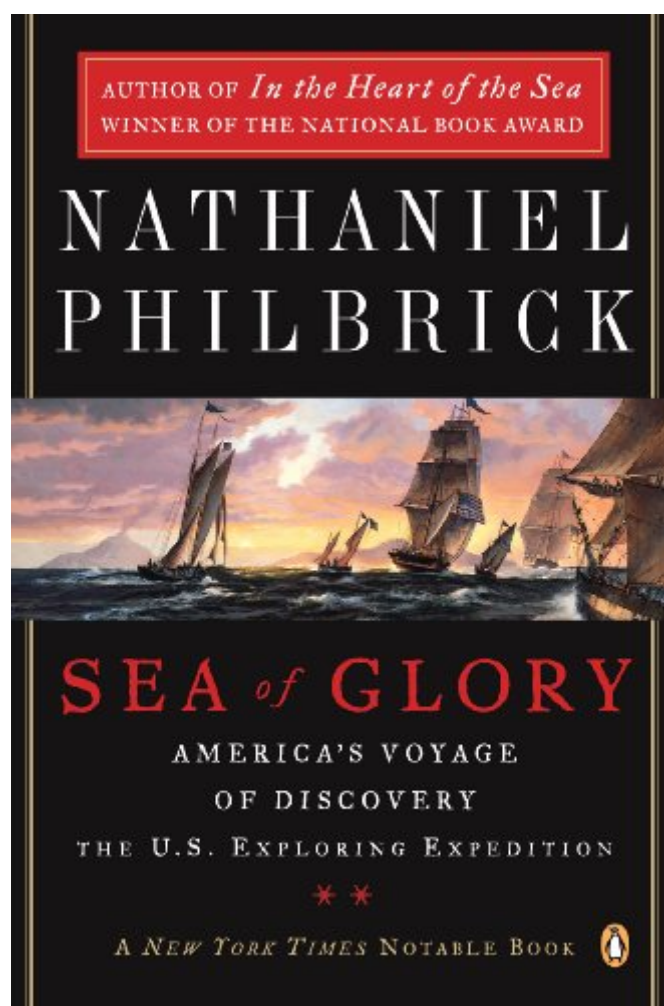


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Sea Of Glory: America's Voyage Of Discovery, The U.S. Exploring Expedition, 1838-1842



Synopsis

"A treasure of a book." -- David McCullough
A New York Times Notable Book
America's first frontier was not the West; it was the sea, and no one writes more eloquently about that watery wilderness than Nathaniel Philbrick. In his bestselling *In the Heart of the Sea* Philbrick probed the nightmarish dangers of the vast Pacific. Now, in an epic sea adventure, he writes about one of the most ambitious voyages of discovery the Western world has ever seen--the U.S. Exploring Expedition of 1838-1842. On a scale that dwarfed the journey of Lewis and Clark, six magnificent sailing vessels and a crew of hundreds set out to map the entire Pacific Ocean and ended up naming the newly discovered continent of Antarctica, collecting what would become the basis of the Smithsonian Institution. Combining spellbinding human drama and meticulous research, Philbrick reconstructs the dark saga of the voyage to show why, instead of being celebrated and revered as that of Lewis and Clark, it has--until now--been relegated to a footnote in the national memory. Winner of the Theodore and Franklin D. Roosevelt Naval History Prize
From the Trade Paperback edition.

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Customer Reviews

You have heard of Lewis and Clark, but you probably never heard of the US South Seas Exploring Expedition of 1838. If its leader, US Navy Lieutenant Charles Wilkes, had had his way, the Ex. Ex.,

as it was known, would still have been sung internationally for the inarguably tremendous contributions it made to geography, biology, and simple adventure. In addition, it started the still-lasting partnership between the US government and the sciences that, say, does the exploring upon Mars. Wilkes, to a large extent, made the expedition successful, and also defeated himself by preventing it from being universally celebrated. *Sea of Glory: America's Voyage of Discovery, The U. S. Exploring Expedition 1838 - 1842* (Viking) by Nathaniel Philbrick tells an amazing adventure yarn of real explorers, and real human flaws that by turns endangered and enabled the exploration efforts. There were unprecedented logistical tasks in assembling the expedition, which at its start consisted of six ships and 346 men (including nine scientists). Senior officers had trouble putting the expedition together, and the Navy gave the task to the forty-year-old Lieutenant Wilkes. Philbrick writes, "Wilkes was a great man. But he was also vain, impulsive, and often cruel." He took offense easily, and would not be placated by offenders. He remained aloof from his officers. When things went wrong, he was quick to assume that his men had been incompetent or malevolent. Philbrick concludes that a more self-confident and capable leader probably would not have brought the expedition greater success, although it could have brought greater on-board contentment and post-expedition fame.

This book was a very enjoyable read to me, and would likely be so for anyone interested in the age of exploration, nautical adventure, or travels to exotic lands. It tells the complete story of a four year long expedition launched by the U.S. Navy to basically complete the map of the Pacific, primarily told from the point of view of the young officers, most experiencing their first major responsibility and command. The book is comprehensive and chronological, starting with the initial concepts of the exploratory expedition which were cooked up by some very whacky people, including one who thought that at the south pole there would be a giant cave entrance to the middle of the earth! The tale then progresses in a manner that mirrors the nation's rise in scientific, technological, and military prowess. The exploratory expedition was itself intended to announce to the world that the U.S. could master the domain of the European powers of the day, specifically the naval power, expansionism, and spirit of discovery enshrined in the voyages of exploration to the last ends of the Earth. The voyage itself spurred the nation to develop the scientific and naval capabilities that helped to solidify the national character. The voyage was headed by a strong willed, intelligent, but ultimately paranoid and cruel martinet. The contrast between his fortitude to keep the expedition moving forward and his capricious capacity for punishment, as told by the junior officers who had to walk the line between following orders and preventing desertion and mutiny among the ranks, was

very interesting and well expressed by the author. This was the backdrop for a years long voyage that was at times both gruelling and exhilarating.

It was a review of this book in the National Geographic Adventure magazine which first caught my eye, and prompted me to purchase Philbrick's excellent narrative of the US Exploring Expedition. The Expedition sailed from Norfolk, USA, carrying the scientific and exploratory hopes of the United States on a trip to South America, Antarctica, Australia, New Zealand, the Pacific Islands and Asia that encompasses nearly 5 years. Over 500 men, in 6 ships left in 1838, to return in 1842, much reduced in number, but with enough scientific specimens (over 4000) to form a large portion of the Smithsonian collection. Commanded by Lieutenant Wilkes, the story of the US Ex. Ex has largely been forgotten, but Philbrick has produced a book which hopefully will bring to the forefront the achievements of the US Ex. Ex and its' men. "Sea of Glory" is truly a spectacular rendition of events, as Philbrick portrays the deterioration of the relationship between Commander and his men, while journeying through some of most inhospitable seas in the world. Wilkes comes across as a near megalomaniac and odious character (almost immediately after beginning the expedition, he promoted himself Captain!), belittling the achievements of his underlings and inflating his own. It is a miracle that he was succeeded in bringing the expedition home largely unscathed. Nor does the story end there. The final chapters reveal the trials and tribulations of Wilkes (and other members of the expedition) as he realizes that he may be held accountable for his actions. Upon return of the expedition, there were no fewer than 5 court martials involving Wilkes and officers of the vessels comprising the expedition, largely petty incidents raised by Wilkes as revenge for perceived slights by the officers.

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