



## William D. Riddell *On the Waves of Empire* U.S. Imperialism and Merchant Sailors, 1872-1924

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[Ian Rocksborough-Smith](#) interviewed William D. Riddell about his new book *On the Waves of Empire: U.S. Imperialism and Merchant Sailors, 1872-1924*, published by the University of Illinois Press in 2023. Set mainly in the years preceding and following the Spanish-American War (1898) through World War I (1914-1918) and its aftermath, the book looks especially at the experiences of merchant sailors, their unions, and their labor leaders to indicate how class conflict impacted America's emergent 20<sup>th</sup> Century empire.

Focused on organizations like the Sailor's Union of the Pacific and International Seaman's Union of America, *On the Waves of Empire* charts a fascinating, yet ultimately tragic tale of the ways white working-class American sailors tried to reimagine themselves as "agents of empire," beholden to restrictive notions of American citizenship that ultimately relied on what W.E.B. DuBois and David Roediger might have called the psychological "wage of whiteness" in an age of extreme racial exclusions and shifting imperial boundaries. It is a dramatic, yet ultimately tragic tale of paths not taken for a strategic industry in the history

of American capitalism. It should interest any students of American empire, capitalism, labor, and race.

Will provided a copy of the excerpt available here: [Riddell Waves of Empire excerpt](#)

Video segments (viewable once you press play)

0:00 Intro

1:29 - Approaches & Inspiration

12:45 - Class Conflict and U.S. Empire

17:30 - On White Settler Colonialism

20:50 - Paths Not Taken

25:10 - A Tragic Tale & World War I

29:20 - Agents of Empire

39:00 - Future Plans



**William Riddell bio:**

Will is an Assistant Professor, Teaching Stream in History at the Department of Historical and Cultural Studies, University of Toronto-Scarborough. His research areas include Post-Civil War to mid-twentieth century U.S. history, Labor and Working-Class history, the history of capitalism, and the history of empire. In addition to *On the Waves of Empire: U.S. Imperialism and Merchant Sailors, 1872-1924*, his latest article, "Does Exclusion Follow the Flag: Merchant Sailors and U.S. Imperial Expansion, 1895-1906," was published in *The International Review of Social History*. His next project, tentatively titled, *Moving the*

*Empire: Workers and the Imperial Geography of Lend-Lease, 1940-1973*, is a social and labor history of Lend Lease.



The Arago Four. Credit: University of Washington Libraries

## **Author**



• [Ian Rocksborough-Smith](#)

Ian teaches primarily U.S. history at the University of the Fraser Valley in Stó:lō / S'ólh Téméxw / Abbotsford, B.C., Canada. His research interests include public and urban history, social movements, and histories of race, labor, religion, and empire in the Atlantic world. He has published academic articles and book reviews in a variety of journals like *The Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research*, *Reviews in American History*, and *The Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* and has a book entitled: *Black Public History in Chicago: Civil Rights Activism from World War II Into the Cold War* (April/May 2018). He has written op-eds in *Canadian Dimension* and *The Conversation (Canada)* and is on the editorial team for *Labor Online* (LAWCHA). He has served as an international solidarity and human rights officer for his faculty union, local 7 of the Federation of Post-Secondary Employees of British Columbia (2021-2023).