

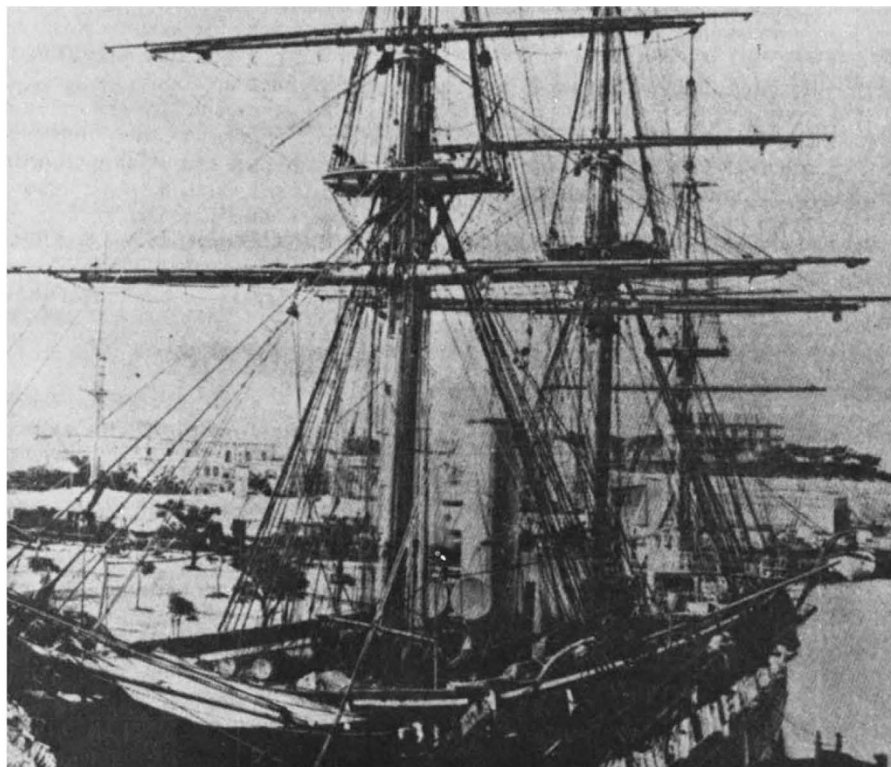
## Oceanography: edge of an unfamiliar world

Courtesy Trustees of the British Museum (Natural History)

WE have become used to publishers coyly hiding the dates of publication of their books on the back of the title page; they believe, I suppose, that no one buys books when they are more than a year old. The publishers of this book\* have extended the idea and concealed the fact that it is a reprint of one first published in America, by another company in 1973 (though they do say "© 1973"). This practice is dubious in relation to the purchaser; for the author, in this instance, the practice is grossly unfair. The reader looks for references to Margaret Deacon's book, which has become the standard work on the history of oceanography, and does not find them. The reason is that copies of her book only reached the US at the time that this book went to press so the author is, quite unjustly, made to seem ignorant of things one would expect to find in a book published in 1975.

The book covers the period from about 1830 to the 1970s and does not touch on the work of the 17th and 18th centuries. That is fortunate as the earlier period has been fully covered by Margaret Deacon. The opening chapters, on the early years of what eventually became the Coast and Geodetic Survey and the Hydrographic Office of the Navy, are, perhaps, the most instructive and original part of the book. There, Ms Schlee has gone back to the primary sources and one can see the back history of oddities of organisation and of disputes which lasted almost to the present time. The account of the "infamous United States Exploring Expedition" and of the shortcomings of M. F. Maury as a theorist are particularly interesting.

In the later parts of the book she demonstrates an irritating tendency to quote quite dubious and often inaccessible secondary sources when better information is easily available. For example, for an interesting quotation from



RV Challenger, one of the earliest oceanography research vessels, at Bermuda in 1873

Darwin the reader is referred to *The Darwin Reader* which contains, presumably, extracts from Darwin's works. Again, an improbable quotation from Halley is taken from *The Last Cruise of the Carnegie* where it occurs, but without any reference. Occasionally, the author is led into error by such sources: for example, Edmond Halley, with his name spelled Edmund (a form he never used in English) sails to the Antarctic in the *Paramour Pink* (a Pink is a kind of ship, not the name of a ship); both are venerable errors. The source of other errors is less clear, as when Ritter is said to have founded Scripps and to have been an "instructor in biology at the University of California at San Diego" (he was a professor at Berkeley, and UCSD was founded 60 years later by a professor from Scripps). This error is part of an eastern US and western European bias; for Ms Schlee everything west of the Ohio is Indian Country. These small errors are not of much importance but they do produce a feeling of insecurity in the reader and it is only fair to say that my doubts on several other

matters proved unfounded (for example, I doubted that St Vincent was First Lord in 1804).

The author has, perhaps, not firmly decided for whom the book is written: much of it is serious and reliable history, but in places she feels the story is getting dull and lapses into a more popular style with a wealth of irrelevant detail derived, remotely, from Hemingway and his imitators. For example: "A light snow was falling on Boston Harbour as two tugboats cast off their heavy docking lines . . ."; I am sure that she knows that it was snowing and that the lines were heavy—but that is the language of journalism rather than of history.

Perhaps I have overstressed the things that, to me, seem shortcomings; it is an interesting and readable book, contains many things that will be new to most readers and should be read by anyone with a serious interest in oceanography and the history of its development.

Some of the figures are little more than black smudges; they were only slightly better in the American edition.

E. Bullard

\**A History of Oceanography: The Edge of an Unfamiliar World*. By Susan Schlee. Pp. 398. (Robert Hale: London, February 1975.) £5.