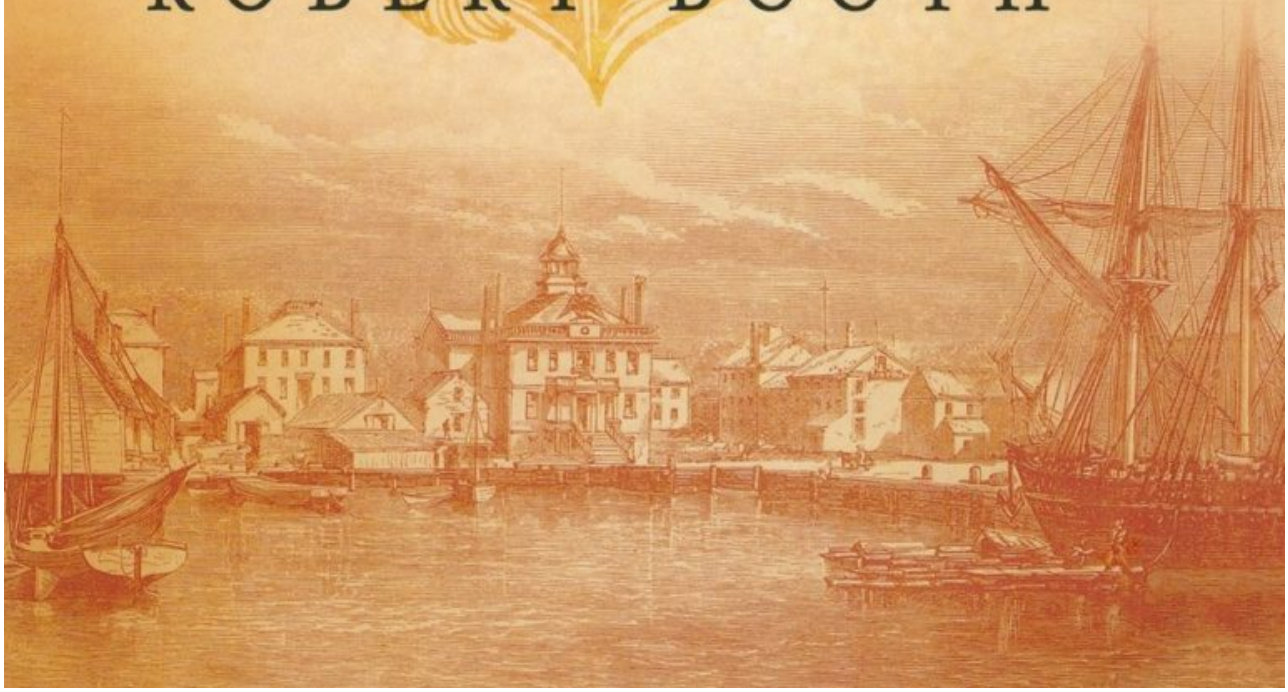
Death of a Memory: Robert Booth’s Search for Salem’s Forgotten Commercial Past

DEATH *of an* EMPIRE

THE RISE AND MURDEROUS FALL OF SALEM, AMERICA'S RICHEST CITY

ROBERT BOOTH



A few years ago, during an afternoon’s exploration of Salem, Massachusetts, I stopped by the Orientation Center of the Salem Maritime National Historic Site to ask for a map and a recommendation of what to see. Despite the center’s location at the base of historic Derby Wharf where Salem ships once launched for Asia, South America, and most places in between, the staff member pointed me back up the street for a walking tour of the city’s infamous witch trials. At that moment I pondered the same question that struck author Robert Booth and encouraged his new book: Why do we care so much about Salem’s witchcraft trials and know so little about Salem’s rich maritime past? Booth attempts to answer this question by following two generations of the White, Story, and Crowninshield families in Salem as he traces the port’s commercial history from the closing years of the War of 1812 to the 1840s. This is the story of the lamentable decline of Salem, once one of the richest towns in the United States, under the weight of immense commercial wealth and amidst the growth of a nation whose interests by the mid-nineteenth century seemed to be at odds with Salem’s maritime trade.

