

*Freshwater Heritage: A History of Sail on the Great Lakes,
1670-1918* By Don Bamford

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Volume 100, Number 2, Fall 2008

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065701ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065701ar>

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Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

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Cite this review

Karamanski, T. J. (2008). Review of [*Freshwater Heritage: A History of Sail on the Great Lakes, 1670-1918* By Don Bamford]. *Ontario History*, 100(2), 239-240. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065701ar>

Book Reviews

Autumn 2008

***Freshwater Heritage:
A History of Sail on the
Great Lakes, 1670-1918***

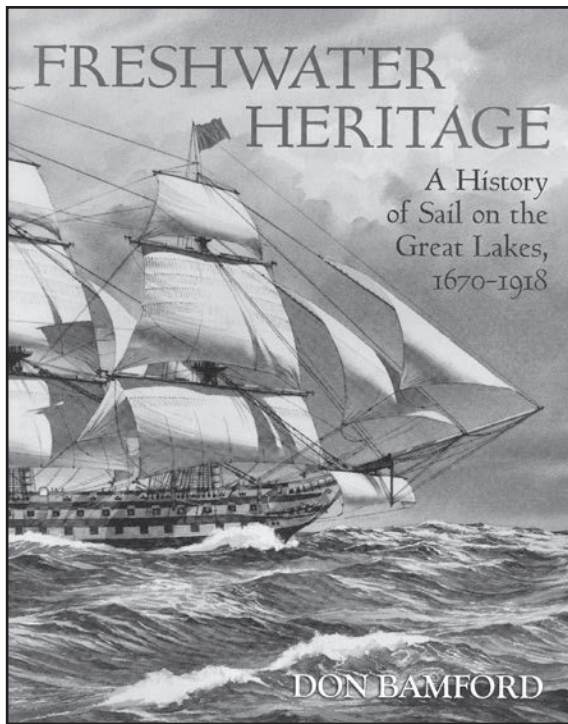
By Don Bamford. Toronto: Natural Heritage Books, 2007. xviii + 301 pages. \$34.95 softcover. ISBN 1-897045-20-6. (www.dundurn.com)

Some of the best books on Great Lakes history have been written not by professional historians but by writers and enthusiasts drawn to the beauty of the lakes and the drama of their history. The work of Pierre Berton and James Barry, for example, is well researched and wonderfully narrated. The popularity that Great Lakes history enjoys with the public is in no small measure due to this tradition of public scholarship. At first glance Don Bamford's *Freshwater Heritage* appears to be a welcome new addition to the field. The author is an experienced sailor with a long-standing interest in Great Lakes history. The book is attractively produced and well illustrated, including a beautiful colour gallery of some of the best regional marine art. Unfortunately, for all of



Bamford's obvious knowledge of the subject, the book falls well short of what should be expected of any published work of history.

The distress flags go up very early in *Freshwater Heritage*. In the foreword written by Maurice D. Smith, the prologue by Paul Carroll, and Bamford's own introduction, care is taken to point out that the book is not a work of scholarship. In Bamford's own words, his is an "informal approach" (p. xviii). The "informal approach" is laudable when it includes Bamford sharing his stories of cruising the Great Lakes in his yacht or even his asides about childhood memories. This colour adds to the reader's experience of the subject. Yet just because he says he is not a practitioner of "pure and scholarly Canadian history" (p. ix), readers still have the right to expect a narrative that is well-researched and properly organized. *Freshwater Heritage* is meandering and eccentric in its organization and use of sources. Bamford is clearly more knowledgeable of his home waters around Kingston than he is about the Upper Great



Lakes in general or the American shore in particular, and the maritime history of Lake Michigan and Lake Superior is handled only in the most cursory fashion. Bamford seems to have made no use of any of the numerous books in Wayne State University's *Great Lakes Books* series, which has included scores of maritime history volumes since it began eighteen years ago. An example of how this oversight hurts his book can be seen in Chapter 16. Bamford devotes three pages to the important issue of charting the Great Lakes; however, only one sentence acknowledges the work of the United States Lake Survey. This body was active for 135 years, mapping the lakes, and its history is readily available in an excellent book by Arthur M. Woodford.

What *Freshwater Heritage* needed more than anything else was a strong editorial hand. While important subjects such as the

development of harbours receives barely a nod, Bamford treats the reader to a rambling discussion of the War of 1812 (which takes up fully half of the text), including two separate digressions in which he broaches the unsupported hypothesis that the United States infiltrated fifth column agents into Upper Canada prior to the war. A good editor would have removed at least one of these speculative flights as well as eliminated many awkwardly-constructed sentences, extraneous paragraphs, and hyperbolic comments such as his observation that the seventeenth-century voyage of the *Griffon* from the Niagara River to Green Bay "was a miracle in itself." (p. 21) And I cannot imagine how any editor could allow Bamford to describe First Nation people acting like "covetous children" (p. 195) when they encountered European explorers.

Bamford, who has a background in engineering and construction, is at his best when he is writing about shipbuilding. His chapter on ship construction in the early nineteenth century is a legitimate contribution to Great Lakes history and makes the reader long for more of the same about the much more numerous fleet of sailing ships of the mid-nineteenth century. *Freshwater Heritage* is a book that was begun in the 1970s and completed a generation later. Bamford's effort, however, is undone by poor editing and outdated research.

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- Woodford, Arthur M. *Charting the Inland Seas: a history of the U.S. Lake Survey*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994.