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FRIENDS AND FELLOW SEAMEN!:

TYNESIDE TRADE UNIONISM, 1790-1800

by

Lori B. Anthony

B.A., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1979

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

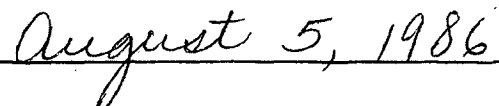
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History

Friends and Fellow Seamen!: Tyneside Trade Unionism, 1790-1800  
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The Tyneside collier seamen present a problem for the traditional interpretations of English trade unions in the eighteenth century. Their example clearly demonstrates that the attitudes and methods, if not the ultimate form, of defensive trade unionism predated the repeal of the Combination Acts and the advent of the industrial factory system in the nineteenth century. More importantly, this trade unionism existed among workers who do not conform to the accepted historiographic interpretations of the labor "aristocracy" of the eighteenth century.

The seamen's organization was intrinsically linked to both the economic structure of the seaborne coal trade and the social basis of the Tyneside maritime community. These merchant seamen enjoyed a distinctive status because of their expertise in manning the sailing ships of the collier fleet, which was recognized as the nursery of British naval seamen. These factors, and the moderate methods and effective leadership of their organization, enabled them to defend their economic interests against the Tyneside ship-owners, the local magistrates and officers of the British Army and Navy.

Because their trade union was proscribed by English law, the seamen continually faced the problems of a labor group organized only on an extralegal and ad hoc basis. But the decade of the 1790s presented other peculiar difficulties and was particularly critical in the further development of the collier seamen's trade unionism. During this period the seamen were faced with a rising cost of living, the threat of impressment into the Royal Navy and the perceived association of all popular disturbances, including labor strikes, with radical political agitation.

These conclusions are based on research from both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources, including contemporary pamphlets, newspapers, printed manuscripts, unpublished manuscript materials and government documents, provide detailed accounts of the seamen's trade unionism and give insight into contemporary opinions and perceptions of the seamen's activities. Particularly informative is the correspondence between the Home Office and the local Tyneside officials contained in the Home Office Papers and the papers of the Tyne and Wear Public Records Office.

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"The Shipping of this Port . . . has been long situated in a very alarming and critical Predicament, by the reiterated, arbitrary and dangerous Attempts made by the Seamen of this Northern Navigation, to raise the Price of their Wages, without any just Cause or Reason, but solely originating from their own Caprice, and Humour."

A Newcastle shipowner, 1790

## INTRODUCTION

According to labor historians, one of the first recorded uses of the term "to strike," in the sense of a refusal to continue work, occurred during a labor dispute among Tyneside collier seamen in 1768.<sup>1</sup> The belief that this term was nautical in its derivation, presumably on the analogy of a ship striking its mast or sail, has persisted despite the fact that it did not originate with the collier seamen. Instead, these merchant seamen used the commoner phrase "to turn out" or the local variants "to stick" or "to stop," which were peculiar to Durham and Northumberland. The workers who most often "struck" in the eighteenth century were those engaged in the non-maritime trades.<sup>2</sup> Whatever the true origin of this term, the perceived association of the collier seamen with forced work stoppages is a clear indication that these workers were recognized, even by their contemporaries, as pre-eminent in the early English labor movement.

From a Marxian perspective, the early development of collier seamen's trade unionism appears to be anachronistic. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels characterized the pre-industrial eighteenth century as an idyllic golden age of benevolent cooperation between masters and labor. Marx and Engels argued that the recognition of the necessity for defensive organizations to protect the interests of



labor occurred only with the concentration and exploitation of labor under the industrial factory system. The sense of labor solidarity and the creation of a working class consciousness were products of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

Sidney and Beatrice Webb disagreed with the Marxian interpretation. The Webbs traced the origins of the early labor unions to the numerous local trade and craft societies extant before the Industrial Revolution. The Webbs, however, have been accused by some modern historians of inadequately accounting for the development of trade unionism in the eighteenth century. V.L. Allen claimed that the Webbs ignored the basic economic and social forces which stimulated the growth of of trade unions and that their emphasis on permanent forms of organization caused them to neglect the more ephemeral aspects of the labor movement. It is true that the Webbs' research into the earliest manifestations of trade unions was not extensive because their primary interest was in the labor movement after the passage of the Combination Acts of 1799 and 1800. The Webbs, however, did not contribute to the naive, but widely-held, belief that trade unions and labor conflict originated only after the advent of industrialization.<sup>4</sup> On the contrary, they argued that "the earliest permanent combinations of wage-earners in England precede the factory system by half a century."<sup>5</sup> The Webbs recognized that the basic social and economic conditions underlying the growth of trade unionism

existed in the eighteenth century: the widening disparity of interests of capital and labor, increasing economic competition and exploitation, workers' grievances concerning wages, working conditions and the terms of employment, and the disintegration of protective trade regulations and traditional social norms. Rather than creating the conditions which helped foster the growth of trade unions, the industrial factory system only intensified these pre-existing tendencies.<sup>6</sup>

