Alison Brown and Jonathan Harlow, eds. *Atlantic Venture Accounts of Eighteenth-Century Bristol* (Bristol Record Society, vol. 74: Bath, 2021). 311 pp., 2 maps. Paperback, £15.00. [ISBN 978-0-901538-43-7 and 978-0-901538-44-4].

At first sight the latest volume of the Bristol Record Society appears a formidable set of documents: detailed accounts of the outlay and return on shipping ventures; captain’s and surgeon’s journals, one by the well-known maritime artist Nicholas Pocock, leavened by sketches from one of his own voyages. Fans of Patrick O’Brian will relish these impromptu drawings, which are reproduced here in a separate sub-volume, on high-quality paper.

Divided into nine sections involving 18 round-trip voyages between 1743 and 1798, the volume deals principally with the financial intricacies and environmental hazards of sea ventures: ventures being deployed in two senses; as commercial ventures, the shipments of goods in the open market, and as adventures at sea. The division of labour between the two editors is not altogether clear, but one may hazard from their expertise that Alison Brown, the former archivist at Bristol, wrestled with the palaeographical problems while Jonathan Harlow made sense of the financial record. Dr. Dilys Harlow contributed to the understanding of the surgeon’s notes on the Dreadnought privateer, a difficult undertaking in that the medicines were written in Latin, and she offers an illuminating glossary of what was dispensed. Her translations also disclose the extent to which humoral theory (emphasising the four “temperaments” supposed by the ancients to comprise the human body) still dominated eighteenth-century medicine. Seamen with fevers were bled and given purgatives, to dubious benefit.

As volumes in this series go, this was a tough assignment. Unravelling shipping accounts is never easy, and the editors are to be congratulated in making them accessible to readers, gently guiding them through the different sections and offering a *vade mecum* of eighteenth-century accounting and navigation.

In historiographical terms, the introduction is light. The background of overseas trade is touched upon, with very brief references to Kenneth Morgan’s book on Atlantic trade and Nuala Zahedeah’s essay on the Atlantic economy. But it would have been helpful if readers were given a more detailed commentary on the pattern of trade over the course of the eighteenth century and the relative weight of different sectors, so that these very specific accounts, many of which deal with Bristol’s shuttle trade to the Caribbean, could be situated within them. This would not have been difficult, since Morgan offers good and relatively accessible tables on the subject. A summary of Bristol’s privateering would also have assisted, since Bristol was the leading outport in these ventures, and for much of the period under discussion (27 of 56 years), Britain was at war, and thus subject to attack by enemy vessels. Private warfare, licensed by the state, supplemented naval warfare until the mid-nineteenth century and heightened the risk of overseas ventures and their cost. In the section on the *Fanny* and the *Triton* we are offered a glimpse of how different owners handled the predicament of war, with the owners of the *Triton* opting to take out a commission to maraud enemy shipping to reduce the costs of insurance, even though the skipper was given strict instructions not to chase down enemy vessels. This activity, by a commercial vessel with a letter of marque, was very different from that of the Dreadnought privateer in section 2. The Dreadnought was a private man of war with a crew of 140 men, all paid on commission, according to the prizes they captured. Unlike the *Triton*’s*,* the crew was not paid monthly. These distinctions might have been clarified rather than taken for granted. From the classic account of Bristol privateering by John Damer Powell, and the new work by David J. Starkey, it is possible to calculate the proportion of privateering cruisers to commercial letters of marque in any war, and in the case of the latter, their disposition to chase prizes.

That said, the documentation offers some illuminating insights into Bristol’s overseas trade in the eighteenth century. We are constantly reminded that we are in the age of wind and sail, in which squalls, storms, and doldrums could affect the length of voyages, the quality of perishable items, and even the fate of vessels themselves. Eighteenth-century ships were often works in progress, constantly subject to repair and refitting, and until the introduction of copper sheathing, potentially riddled with teredo worm in tropical waters. In an appendix to section 2, the crew of the *Bellona* formally refused to sail the vessel until she was refitted in port because she did not scud well and had forced them to heave lumber and guns overboard to keep her afloat. In the final section, Captain Alleyn of the *Levant* is plagued with a ship that is coming apart at the seams, a predicament that obliges him to offer very generous wages to seamen on the homeward run, who demand as much as thirty guineas to literally pump the *Levant* back to Bristol.

Several of the accounts deal with slave voyages and it is interesting to note that, contrary to popular lore, they did not always make a profit. Sluggish and lengthy trading in Africa, the risks of disease and war, and unexpected import policies by colonial authorities could all mean losses. What the slave and shuttle voyages to the Caribbean also disclose are the complexity of the service industries required to refit and launch voyages, and the range of manufacturing and provisioning trades that did transatlantic business. They add important detail to the proposition by David Richardson that at least 40% of Bristol businesses were engaged in and dependent upon the plantation economy of the Americas.

There is a lot that can be excavated from this volume and there is not space to mention it all. In two respects I felt that editors could have done more cross-referencing. There are some illuminating glimpses of labour relations on board ship, particularly with respect to the rash of desertions on the *Ruby.* More insight into some of these episodes might have been achieved by using the muster rolls rather than the portledge bills (lists of crews), because they detail who ran, who were discharged or impressed, and when. I also felt the biographical details of some of the owners or investors might have been advantageously fleshed out, particularly those linked to the Merchant Venturers and Common Council. Some of the key players in Bristol politics and society are in this volume and a sense of the centrality of this elite to Bristol’s commercial endeavour might have been foregrounded more effectively.

All in all, this is an important endeavour that offers critical leads into the financing and logistics of Bristol’s transatlantic trade.

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