and exchange banks in the early seventeenth century were signs that for the first time they intended to build up and sustain permanent commercial and military fleets, but there is very little known about how views about the sea, seafaring and seafarers began to change, because writers and poets began to reevaluate the place of the sea in literature only at least a century after adventurers and merchants had undertaken a more permanent and systematic approach to maritime affairs.

Those who wrote about the sea either did not know how or did not care to express the challenge, risk, ambition and pleasure of making seafaring profitable and a sign of mastery.<sup>5</sup> Hakluyt's works, which first appeared in the 1580s and followed quickly upon early Italian examples, showed that seafaring could be an important and exciting subject, but a

century later their example had not yet been widely imitated.<sup>6</sup> In 1724 Defoe could still complain that discovery voyages, commercial, trade and naval encounters were visible in books only “superficially and by halves; (that) the storms and difficulties at sea or on shore have nowhere a full relation; and (that nautical accounts) are generally filled up with directions for sailors coming that way. . . .”<sup>7</sup> Tedious logs make dull books, but they are precious evidence of what distinguished the seventeenth century from previous periods of English maritime growth. Like markings on a trail, they indicated that the path of a few pioneers would be repeated routinely, but that was not what men of literary imagination wanted to find in the new nautical age. Sailors and sea captains were by and large a literate group, but very little of what was important to them needed to be written down or transmitted through a text. The routine and excitement of being at sea mattered little to writers, who wanted to bind the sea into an established framework of religious and philosophical ideas that had marginal relevance to the changing realities of seafaring. Perhaps one reason why the natural landscape of seventeenth and eighteenth century literature was largely terrestrial, composed of gardens, grand vistas and precipices, was because the sea as a workspace competed with the sea as a dreamspace: poets and writers had full claim to the mountains, but only partial claim to the sea. How could writers without an intimate knowledge of seafaring make a portrait of the sea interesting and plausible? To what ends could a more realistic perception of the sea be directed? Would such a perception help a man better understand himself and his world?

Two who tried a more documentary approach to the sea were William Falconer and Tobias Smollett. Both conveyed an appreciation for the seaman’s professionalism, Falconer in his long poem “The Shipwreck” (1762) and Smollett in his mid-century novels of life in the Royal Navy, but neither could indicate what stake the land-based reader had in what took place at sea. The science of oceanography was as yet unborn—and that at a time when thinking persons were busy organizing, classifying and conceptualizing the manifold aspects of nature. Newtonian science and eighteenth-century geology had made possible an understanding of mountains, and an appreciation of their beauty. But so long as the sea did not reveal the secrets of currents and tides, it could not be included in a concept of nature that made nature rational and open to knowledge through experience. Perhaps because the undeveloped scientific study of the sea made it appear unapproachable and alien, even writers such as Smollett and Falconer could not yet dissolve the established literary formulae regarding seafaring.

Writers handled sea materials with greater ease and ambitions at the end of the eighteenth and during the first half of the nineteenth century. At that time an intensified search for the relevance of seafaring to man was channelled into a renewed literary convention based on past formulae, and into new approaches independent of the past. Poets (Byron in "Childe Harold", Coleridge in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner") explored the freedom and solitude of those on the sea as good things of themselves.<sup>8</sup> In contrast to a trivial life on shore, time spent at sea could bring on an awareness of eternity, of the unknown, and of one's own destiny. The qualities of being at sea which had encouraged earlier writers only to refer to the sea as a place for the fear of God instead encouraged these poets to use the sea as a setting for the most profound and revealing experiences of life, but this was still the literary use of the sea for its philosophical values. Novelists, especially in America (Cooper, and later Melville) who had an intimate knowledge of seafaring and had a vision of its role in civilization, also used the sea as a place where man fights for self-realization, and often for life itself. Such literary uses of the sea could still reinforce the impression that life at sea was fundamentally divorced from society, which was a wholly terrestrial enterprise—perhaps why eighteenth-century writers may have stepped back from the shoreline, while romantic authors went on board ship. There was a contrary tendency among some writers (including Dana, and sometimes Cooper) to demonstrate that the effect of sailing on the sailor was like that of farming and hunting on those who worked the land and walked the forests, and that seafaring was interesting precisely as the lives of sailors revealed parallels to the lives of all men.<sup>9</sup> To be sure, many early nineteenth-century American writers saw the sea as their country's true frontier, and celebrated America's independence through a fascination with it. Whatever the reason, these American writers informed their readers about the maritime world in such a way that for the first time, the land seemed to support the sea, instead of the other way around.

