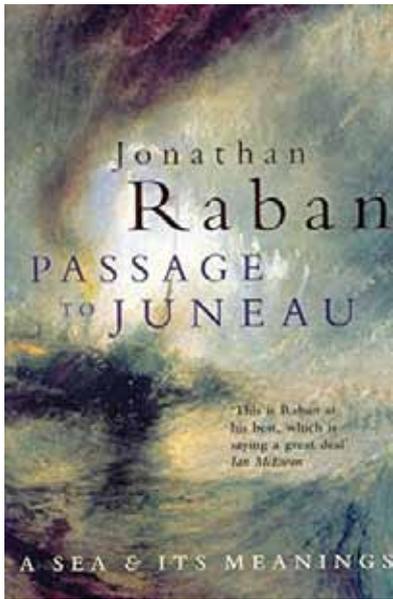


Book Reviews



A Passage To Juneau:

A Sea and Its Meaning

by Jonathan Raban

Picador, 435pp, £16.99, November 1999

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Reviewed by Len Wingfield

'I am not a travel writer. For me, "travel writer" means someone who samples other people's holidays – you talk about the food, the hotel, throw in a bit of local colour. If I thought that was the business I was in, I'd slit my throat.'
Jonathan Raban in interview, mid-1990s.



THIS IS AN ACCOUNT of a difficult and hazardous singlehanded voyage by a famous travel writer who took to sailing rather late in life. Raban's 1,000 mile Seattle to Juneau cruise partly followed the famous exploratory voyage of Captain Vancouver, and his account digresses into the history of that voyage and the life of the coastal Indians and many related environmental and political issues. It is also partly autobiographical..

Raban's boat was a fine seaworthy 35-foot wooden ketch which he had used as a floating cottage as well as a serious seagoing cruiser. It carried a massive library of sailing and general literature, but Raban says very little about the boat itself. It had an elderly radar set in

the saloon, but having to keep deck watch at all times for rocks or huge semi-submerged logs, he rarely had the chance to use it. He did eventually hit one huge log but fortunately his boat was strongly built and withstood the impact.

Captain Vancouver's orders were to check that no trans-American waterway existed, which involved exploring every one of the west coast fjords and estuaries and charting the waters. With tidal currents running up to 15 knots, whirlpools said to be capable of pulling tugs under, and depths close inshore beyond sounding, it was a formidable task.

Even with the large naval crew it could take four hours to raise anchor, and one of the passes could only be attempted within the five minutes of slack water. The ship hit a reef and nearly foundered, but was saved with great difficulty. Although he was carrying Harrison chronometers he could not depend on them, and huge errors had accumulated during his journey across the Pacific. Fortunately a time arose when sun and moon were in sight together and it became possible to check their longitude by the lunar distance method, an incredibly difficult and complex task, but an area in which Vancouver excelled. He found that the chronometers were over 45 minutes out!

The history of the American West Coast is one of exploitation; first for furs, particularly of the sea otter which soon became virtually extinct, then it was for gold, until that ran out, then logging, leaving vast areas stripped of trees, then over-fishing until the fish were gone. From time to time Raban came across the remains of canneries and logging camps abandoned and fast rotting away in the wet climate.

Many settlements now survive on tourist income. The Amerindians when contacted by Vancouver's expedition were a boat people, reluctant to travel inland, still in the stone age but keen to obtain metals from venturesome traders, with whom they traded furs. They suffered greatly from western contact, three-quarters died from smallpox, some say deliberately introduced, but although much of the original Amerindian culture has been lost under missionary interference, they have adapted to western ways without losing their identity.

However some believe that their huge totem poles could not have been carved without steel chisels, and date only from after Vancouver's voyage. They may have even have been inspired by Vancouver's ship's carved and painted figureheads which the Amerindians greatly admired!

Raban's book ends sadly. Missing his little daughter Julia greatly, he had been hoping that they would be re-united at Juneau, and had many delights planned for her. However soon after her arrival at Juneau his wife told him that their marriage was over, and departed taking Julia with her, leaving him to sail back home devastated.

I rate this book as one of the greatest travel stories. My only complaint is that too few of the place names in the account appear on the two maps provided. [LW](#)