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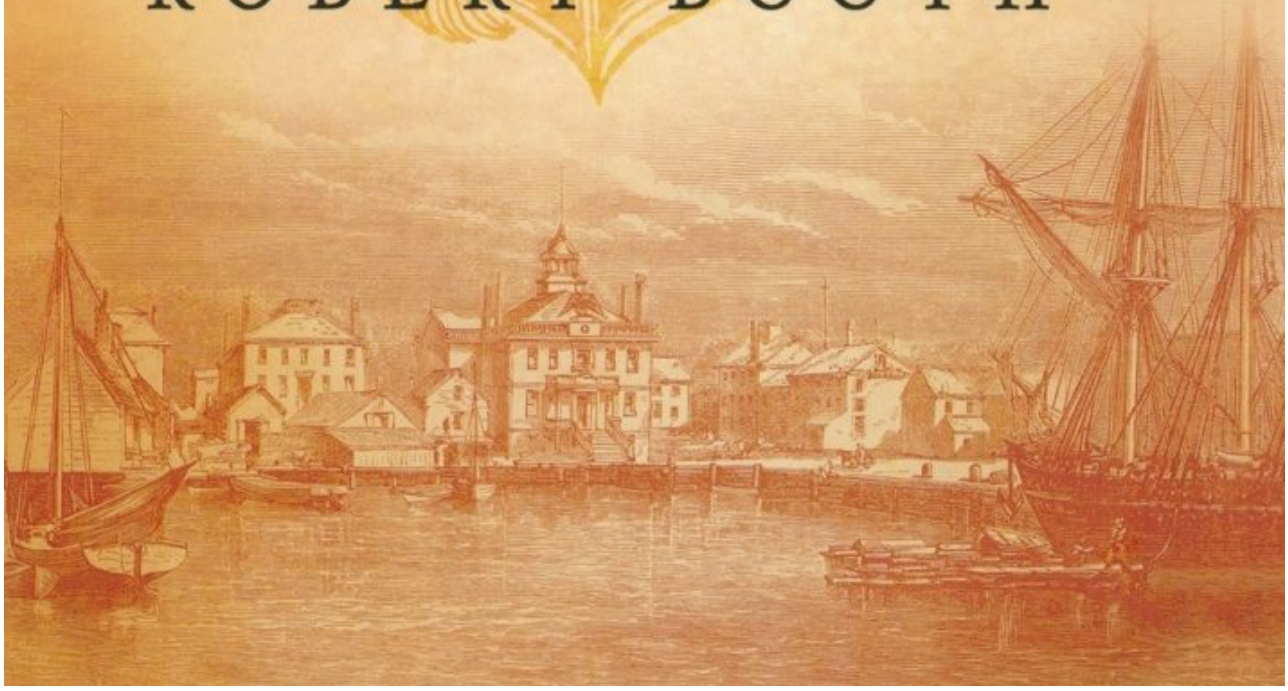

Robert Booth, Death of an Empire: The Rise and Murderous Fall of Salem, America's Richest City. New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2011. 325 pp., $26.99.

At the start of the nineteenth century, Salem had a global empire, as Booth puts it, in which Salem ships traded peaceably and lucratively in distant markets, particularly those in the Indian Ocean and in South Asia. The term empire obscures the more complex and interregional trading networks of which Salem was a part, but nonetheless the port's trade did spread successfully to points across the globe. But as the United States expanded westward and embraced manufacturing, Salem merchants and seamen found diminishing opportunities to get ahead in maritime commerce, and the wealth from foreign trade that had once "raised up all classes in Salem" (25) gave way to growing poverty and criminality in this port town. As trade faltered, many leading businessmen left Salem to invest in new manufacturing, shipbuilding, and neighborhood development projects in Boston, New York, and points west. At sea, opium trafficking and increased violence toward foreign trading partners replaced the honorable commerce of Salem's past. Booth recounts the resulting degradation of Salem society that culminated in the 1830 murder of Joseph White, a preeminent Salem merchant of the old guard, whose death came at the hands of a devious group of former ship captains and a wayward son of the famed Crowninshield family in search of a dark thrill and financial gain. Salem was so embarrassed by this internal collapse, Booth concludes, that it suppressed the memory of its former commercial greatness.

