

Lifeboat

By John R. Stilgoe. Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2003; xi +325 pp., photographs, illustrations; cloth \$29.95.

The introduction to John R. Stilgoe's *Lifeboat* describes a classic winter northeast gale along the Massachusetts coast, with the author himself crouched low in the belly of a lifeboat, struggling to make needed repairs as his body chills and his fingers grow numb. One can sense Stilgoe's connection with the vessel and with the storm that he and his Yankee verbalize as a "noth'easter." One soon learns that Stilgoe and his ancient craft are in his barn on the New England coast, not on the open sea. Shortly, the reader finds the author in his kitchen, warming his hands around a cup of tea as he ponders his fascination with the venerable lifeboat built "so long ago." And well might he put his agile mind to such a question. Stilgoe, son of a commercial boat builder and son of the Massachusetts Bay, knows boats and their characteristics intimately. He has grown up with and in them. Thus, early in this intriguing work he establishes his personal link and authority which strongly influence his lengthy and broad research.

Why his intrigue? Why did this professor of landscape history at Harvard University write a volume on an arcane piece of waterborne material culture? Stilgoe is author of several classics in urban and suburban history, including *Common Landscape of America, 1580 to 1845* and *Borderland: Origins of the American Suburb, 1820-1939*.¹ His books also include *Alongshore* and *Outside Lies Magic: Regaining History and Awareness in Everyday Places*, which provide a more tangible connection to *Lifeboat*.² The trigger for his study, Stilgoe tells us, was something about the physical character of this artifact of a past era.

Lifeboats, for Stilgoe, are objects that can speak to us. Ours, he explains, is an age when war against an

unsuspecting civilian population might plunge a society into unthinkable chaos, when the conventions of that society and the protection of familiar technologies might fail. Such developments, the reader is told, parallel the disasters that befall unsuspecting passengers aboard doomed ships at sea. And to what did these passengers and their crews turn for deliverance? The lifeboat.

Lifeboats, Stilgoe explains, are remnants of the past. Those confronted by disaster at sea today radio the U.S. Coast Guard, check their Global Positioning System devices, launch self-inflating rafts, trigger Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacons, and await rescue. If rescue is slow in coming, they simply drift and continue to wait. Those who abandon ship into a lifeboat, like the thousands who have done so in years past, find themselves in a craft that may be allowed to drift aimlessly, but is in fact designed for ocean passage, to travel under the power of oars, sail, or both. Whether one drifts aimlessly, fails in an attempted passage to safety, or in fact succeeds in reaching safety, is, says Stilgoe, dependent largely on one's skill, knowledge, and ability to withstand the rigors of an unexpected disaster.

Stilgoe makes clear the lessons to be found in numerous emergencies that relied on the small craft for salvation. He examines a number of open boat passages of historical note. These include Captain William Bligh's incredible 3,600-mile passage when abandoned in the *Bounty's* launch, and the 4,300-mile, 43-day passage of the longboat of the doomed Yankee clipper ship, *Hornet*. Numerous other open boat feats of survival are investigated as Stilgoe taps personal accounts of survivors of harrowing experiences, many of which occurred during the great wars of the last century. He also draws upon a variety of books written explicitly to inform mariners about lifeboats, and their characteristics and use. His discussion of these life-and-death matters, unfortunately, did not draw on *In the Heart of the Sea*, the subtle work of Nathaniel Philbrick that so success-

fully explored the internal struggle of those imperiled on the sea.³

Stilgoe has little sympathy for blithe and ignorant passengers who, like those on airplanes, never take even the simplest and most important step toward self-preservation—a glance to notice the nearest exit. Such people are for Stilgoe, nascent victims awaiting slaughter. Perhaps even less sympathy is shown for members of the black gang—coal heavers, stokers, and trimmers who though making their life on the sea, were never of the sea. Stilgoe refers to the sinking of steamers like *Lusitania* to exemplify how laborers pushed women and children aside in the scramble to survive.

Joseph Conrad might nod approvingly at Stilgoe's view that technology has separated seafarers from their natural element and eroded their "fellowship of the craft." Stilgoe cites observers like Robert Bennett Forbes and George Templeton Strong who, like Conrad, mourned the loss of the traditional knowledge and skills that were part and parcel of seafaring under sail. The separation, says Stilgoe, was evident in the three stages of a survivable disaster at sea: launching the boats, the "waterborne moment" (the time between entering the boats and the departure from the site of the sinking), and the open-ocean passage. He looks closely at the three stages. His message is that those who had knowledge, understanding, skills, and equipment to meet these challenges could succeed. Those who did not often would fail.

Lifeboat is a well-crafted paean to a misunderstood and largely invisible piece of the seafaring environment. The book's readers will be awakened to both the intricacies of the object's design, appurtenances, and operation, as well as to the lessons learned by and the guidance available to mariners. The depth and breadth of Stilgoe's research are impressive, and his style is engaging. *Lifeboat* is a fine example of the value of close analysis of a remnant of a culture fast slipping away.

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1. John R. Stilgoe, *Common Landscape of America, 1580 to 1845* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982) and *Borderland: Origins of the American Suburb, 1820-1939* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988).

2. John R. Stilgoe, *Alongshore* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994) and *Outside Lies Magic: Regaining History and Awareness in Everyday Places* (New York: Walker and Co., 1998).

3. Nathaniel Philbrick, *In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex* (New York: Viking, 2000).

Seaport: New York's Vanished Waterfront

Photographs from the Edwin Levick Collection;
Text by Philip Lopate. Washington, DC:
Smithsonian Books in association with the
Mariners' Museum, 2004; x + 182 pp., photographs;
cloth \$34.95.

When Edwin Levick and his colleagues were photographing the New York waterfront in the early decades of the 20th century, merchants and workers in the city's commercial core were supplied through nearby docks, and in turn sold, packed, and shipped locally produced and transported goods, profiting from the value added by their labor and brokeraging. Teaming mobs of longshoremen and sailors moved goods on and off all manner of watercraft, from barges floating down the Erie Canal and Hudson River to large steamships destined for Europe, South America, and Asia.

Beverly McMillan, this volume's developer and editor, deserves praise for serving these slices of early to mid-1900s New York to a wider audience, and steering the themes towards both elite and populist activities simultaneously. *Seaport* is divided into three parts, an introductory essay by Phillip Lopate that contextualizes the photographs, anno-

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