

# Maritime Space as Law and Light: Retrieving William Clark Russell's *An Ocean Free-Lance* (1882).

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## Maritime Space as Law and Light: Retrieving William Clark Russell's *An Ocean Free-Lance* (1882)

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### Abstract

William Clark Russell's *An Ocean Free-Lance* (1882) most obviously reads as a brittle homage to the nobility of a certain mode of imperial activity: it is, most apparently, a memorialisation of the privateer. But this is not the novel's only register. It also involves a broody engagement with oceanic space that is harder to interpret. This might simply be read within a belated-Romantic genre of novelistic yearning within the age of steam for the age of sail: in such terms, the novel easily reads as a critique of industrialisation. But the clear legal tones of the narrative and the novel's particular maritime aesthetics indicate that the nostalgia is more fully felt for the loss of a righteous order, a universal *lex naturalis* that is embodied in—that inhabits—the privateer. But even this is brought into question by the obscure poetics of light and water that slow down the plot and

over-determine the atmosphere of the narrative. Via an engagement with recent historiographies of empire and of British privateering, against the background of work on the significance of law within nineteenth-century literature, and with the help of W.C.R.'s contemporary Robert Louis Stevenson, this paper reads *An Ocean Free-Lance* towards some larger speculations on the anxious meanings of the ocean as both an inhabited and abstracted space of empire.



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