

Worthington, David (Hrsg.): *The New Coastal History. Cultural and Environmental Perspectives from Scotland and Beyond*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2017. ISBN: 978-3-319-64089-1; XXV, 307 S.

Rezensiert von: Hannes Ziegler, German Historical Institute, London

Usually, when historians call a certain type of history *new* they refer to an established form of historical writing that ought to be done – according to them – in a new way, as is the case with the New British, the New Diplomatic or the New Imperial History. The situation of the New Coastal History is different. Although the first call for such a history dates back to 2007¹, this volume edited by David Worthington – Reader in History at the University of Highlands and Islands, UK – is one of the first collections of essays to address this theme explicitly and it is based on the „first ever international coastal history gathering“ (p. xvii). In other words: There is no *Old Coastal History*. This does not mean, however, that this new enterprise is not designed, either directly or indirectly, in opposition to other forms of historical writing. After all, it seems hardly possible that the coast as a place of human activity should arrive in history as late as the twenty-first century and maritime historians (among others) would certainly beg to differ. At the same time, it is true that there is a new quality and determination in addressing the coast historically in recent years as a number of monographs from the past decade show.² So what is this New Coastal History about?

As the subtitle indicates, the bulk of the contributions in this volume address Scotland with chapters ranging from the Middle Ages to the twenty-first century. This is complemented with only a few chapters on English, American and European history. Anyone not interested in Scotland need not be deterred by that. When exercising a new agenda, one must of course start somewhere and Scotland with its long and craggy coastline is certainly an apt place to do so. What is more, the conceptual agenda of the volume as laid out in its first three chapters reaches – at least in principle – far beyond Scotland. Worthing-

ton's introduction starts from an assumption that has become central to most scholars engaging in coastal history, namely that communities at the water's edge („coastal communities“, in his words; „littoral society“ in those of Michael Pearson³; „edge species“ in the words of John Gillis⁴) are different both from inland societies and from more properly maritime communities. The main assumption, therefore, is one about social conditions. Yet when identifying the subject as such, Worthington mainly – and perhaps not altogether surprisingly – refers to geography: From channels and sounds and straits to gulfs and firths and estuaries, there are many different meetings of land and water and all of them, so the contention, create special and to date understudied habitats that warrant further attention.

In terms of studying these, there are several features Worthington highlights as being instrumental, not least among which is the need for a cross-disciplinary approach combining expertise from port, rural, urban, naval and maritime historians, among others. In terms of scale, Worthington favours a micro-historical approach that is also advocated by Isaac Land and subsequently demonstrated in the rest of the contributions to the volume. Perhaps most importantly, however, Worthington suggests a combination of cultural and environmental approaches to the coast and these are more elaborately spelled out in the two subsequent chapters by Isaac Land and T. C. Smout. Land, in an explicit move against the wide scopes of oceanic history, suggests a micro-historical focus on „the local, the adjacent, and the domestic“ (p. 32), particularly in relation to urban history. This „watery-but-not-maritime“ (p. 44) approach

¹ Isaac Land, Tidal Waves. The New Coastal History, in: Journal of Social History 40 (2007), 731–743.

² John Gillis, The Human Shore. Seacoasts in History, Chicago 2012; Christopher L. Pastore, Between Land and Sea. The Atlantic Coast and the Transformation of New England, Cambridge, MA 2014; Andrew Lipman, The Saltwater Frontier. Indians and the Contest for the American Coast, New Haven 2015; Graeme Milne, People, Place, and Power on the Nineteenth-Century Waterfront, Basingstoke 2016.

³ Michael N. Pearson, Littoral Society. The Concept and the Problems, in: Journal of World History 17 (2006), 353–373.

⁴ Gillis, Human Shore, *passim*.

should focus, according to him, on social and cultural manifestations of the coast, including themes like the water-front as a social and economic space, the sailortown, the beach or off-shore quarantine zones. Smout, on the other hand, sketches the way that environmental history can provide an inroads into coastal studies and highlights both the ways that the economic history of humanity has impacted on the natural conditions of coastal life and how cultural factors can drive positive change in this regard.

All of this is intriguing, yet the specifics of what exactly coastal history is about beyond geographic localisation remain somewhat elusive up to this point. This is mirrored in the case-studies following the introductory chapters. Many provide fascinating examples of either cultural or environmental perspectives on coastal themes. Jonathan Thayer presents an innovative account of sailortowns in nineteenth and twentieth century New York and recognises these as a „historical microcosm“ through which to study the commercial and cultural exchange among the members of „a uniquely transient class of maritime labourers“ (p. 72). Domnhall Uilleam Stiubhart relates the genesis of the geographical name of „the Minch“ – the previously unnamed stretch of water between the Scottish Highlands and the Inner Hebrides – to economic and political developments in eighteenth-century Europe and the growth of state power. Cathryn Pearce provides insights into the social and economic world of Scottish fishing communities in the nineteenth century, suggesting that it was the very nature of littoral habitation that was at the roots of the national success of maritime charity networks.

In many ways, the chapters to the volume complement each other very neatly, as Peter Jones for example gives a more properly environmental outlook on Scottish fisheries during roughly the same period. Moreover, Smout's introductory chapter on the Firth of Forth ties in very well with Edward J. Cohen's chapter on the Solway Firth in an enlightening juxtaposition of environmental and cultural history. Yet there is still a sense that much of what is being classified as coastal history in some of the contributions could be and

certainly has been done under different headings such as maritime history in the past. In how far the coastal focus gives a new edge to existing research is, therefore, not always altogether clear throughout the volume.

Yet there are exceptions. Lizanne Henderson's explorations of coastal witch belief is certainly very instructive, as she argues that witch belief gives „important insights into inherent social values, mindsets and cultural attitudes“ (p. 234) and one can easily imagine that such an approach – once it is carried beyond first explorations – can cut to the core of what characterises or distinguishes coastal communities. The same is true for David Worthington's idea of focusing on coastal communications such as Highland ferries or Carl Griffin's and Ian Robertson's study of the „moral ecologies“ of fishing in the Severn during the nineteenth century. And perhaps the most inclusive account of coastal life in economic, social, political and environmental terms is contributed by Outi Korhonen in a fascinating study of post-glacial rebound in a small Baltic island community, because it shows how the problem of the coast heavily impacted not only on questions of fishing and navigation, but also on the realm of social structures, administration and taxation.

Nonetheless, it is a little odd to suggest, as this volume does (Worthington, p. 5), that coastal history is currently being done by many without them actually realising they do so. If coastal history is to become a „subfield“ or „academic brand“ (Land, p. 44), more is needed perhaps than the suggestion that anything that happened on the coast amounts to coastal history. A more specific set of questions, a coherent understanding of what it is that makes coastal communities different and what this amounts to in terms of broader consequences and perhaps a clearer and more explicit dissociation from traditional fields such as maritime history would certainly enhance the chances of coastal history gaining the status of a field of its own and attracting scholars to its banner. After all, for opening ways into a new field, it is helpful to elaborate on where and how it departs from older ones. While more could have been done on the latter point, this volume does a wonderful job regarding the former, providing a fascinating

conceptual and thematic stimulus for coastal research far beyond Scottish history. In times when coasts are being both endangered in environmental terms and transformed in cultural terms, a realisation of how fundamentally human attitudes towards the coast have changed over the past centuries along with a deeper scrutiny of how coastal life figures in the history of past societies, empires and nations is certainly called for and commendably advanced by this volume.

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