

Title—The Indian Ocean
Author—M.N. Pearson
Year—2003

Categories: Region,
Place: Indian Ocean
Time: BCE-1950

Argument Synopsis:

M N. Pearson's *The Indian Ocean* attempts to provide an overview of history of the Indian Ocean reaching back to its earliest encounters with people. Pearson argues that the Indian Ocean maintained a fairly stable existence, with the exception of the period 1800 to 1950 when Westerners controlled it. Pearson aims to write the about the whole of the Indian Ocean over the **whole of its recorded history**, while avoiding concentration on trade and war as in most literature on the Indian Ocean. While he seeks to provide a total history of the Indian Ocean, he acknowledges that he may not pay enough attention to the Malay maritime world. He argues that this is due to the Malay world being tied more often to the Chinese maritime world, as opposed to the Indian Ocean world.

For his comprehensive history, Pearson divides the history of the Indian Ocean into two major periods, which differs from mainstream historiography's division into four periods. Pearson's two periods are: the history of the ocean from its beginnings in geology and myth until about 1800 and the subsequent period where the Indian Ocean became embedded in a truly global economy which affected production. Pearson does not consider changes in trade to be dramatic enough to designate a new period; only changes in production brings about the temporal break he suggests. Thus he notes that Europeans entered the Indian Ocean arena around 1500, but maintains that they did not cause any substantive change until around 1800.

Pearson was directly inspired by Fernand Braudel's work on the Mediterranean and attempts to replicate his analytical structure for the Indian Ocean. Pearson begins his book with a discussion of the physical features of the ocean itself. Here he strives to mimic Braudel's study which begins with a discussion of the permanent or recurring features of the Mediterranean. He does not even consider the role of humans until the third chapter, demonstrating his commitment to providing a full history of the Indian Ocean itself. Pearson then seeks to provide some constant invariant aspects of the lives of people around and on the sea. Throughout the book, he stresses the continuity of the Indian Ocean claiming that only concerted Western intervention caused a significant change. Pearson insists that the changes that occurred across the bulk of the Indian Ocean's history were not significant enough to denote a change in period, that is, until the imposition of substantial European involvement. In Pearson's framework, after 1800 the history of the Indian Ocean is merely an aspect of global history.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Continuity of the Indian Ocean arena until the imposition of Western colonialism & rule
- Indian Ocean as a discrete arena until 1800 when it became part of the global history
- Majority of Indian Ocean literature focused on trade and war