Document généré le 23 avr. 2024 18:39

**Ontario History**

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Volume 109, numéro 2, fall 2017

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1041290ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/1041290ar

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Éditeur(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (imprimé)
2371-4654 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce compte rendu

Stagg, R. (2017). Compte rendu de [*The Heroic Age of Diving: America's Underwater Pioneers and the Great Shipwrecks of Lake Erie* by Jerry Kuntz]. *Ontario History*, *109*(2), 270–271. https://doi.org/10.7202/1041290ar

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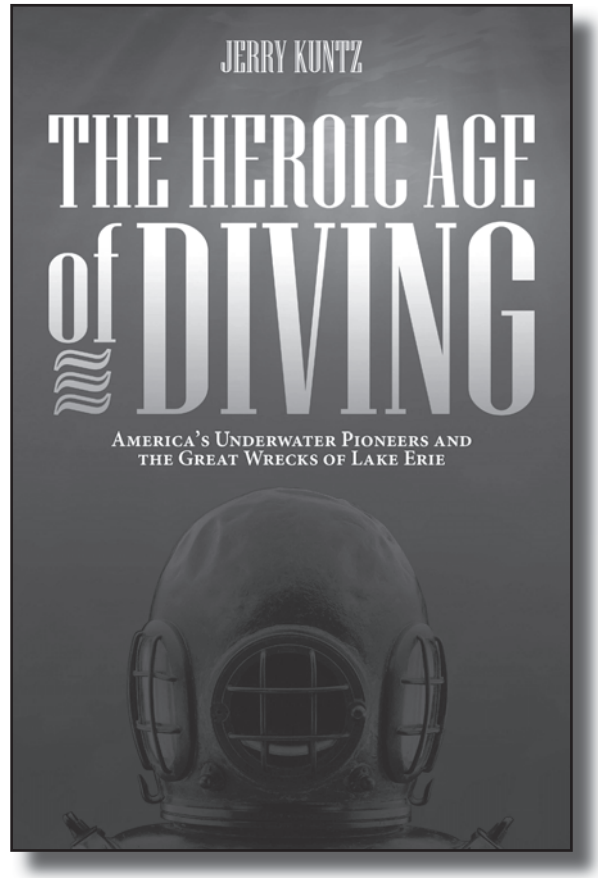
## *The Heroic Age of Diving*
### *America's Underwater Pioneers and the Great Shipwrecks of Lake Erie*

by Jerry Kuntz

Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2016. 196 pages. $19.95 U.S. softcover. ISBN 978-1-4384-5962-2 $21.03 U.S. eBook ISBN 978-1-4384-5963-9 <sunypress.edu>




The subtitle of this book is a bit deceptive, as this is really an account of the activities of pioneering American divers, which features diving on three famous Lake Erie wrecks, but deals with a wide variety of underwater activities, from attempting to recover bodies from sunken ships, to salvaging parts or all of wrecks in Long Island Sound, the Mississippi, Argentina, and Nova Scotia, to removing a wreck at Gibraltar, to blowing up underwater hazards in New York Harbor.

This is really the story of prominent early American divers and naval inventors/entrepreneurs. Most of the book deals with the period 1820 to 1879, with a short chapter summarizing the period 1870-1891. The reader is first introduced to William Hannis Taylor, a privateer/pirate who founded American diving. Diving in the 1820s was associated with free diving, diving without equipment, for pearls. Taylor wanted to make money and, in the 1830s, designed or stole a British design for a diving suit. Those who followed built improved suits or other inventions for movement underwater, including a submarine in which no one was interested, and a diving bell that had a limited ability to move itself underwater, an unusual trait. Early on we are introduced to most of the major characters featured in the remainder of the book. After that, their careers and their inventions are interwoven in the narrative.

Three famous Lake Erie wrecks appear and reappear in later chapters. The 1850s were the heyday of the 'palace steamers'. Large steamships, they transported cargo, and particularly passengers, mostly immi-

grants, from the end of the Erie Canal, at Buffalo, to ports further west, on the way to a new life in the American West. Until the railways took over as the principal means of reaching the West, beginning in the1860s, these ships transported thousands to their dream. Built of wood, with primitive engines and few safety features, accidents were not unusual, and many passengers could not swim.

The *G.P. Griffith* caught fire off Fairport Harbor, Ohio, in 1850, with the loss of almost 300 lives. The *City of Oswego* was hit and sunk by another ship off Ohio in 1852, with little loss of life, because it was carrying mostly cargo. The largest of the three, the *Atlantic*, was struck by another ship near Long Point, Ontario, and took up to 300 passengers to the bottom with her. The narrative deals with various attempts to recover valuables, parts of the ships, or the entire ship, over a period of years. The *Atlantic* was the richest prize, as it contained not only the personal wealth of the many immigrants, but also an American Express safe containing $30,000 dollars.

The *Atlantic* lay 160 feet down, deeper than any diver had ever gone, which created unique challenges, including complete darkness, and heavy pressure. In discussing attempts to salvage the safe and the ship, and other ships, the author details how divers encountered 'diver's squeeze', a sudden change of pressure that caused horrible disfigurement and usually death, and 'the bends', the result of coming to the surface too quickly. This latter condition was not known at the time and led to death or serious injury. For the uninitiated, Kuntz provides graphic descriptions of the effects, culled from accounts of the time.

In fact, the author confesses at the beginning of the book that he is neither a diver nor a marine historian. He consulted various individuals, mostly, one can assume, about technical details, and various books for background, but based his history mainly on numerous newspaper accounts from multiple locations, and on two, somewhat different, autobiographical accounts written by one of the major figures in the book, John B. Green. What distinguishes this book from many amateur historians' accounts is that Kuntz is sceptical of newspaper versions of events, warns the reader, and questions some aspects of what was written. He does the same for Green's accounts, and on some occasions speculates on what the truth may have been. At no time though does he insist that his speculation is what really happened; he makes it clear that it is just speculation. This approach adds a strong measure of credibility to the book.

As mentioned above, the author introduces most of the major figures early on in the book, so that the reader will know their backgrounds as they reappear at various times in the later account. While a logical way to deal with a large set of characters, the reader may need to turn back to these background accounts at various times to keep track of who is who. This is a minor quibble though about what is an extremely readable and generally convincing account of early American diving, and early diving in Lake Erie.

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