



The Custom of the Sea

Neil Hanson

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Adrift at sea, your food and water gone, you are slowly starving to death: what would you do to survive?

On May 19, 1884, the yacht Mignonette set sail from Southampton, England, bound for Australia. Halfway through the voyage, the crew were beset by a monstrous storm off the coast of West Africa, and the Mignonette was sunk by a massive forty-foot wave. Cast adrift a thousand miles from landfall with no food or water and faced with almost certain death, the captain resorted to a grisly practice common among seamen of the time: the "custom of the sea." While the others watched, the captain killed the weakest of them, the cabin boy, and his body was eaten. In this riveting account of the ordeal of the crew and the sensational trial that followed, Hanson recreates the shocking events that held a nation spellbound. Drawing from newspaper accounts, personal letters, court proceedings, and first-person accounts, he has brilliantly told a tale rife with moral dilemmas.

The Custom of the Sea Details

Date : Published February 19th 2001 by Wiley (first published 1999)

ISBN : 9780471399773

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Format : Paperback 336 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Adventure, Maritime, Survival

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From Reader Review The Custom of the Sea for online ebook

P says

Simply put: a harrowing story.

Kate says

Enjoyed every minute of this book....allowing, of course, that the subject is far from pretty. Mr. Hanson helps the reader understand many aspects of the life of seamen and indeed every aspect of Victorian life that touches on the case, including the Victorian fetish with freaks.

Nancy Oakes says

The difference between this story and other "shipwrecked at sea; out on the open ocean, had to eat one of the survivors" type stories is that the author goes on with what was at the time an incredibly sensational trial of the Captain and the other 2 survivors of the wreck of the Mignonette. Up to that time in history if crew members had to resort to "the custom of the sea" by drawing lots as to who would die for the good of the others, they were not held accountable for their actions since most people understood that they were in dire straits and had to do this to survive. However, the captain of the Mignonette, a Tom Dudley, upon his arrival back to terra firma told his story and expected to be home for dinner that night, was instead held for murder along with the two other survivors of the shipwreck. The author has done a great deal of research into the wreck, the trial and the aftermath and put it all together into this very well-written book.

I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in the topic.

MaryG2E says

Neil Hanson is a journalist, and he has the skill to write about serious, non-fiction topics in an accessible way. I found this book to be very interesting. In very particular circumstances it has been an accepted convention that a person may be killed for food in order to keep the majority of a group alive in desperate situations. Legally sanctioned cannibalism??

T0 says

Raskasta luettavaa. Toisaalta, eipä ihme kun kirjailija on käyttänyt lähteenään runsaasti 1800-luvun brittiläisten oikeusistuimien pöytäkirjoja. Tarina sinänsä mielenkiintoinen, kirjassa puidaan kärejillä vanhaa merimiesten tapaa pistää haaksirikon sattuesssa ja ruuan loppueassa joku onneton merimies ns. lihoiksi ja parempiin suihin.

Jan says

The book was interesting until I got to the part when the deed was done. I knew it was coming, but it was so graphic, I had to put the book down. I could not go on, I knew it would give me nightmares.

Peter says

This is a great read if you're interested in nautical history. It's a combination of fact and fiction, pieced together in a very compelling book.

Sandra says**Held my interest**

This book was well written. I didn't know most of the sailing terminology but it didn't keep me from enjoying the interesting and sometimes gruesome events that occurred.

Crystal says

Very well written, horrific true story. But it isn't just about this case - the author provides a lot of background, details and information on the culture of this era and the law as it was being reshaped. Terrifying but awfully good read!

Kirsten says

In 1884, Captain Tom Dudley and his three-man crew were aboard the Mignonette, a small yacht they were delivering from England to Australia. Hit by a rogue wave in a storm, the Mignonette sank, leaving the four men in a 13-foot dinghy with two cans of turnips and little else--no other food and no water--in the middle of the Atlantic. After nearly two weeks, Dudley announced they would have to resort to "the custom of the sea": drawing lots to decide who would be sacrificed and eaten to save the others. Two crewmen argued against lots, pointing out that the young cabin boy, Richard Parker, was delirious and on the verge of death. Dudley refused to kill the boy, and a few more days passed. Finally, on the 19th day adrift, Dudley killed young Parker while his crew watched. Three days later, the three survivors were rescued. Upon their return to England the three men were arrested and charged with murder.

