

Inside an invisible industry

The real monsters of the seas have nothing in common with the ships which plough the Venetian Lagoon carrying thousands of tourists and an overabundance of crew members. Belying their XXL dimensions, these monsters are much more discreet and keep their distance from the shipping lanes along the coasts of antique Mediterranean islands and cities. Their true home is out at sea, traversing oceans or maritime corridors – the real sea, with all its tempests, 40knotplus winds and waves averaging 10 metres in height.

Despite boasting a length of 300 metres and a gross tonnage of 74 000 tonnes, the merchant ship *Kendal* is nothing but a middleweight when set against recent vessels with a length of almost 400 metres. It belongs to the Danish-owned Maersk, the world's leading container ship operator, and can carry around 6 000 containers. Latest-generation vessels accommodate almost 20 000, with capacities having almost tripled over the past 10 years.

"These ships and boxes belong to a business that feeds, clothes, warms, and supplies us. They have fueled if not created globalization. They are the reason behind your cheap T-shirt and reasonably priced-television. But who looks behind a television now and sees the ship that brought it? Who cares about the men who steered your breakfast cereal through winter storms? How ironic that the more ships have grown in size and consequence, the less space they take up in our imagination," writes Rose George.

The British journalist, who authored a book some years ago about human waste and the health problems faced by populations without access to sanitary facilities¹, was able to persuade the powerful Danish multinational to give her passage on the *Kendal* for a five-week voyage from Felixstowe in south-east England to Singapore.

Although it is easy to find images on the Internet of these behemoths of the sea battling through raging storms, it is hard to believe that as few as 20 crew members are needed to navigate their thousands of containers safely into harbour.

The *Kendal* has a 21man crew, including one woman with the role of chef. One third of its crew members are from the Philippines, demonstrating the apparently irreversible rollback of the West's former dominion over

the merchant shipping industry. Only the command positions are still reserved exclusively for Europeans, and even these are not safe given the increasing number of officers graduating from the new maritime training colleges set up in India.

George laments this development: "There are already more blue whales than there are British seafarers on British ships. The difference is that people are taking conservation measures to save the whale."

Around a quarter of a million sailors originate from the Philippines, with these Asian-born sailors making up over one third of a hard-working but discreet merchant navy which helps oil the cogs of global trade.

Given that they are responsible for transporting 90% of everything we consume, this is ultimately a very small number of people. When she boarded the *Maersk Kendal* one morning in June, George hoped to infiltrate this "invisible industry that puts clothes on your back, gas in your car, and food on your plate," to quote the front cover of *Ninety Percent of Everything*. "If *Kendal* discharged her containers onto trucks, the line of traffic would be sixty miles long."

The complex and opaque legal arrangements which underpin this entire branch of the economy mean that modern-day merchant shipping is a potent symbol of globalization.

It is a curious fact that the success of global trade hinges on the fact that the four largest merchant fleets in the world are registered in Panama, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Mongolia – the first of which is the world's most notorious tax haven, two of which feature on lists of the world's 20 poorest countries and the last of which has a capital located over 1 300 kilometres from the coast.

Flags of convenience allow unscrupulous shipowners to do business more cheaply while closing their eyes to employment legislation and environmental or safety standards, with the assurance of almost total impunity. Incredible as it may seem, abandoning a ship and its crew before they have reached their final destination is sometimes the most sensible course of action for a shipowner in financial terms.

George criticises this practice, writing that 57 ships and 647 sailors were abandoned in 2009; "If insurance premiums or port fees

are too high, or the company goes bankrupt, the owner disappears, leaving unpaid wages and a stranded crew."

Although George writes very convincingly about the failings of the maritime economy, her descriptions of the living and (in particular) working conditions she saw during her five-week voyage are somewhat lacking. After reading the book to its end, one has the impression that the journalist sought refuge on the bridge and avoided venturing down into the ship's hold.

She does not touch at all on the work carried out by the mechanics and labourers responsible for the upkeep and maintenance of the mammoth vessel, and after reading certain passages in the book, for example those in which she writes about the Filipino crew playing video games and indulging in karaoke – to say nothing of their alleged sexual quirks, which are foreign in the extreme – one could be forgiven for thinking that the *Kendal* was operated remotely from London, with its engines delivering their maximum output of 57 000 kW without any human intervention.

The overall feel is one of monotony, as if one were traversing an endless ocean as still as a millpond, under the heat of a scorching sun. George herself apparently succumbs to boredom, to the extent that she pads out the tale of her voyage with the second-hand adventures of other mariners. It is a shame that she was not able to do better justice to the rich gamut of human experience at her disposal.

— Denis Grégoire

Ninety percent of everything: inside shipping, the invisible industry that puts clothes on your backs, gas in your car, and food on your plate

by Rose George,
Metropolitan, 2014, 287 p.

1. Rose George (2008)
The Big Necessity. The Unmentionable World of Human Waste and Why It Matters, Metropolitan Books, 288 p.