Seafarers, Seafaring and Occupational Identity: 'Jack Tar' and its Contemporary Uses in Britain c.1815-1914

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Introduction

This is a paper about how maritime workers were perceived in the past. In 1968, in a very influential paper, the American historian Jesse Lemisch lamented that 'Maritime history, as it has been written, has had little to do with the common seaman.'[1] In prefacing his paper with a description of the archetypal sailor or 'Jack Tar', Lemisch argued that, as historians, 'surely we can do better than these stereotypes'. At that time, this was an important proposition. Others seem to have agreed, for with the passage of time a lot of work has been done to understand the seafarer, though not necessarily as a direct response to Lemisch's challenge. Space does not permit a discussion of the relevant literature, but without doubt a more rounded – if not *fully* formed – historical view of seafarers has resulted.[2]

However, in coming to the seagoing labour force from a slightly different angle I have wondered for some time whether if by seeking the 'real Jack Tar', as Isaac

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[1] Jesse Lemisch, 'Jack Tar in the Streets: Merchant Seamen in the Politics of Revolutionary America', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 25/3 (1968), 371-407, at 372.

[2] Several essay collections are generally regarded as seminal in the history of seafaring, namely Rosemary E. Ommer and Gerald Panting, eds., *Working Men who Got Wet: Proceedings of the Fourth Conference of the Atlantic Canada Shipping Project, July 24-July 26, 1980* (St. John's, 1980); Colin Howell and Richard Twomey, eds., *Jack Tar in History: Essays in the History of Maritime Life and Labour* (Fredericton, 1991); and Jaap R. Bruin, Jan Lucassen and Paul C. van Royen, eds., *"Those emblems of hell"?: European Sailors and the Maritime Labour Market 1570-1780* (St. John's, 1997). Particularly influential monographs include Judith Fingard, *Jack in Port: Sailortowns of Eastern Canada* (Toronto, 1982); Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates and the Anglo-American World, 1700-1750* (New York, 1987); Eric W. Sager, *Seafaring Labour: The Merchant Marine of Atlantic Canada, 1820-1914* (Kingston and Montreal, 1989); and Daniel Vickers and Vince Walsh, *Young Men and the Sea: Yankee Seafarers in the Age of Sail* (New Haven, 2007).

Land put it, we have neglected other equally pertinent questions.[3] Recalling Lemisch's phrase, is it not at least as important to ask if *contemporaries* could 'do better' than the Jack Tar stereotype, or, indeed, if they even tried or wanted to 'do better'? Were there advantages to be had from sustaining or propagating it, even if that meant blurring, ignoring or consciously distorting the realities of seafaring? The passage of time and the nature of the surviving evidence make it difficult to draw hard and fast distinctions between ignorance and guile in how seafarers were characterised by different interested parties. Certainly, there were commentators who expended considerable time and effort in sifting the truth from the myth, prompted by various motives, and driven along by fast-changing conditions ashore and afloat; but such undertakings were rarely objective, and their outputs tended to cluster around well-established attitudes to seafarers, whether positive or negative. At each pole exaggerations were commonplace. From the various different strands of debate and discussion emerged a sailor discourse with distinct peaks in those rare moments when seafarers came into the public spotlight, most notably during the Plimsoll agitation of the 1870s.[4] In the face of all this material, and in part because of it, Jack Tar proved to be a very resilient trope.

I am not alone in posing the question of how seafarers in the past were understood by their parent or surrogate societies – but it is a question that deserves to be restated, and the implications of answers to it revisited. My emphasis throughout this paper will be on the British case, with which I am most familiar. The temporal frame will be the 'slightly offset' nineteenth century between the defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte in 1815 and the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. There is little doubt, though, that similar circumstances can be found elsewhere, and at other times.

The paper divides into three sections. It will begin with some brief comments about the framing of the research question, together with a few contextual observations about the maritime labour force. The second section will address the problem of seafarers' occupational identity, noting some of the variables that

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[3] Isaac Land, *War, Nationalism and the British Sailor 1750-1850* (New York, 2009), chapter 1: 'Will the Real Jack Tar Please Stand Up?'.

[4] For an accessible introduction, especially good on the popular media, see Nicolette Jones, *The Plimsoll Sensation: The Great Campaign to Save Lives at Sea* (London, 2006).

fashioned identities, and a few of the more persistent – and likely very familiar -- seafaring tropes or characteristics. Finally, an attempt will be made to determine if any of this had a practical utility; a *political* utility, in particular. This last question assumes that Britain's shipping industry was politicised, at times significantly so. It will see 'utility' largely in terms of advantages that could be gained or maintained by shipowners (employers) in respect of seafarers (employees) or vice versa, though I accept that this is not the only way of measuring 'utility'.