Death of an Empire follows in the historical true-crime style of author Erik Larson and presents a vivid description of life in early nineteenth-century Salem and aboard Salem vessels as they traded in distant markets. Using primarily newspaper accounts, published memoirs, and court records, Booth does impressive work to illuminate Salem tableaus that don't often get recreated in such detail, from the bustle of life along Union Wharf to the seedy rooms of the Mumford bar and brothel on the edge of town. Booth writes with the same ease discussing Salem local politics as he does describing the intricate process of trade between Salem merchants and the rajah Po Adam on the coast of Sumatra. Familiar American characters like Daniel Webster, John Quincy Adams, Joseph Story, and Nathaniel Hawthorn circulate through the narrative as they move into and out of Salem, and they help flesh out the breadth of Salem life, from law to politics and from business to literature.

Booth's efforts to bring to life the social and economic networks of Salem residents pay off in the book. When many of Salem's leading families depart the dwindling port for Josiah Quincy's Boston, the process of smaller, specialized ports getting subsumed into the commercial orbit of larger ports like Boston that unfolded throughout the nation in the nineteenth century becomes for the reader more than just a statistic of tonnage or ship clearances. Booth shows how a port's commercial advantage could be significantly diminished with the loss of maritime expertise, political connections, and business that went with every family defection. In spite of Booth's emphasis on the role of shame in suppressing Salem's memory of its commercial greatness, the most compelling

explanation for how so much first-hand memory of Salem's commercial past was lost is this migration of trade and merchant families out of Salem by the 1830s and the subsequent loss of community. In a town that as late as 1836 chose the motto "To the farthest port of the rich Indies" (from the Latin *DivitisIndiae, usque ad ultimum sinum*) for its new city seal, the memory of Salem's commercial glory was still strong among the remaining community.

Booth has a clear talent for descriptive and captivating writing. Still, *Death of an Empire* at times reads more as a series of short, engaging stories than as a coherent narrative. The family trees at the beginning of the book become essential tools for reminding the reader how each character fits into the arc of Booth's story and into Salem's history, though new characters and episodes still pop up without clear introduction or explanation. Further, although the claims that Booth makes about Salem's commercial rise may make for a more dramatic fall in this narrative, in glorifying Salem's commercial success in the early 1800s he also obscures historical reality. Booth characterizes Salem men and merchants of the early nineteenth century as honorable and adventurous, and attributes much of their success to these traits. He writes that Salem "had few resources other than confidence, aggressiveness, and intelligence" (xi) and that the port achieved commercial success "without the arrogance and exploitation that were typical of Europeans" (xii). At other times, Booth contrasts honorable Salem merchants of the early 1800s who helped create "friendship around the globe" (268) with Andrew Jackson, who lived among his slaves and led an administration of "racist militarists" (xv). But the implication that virtue and self-reliance had a causal role in Salem's early economic success is specious, and this claim is undermined by the fact that the same Salem merchants that Booth praises made large profits carrying and selling the products of slave economies around the world. Elias Hasket Derby, the 18th-century Salem merchant whose story begins Booth's Preface, owned a slave.

Death of an Empire adds to a growing volume of historical work on early American trade that examines American commerce beyond the Atlantic Ocean, and Booth's book will have appeal for both the general public and for historical researchers. Booth claims that Salem was without comparison in its connections to overseas trade in the early United States, but his book will nonetheless bring readers to wonder how Salem's dynamics of downsizing compared to other smaller ports of the early republic. *Death of an Empire* is a welcome addition to the history of Salem for its detailed synthesis of this important transition period in the port's life, and his engaging book should suggest many further avenues for others to tap the rich historical resources of Salem's commercial past and recapture this forgotten history.

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