This is a fascinating story because up until this point, it was very unusual for sailors who resorted to "the custom of the sea" to be prosecuted; it was held that the experience of being adrift in the ocean and having to resort to survival cannibalism was punishment enough. Indeed, when Dudley and his remaining crew

returned to England, the consensus among the maritime community was that their survival was heroic and they should be treated with kindness and even approbation. The only action that other sailors questioned was that the crew didn't go through the motions of drawing lots. In reality, this seems to have been a mere formality, rather than a truly fair lottery -- Hanson's research revealed that regardless of the drawing of lots, those who perished due to the custom of the sea were nearly always the weakest and those lowest on the societal totem pole. But the crew's failure to uphold the illusion was considered to be bad form.

I was sort of surprised by how much sympathy I ended up having for the men, particularly Dudley, who seems to have been a very decent sort. It's a fascinating ethical conundrum, because on the one hand, I can understand why the government felt the need to prosecute -- I can understand why the British government shied from actually appearing to condone murder and cannibalism. But I felt deep sympathy for the men and their predicament, and I can't honestly say I know I wouldn't participate in such extreme measures myself in the same situation.

Ren says

This book straddles the strange place between non-fiction and fiction, and it took me a good 50 pages to rein in the expectation that it was a novel before I really started to enjoy it. In the end I chose to think of it as a work of non-fiction interspersed with some flavour of scenes and emotions that the people might have experienced during their trials.

Hanson has done a lot of research as a lengthy bibliography at the end of the volume can attest. There are chapters devoted entirely to background information that would help the reader in better understanding the context for what took place (i.e. racing yachts and the Victorian fascination with 'freakshows', etc.). The vast majority was interesting, though can feel a bit took much like an unnecessary 'infodump' earlier in the book.

Recommended for anyone interested in early sailing.

Joe says

Had to set aside when the forlorned stranded sailors began to see steaks and chops in each other . Up until the sinking I give it a 3 star rating

Jeff says

A gripping true story about a shipwreck on the high seas and the resulting tragedy that set the law in Britain on the "custom of the sea". You will have to read it to find out what that is.

Michael says

I really hope I never end up floating in the middle of the ocean, in a small boat, with 3 other people, without

food or water. And I hope that if I do, I'm not the guy that gets eaten. This is quite a story, and pretty darn good book. I am a fan of maritime history...but I think anyone could find this book interesting. Having read a lot of exploration and maritime history I have learned a lot about how terrible a lack of food and water can be. And about the things people have done to survive. But the men in this book, unlike the others I read, are held accountable. A dark yet riveting tale. Good book. And I learned that if you ever need to resort to eating someone to survive, when you're rescued, tell them the person died BEFORE you ate them. Even if it ain't true.

Karen Brooks says

This was an extraordinary book that tells the true story of the Mignonette, a yacht that set sail from Southampton in 1884 heading to Sydney. Enroute, the ship endures a terrible storm that, after four days, finally destroys it. The survivors take to a smaller craft where they float, without food or water for twenty four days. When they're finally rescued, only three men have survived, but they have a terrible tale to tell - a tale that sees them taken to court and not only their lives put on trial, but the old custom of the sea as well.

Riveting, heartbreaking and shocking, Neil Hanson takes us on this disastrous voyage while also referencing others throughout history. But, it's this doomed voyage that brings to the public's horrified attention a practice that has been going on since ancient times, a custom that allows those who survive a shipwreck a chance.

Written in tight, unsentimental prose, Hanson manages to recreate the conditions the men endured - the monstrous storm, the fear, the hope, the suffering as they slowly die of thirst and starvation, and watch their dreams being dashed. He also explores the growing awareness of the survivors who, in order to survive, have only one choice left to them. It's a tale of what desperate men will do in order to cling to life and the sacrifices some will make - willingly or unwillingly to ensure that happens. Hanson manages to retell a shocking tale in a swiftly paced, imaginative way, but without sacrificing facts.

I couldn't put this book down.