Context: Merchant Shipping and Seafaring

This present paper stems from a much broader survey of British merchant seafaring during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The emphasis of this work has been administration: how different agencies, most notably the state, managed a large and arguably difficult part of the labour force. Naturally, this has brought many encounters with the laws and regulations set up to deal with seafarers. In Britain, the laws governing merchant shipping and seafaring were formidable in size and scope. An indication of how far and how frequently the state intervened in shipping can be found in an official report published in 1876 which enumerated legislative and investigative activity between 1836 and 1875.[5] The list runs to over ninety items. Not all of them had a direct bearing on maritime labour, but a good proportion did. The report's origins are worth noting, for it was a defence against the British Board of Trade's alleged laissez-faire 'neglect' of 'our merchant sailors'. The officials most responsible for shipping and seafaring, belonging to the Marine Department, robustly denied the allegation. The volume of parliamentary business might have been enough to win the argument -- major Acts of Parliament on Merchant Shipping were passed in 1850, 1854, 1894 and 1906, with many amendments, additions and subtractions in between – but it fails to take account of the workload borne by the Marine Department in making this paper system work. Even the harshest critics of maritime legislation would have found it difficult to sustain charges of inactivity, and indeed many within the shipping industry were dismayed by what they felt was the

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[5] British Parliamentary Papers [hereafter BPP], 1876 [C.1398]. *Report to the President of the Board of Trade on Recent Legislation Concerning Merchant Ships and Seamen*.

state's over-activity; but it is rather more difficult to judge the effectiveness of it all. Effectiveness tended to be in the eye of the beholder. Historians too have failed to reach agreement on the efficacy and real extent of industrial regulation, or how this bears on our broader understanding of laissez-faire. Suffice it to say that long lists of statutes, like that cited above, are not necessarily the best guide to impact.[6]

Nevertheless, the bureaucratic footprint left by shipping and seafaring has left numerous sources which preserve people's views on seafarers. The conclusions reached in this paper have been informed by extensive work in published official sources, unpublished files from the Board of Trade archives and the press.[7] Seafarer 'tropes' or characteristics are frequently found in these sources. In order to capture material intended for a more general audience – not necessarily a genuinely 'popular' readership, but less industry oriented – this paper builds on those foundations by making extensive use of digitised periodical literature available in several commercially produced packages.[8] The growth of the periodical press in Britain was one of the remarkable features of nineteenth-century publishing and reading.[9] Many hundreds of titles were produced, some very short-lived, catering for different tastes and pockets in what must have been a very saturated market. The published output was eclectic in the extreme, even within particular titles.

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[6] The influence of laissez-faire in British policy, not least in the search for forerunners of the Welfare State, is a contentious subject. For convincing arguments against counting statutes and a useful summary of the classic contributions to the debate see P.W.J. Bartrip, 'State Intervention in Mid-Nineteenth Century Britain: Fact or Fiction?', *Journal of British Studies*, 23 (1983), 63-83. Research on industrial regulation has been dominated by factories, workshops, mines and railways; but for shipping see John Armstrong and David M. Williams, 'The Steamboat, Safety and the State: Government Reaction to New Technology in a Period of Laissez-Faire', *Mariner's Mirror*, 89/2 (2003), 167-84.

[7] Published outputs include 'Health and Safety aboard British Merchant Ships: The Case of First aid Instruction, 1881-1908', in R. Gorski, ed., *Maritime Labour: Contributions to the History of Work at Sea, 1500-2000* (Amsterdam, 2007), 119-40; 'Employers' Liability and the Victorian Seaman'; *Mariner's Mirror*, 95/1 (2009), 62-75; 2012: 'Protecting British Seafarers on the Continent: The Export of Attitudes, Ideals and Systems in the Late Nineteenth Century', in R. Gorski and B. Söderqvist, eds., *The Parallel Worlds of the Seafarer* (Gothenburg, 2012); and « Systèmes d'épargne et retraites des marins du commerce au Royaume-Uni, 1747-1931 », *Revue d'Histoire Maritime,* 18 (2014). 133-60.

[8] The principal collections used in this research are *19th Century UK Periodicals* (Gale Cengage), Series 1: New Readerships and Series 2: Empire; and *British Periodicals* (ProQuest), Collections I and II.

[9] For a useful introduction to see Joanne Shattock and Michael Wolff, eds., *The Victorian Periodical Press: Samplings and Soundings* (Leicester, 1982). Numerous individual titles have been treated in the journal *Victorian Periodicals Review*.

Sometimes pieces were topical, but not always. Serious journalism or social commentary might appear next to literary whimsy or pure entertainment. Mining periodicals for historical 'data' is not without its problems, here exacerbated by modern editorial decisions about what to digitise. In dealing with questions of perception and identity, however, the effort was judged to be worthwhile as a supplement to the official record. None of the titles searched were specifically concerned with shipping, which has the virtue of tapping into material intended for different readerships. Some of the material was clearly written by 'experts' – but a good proportion of it was unattributed (penned by 'staff' writers most probably); and sometimes it was dressed up, rather disingenuously, as the first-hand testimony of seafarers. Sadly these *faux* sailor narratives do not compensate for the lack of authentic testimony by common seamen, though memoirs by former officers abound. Quantitative textual analysis, the frequency of certain words and phrases, for example, was not undertaken but might in future yield interesting results.

