



Sea of Glory: America's Voyage of Discovery, The U.S. Exploring Expedition, 1838-1842

By Nathaniel Philbrick

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"A treasure of a book."—David McCullough

A *New York Times* Notable Book

America's first frontier was not the West; it was the sea, and no one writes more eloquently about that watery wilderness than Nathaniel Philbrick. In his bestselling *In the Heart of the Sea* Philbrick probed the nightmarish dangers of the vast Pacific. Now, in an epic sea adventure, he writes about one of the most ambitious voyages of discovery the Western world has ever seen—the U.S. Exploring Expedition of 1838–1842. On a scale that dwarfed the journey of Lewis and Clark, six magnificent sailing vessels and a crew of hundreds set out to map the entire Pacific Ocean and ended up naming the newly discovered continent of Antarctica, collecting what would become the basis of the Smithsonian Institution. Combining spellbinding human drama and meticulous research, Philbrick reconstructs the dark saga of the voyage to show why, instead of being celebrated and revered as that of Lewis and Clark, it has—until now—been relegated to a footnote in the national memory.

Winner of the Theodore and Franklin D. Roosevelt Naval History Prize

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

The expeditions of Magellan, Columbus, and Lewis and Clark have been well documented and are instantly familiar to anyone with even a passing interest in world history. But the average person is likely unaware of the U.S. Exploring Expedition or its mercurial leader, Charles Wilkes. This despite the numerous accomplishments and lasting legacy of the massive four-year project that involved six ships and hundreds of men. The "Ex. Ex.," as it came to be known, is credited with the discovery of Antarctica, the first accurate charting of what is now Oregon and Washington, the retrieval of thousands of new species of life, and the foundation of the Smithsonian Institution. Yet when Wilkes returned, instead of being hailed as a great man of science or a national hero, he was shunned by the President, ignored by the press, and was the subject of so much ill will on the part of his men that he was ultimately put on trial for a variety of offenses. In the portrayal presented in Nathaniel Philbrick's *Sea of Glory*, Wilkes is a passionate man, brash and enthusiastic, driven by seemingly impossible goals, many of which he actually accomplished. But he's also a petty, mean-spirited loner, egotistical enough to unilaterally give himself a promotion in the middle of the expedition. Without Wilkes' singularity of purpose, it's hard to imagine the mission being as successful as it was, but it's also hard to conceive a personality more poorly suited to leadership than the near-universally-despised Wilkes. Philbrick also skillfully reveals the insecurity behind the tyranny in excerpts from letters to Wilkes' wife, Jane. The accounts of the expedition's adventures are at various times exhilarating and tragic as the crew scales the volcanoes of Hawaii, becomes involved in a bloody war with Fijian natives, and struggles merely to stay alive while at the same time not killing Wilkes. Philbrick's compelling narrative and meticulous research provide a vivid picture of the triumphs and hardships of the exploration age. --*John Moe*

From Publishers Weekly

After chronicling the sinking of the whaleship *Essex* in *In the Heart of the Sea*, Philbrick attempts to rescue from obscurity the U.S. Exploring Expedition's 1838-1842 circumnavigation of the world and its cartographic and scientific accomplishments. With a strong narrative pull but an anticlimactic story arc, he chronicles the six-vessel squadron's Pacific escapades. Instead of a grisly page-turner, however, Philbrick follows his bestselling tragedy with a drawn-out success story. More than a tale of the Ex. Ex.'s journey, the book also profiles the expedition's egomaniacal commander, Lt. Charles Wilkes; the psychological warfare he waged against his officers; and the near-miraculous survival of the squadron despite Wilkes's perverse leadership and lack of nautical experience. Wilkes was, however, an accomplished surveyor, and the Ex. Ex. mapped hundreds of Pacific islands, 800 miles of the Oregon coast, 100 miles of the Columbia River and 1,500 miles of Antarctic coast. The expedition's scientists made groundbreaking contributions in ethnography, biology and geology (their collections formed the basis of the Smithsonian Institution). Particularly noteworthy among Philbrick's gripping passages are his descriptions of brash navigation in the Antarctic-but too much of the book bogs down in Wilkes's petty politicking, as he degraded talented men and promoted incompetent ones so as not to be outshone. After four years at sea, he had alienated nearly every officer and returned home to a court-martial. "Instead of a thrilling tale of discovery and incredible achievement, [America] heard more about the flawed personality of the Expedition's commander than anyone wanted to know," Philbrick writes of Wilkes's 1842 trial, in which he was acquitted. Unfortunately, this spoils the retelling, too. Maps not seen by PW.

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From School Library Journal

Adult/High School-The author of *In the Heart of the Sea: Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex* (Viking, 2000)

returns with another high-seas adventure: the U.S. Exploring Expedition of 1838-'42 (the Ex-Ex). This "voyage of discovery" was as ambitious, dangerous, and full of promise as the Lewis and Clark Expedition. But while Lewis and Clark have become icons, the name of the Ex-Ex leader, Charles Wilkes, is all but lost from our national consciousness. How this came to be is one central theme. The other is the extensive scientific, political, and nautical legacy of the Ex-Ex. Its lengthy list of accomplishments includes confirmation of a "new continent" (Antarctica); hundreds of new species of plants and animals identified and cataloged; dozens of Pacific islands charted for the first time; and a valid U.S. claim to the Columbia River and Puget Sound region. To garner these triumphs, the officers and crew overcame enormous obstacles, including icebergs, cannibals, and dwindling provisions. This expedition had it all-and one thing more: a commander unable to master his demons. Because of complex circumstances, Wilkes was handed a task beyond his abilities, and he was not given the authority and rank to do it, so he tried to lead by intimidation. Countless things went wrong. It's a miracle most made it back alive, and a greater miracle that they accomplished so much. A riveting read.

Robert Saunderson, Berkeley Public Library, CA

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