

***Taking the Sea: Perilous Waters, Sunken Ships, and the True Story of the  
Legendary Wrecker Captains***

Dennis M. Powers

AMACOM

ISBN 9780814413531

Reviewed by Richard R. Blake for Reader Views (12/08)

“Taking the Sea” is the fourth in Dennis M. Powers’ celebrated maritime narratives. Research on his book “Sentinel of the Seas” triggered Powers’ curiosity about the ships used during the building of the St. George Reef Lighthouse, and about the colorful Captain Thomas P. H. Whitelaw and other master wreckers. The book describes an era when shipping was the dominant form of transportation throughout the world. Powers writes about the courage, achievement, risks and the challenges these men faced.

Powers delved into the records of maritime museums, libraries, newspapers, and magazine articles to bring together the facts for the stories for this project. He supplemented this information with interviews and genealogical records.

The account begins in 1863 when, as a sixteen-year-old seaman, Tom Whitelaw, arrived in San Francisco. The book covers his career of over sixty years. Powers documents detailed descriptions of Whitelaw’s most memorable salvaging projects, including: The Rosecrans, the Respigerdo, the Umatilla, the Dumbarton, and the Blaimore.

Tom’s grandson Ken shared intimate insights into the family life of his grandparents and of his personal career with Whitelaw & Company.

Articles in the Literary Digest, American Magazine, Popular Mechanics, and Sunset Magazine all have featured various aspects of Whitelaw’s story. His divers made 17,000 dives while Whitelaw’s salvage operations saved over 289 ships.

In addition to Thomas P. H. Whitelaw, Powers includes stories of other colorful divers and wreckers, like Dynamite Johnny, Martin Lund, T. A. Scott, William E. Chapman, and Israel J. Merritt. He tells of wrecking and salvaging phenomenon’s from the Bering Sea and the coast of Alaska, up and down the western coastline of Canada and United States and on the East Coast from Canada to the waters of the Florida Keys, and the islands of the Bahamas. I especially enjoyed the story of a ghost ship, the City of Columbus.

Detailed background on Maritime Law and its evolution include specific judgments, appeals, and settlements between, Ship Owners, Insurance Companies, and the Wreckers.

An amazing collection of photographs dramatically reinforce Powers' narrative. The scope of his selected bibliography gives evidence of the background reading and specific research that has gone into the preparation of this book and which so deftly qualify Powers to compile this chronicle.

Powers' writing is imaginative, informative, and motivational. He is a gifted story teller. His descriptions are strong and powerful. He paints word pictures of wave explosions, ferocious storm conditions, and the devastating loss of lives. I could almost feel the tension of the octopus gripping my leg, squeezing my arm, and throttling my throat in an underwater wrestling match.

"Taking the Sea" by Dennis M. Powers will be enjoyed by anyone understanding the call of the deep, lured by maritime adventure, and tales of an almost forgotten era in history when Spanish galleons, steam schooners, and tall masted sailing ships gave fortitude to commerce and industry.