For the sake of brevity, the industry and labour force discussed in this material can be distilled to a few key points. British merchant shipping in the century after 1815 was kaleidoscopic in its variety, but expanding overall; it was increasingly capital intensive; and it was caught up in an extended cycle of technological change in which the obvious headline was the prolonged, but ultimately decisive shift in the balance between sail and steam tonnage on the register. The pace and intensity of change varied, but it was a constant underlying force in shipping. Each influenced the operation of shipping, its business organisation and, crucially, the structure and practical experience of its labour force.

Concerning the seagoing workforce more specifically, again a few very obvious contextual points might be helpful in interpreting the images and identity elements discussed below. Government efforts to count sailors, and at times even to track their movements, clearly reveal the outlines of labour employed on British registered vessels.[10] Knowledge, however, did not necessarily bring *understanding* by society at large, whether through ignorance or myopia. The seagoing workforce was large, perhaps surprisingly so. Summary totals for the period 1854-1900 published in the

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[10] Valerie Burton, 'Counting Seafarers: The Published Records of the Registry of Merchant Seamen, 1849-1913', *Mariner's Mirror,* 71/3 (1985), 305-20.

annual *Tables Showing the Progress of Merchant Shipping* ranged between 160,000 (1854) and 210,000 (early 1890s), averaging around 200,000 people employed in all capacities. Second, the workforce was hierarchical (by custom and usage) and highly segmented (by function), to which the adoption of steam added considerably. Third, the workforce was cosmopolitan. This was hardly a new development, for sailors had always been among the most mobile of workers, but the significant foreign element of the labour force became a persistent topic in the sailor discourse, and a cause of concern for those who hankered after a return to the protected markets of the Navigation System. Fourth, the workforce was exposed to relatively high risk. Safety and protection were the major drivers of legislative intervention, and were large subjects in their own right. More than any other aspect of shipping, loss of life at sea was capable of capturing the popular imagination. Fifth, as the period wore on, there was a marked souring of industrial relations within the shipping industry as the waterfront was permeated by the so-called 'New Unionism' of the 1880s. Conflict was evident long before then, but by the end of that decade the demands of labour and of capital were each articulated by much more capable organisations, respectively the first national seamen's union (National Amalgamated Sailors' and Firemen's Union) and the Shipping Federation. Sixth, and last, merchant seafarers were subject to a good deal of navally-influenced rhetoric and debate about Britain's maritime strategic interests, often couched in terms of nation and empire.

Against this backdrop, the immediate issues dealt with in this paper stem from the politicisation of merchant seafaring once government interposed itself between shipowners and seamen. This had long been the case as shipping was a source of national prosperity and security. From around the 1830s, however, there was a marked increase in intervention, though it was not entered into lightly. So far as maritime labour was concerned, the agency of the state placed an already distinctive occupation group on a unique legal footing – with one fact reinforcing the other. Perceived interference in the employer's freedom of action often brought complaint from that quarter. Seafarers, too, occasionally lashed out against the long arm of the state, most notably in 1851 with the 'tyrannous' provisions of the Mercantile Marine

Act.[11] Finding a politically acceptable balance between voluntarism and compulsion left successive governments, and the Board of Trade's permanent officials, with some painful decisions to make in the face of growing public concern about the plight of seafarers. This was especially so following Samuel Plimsoll's campaign of the 1870s. Policy-making in this area was informed by frequent consultation with industry representatives, and these exercises, together with the welter of available statistics, usually produced contradictory evidence, rumblings of protest, and an excuse for vacillation. Progress could be described as glacial, both in its speed and ability to ride over existing interests.

Yet, in spite of the obstacles, we find that shipping and seafaring *were* heavily regulated. So far as labour was concerned, the state assumed a role in the hiring and discharge of seafarers, the payment of wages, assuring the competency of masters and officers, defining conditions of service, ensuring safety, and so on. The protection of seafarers – from unacceptable usage, *and* from themselves – was a recurrent objective, to which I will return later. Government also provided seafarers with opportunities to aspire to the social 'values' of the day; self-reliance; self-improvement; thrift; and moderation – in sum, 'respectability'. Where aspiration failed, the state provided a code of shipboard discipline which embraced officers and ratings alike, but which left undisputed authority in the hands of the master and his lawful commands.

