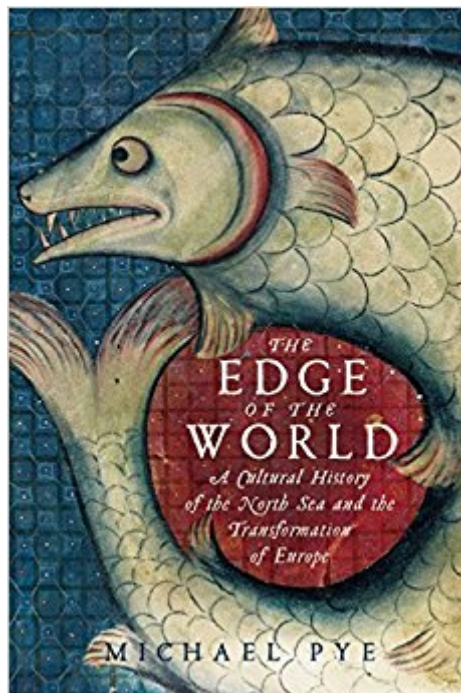




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The Edge Of The World: A Cultural History Of The North Sea And The Transformation Of Europe



Synopsis

A New York Times Notable Book An epic adventure ranging from the terror of the Vikings to the golden age of cities: Michael Pye tells the amazing story of how modernity emerged on the shores of the North Sea. Saints and spies, pirates and philosophers, artists and intellectuals: they all criss-crossed the grey North Sea in the so-called "dark ages," the years between the fall of the Roman Empire and the beginning of Europe's mastery over the oceans. Now the critically acclaimed Michael Pye reveals the cultural transformation sparked by those men and women: the ideas, technology, science, law, and moral codes that helped create our modern world. This is the magnificent lost history of a thousand years. It was on the shores of the North Sea where experimental science was born, where women first had the right to choose whom they married; there was the beginning of contemporary business transactions and the advent of the printed book. In *The Edge of the World*, Michael Pye draws on an astounding breadth of original source material to illuminate this fascinating region during a pivotal era in world history. 16 pages of B&W photographs

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Customer Reviews

“Bristling, wide-ranging and big-themed. At its most meaningful, history involves a good deal of art and storytelling. Pye’s book is full of both. An exuberant amalgam of sources. A fruitful way of reorienting our thinking about the past. By bringing back to life a mostly forgotten cast of medieval shippers, mauraders, thinkers and tinkerers, Pye challenges us to consider how we got to be where we are and who we are.” - The New York Times Book

Review – “As Michael Pye shows us in *The Edge of the World*, the people living around the North Sea were crucial to the birth of a new Europe. Pye, like a scholarly magpie, picks up his glittering bits from the most up-to-date academic research.” – Michael Dirda, *The Washington Post*

– “A lively account. Pye’s vivid prose proves that this time was anything but dark.” – *Explorer’s Journal*

– “Beautifully written and thoughtfully researched. For anyone, like this reviewer, who is tired of medieval history as a chronicle of kings and kingdoms, knights and ladies, monks and heretics, *The Edge of the World* provides a welcome respite.” – *The Wall Street Journal*

– “A double pleasure, first for its unique, illuminating vision of a time largely unknown and misunderstood by modern readers, but even more for its exemplary prose. Pye’s writing is vigorous and precise, the work of a writer who revels in his subject and who nurses a fondness for its many curious byways and paradoxes.” – *Dallas Morning News*

– “Novelist, journalist and historian Pye challenges all our notions of the Dark Ages and shows the vast accomplishments completed long before the Renaissance. A brilliant history of the Dark Ages showing the growth and development of science, business, fashion, law, politics and other significant institutions – a joy to read and reread.” – *Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

– “Historian Pye excels at painting a unique portrait of the political, economic, and cultural transformation that has occurred on the shores of the North Sea. Pye’s message and intention provides the reader with a refreshing view of the connection between time and place. His frequent use of primary sources as well as fictional literary works gives the work an ethereal nature. Readers who enjoy broad historical analysis will enjoy this book as a companion to Lincoln Paine’s *The Sea and Civilization* and David Bates and Robert Liddiard’s *East Anglia and its North Sea World in the Middle Ages*.” – *Library Journal*

– “Mr. Pye draws on a dizzying array of documentary and archaeological scholarship, which he works together in surprising ways. Mr. Pye advances on several fronts at once, following the overlapping currents of customary, religious and empirical ways of thinking. He writes about difficult concepts with vivid details and stories, often jump-cutting from exposition to drama like a film. It’s complicated, but fun.” – *The Economist*

– “No more of the tired old attribution of Europe’s glories to Italian city states or Germanic empires; it’s around the shore of the North Sea that Michael Pye sees the slow but decisive emergence of our modern world. Utterly readable.” – Neal Ascherson, bestselling author of *Black Sea*

– “From a new perspective on the Vikings to an examination of information as a form of currency, Pye’s book offers an engaging and enlightening look at a little understood time and place.” – *The Columbus Dispatch*

– “An utterly beguiling journey

into the dark ages of the north sea. A complete revelation. Pye writes like a dream.

