

Book Review

By Steven Schwinghamer

Mike Parker, *Running the Gauntlet: An Oral History of Canadian Merchant Seamen in World War II*, 3rd ed., (Halifax, NS, Canada: Nimbus Publishing, 2003, 327 p.)

There has been a spate of recent scholarship on the history of the Battle of the Atlantic, dating from just before Mike Parker's *Running the Gauntlet* through to recent official publications. Among these works, *Running the Gauntlet* has been in print for more than a decade now, and has been released in a third edition. Why, then, should the work be reviewed now?

Running the Gauntlet is a valuable historical resource with strengths that have become more apparent since first publication, particularly in the context of other recent scholarly and popular works on Canada's naval commitments during the Second World War. The principle merit of the work is its tight focus on the personal experience of merchant mariners, a group whose history has been neglected as badly by scholars by political leaders. The concept of the project sets it apart from the many other examinations of the Battle of the Atlantic in two ways. Parker's focus is wide and he includes a great amount of oral historical source material which, in edited form, makes up the bulk of the work. In addition, he restricts that oral history to merchant navy sources. This combination of mass and purpose has lent Parker's work durability and authority.

Including oral history, even if only as a quoted and cited source, is standard in the scholarship on the Battle of the Atlantic. Consider Sarty's *Canada and the Battle of the Atlantic* (1998), a work that includes resources from oral histories and image collections. It is rare that more than a few pages pass in the work without the inclusion of at least a paragraph-length quote from an oral history or personal memoir. However, the book excludes merchant mariners almost completely from the text; where they are represented, it is in the mode of dependency or victimization. The photographic selections bear this out beyond the argument of the prose.

This, then is the contribution of Parker's work, even amid more recent writing: he addresses the merchant mariners as historical agents whose

work and sacrifices have been and are still marginalized in representations of the Battle of the Atlantic. However, placing Parker's work in this way exposes a flaw in *Running the Gauntlet*. Parker elected to craft his work in a way that would relate to this same wider historiography, and so his interviews are offered in a thematic organization that is instantly recognizable to any student of the Battle of the Atlantic. His chapters are titled "The Fourth Arm", "Operation Drumbeat", "Lifeline of the World" and "Prisoners of War". However, the eclectic personal accounts Parker offers overwhelm the attempted structure. A reader could feel completely adrift while reading *Running the Gauntlet* – not necessarily an undesirable effect, given the subject – due to the disjoint between the scope of the organizing themes and the minutiae of the oral histories. The empathy and engagement generated by the quality of the material Parker presents does not fit well into the over-arching historical patterns of the war.

Running the Gauntlet also contributes to history outside the area of the Battle of the Atlantic. By dint of timing, many of the interviews deal directly with the attitudes and interpretation of the veterans with respect to their new status as "recognized" veterans in Canada. At the time of publication, these inclusions made the work timely and relevant in contemporary political discussion. The comments are now of value for those who wish to reflect on the history of that recognition or the veterans who received such belated acknowledgement.

There is a potential weakness with the work rising out of the tone of Parker's prose, which is overtly sympathetic: *Running the Gauntlet* might ignore certain aspects of the history of merchant mariners during the war, such as labour unrest. While not as frank as Frederick Watt's *In All Respects Ready* (1985), the interviews as presented by Parker do not shy away from many of the problematic aspects of the merchant navy during the war. The range of experiences and the number of interviews make the collection quite versatile, and it is a more critical work than the author's prose alone might suggest.

Running the Gauntlet is a significant contribution that continues to complement and challenge more recent works on the Battle of the Atlantic. It is a work of scholarship that functions as a credible human counterpoint to the catalogues of technological change that comprise the historiography of the Battle of the Atlantic.