

Penny McCall Howard

Environment, labour and capitalism at sea. Working the ground in Scotland

In this evocative book, Howard offers a detailed insight into selected aspects of prawn (creel boat and trawler) fishing practices. Using her own sailing boat as a base from which to live and work, her ethnographic account is largely based upon her experiences working as relief navigator/crew on trawlers and to a lesser extent excursions with creel boat prawn fishers engaged in setting and retrieving their traps. In considering these activities, she reflects on the ways in which meanings are developed and associated with practices such as: naming, developing and working fishing grounds; the skills and technologies that underpin effective fishing strategies; and finally a consideration of the ways in which profits and 'wages' are distributed in the context of competitive markets which act to drive down returns on fish catches.

As a qualified seafarer (navigating officer) it is unsurprising to find that in developing her account Howard was particularly drawn to the skills required to successfully trawl or 'feel' the sea floor. Her chapter devoted to a consideration of the 'extension of the whole body's perception into the sea' leaves a considerable impression of the skills, knowledge, character and techniques required by trawler skippers to maximise catches, develop new grounds, and resolve sudden problems associated with twisted or snagged gear. She offers a similarly insightful account of navigation techniques. Here she describes how fishers frequently rely on local knowledge of geographic landmarks and waterways to locate themselves, and plan their routes, whilst relying on expensive technology (GPS chartplotters) to maximise what are termed 'affordances' (essentially yields from particular grounds).

In its final sections the book attempts a more macro analysis of profit sharing and distribution alongside a consideration of the brutality of the market pressures associated with both local and international competition. Here there is a consideration of some of the ways in which commercial

pressures can be translated into poor maintenance, and safety, and a brief exposition of some of the tensions which characterise the relationships between skippers and their crews.

However, in spite of its many strengths, the book is frustrating in relation to a number of 'holes' in the 'fabric' of the account. Some of these are a result of the limitations of the associated fieldwork which omitted detailed interaction with crew members and with fishermen's families. As a result, when the broader commercial context of fishing is discussed our understanding of the associated financial pressures on skippers is constrained by the lack of detail provided about their ways of life. This is less the case in relation to crew who are described as working in highly precarious roles, with unpredictable hours, schedules and incomes. However, more generally, the information on crew is extremely sketchy and they feature very little in relation to the earlier sections of the book. Thus we learn little about the substance of crew-skipper relationships and/or crew tasks and duties on board. One brief account is offered of sorting, and gruesomely 'tailing', live prawns but this is based on Howard's own experience and although we learn that crew members regard many of their vessels as 'shit buckets' and resent the investments made by owners in expensive technology, whilst failing to provide basic toilet facilities on board, these insights are all too fleeting. Overall the 'voices' of crew are overshadowed by the overwhelming emphasis on the accounts given by skippers - an emphasis which also appears to smother engagement with environmental issues and debates.

Alongside such narrative gaps, the book is characterised by unresolved contradictions in its final chapters. Here we are offered a description of the ways in which owners and owner-skippers have increased their share of the value of catches at the expense of crew members - who are left with meagre pickings once the costs of trips are deducted from the distributed 'profits'. This account is convincingly backed up with data but it is difficult to reconcile with the narrative presented in the book's penultimate chapter which more sympathetically focuses on the commercial pressures which are faced by owners and how these result in a lack of attention to human safety and loss of both vessels and life.

Notwithstanding these limitations this well-written and memorable account provides thought-provoking reading on an industry that is poorly understood. As such it will merit a space on the shelves of those who are interested in fishing, in ethnography, and in the human costs of capitalism.

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