Magnificent. — Jerry Brotton, author of A HISTORY OF THE WORLD IN TWELVE

MAPS — “Splendid. A heady mix of social, economic, and intellectual history, written in an

engaging style. It offers a counterpoint to the many studies of the Mediterranean, arguing for the

importance of the North Sea. Exciting, fun, and informative. — Michael Prestwich, Professor

of History, Durham University — “Takes readers on a far-ranging tour of Europe during the

Dark Ages. Pye’s style is leisurely yet authoritative, scholarly but engaging; his approach

resembles that of a docent leading a group through a vast museum, with each section devoted to a

different aspect of society. An eye-opening reexamination of the era, and delightfully

accessible. — Publishers Weekly — “Michael Pye has a great journalist’s eye for a story

and the telling anecdote as well as a great historian’s ability to place it in the bigger picture. Here he

fuses those talents in a hugely eclectic study of the very first stirrings of modernity in northern

Europe. — Alexander McCall Smith, New York Times bestselling author of THE NO. 1

LADIES’ DETECTIVE AGENCY — “A closely-researched and fascinating characterization of

the richness of life and the underestimated interconnections of the peoples all around the medieval

and early modern North Sea. A real page-turner. — Chris Wickham, author of THE

INHERITANCE OF ROME: A HISTORY OF EUROPE FROM 400 TO 1000 — “For more than a

millennium, the North Sea was our trading floor and our internet. Yet this connection, this period,

and this sea remain wrapped in fog. With elegant writing and extraordinary scholarship, Pye does a

rare but important thing by focusing not on lands but on the waters that unite them. — Hugh

Aldersey-Williams, author of PERIODIC TALES and ANATOMIES — “Persuasive and eloquent.

A radical perspective on the modern world. No book I have read has looked at the available

evidence in the way it is presented here. A multilayered, complicated, dense book that demands

time to be read and be digested but rewards by giving one plenty to chew on. — The

Observer (UK) — “A treasure chest. [Pye] breaks most of the rules of scholarly history, but who

cares? The end result is brilliantly illuminating. Pye’s creativity brings light to this once dark

time. — The Times (London) — “A pleasure. I learned a great deal and enjoyed it

enormously. — Carolyn Larrington, St. John’s College, Oxford — “Brilliant. Pye is a

wonderful historian . . . bringing history to life like no one else. — Terry

Jones — “Excellent. The Edge of the World does what good non-fiction should, in making the

reader see the world in a different light. — Scotland on Sunday — “The amazing story of

how the North Sea made us who we are. — A dazzling historical adventure. — The Daily

Telegraph — “It is the measure of Pye’s achievement that he can breathe life into the

traders of seventh-century Frisia or the beguines of late-medieval Flanders as well as into his more celebrated subjects. Hugely enjoyable. Grey the waters of the North Sea may be; but Pye has successfully dyed them with a multitude of rich colors. – The Guardian – “This is the kind of book that can open up new vistas. An inspiring book, full of surprises. – The Independent – “A compelling account of societies around the North Sea will make you see the world in a different light. – The Scotsman – “Extraordinary. Astonishing. The end result is brilliantly illuminating. Pye’s creativity brings light to this once dark time. – The Times Saturday Review – “A masterly storyteller. – Vogue (London)

Michael Pye is the author of *The Drowning Room* and *The Pieces from Berlin*, which were both New York Times Notable Books of the Year. He won various prizes in Modern History at Oxford before working as a journalist, columnist, and broadcaster in London and New York. He now divides his time between London and rural Portugal.

