

# John Szarkowski and Richard Benson, *A Maritime Album: 100 Photographs and Their Stories*

N. LYLES FORBES

Szarkowski, John and Richard Benson. *A Maritime Album: 100 Photographs and Their Stories*. Newport News: The Mariners' Museum and Yale University Press, 1997. 245 pp., including supplemental checklist. Cloth US\$39.95, ISBN 0-300-07342-9; paper US\$24.95, ISBN 0-300-07399-2.

Selecting one hundred photographs to represent a collection of over six hundred thousand is an enormously difficult feat. The images compiled and presented here by John Szarkowski are superb, reflecting the breadth and diversity of the archives at the Mariners' Museum. The images are randomly arranged making this book highly enjoyable either to browse or explore in depth. Each photograph was chosen because of what it reveals about the relationship between humanity and the sea, and because of its visual appeal (p. 14). The images range in time from the last quarter of the nineteenth century to the mid-1950s, reflecting major shifts in technology, industries that have been surpassed by new methods and materials, and the explosion of leisure activity upon the water. And while readers should not expect to come away with a comprehensive understanding of America's maritime heritage, their perspective will certainly be enriched.

The authors who collaborate on this album are both influential in the field of photography. John Szarkowski is the noted author of at least two important works on photography, and Richard Benson created a new standard, both technically and artistically, of photomechanical and photoelectronic print reproduction. Purchasers of this album should also note that Szarkowski is not only a historian and photographer, but the retired Director of the Department of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Likewise, Richard Benson is the Dean of the School of Art at Yale University.

As the book's subtitle indicates, this is an album of both photographs *and* stories; the latter having been penned for the viewer by Richard Benson. The images are of course mute, and cannot speak for themselves. They require interpretation, the quality of which ultimately distinguishes any topical collection of images or artifacts.

*Photographs make no effort to create sense out of a scene, as painting traditionally did, but only lay out the jumble of facts. Occasionally a viewer comes along who cannot tolerate this indefiniteness and so declares the subject with some notation or enlightening caption. Often this description bears little relation to the scene that generated the picture, but a written declaration convinces us with authority based on centuries of literacy in our society. (p. 112)*

The above extract from Benson's story accompanying an exquisite photograph entitled "Horse-Drawn Lifeboat" underscores the major failing of this work. Richard Benson was presented with one hundred images to interpret. Unfortunately for the viewer, few of his descriptions bear any direct relevance to the scene that generated the picture. But because he has put words alongside an image we are encouraged to accept his authority. Apart from the poor quality of many of the descriptions, there is the lack of primacy given to the photographs. Even the elegant presentation of the images is not enough to command the viewer's complete attention; for often the photographs must compete with the stories, when more concise and understated interpretations are warranted. For example, one of the most stunning photographs, both technically and artistically, is that of the "Bark *Garthsnaid*" (p. 115). The unknown photographer is precariously positioned in the leeward rigging as the heeling bark is pounded in heavy seas. Instead of allowing viewers to be awed by the scene before them, Benson cannot stop himself from describing the action as if the image did not exist. This particular photograph should simply have been allowed to stand with minimal interference.

On the other hand, he could hardly be more insightful than he is with the final photograph, "Deadrise Boat Under Construction" (p. 217). Here he writes: "Something even more ancient than boatbuilding is going on here, however. This is the process of learning by doing, the handing down of craft and understanding from parent to child." Benson goes on to lament the shift away from this process to one of learning from books and verbal lessons. This testimony combined with a stunning photograph only emphasizes what this entire album might have achieved.

Unwilling to let brevity stand in the way of a story, occasionally Benson simply gets it wrong. He asserts in the Levick photograph "*Shamrock and Resolute*" (p. 165) that one can see the effects of hogging on *Shamrock* by comparing her lines to that of *Resolute*. He might have a point if *Resolute* was not between the viewer and *Shamrock*, heeled over in a light breeze and sailing slightly away from the viewer. Never mind that both yachts were a good distance from Levick when he took the shot. When on occasion the story does happen to be brief, as it is with the "Sound Muffling Trunk" (p. 142), the viewer is left with insignificant conjecture about an image that would have benefited greatly from more research. Then, in "Letters Salvaged from the *Empress of Ireland*" (p. 116), Benson spends an inordinate amount of space expressing his amazement at how the mail system functions, when a more important question might have been why the

photographer felt that the letters were important enough to record in the first place.

Overall there are too few instances where the viewer is enlightened with any substantial interpretation. As "photography once more rolls out its own seductive version of the truth" (p. 164), so, it seems, does Richard Benson. Greater editorial control would have remedied Benson's case of logorrhea, and placed the stories in a more supportive role to the photographs which are the original reason for the album. Benson asks us in the story of "Raising the *Lord Dufferin*" (p. 134) "to suspend our analytical eye and enjoy a photograph for what it is" only to continue his own analysis for another entire paragraph. The publication would have fared better had he taken his own advice more often. One must then ask whether Szarkowski, whose background as an author, and Benson, who has set a new standard of photographic reproduction, should not have switched roles in this publication.

## Robin Fisher and Hugh Johnston, *From Maps to Metaphors: The Pacific World of George Vancouver*

ANNE GODLEWSKA

Fisher, Robin and Hugh Johnston. *From Maps to Metaphors: The Pacific World of George Vancouver*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 1993. 365 pp., 18 illus., 7 maps. Cloth \$39.95, ISBN 0-7748-0470-X

*Maps and Metaphors: The Pacific World of George Vancouver* is the treasure box that its title promises: full of interesting things, some old and some valuable. Books about exploration and discovery certainly have changed in the last couple of decades.<sup>1</sup> This book reflects how happy that change is. From a story told by one man about the heroism of the explorers, the wonder of their scientific instruments and calculations, the geopolitics guiding their steps,<sup>2</sup> these books have evolved into tales told from multiple points of view. This work, focused on George Vancouver's appearance in the Pacific, is multi-authored, multi-disciplinary and suggestive of how rich history can be when written critically.

In the first chapter Ben Finney describes the surprise and fascination with which Vancouver's predecessor, Cook, and his crew discovered the extent and consistency of a Polynesian culture spread over 3000 kilometres between

Tahiti and New Zealand. Finney describes the unprecedented European curiosity that embraced the native peoples' language and culture but also focused on their shipping and navigational skills and the way these were adapted to the peculiar climatic conditions of the South Pacific. These observations brought Cook and his associates to very early and remarkably sound hypotheses about the origins and migrations of the Polynesians.

The next five chapters by Glyndwr Williams, Andrew David, Alun Davies, James Gibson and Alan Frost are amongst the most traditional in the book. They focus on the mapping effected during Vancouver's voyage, the clock technology revolutionizing oceanic travel at the time and the geopolitics of exploration. It is because Vancouver does not himself describe his mapping operations, that Andrew David must reconstruct them from several sources. He uses Vancouver's descriptions of his map making operations in other regions of the world and his charts of the Pacific coast. David also essays the instructions sent by Major James Rennell, surveying and astronomical manuals and instruments known to have been on board and accounts of Cook's voyages and mapping