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The Journalist And the Sea

By Marc Levinson

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Ninety Percent of Everything

By Rose George

(Metropolitan, 287 pages, \$28)

In August 1834, having turned 19, Richard Henry Dana shipped out from Boston for California aboard the tiny brig Pilgrim. For Dana, a Harvard man from a prosperous New England family, the voyage was a coming of age, a chance to experience the workingman's life and see the world. "Two Years Before the Mast," his classic 1840 account of the adventure, is full of gripping moments, such as the author climbing icy rigging barehanded to furl sails frozen rigid in a Cape Horn storm. But for the most part, Dana found, being at sea meant boredom. As he explained, "It is the officers' duty to keep every one at work, even if there is nothing to be done but to scrape the rust from the chain cables."

Journalist Rose George follows in Dana's footsteps. In "Ninety Percent of Everything," she uses a voyage aboard the Maersk Line containership Kendal to frame an exploration of the modern maritime industry. And like Dana, she soon discovers that the merchant seaman's life is no action-packed adventure. "It is too hot to be on deck," she recounts at one point; "it is too dull on the bridge now that I've seen twelve hours of desert and canal and the rest of the miles look the same. There is nothing to do but wait."

In Dana's day, ships meandered on no particular schedule and often with no particular destination. Pilgrim sailed out of Boston packed full of shoes, wine and iron-rimmed wagon wheels, which the ship's clerk sold to customers who came aboard at various ports in Mexican California; once the hold was empty, the ship began buying up cattle hides. It remained on the California coast until it had a full load to take back to Boston, giving sailors such as Dana a chance to meet all manner of colorful locals.

Many merchant vessels traded that way into the 1960s, sailing hither and yon in search of cargo and spending days at the dock while crates and barrels were loaded off and on, leaving the crew ample time to enjoy exotic ports of call. Container shipping, which first came into international use in 1966, and the petroleum supertanker, which arrived around the same time, put an end to that casual way of doing business.

That transformation turned ocean shipping into an extremely capital-intensive industry, in which legions of corporate pencil-pushers keep close track of every dollar to make sure the mortgages get paid. For efficiency's sake, ports were moved from city centers to the edge of town, far from the bars and brothels. Shorter turnaround times did away with generous shore leave in romantic harbors. The rhythms of maritime life became much like those of an assembly line, save for the fact that once in a while the weather gets in the way.

Aside from the officers who steer the ships, workers are almost an afterthought. The crew of Kendal, the ship Ms. George travels with, has 21 members, most of them Filipinos employed not by Maersk but by temporary employment agencies. These men (and one woman) are neither exploited nor well rewarded; each earns at least the \$555-a-month minimum set by the International Labor Organization, plus the scant \$7 per person per day

budgeted for food. The officers, Europeans, earn much more, but maybe not for long: Maersk seems intent on replacing British, Ukrainian and Romanian officers with Filipinos and Chinese who earn much less, Ms. George says. Being away from home for months at a time, bereft of Internet access and hence unable to Skype with the wife and kids, is part of the package.

After describing shipboard life, Ms. George explores a variety of issues related to merchant shipping: containers lost overboard; whales injured by ships' propellers; stowaways; sewage disposal; abuse of the small number of female seafarers. Regarding the last, she points out that in the container age, as in Dana's, the captain is in total command of his ship and that those who disturb him -- by complaining of rape by an officer, for example -- do so at their peril. Her portrayals are balanced and in some cases vivid. But her method gets in the way, because many modern maritime problems aren't well illustrated by a containership run by a major operator.

Lonely as the crew members' lives may be, they are infinitely better aboard Kendal than aboard one of the thousands of floating rustbuckets on which workers are lucky to collect their wages and face a not insignificant risk of sinking. Similarly, Ms. George uses the tragic sinking of Danny F II -- an ancient Panamanian-flagged, apparently Egyptian-owned vessel carrying livestock from Uruguay to Lebanon when it went down in 2009 -- to expose the evils of hidden ownership and lax regulation. The story is nightmarish, but it isn't the story of the modern Danish-owned, British-flagged ship on which she is traveling.

Kendal's crew goes on alert as it moves from the Red Sea into the Gulf of Aden, providing an opening to talk about piracy. On this subject, the author has a passionate, well-reported chapter. She spends a week on a Portuguese navy frigate escorting a ship carrying food aid to Somalia, introduces us to a professional hostage negotiator back in London and acquaints us with an Indian seaman still terrified after seven months in pirate hands. Ms. George holds no truck with those who see pirates as Robin Hoods seeking to survive amid abject poverty. The pirates' victims, she points out, aren't shipowners continents away but shipboard workers of modest means, who end up trussed and deeply afraid, or worse, while men with guns negotiate their fates.

"Ninety Percent of Everything" offers some acute insights about ocean shipping. Several of the author's chapters could make colorful magazine articles. But neither Kendal nor any of the people we meet aboard it is interesting enough to carry a book. Amid his many days of boredom, Richard Henry Dana at least managed to have a few adventures. The seamen on modern containerships, who normally aren't meant to touch the thousands of 40-foot boxes aboard, can go years without having any.

Mr. Levinson's books include "The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger."

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