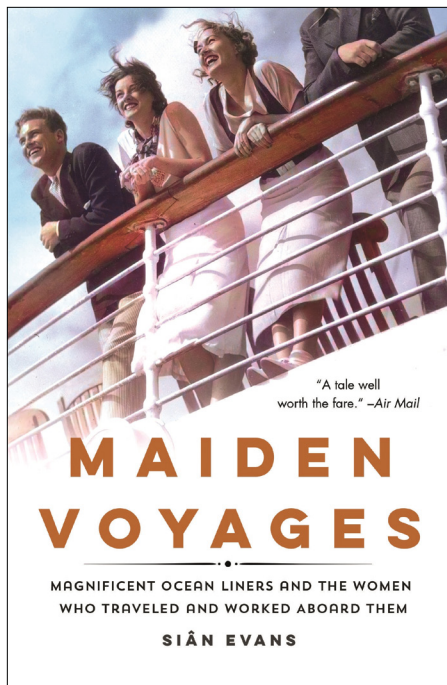




MAIDEN VOYAGES: MAGNIFICENT OCEAN LINERS AND THE WOMEN WHO TRAVELED AND WORKED ABOARD THEM

By Siân Evans, St. Martin's Press, 2021

Reviewed by Julia C. Stryker, Ewart A. Pratt Postdoctoral Fellow, Memorial University

Thanks to the strenuous and persistent efforts of scholars and activists, women's stories now have a place in the perennially fashionable pop-culture seafaring yarn. This popularity, however, as often complicates as promotes stories of women's lives at sea, a paradoxically under-studied and overexposed subject still shadowy with assumption, exceptionality, and pat generalization. Because these stories are both exoticized within and segregated from understandings of seafaring or maritime life, *Maiden Voyages* is an important introductory text describing women's work and travel at sea on luxury liners in the first half of the twentieth century. Histories of the development of ships, ship design, and passenger travel are paired with stories of women travelers, demonstrating connections between women's increasing participation in passenger travel and how ocean liners developed. An engaging read in the old style of maritime books written by thorough enthusiasts, excellent in its individual detail and marshaling of amusing anecdotes, and well constructed around the themes promised in the subtitle, *Maiden Voyages* attends to often elided matters of class, labor, and migration. Scholars will find that some faults can be blamed on the book's format as a popular history, but some faults lie with the text alone. Nonetheless, the book highlights promising subjects in need of more thorough investigation, and can therefore be recommended to scholars in search of an introduction to the subject.

Maiden Voyages proceeds in roughly chronological order, planting its garden of details and anecdotes in three memoirs by women (the lesser-known Maida Nixson and Edith Sowerbutts, and the increasingly popular account of *Titanic* and *Britannic* survivor, Violet Jessop) who worked aboard ocean liners from, roughly, the 1910s to the 1950s. Grounding itself in the experiences of working women provides some check to the accounts of the more lavish lives of other women travelers moving through the narrative,

such as Nancy Astor, Tallulah Bankhead, and Josephine Baker. Detailed stories of individual experiences garnished with paragraphs or pages about ship specifications, emigration schemes, or what luggage was like before rolling bags, produce a well-balanced intermixture of contextual detail and vivid personal accounts. These accounts include tales of harrowing disaster, the struggles of economic migrants and refugees, and more lighthearted familiar tales of raconteurs, entertainers, card sharps, and politicians. The highly episodic narrative holds together through the broadly familiar strokes of (mostly, but not exclusively) Anglophone Atlantic early twentieth-century history: WWI, the interwar period and Great Depression, and WWII.

Most fittingly, *Maiden Voyages* is an easy read, episodic and entertaining, but with moments of emotional depth and interest brought by the new stories it highlights. As a popular history covering a great deal of ground through a relatively narrow lens, its treatment of context can be disappointing, but this will largely depend on the depth of interest the reader has in that particular historical moment or topic. Scholars familiar with the work of Jo Stanley, among the most public and prolific scholars of women at sea in this period and the only historian directly referenced in the text, will note that the text follows the lines of Stanley's scholarship closely. The book lacks some of the thoroughness and criticality of other popular histories of the subject of women at sea, such as those of Joan Druett, but does something new in the way that it links technology, mobility, and gender, and attends specifically to working women. Likewise, the photo pages are nicely done, but they contain mostly images from stock photo websites, though archives are thanked in the acknowledgments. The rights and publishing of images can be enormously complicated and expensive, as is debate over what role archival versus stock image sources should play in historical writing.

In particular, the book ties together how women's work aboard evolved and expanded alongside ship design and technology as women's mobility improved with gains in social and political rights. Harder to overlook is a glib approach that treats celebrities with breathless admiration while overlooking their darker histories; for example, the "great romance" of Wallis Simpson is inserted between stories of Jewish war refugees without addressing accusations of the Nazi sympathies of Wallis and the Duke of Windsor. An exhaustive wash of the lives of individuals mentioned in the text would be out of place, but the surface-level treatment or elision of some persons and subjects leaves an occasionally dangerous, uneven impression. Still, the book accurately and entertainingly demonstrates the emergence of a certain symbiosis between the luxurious vessels and their luxurious passengers, and the frequent attention to great ships and historical celebrity can buoy the lesser-known stories of emigrants, activists, and laborers to greater public awareness. The struggles of these classes of women, even as they actively take advantage of a (generally) improving lot in life, remain centered. This allows the book to make important interventions and critical new observations about underemphasized subjects like menstruation at sea (256), or that women would be signed on for professional skills such as nursing, and would often perform skilled labor at sea, but shipping companies "denied them 'nursing rank' to save money" or otherwise refused to recognize that labor (131).

Maiden Voyages offers an important contribution to popular histories of seafaring, a readable and enjoyable collection of stories, and a promising source for future scholarship. It pushes the public awareness of stories of women at sea forward to abut, if not meet, scholarship, and does so in an engaging way. Scholars and public historians should find this book a good prompt to reach for broader audiences, and a worthy text with which to converse. Hopefully, there will be more to come.