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A List of Books that I Did Not Read on the Voyage

Second mate James C. Osborn kept the logbook during the first voyage of the *Charles W. Morgan*, which began in 1841 and lasted four years. In addition to recording the usual weather reports, ship movements, and whale hunt updates, Osborn also maintained “A List of Books that I have read on the Voyage.” He read eighty-nine volumes during that first cruise, including novels (*Pamela*, *Humphrey Clinker*, multiple Marryat and Bulwer novels); travel narratives and histories; and etiquette and medical conduct manuals, at least one of which—the *Ladyes Medical Guide*—would have had more prurient than practical applications (Log 143, *The Charles W. Morgan: 1841-1845*, 184-85). When did Osborn find the time to read all these books? Where did he find the space? How did he share that time and space with his fellow crewmembers? These questions sparked my *Morgan* project and drive my research and teaching more broadly; I am interested in communities of knowledge and collectives of readers and have written about sailors’ participation in literary culture as producers and consumers of books. As a 38th Voyager, I sought to occupy—however fleetingly—the space of communal knowledge aboard ship.

Those of us who spend our professional lives in libraries and special collections, handling manuscripts, ephemera, and books that are out of general circulation, rarely, if ever, have the opportunity to inhabit an archival monument such as the *Charles W. Morgan*. What would it be like for me to read and write at sea? What kind of imaginative work would my fellow Voyagers do while we sailed? How would the crew pass their leisure hours? How would this lived experience enhance or alter my scholarly sense of nautical intellectual community? The *Charles W. Morgan* is no replica, and my aim in joining the 38th Voyage was to see if superseding the usual historical distance from the objects of my studies would bring into sharper relief the real conditions of sailors’ literary culture. The questions that structured my encounter with the whaleship, as it turned out, found unexpected answers: I neither read nor wrote a word while aboard. I felt keenly the absence of places on deck that were out of the way of the crew’s labor, to which my fellow Voyagers and I stood witness in its unceasing exertions. Rather than gathering examples of communal knowledge production, I was confronted with how difficult it would have been for sailors to carve out space and time for leisure and for imaginative and

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Desk in first mate's cabin aboard the *Charles W. Morgan*. Photo courtesy of Hester Blum.

intellectual work while at sea. And still they did. My brief cruise on the *Morgan* revealed the nimble inventiveness that nineteenth-century sailors necessarily brought to their social and intellectual lives as well as to their professional labor. The conjunction of their physical and imaginative work are newly present to me, as well as the eloquence of that labor itself.



Shipboard library aboard the *Charles W. Morgan*. Photo courtesy of Hester Blum.

Two features of the *Morgan*'s tween decks were targets of my interest: one was the standing writing desk located in the first mate's cabin, upon which various officers throughout the decades wrote up the log. Although James Osborn was a second mate, perhaps this desk was the one at which he stood—or maybe he had a stool—in recording the wind that day, or noting his completion of “Tracts on Disapation” [sic] or *Female Horse Thief*. The writing desk and adjoining shelf (a bookshelf?), illuminated by an oil lamp positioned over bunk and desk alike, present a scene of luxury compared to the narrow press of the forecastle berths, where we Voyagers tumbled into the common seamen's crowded sleeping quarters. And yet keeping the ship's logbook was a job, an essential one; the mate's writing desk was no indulgence or extravagance.

Just as James Osborn had access to scores of books on the first cruise, so too were the 38th Voyagers on the *Charles W. Morgan* provided with a shipboard library, and this was the object of my other interest tween decks. It was contained within a small wooden chest in the manner of many mid-nineteenth century charitable shipboard libraries, such as those provided by the American Seamen's Friend Society. This library held forty-six volumes, about half the number that Osborn alone read in the *Morgan*'s inaugural journey; these were divided into categories of history, reference works, and examples of books from



Drone above the *Charles W. Morgan*. Photo courtesy of Hester Blum.

the 1841 *Morgan* library. I expected to spend time working with this library, trying out literary labor rather than blubber. But during my leg of the voyage I was too captivated by the density and omnipresence of the lines on ship, the marlinspikes and rigging knives of the sailors, the press of canvas, and above all the crew's unremitting, vigorous, nimble work. Bearing witness to the crew's labors did more for my nautical knowledge than would four years with a carefully curated shipboard library (or four times that with a university library).

But the Voyagers and other passengers were not the only ones bearing witness. On the morning we sailed, an angry buzzing punctured the dawn stillness and disrupted our fantasies of historic transportation. Looking skyward to the masthead, we saw an ugly blinking bug of a machine moving through the sky just above the ship. It was a drone: an unmanned, aerial camera was recording the *Morgan* as she prepared to shove off from New Bedford, 173 years after she first launched from the port of her birth. The doubled remoteness of this drone from the ship and her laboring sailors in providing its bird's eye view was arresting: the narratives written of the 38th Voyage of the *Charles W. Morgan*, however mindful of both their C19 and C21 moments, must venture, as Ishmael writes in the first chapter of *Moby-Dick*, "right before the mast, plumb down into the forecastle, aloft there to the royal mast-head" (NN *Moby-Dick* 5-6).

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