Overall, then, the character of the resulting legislation was firmly patriarchal. This is somewhat paradoxical, for although state interference in seafaring ran ahead of shore-based labour in certain respects, it lagged behind in others. For example, seamen were specifically excluded from some of the more important mainstream reforms of the 1880s and 1890s. Two arguments were commonly put forward to justify this situation. First, seamen were already catered for, and indeed *privileged by*, the Merchant Shipping Acts. Second, the peculiar character of work at sea was impossible to harmonize with work ashore. The net result is simple and worth re-

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[11] The seamen's complaints can be found in BPP, 1851 (334). *Memorials to the Committee of Privy Council for Trade against the Operation of the Mercantile Marine Act which relates to the Engagement and Discharge of Crews at Shipping Offices.*

iterating: under the Merchant Shipping Acts (used here, and throughout, as a convenient shorthand), the seafarer assumed a peculiar legal identity.

Occupational Identity

Having sketched the context, I will move on to discuss 'occupational identity' before considering some of the evidence for its 'political utility' or 'capital'. By way of simple 'working out', identity can be difficult for historians to get at because it is constructed internally. Second, it is also socialised – that is, the process by which we learn norms and behaviours from each other, through observation and experience, or by deliberate instruction. For example, one might be 'bred to the sea' in a general sense, but also conditioned to a more specific work culture in a particular workplace. Third, identity is also fashioned by others and therefore projected externally. Perhaps it would be better to describe this as 'image'; but in either case it is a labelling process, and no less real – and no less potentially influential – for being constructed by outsiders who may have had limited understanding of the group in question. Fourth, it is also absolutely clear that image/identity is mutable – it can be actively cultivated; it can be adaptable; it can be negotiated or contested. Before going any further it should be clarified that this discussion is restricted to ratings or common seamen, and therefore excludes masters and officers of the merchant service. Officers had their own distinctive professional identity and distinctive sectional interests promoted by societies like the Shipmasters and Officers Federation and the Merchant Service Guild, and in organs such as *Nautical Magazine*.

Yet even if officers are discounted, it may be legitimately asked how it was possible for such a large and diverse labour force to be characterised in any meaningful generic way? For example, what did the coasting sailorman have in common with the deep-sea shellback? It could be said that the only common denominators were the facts of being at sea, and the fusion of laws and customary practices which defined working life afloat. Undoubtedly this made the ship a very distinctive workplace. The shipboard regime was probably more intrusive than comparable shore-based occupations, and perhaps it was 'total', though objections

have been raised against this view.[12] Important distinctions, however, remained within the floating population: a sailor or Jack Tar identity could not really exist without a good deal of elision and simplification, in which the subtle contrasts of shipboard law and custom were unlikely to have been at the forefront, and which, if my impression is correct, prioritised the deep-sea, long-voyage *sailor* in the strict sense of the word.

Among other things, historians (for the past) and sociologists (for the recent past and present) have tried to establish if this regime produced or exaggerated any physical, moral, psychological or emotional characteristics among seagoing workers. Here we ask if contemporary observers posed and tried to answer the same question.

When it comes to occupational identity, we must first of all point to the defining importance of skill and knowledge, as well as shared experience of a given workplace. The relevant literature, much of it applied rather than historical, suggests that skill acquisition is central to the formation of work-related identity.[13] The periodical evidence sampled for this paper can be imprecise on this pivotal issue. Some contemporaries had no problem whatsoever in speaking about a distinct 'race of seamen' who might also be 'workmen' – that is belonging to the general ranks of unskilled and semi-skilled labour.[14] As an aside, this prompts some big questions about the collective identity of seafarers and, even more so, their group solidarity. On the one hand, 'skill' as a defining quality of identity is problematic, as we shall see. On the other hand, how, if at all, can elements of a generic 'working class' identity (for want of a better term; and if there was such a thing) be disentangled from those elements that were occupation-specific? This in turn raises a number of fundamental questions about seafaring itself – not least the degree and extent of occupational specialisation, as might be inferred from the length, frequency and

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[12] Heide Gersteberger, 'Men Apart: The Concept of "Total Institution" and the Analysis of Seafaring', *International Journal of Maritime History*, 8/1 (1996), 173-82.

[13] FAME Consortium, 'Introduction and Overview', in Alan Brown, Simone Kirpal and Felix Rauner, eds., *Identities at Work* (Dordrecht, 2007), 34.

[14] Of many instances see the comments of Cuthbert Laws, BPP, 1903 [Cd. 1608]. *Report of the Committee appointed by the Board of Trade to Inquire into Certain Questions affecting the Mercantile Marine. Volume II: Minutes of Evidence*, 677, q.21,573.

spatial patterns of service. Put simply, for how many of the 200,000-or so people counted in British employment statistics was seafaring the sole or primary source of income? Does this matter? Was a seagoing identity weakened (or reinforced?) by seasonal or part-time employment? Without further research, especially career reconstruction, it is easier to pose questions than supply answers.

Nonetheless, whether viewed from the shore, or from the ship's foc'sle, few would doubt that much of the seafarer's identity sprang from a specific competency, reinforced by visual emblems, language and a matrix of stock attributes such as courage and hardiness. This is consistently the case across all types of evidence. To cite from a piece published in January 1883, 'Monkey-like agility, heroic courage, dare-devil emulation, were needed in the fearful crises to which every sailing-ship was exposed.'[15] This is absolutely typical of the identity given to the nineteenth-century sailor, albeit with a characteristic fuzziness.