One book where I think the dust jacket reviews nailed it rather well. Two chosen at random: "An utterly beguiling journey into the dark ages of the North Sea. A complete revelation. Pye writes like a dream." Or another one: "A brilliant history of the Dark Ages showing the growth and development of science, business, fashion, law, politics and other significant institutions - a joy to read and reread." The period between the fall of the Roman Empire and the Renaissance that the author puts from roughly 700 CE to 1400 has traditionally been seen as a period of human stagnation - the Dark Ages. As the author shows in endless intriguing anecdotes from the era, the area surrounding the Baltic and North Seas was a very lively place. This isn't a typical political history of kings and armies, rather more of a ground-level view of what people were up to in their daily lives, how they interacted with each other on not only a local level, but more importantly, in trade and business; the tale of the Hanseatic League is fascinating - the first international trading cartel, and one with no home address. The amount of research done by the author is staggering - and what makes it so much fun to read; where and how he managed to dig up the documents, personal correspondence and other material used in the book would probably make a book in itself, and draws the reader into personal communication with individuals and an appreciation of "what was in the wind" at the time. Pye also has a sly and at times wicked sense of humor. A fun and very informative book.

The premise of this book -- that the regions around the North Sea contributed much more to European culture than is generally recognized -- is a fascinating one. Indeed, I found it so

fascinating that I ordered the book from the UK before it was available in the States. In terms of the author's subject matter, I was not disappointed. He does indeed examine local cultures that usually pass below the historical radar, most notably Frisia in the early middle ages, but also Flanders under the Dukes of Burgundy, and the Hansa. And he does argue convincingly that these cultures had an impact on the modernization of European culture. And, he does tell many interesting stories, and introduce many interesting people. Why then only four stars? First and foremost, Pye seems to me to overstate the strength of an overriding North Sea culture, and to overstate its impact on European history. The cultures of the Low Countries and those of Scandinavia were all trading cultures, but that doesn't make them the same thing. Nor, for me at least, does their financial orientation explain the monetization of European culture nearly as much as Pye suggests -- what about Italian banking? There is a great deal in this book, but not perhaps as much as the author implies. Secondly, as another reviewer suggests, the book is repetitive. Finally, the arguments are not always tight, and some subjects seem to be introduced simply because they are of interest, not because they have that much to do with the subject at hand. Those who are interested in emergence of European culture, particularly in its earlier phases, are likely to enjoy this book. But be prepared to take it with a grain of salt, and be prepared to skim.

I thought this would be about each place and people around the northern sea; instead it was a much richer read about how the concepts of money, measurement, writing, mathematics began or were further developed by these cultures. The author shows how, sometimes, tiny ideas or inventions revolutionize the world. I was not interested in economics, (or so I thought), until this book. Many parts read like a novella, and the author follows historical personages and their influences which illustrated his points. I very much enjoyed the history/economic lessons here - now I am going to see what else the author has written.....

It turns out the Dark Ages are not so dark after all. Thanks to the extraordinary research by Michael Pye, the author of this intriguing book, we are given access to a world that heretofore seemed forever closed. Pye, a born story-teller, brings alive the world of the North Sea, in the twelve-hundred years between the fifth and seventeenth centuries. It was a time of chaos, war, and plague. Pye paints a vivid picture of life lived on the edge of the known world, out of the reach of kings, nobility and the church, where anything goes. It's a world without national boundaries, without law, where race is not an issue, and where everybody pretty much speaks the same language. It's a world where the strong survive and, through trade and

creative ingenuity, learn to thrive. The players are boatmen living on hillocks in the Frisian marshes, dependent on trade to survive; and Scandinavian explorers and raiders spreading terror and taking what isn't nailed down; and a growing class of merchants from the Hanseatic trading towns in Northern Germany. Ultimately, trade draws them all together and has a civilizing effect, in the exchange goods and ideas. It leads to the rise of guilds and professions, classes of merchants and businessmen. In turn, it opens up a world of money and banking, investment and insurance, enriching the region materially and intellectually. Along the way we are given insights into the development of international tastes in fashion and art; the book trade and lay reading; the development of law and the legal profession; technologies of land reclamation as well as commercial agriculture; the rise of university education; and the beginning of equality between men and women. What happened to end this prosperous and promising world? The Black Death of the 14th century had a chill effect that limited travel and kept people in their place. Religious and sectarian strife played a role as well, restricting the free-flow of ideas, and forcing people to choose one identity to the exclusion of others. And behind both of these was the rise of the state, a modern invention that attempted to restrict and ultimately control human thought and activity. The area least effected was the Netherlands, particularly Amsterdam, which carried on as key player in world trade and international finance, where art and science flourished, and the rulers more or less stayed out of the way. Finally, this: Dutch traders created an outpost in the New World called New Amsterdam, an island that became the center of United States' finance and culture, and ultimately the center of the world's financial market, with a beacon of hope for the world set in the harbor--the Statue of Liberty. In a way, that is the legacy of what was started in the dark world of the North Sea. Pye, a British journalist and novelist, has done a bang-up job in filling the gaps of world history, and along the way revealing that at its best the world of trade can be a world uniter. Five stars.

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