Then, for reasons that have not been explained, the great literary interest in the sea did not survive the Crimean and Civil Wars—even though those wars demonstrated the importance of sea power as much as had engagements of the Napoleonic Era. Writing of the sea since the mid-nineteenth century calls to mind the novels of Conrad and Verne, and poems by Arnold, Mallarmé and Valéry, but interest in these writers does not indicate a parallel interest in the sea. In the last century the theme of the sea as central to an understanding of individual and society has attracted neither critics nor audience: Melville has become

popular only since the 1920s and Lewis Mumford's biography, and Cooper's sea novels were neglected altogether until Philbrick's study appeared in 1961.<sup>10</sup>

In terms which Marjorie Nicolson might have applied, we approach the sea unconsciously anticipating experiences and feelings which have already been given form in the consciousness of writers, and accept the same limitations on the aesthetic uses of seafaring which they have. Thus to turn to an oral tradition is to recover information about and attitudes towards what man encounters when he sails which the literary community has neglected. It is significant that when Conrad expressed himself on seafaring as he had known it (in his essay, *Mirror of the Sea*<sup>11</sup>), he assumed that the image which his reader had acquired of seafaring from novels needed correcting. Conrad went to sea during the last great age of sailing ships. Phattie Morris and her father were at sea then, too: even the 1880s still saw large numbers of tall-masted vessels carrying bulk cargoes on the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Oceans. At that time, Conrad revealed, the role of speech for the sailor was still tremendous, on board ship or on land. The complexities of sailing granted speech a natural and functional superiority over the written word. An oral tradition gave a sailor what he needed to understand his work and his experiences, and gave him a way to add what he could to it; reliance upon it enabled generations of men to cope with life upon "Dread Neptune's wild unsocial sea." The motor ship, however, was such a different sort of machine, so much more regular in its movements and operations, that the written word could easily supplant speech as the essential way to communicate orders and information. And as the motor ship took less notice of winds, storms and tides, sailors also had fewer adventures to tell from having been at sea. Horace Beck, in *Folklore and the Sea*<sup>12</sup>, has traced the survival of the oral tradition where it survives in the mid-twentieth century, especially in the Caribbean, and explains its survival in the practical, utilitarian terms which Captains Morris and Conrad would have accepted.

There were reasons, more obvious to Marjorie Nicolson than to most of us, why writers in search of new material have not done much with the sea or with seafaring. With rare exceptions, writers have not been able to get as close to or as familiar with the oceans as with other parts of nature, for either they must remain on shore and focus on the horizon, or they must entrust themselves to the skills of the shipbuilder and the sailor. In either case they have not experienced sailing as sailors do, but only as men of the land who happened to find themselves at sea. In general, writers searched out the mountains; they endured a sea voyage.

Perhaps Marjorie Nicolson did not explain herself more fully in the Preface to *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory* because she did not know how to explain what she had intuitively grasped. But she could explain herself by writing about Phattie Morris. Phattie Morris Nicolson had told stories to entertain her children, but both she and they knew that those stories more than amused. After all, Marjorie Nicolson's father also entertained the children, but he read aloud to them from books after dinner, and Marjorie Nicolson cannot recall what they were like. Her mother told stories before dinner while she cooked, the children attentively near the stove. As Marjorie Nicolson knows, those tales of her grandfather and mother at sea represented life in a way which made inadequate all the fictional stories based on the mere substitution of imagination for reality: when she listened to her mother, she was partaking of an experience which she shared with all those who had sailed to the places she dreamed of seeing.

## NOTES

1. Marjorie Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1959).
2. *Ibid.*, p. xii.
3. Momigliano, "Sea-Power in Greek Thought", reprinted from *The Classical Review*, 58, in *Secondo Contributo*, 1960.
4. John Nef dealt at length with the linkages between "What happened in the temporal world of positive experience" and "organized violence" at the end of the 16th century in reference to the writings of Grotius, and Cruce. See *War and Human Progress* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), pp. 140-144.
5. Harold F. Watson, *The Sailor in English Fiction and Drama 1550-1880* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931); Anne Turner, *The Sea in English Literature from Beowulf to Donne* (Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press, 1926). R.R. Cawley presents a strong case for writers making "full use of the material which the sea afforded" in *Unpathed Waters: Studies in the Influence of the Voyagers on Elizabethan Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940). But he overstated his case. The first part of the book is about the myths, allegories and taste for the picturesque which characterized map illustrations and literature during the sixteenth century. To be sure, a change took place under Elizabeth when writers (really only a few) began to refer to and discuss the voyages of discovery of that age. But stereotype and exaggeration suppressed the observable maritime world as writers created images of splendor and terror, using the sea and seafaring for their own ends.
6. John Parker, *Books to Build an Empire* (Amsterdam: N. Israel, 1965). John Smith, in *A Sea Grammar* (1627) wrote that he had "seen many bookes of the Art of Warre by Land and never any for the Sea." (Quoted by Beck, n. 12 below, p. 316).
7. Daniel Defoe, *A New Voyage Round the World by a Course Never Sailed*, p. 2. (New York: Crowell, 1903-04).
8. W. H. Auden, *The Enchafed Flood* (New York: Vintage, 1967), p. 15 ff.
9. Thomas Philbrick, *James Fenimore Cooper and the Development of American Sea Fiction*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961). See additional background on American attitudes and writings by Roger Stein: "Pulled Out of the Bay: American Fiction in the Eigh-

teenth Century". *Studies in American Fiction*, 2 (1974), pp. 13-36, and "Seascape and the American Imagination: The Puritan Seventeenth Century", *Early American Literature*, 7 (1972), pp. 17-37.

10. Philbrick, *Ibid.*, and Lewis Mumford, *Herman Melville* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929).
11. Joseph Conrad, *Mirror of the Sea*. (London: Methuen, 1906).
12. Horace Beck, *Folklore and the Sea*. (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1973).