At times this took a rather utopian turn. As declared in a piece from 1851: 'The fact is, that a sailor is generally in a true, real position – has certain work to do – certain people to obey. There are no false struggles, no sham pretensions, afloat.'[16] A few years earlier, in a different publication, work at sea was compared favourably with work on land. The lives of seafarers were more 'genial' than those of agricultural labourers: 'I believe that in proportion to his education, the seaman is indeed greatly superior to any other class of natural livers, and that nature in this element teaches both forcibly and by calm negations.' Following from this was a 'manly energy and directness of view'. The anonymous author offers an almost anthropological analysis of seafarers erring towards the nobility of the savage.[17] Though characterisations such as these surely captured something of the essence of life and work at sea, the skill of the seafarer was not much discussed in relation to the formal hierarchies of the floating community. Besides the earning power conferred by a particular rating or job, modern scholarship has reasonably suggested

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[15] Anon., 'Ships and Sailors', *Chambers's Journal*, 20, no. 995 (20 Jan. 1883), 33-36 at 33.

[16] Anon., 'The Sailors' Home', *Household Words*, 2, no. 52 (March 1851), 612-15 at 613.

[17] Anon., 'A Yarn over the Capstan, in the Second Dog-Watch', *Chambers Edinburgh Journal*, New Series, 147 (24 Oct. 1846), 257-61 at 257.

a relationship between self-identity/self-worth and being seen to be able to perform duties to a given standard.[18]

However important the occupational traits of skill, hardiness and stoicism were, they not taken for granted; and nor were they unimpeachable. Within the evidence, and especially in the periodical literature, can be found a strong current of 'telling the reader how it was', and, equally, 'how it should be'. This vein of material is particularly important for the present paper, for it supports a questioning attitude towards some elements of the sailor trope. The premise of such writings was the need to overturn a flawed 'popular' myth of 'Jack Tar', and then, having revealed the truth, to argue the case for proper understanding and reform of this strange creature. Among the articles are professed 'true accounts' of life at sea, designed to overturn a view of the sailor's life as 'all fun, frolic and happiness', where the ship was a stage for the sailor's stoic (and at times heroic) performance of a daily drama away from the eyes and experience of shore dwellers.[19] Though they are sometimes of indifferent quality, and some are frankly very poor, these accounts often tried to correct that 'idyllic' aspect of the seafarer's life and identity.

One example will suffice. Having provided a conventional description of life at sea, the author addressed his readers with the following:

'Landsmen! do you now envy and begrudge a living to the poor blue-jackets, who risk limb and life to carry on your commerce with the uttermost ends of the earth, and who man the wooden walls that alone render Britain the invincible mistress of the world!'[20]

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[18] Commonly found in the staple works on merchant seafaring (see note 2 above) but also in respect of other branches of maritime labour, for example Trevor Lummis, *Occupation and Society: The East Anglian Fishermen 1880-1914* (Cambridge, 1985). The classic modern study is Knut Weibust, *Deep Sea Sailors: A Study in Maritime Ethnology* (2nd edn., Stockholm, 1976).

[19] Anon., 'Twenty-Four Hours of a Sailor's Life at Sea', *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal*, New Series, 17, no. 431 (April 1852), 221-3 at 221.

[20] Anon., 'Twenty-Four Hours of a Sailor's Life at Sea', 223. References to 'blue-jackets' and 'wooden walls' in a piece purporting to be a first-hand account of life on a merchant sailing ship demonstrate the routine conflation between the Royal Navy and the mercantile marine discussed below.

In this particular rendering, from 1852, the reader was invited to pity 'Jack' as a virtual 'slave' whilst simultaneously praising him as the nation's 'saviour'. It surely did more to reinforce than to reinvent elements of the seafarers' identity.

One of the most insightful of these pieces appeared in 1869. It was one of a series of substantial articles published in the late 1860s under the name 'Commander RN' which have been attributed to Commander William Dawson (1831-1911). Dawson was a naval officer of wide experience who in retirement, from 1870, became deeply involved with the British Missions to Seamen, acting as general secretary from 1874 until 1904, and renowned for his 'whole-hearted devotion for everything affecting the welfare of seamen'.[21] In 1869 Dawson observed very astutely that

> 'The British seaman is a sad sufferer at the hands of his friends, the British public. He and his calling are too often viewed through a sentimental medium of a very poetical character, which raises him above the wants of ordinary mortals, and his calling above the laws and requirements of ordinary occupations.'[22]

Here the point of contention was the distinction *between* sea and shore – between the 'normal' and the 'exceptional'. Later in the same piece, Dawson also tackled the Jekyll and Hyde identity *within* seafaring – the deeply entrenched 'double identity' of Jack afloat and Jack ashore, the first steady and dependable, the second wildly profligate: '[O]f what other profession', Dawson asked, 'would it be presumed that two such opposite characters could co-exist in the same persons?' However perceptive Dawson was, his views were hardly disinterested; it must be remembered that seafarers were 'clients' of the movement he did so much to promote.

