



Brack, H.G.

ART OF THE EDGE TOOL:

*The Ferrous Metallurgy of New
England Shipsmiths and Toolmakers*

Pennywheel Press (220 pp.)

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A dense, challenging yet thoroughly informed history of edge tools, the 18th- and 19th-century devices used by New England craftsmen to build a maritime economy and ultimately a nation.

Brack—a museum curator, businessman and author—brings an absolute command of the topic to bear. In this edition (one of a series on historical hand tools), he spans 280 years of shipbuilding history, charting both the evolution of steelmaking between 1607 and 1882 and the growth of the economy that relied on it in times of revolution, war and peace. The construction of the vessel *Virginia*, in Maine in 1607, is for Brack “an iconic event”—the starting point for the rise of a robust industry that played a role in the economy of New England. “Only written, painted or etched accounts tell of the existence of these ships prior to the introduction of the camera,” Brack relates.

“But written accounts are selective, if not myth-making, leaving out essential information about the

milieu of an era...The tools themselves are important additional primary sources of information about our colonial maritime history.” And what tools they are. With obvious comprehensive understanding, Brack explores the use of felling axes, augers, drawshaves and mortising gouges, and the ways these then-cutting edge devices were used. Brack can be educated to a fault—his knowledge yields a narrative so thick with authority that readers may need a machete (or a peen adz) to cut through it. As such, the book is periodically impenetrable, but won’t ever be mistaken for insubstantial. Brack has the historian’s eye for sweep and connection, and in several appendices he demonstrates both a command of minutiae and of the source material of other writers who’ve tackled the same subject. The author thus provides evidence of our earliest, and most ambitious, pursuit of maritime technology.

American history buffs and nautical scholars will revel in this professorial ode to shipbuilding’s evolution.

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