At this point it is perhaps worth reiterating that my chief interest lies in merchant seamen, but in the British case – and perhaps elsewhere too -- discussion of the different branches within seafaring could become confused. One of the most common errors of the period was to conflate the Royal Navy and the merchant

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[21] Obituary, *The Times*, 17 Oct. 1911. *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals*, ed. Walter E. Houghton and Jean H. Ingerland, Volume 5 (Toronto, 1989), 211.

[22] A Commander, RN, 'British Merchant Seamen', *Fraser's Magazine*, 79, no. 470 (Feb. 1869), 169-87 at 169.

marine as if they were one and the same thing. Until the 1850s, in fairness, the distinction between the two was blurred, because they drew from a common pool of manpower; but it became sharper after 1852 with the advent of long-term naval contracts and the Navy's emphasis on recruitment and training from boyhood.[23] At around the same time, the relationship between these two branches of the sea service – which by mid-century was felt to be rather dysfunctional -- was reinvigorated and formalised through the foundation of the Royal Naval Reserve in 1859. Nevertheless,

> 'A landsman, in thinking of a seaman...invariably looks upon him as being employed in the navy. His notions of a seaman are borrowed from the stage, from pictures, or from a trip to Portsmouth; and he has come to the conclusion that a seaman is the costume, and that all seamen are alike. Now a merchant seaman would very much object to such conclusion...'.[24]

This piece, from 1867, was part of that broader effort to educate people by challenging well-worn stereotypes and misapprehensions. How much impact it had is almost impossible to measure, but the need for this kind of literature in itself says something quite important about society's comprehension of the seafarer.

The Uses of 'Jack Tar'?

Many more colourful examples could be quoted from the periodicals, but enough has been said to sketch a definition of 'occupational identity' which places great emphasis on the contribution to it of distinctive skills and character traits thought to be encouraged by life and work at sea. It has also been shown that there was a body of literature designed to educate readers, and in some cases to renegotiate

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[23] R. Taylor, 'Manning the Royal Navy: The Reform of the Recruiting System, 1852-1862', *Mariner's Mirror*, 44/4 (1958), 302-13; and 45/1 (1959), 46-58.

[24] Anon., 'Jack Afloat', *London Review of Politics, Society, Literature, Art, and Science*, 15, no. 379 (Oct. 1867), 374-5 at 374. Also: 'The gentleman who swings upon a board, with a hat at the back of his head, with one leg in the air, and holding a bottle in his hand, may be accepted by the vulgar as a very faithful and lively representation of an English seaman. But so far from such a portrait being true of sailors in general, it is barely even true of them in a few particular instances.'

with them what it meant to be a seafarer. Equally, the ossified Jack Tar was much in evidence, too. Much of this material was didactic, but also reformist in character and frequently religiously inspired. Crucially, however, it did not hold a consistent line on perhaps the most important question of all: was the seafarer different? This was a question with real, practical implications. The extreme positions – to cultivate difference, or take on a common 'labouring' identity – could be 'played'. My contention is that they were.

Keeping seafarers apart – by fostering and maintaining a strong and distinctive occupational identity – had the advantage of setting a high value on labour which was scarce and nationally significant. Perhaps this, along with the rhetoric of 'old debts' owed to the seafarer from Nelson's time, gave him a strong claim to the nation's sympathy in the pursuit of better working conditions afloat. In turn, so the argument went, better conditions shipboard would help to keep up the stock of British seafarers at a time when there were serious concerns about the future supply of native-born labour.[25] In a piece entitled 'We Mariners of England' readers were reminded that a seaman was obviously not a tailor or a shoemaker, and, without mentioning anything so technical as a manning ratio, the sham seaman author contended that the hiring of landsmen 'skulkers' weakened the workforce, made conditions worse aboard ship, and made more work for experienced hands.[26] His plea was that 'The country knows we are no cowards...and the country should take better care of us'. Occupational distinction at this broad level was built into the notions of 'Tom Landsman' and 'Jack Seaman'.[27] In reality, maritime labour was more complex than this.

The expansion of steam navigation had an impact on this traditionally clear-cut occupational divide. So far as the popular imagination was concerned – and

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[25] David M. Williams, 'The Quality, Skill and Supply of Maritime Labour: Causes of Concern in Britain, 1850-1914', in Lewis R. Fischer, Harald Hamre, Poul Holm, Jaap R. Bruijn, eds., *The North Sea: Twelve Essays on Social History of Maritime Labour* (Stavanger, 1992), 41-58. Reprinted in *Merchants and Mariners: The Selected Writings of David M. Williams,* Research in Maritime History, 18 (St. John's, 2000), 273-92.

[26] Anon., 'We Mariners of England', *Household Words*, 6, no. 153 (26 Feb. 1853), 553-7 at 553. This claims to be a seaman's report of forecastle talk noted down by his wife, against the backdrop of the unpopular Mercantile Marine Act of 1850.

[27] For example, Commander, RN, 'British Merchant Seamen', 171.

arguably within the shipping industry, to some degree -- the blow to Jack Tar may have been softened by a time lag between the adoption of new technology and firm comprehension of what it meant for the sailor and the kind of work he was likely to do. Nevertheless, during the second half of the nineteenth century it was impossible to escape fears about the deterioration of the British seaman, which in part stemmed from anxieties over deskilling and the abandonment of sailing as an art. The ensuing 'crisis' invited people to negotiate, and then renegotiate, the seafarer's identity, against the backdrop of a dwindling supply of native manpower, and fears for the future of the so-called 'nursery' for naval reserves in wartime.

Within the industry, broadly, these changes were dealt with in two ways that are well-evidenced in other settings too.[28] One response was to construct a 'golden age' in which sailing ships and sailors were idealised. Seafarers who had lived their lives and made their reputations in sail naturally sought to find a positive occupational identity in the face of change. There was also the active cultivation of 'differential identity' within the maritime workforce which sharpened group identity among the 'skilled' or 'practical' sailors in distinction to the 'unskilled' deck hands, firemen, trimmers and other 'ship navvies'.[29] Pressure to 'conserve' the Able Seaman – that is the *British-born* AB – was channelled into a variety of suggestions and demands. Chief among them was the revival of compulsory apprenticeship which had been abandoned in 1849.[30] The provision of training ships at the country's expense was advocated. Compulsory examinations had been introduced for masters and mates in 1850 and there was some support for extending formal qualification to the rating of AB, along with a mechanism to ensure proof of entitlement, such as a continuous record of service. Though they were not mutually exclusive approaches, improving and ensuring quality in the domestic workforce ran parallel with proposals to restrict foreign employment aboard British ships.

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[28] Points similar to those in this paragraph were also made in Gorski, « Systèmes d'épargne et retraites des marins » specifically stemming from the seafarer trait of financial extravagance.

[29] For representative comments about the 'true sailor' and the 'ship navvy' see Frank T. Bullen, *The Men of the Merchant Service* (London, 1900), Chapter 30 ('The A.B. (His Position)').

[30] Valerie C. Burton, 'Apprenticeship Regulation and Maritime Labour in the Nineteenth Century British Merchant Marine', *International Journal of Maritime History*, 1/2 (1989), 29-49.

Questions such as these were political by nature. They required legislation, funding and a will to carry them through from policy to practice. Stakeholder co-operation was also required. Moreover, as industry-specific issues, even important ones, they were unlikely to capture the imagination of the general public and therefore have not left much impression on the periodical evidence sampled for this paper. Well-informed analysis of the sort offered by Dawson was rare. The seaman's deterioration, however, was also grounded in anxieties that had much wider currency and which keyed into changing norms and values in British society. Deterioration was not merely restricted to the slow extinction of a specific competency or skill set, but came to be associated with a larger and highly revealing set of sailor traits. Thus, even in the passing of the peculiar art of sailing there were other reasons to suspect, and lament, that seafarers were 'different' from other workmen. 'Different' may be taken as a thinly-veiled code for 'difficult', most notably in relation to the sailor's physical, moral and spiritual condition.

How this discourse of concern mapped onto practical policy-oriented debate can be seen especially clearly during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. There were calls for harsher (or more lenient) shipboard discipline; disagreements over whether desertion should continue to be treated as a criminal act; conflicts about the extension of employers' accident liability from places of work ashore to ships; discussions about schemes to encourage seafarers to save their wages and for their protection whilst ashore; and demands for the improvement of living and working conditions aboard ship. All of this prompted people to revisit an old, but important question. Were seafarers inherently vulnerable, because of their occupation (inspiring pity); or were they simply disadvantaged by their lot in comparison to shore workers (offering hope)? Answers to this question were only likely to be found by studying Jack Tar in the round, and so against the positive identity elements noted above were weighed the negative outcomes of shipboard life and separation from shore society. The list included naivety, superstition, improvidence and excess – the sum was the seafarer's frequent abrogation of adult responsibility. The hope/pity debate was played out in many forms and was so important because it tested the boundaries already referred to between normal and exceptional. Were seafarers simply 'working men who got wet'? Should the state step in to protect them or the interests of their employers?

As the great maritime lobbyist Samuel Plimsoll so clearly demonstrated in the 1870s, this was in part a battle for the nation's sympathy – a fight for the moral high ground. Reformers of a certain persuasion traded on hope, rather than pity, that 'Jack' could be improved and that he was deserving of the effort. They praised the courage, sacrifice and flawed humanity of seafarers, and therefore emphasised certain elements of the 'identity matrix' such as naivety, helplessness, and other-worldliness. The overwhelming sense, presented almost anthropologically, seems to have been that seafarers were deserving of special treatment because of certain traits that were exaggerated by their work and lifestyles. The fault was not theirs. This cost of this well-meaning support was a particularly enduring construction of the childlike seafarer who could be lumped together with society's other vulnerable groups. The image of the hapless Jack also had cracks in it which were exposed and exploited by employers during the industrial conflicts of the 1890s and 1900s. Shipowners were quick to offer their own causes and cures for Jack's faults. In one especially bitter article from January 1891 it was argued that the failings of seamen were innate; Jack had been known 'for ages' as a certain 'kind of creature'; and he was not likely to change from 'the fickle being the seagods have made him'.[31] Setting seafarers apart as different and difficult could serve various purposes.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to revisit constructions of seafarers' occupational identity, most recognisably embodied in 'Jack Tar' or merely 'Jack', in respect of political debates and policy development in the spheres of merchant shipping and seafaring in Britain in the nineteenth century. Scholars have rightly challenged this stereotype as part of the process of better understanding the seagoing workforce. Seafarers have been revealed as a complex and variegated group; no less so than other parts of the labour force. What Valerie Burton called the 'Myth of Bachelor Jack' has been exploded, though some associations of 'Jack Tar' have proven extremely resilient.[32]

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[31] Anon., 'The "Union" Jack', *National Observer*, 5, no. 15 (31 Jan. 1891), 272-3 at 273.

[32] Valerie Burton, 'The Myth of Bachelor Jack: Masculinity, Patriachy and Seafaring Labour', in Howell and Twomey, eds., J*ack Tar in History*, 178-98.

My aim in this paper has not been to rehabilitate the stereotype, but rather to examine how the distinctive occupational identity of seafarers could be used by stakeholder groups at the time to promote their own objectives or to impede the objectives of others in debates, with practical implications for control over the labour force and in their living and working conditions.

On the basis of work carried out beforehand, I began this project with a number of questions, and maybe one or two assumptions, about the 'occupational identity' of seafarers and the uses to which it was put. The main lesson to be drawn from this paper is that however inadequate Jack Tar was as a reflection of life and work at sea in this period, it could be a powerful 'brand' for employers, workers and government alike, with uses in the social and political spheres. There was no single Jack, but rather a matrix of identity elements which could be emphasised, contested and reconfigured according to need. To be sure, there was some readjustment in identity, some shifting around within the matrix, in response to changing conditions. 'Sailor' and 'seaman', 'blue-jacket' and 'mercantile Jack', were often used rather loosely; but they carried particular meaning which was capable of being adapted to a changing industry, a changing society, and to a moving political agenda.

Referring back to the comments of Commander Dawson from 1869, he had been moved to write because of what he judged to be power of public observation, and the 'strong moral power' of the press.[33] His key themes were unexceptional: the need for humanity, justice and equality between 'Jack Seaman' and 'Tom Landsman'. Respectable men should be provided with respectable conditions: seafarers *were* and *could be* respectable. Dawson's real insight, however, was to note the danger of building up exaggerated images of the seaman, even among (perhaps especially among) his 'sentimental friends' – and this a few years before the Plimsoll mania of the mid 1870s. Why did this creature need the state's help to protect him?

> '...it would do violence to the imaginative faculties to suppose that the "ideal"
> Jack had any care for his own life, or that his death could be of any

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[33] Commander, RN, 'British Merchant Seamen', 171.

consequence to anybody else, or whether it be simply because the effect of legal negligence or ignorance...'[34]

Here we have a full house of tropes: the seafarer as uncaring, uncared for, disconnected, and voiceless.

To complete his analysis, however, Dawson might have added that a strategy of *not* hiding the seaman's faults, but of asking readers to understand and engage with them, also carried risks. A few moments ago I referred, in the abstract, to the alternative strategies of keeping seafarers apart or of reaching out to a common labouring identity. During the closing decades of the nineteenth century, in Britain, there is evidence that these strategies were in circulation and were consciously played to earn political capital. In practice, being kept 'apart' meant working within the remit of the Merchant Shipping Acts. This was almost certain to leave the seafarer moving at a different pace, and perhaps even in different directions, from workmen ashore. By the 1880s, and perhaps earlier, this did not fit too well with the objectives of the seamen themselves, for whom better pay and conditions came to include securing parity with other workmen, so far as it was possible. Shipowners, on the other hand, tried to restrict the degree of bleeding between the shipping laws and mainstream legislation. Even if the Shipping Acts were burdensome and 'vexatious', the owners saw advantages in keeping their men apart, within the bounds of a familiar regime, in which they wielded considerable influence. By and large, that agenda was dominated by the tug-of-war over extending or relaxing the regulatory regime. Here, in shaping the day-to-day conditions and expectations of work in the merchant marine, was where stereotype and reality collided.

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[34] Commander, RN, 'British Merchant Seamen', 171.