As E.P. Thompson demonstrated, unskilled factory workers were only a minority of the English labor force in the eighteenth and much of the nineteenth centuries. George Rudé, Henry Pelling, G.D.H. Cole and A.E. Musson argued that in the eighteenth century the most stable and effective forms of labor organization could be created only by highly skilled and relatively highly paid workers. These workers formed the labor "aristocracy" of the early trade union movement. Their narrow sectional and occupational interests and methods of organization formed the bases of English trade unionism until the late nineteenth century. The scarcity value of their skills enabled these workers to extract concessions from their employers and their higher wages allowed them to contribute to box clubs and friendly societies. These mutual benefit societies flourished among the skilled artisans; in 1797 Frederick Morton Eden wrote that "since the commencement of the present century friendly

societies have gradually extended to most parts of Great Britain." In 1793, Parliament recognized them by Rose's Friendly Societies Act, which gave them legal status and protected their funds. The ostensible function of friendly societies was to insure their members against the economically detrimental effects of sickness and unemployment. However, most also had industrial objectives: limiting the number of workers engaged in a particular trade, enforcing the rules of apprenticeship, and promoting policies to prevent local unemployment from forcing down wages. The dividing line between friendly societies and illegal labor combinations remained unclear, and workers combining for wage-bargaining purposes could use the organization and discipline of a friendly society as a legal disguise for their activities. The ranks of the skilled artisans also included a higher proportion of literate workers who could organize, publicize, petition and oversee the accounts of their mutual benefit societies. Methods such as an organized strike or peaceful petitioning for redress of grievances were more readily undertaken by those workers bound by the common professional interests of a particular trade or by those more able to find support among the local magistrates or in Parliament.<sup>7</sup>

The Tyneside collier seamen do not fit neatly into this definition of the eighteenth century labor aristocracy. Although they were highly skilled workers who could use

their expertise to gain concessions from the shipowners in labor disputes, they were not highly paid workers. Their wages in 1792 were among the lowest paid at Tyneside. The demands of their trade did not require a high degree of literacy as compared to other skilled artisans and craftsmen. The early development of collier seamen's trade unionism and the success they achieved in labor disputes were all the more anomalous because they did not formalize or legitimize their organization into a friendly society until 1798.<sup>8</sup>

Despite these apparent discrepancies, the Tyneside collier seamen had certain distinct advantages over other laborers which help to explain their successful trade unionism. These merchant seamen enjoyed a distinctive status, both locally and nationally, which resulted from the vital function they performed in the sea-borne coal trade. Labor unrest among them invariably had national implications through its effects on the fuel supply of the Metropolis. In addition, the merchant service's inextricable link to the Royal Navy as the nursery of British seamen elevated the status of all seamen in the popular mind. Jack Tar, who manned the wooden walls of Britain's senior service, was a popular hero in wartime and the merchant seamen shared in his glory during the eighteenth century.<sup>9</sup> On the local level, the collier seamen's status was bolstered by their position within the Tyneside maritime community, which

provided a substantial basis of support for their trade union activities.

The Webbs provided the clearest and most concise definition of a trade union as "a continuous association of wage-earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the condition of their employment" and protecting their standard of living through organized resistance.<sup>10</sup> With a slight variation, this definition describes the labor organization created by the Tyneside collier in the late eighteenth century. Their organization can not be considered a continuous association because the seamen united only sporadically and on an ad hoc basis to resolve specific and immediate grievances. Yet the example of the collier seamen clearly indicates that the spirit, if not the ultimate form, of defensive trade unionism predated the repeal of the Combination Acts by half a century. Although formal labor unions were illegal under English statute and common law as combinations in restraint of trade, these merchant seamen united repeatedly to defend their interests in wage and other labor disputes. Using established methods of organization and effective, but unofficial, leadership,<sup>11</sup> the seamen were able to bring pressure to bear against the important local Tyneside coal and shipping interests in 1768, 1775, 1777 and 1785.

From the emergency mobilization of the Royal Navy during the Nootka Sound incident of 1790 to the passage of

the Combination Acts of 1799 and 1800, the decade of the 1790s was particularly critical in the further development of collier seamen's trade unionism. During this period the seamen were subjected to a rising cost of living which was exacerbated by the pressures of wartime inflation and food shortages. Revolution abroad and the fear of domestic political discontent stiffened attitudes against any manifestation of popular disturbance, including labor strikes, which might disguise seditious activities. After 1793, war with France brought to the seamen the recurring threat of impressment into the Royal Navy, with its attendant loss of liberty and low wages. The methods developed by the collier seamen, which had proved remarkably successful in earlier labor disputes, were put to the test as the seamen found themselves increasingly subjected to external events and forces over which they had little or no control.

## NOTES

1. "A body of sailors, to the number of 400 or 500, assembled at North Shields . . . and proceeded from thence to Sunderland, with colours flying before them, and at the cross there read a paper, setting forth their grievances and a demand of immediate redress. After this they went on board several ships in that harbour, and struck (lowered down) their yards, in order to prevent them from proceeding to sea." The Annual Register, or a View of the History, Politics, and Literature for the Year 1768 (London: G. Woodfall, 1800), "Chronicle," p. 92; The Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1933), s.v. "strike".
2. Henry Pelling, A History of British Trade Unionism (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 19n; C.R. Dobson, Masters and Journeymen: A Prehistory of Industrial Relations, 1717-1800 (London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1980), p. 19; Stephen Jones, "Community and Organisation: Early Seamen's Trade Unionism on the North-East Coast, 1768-1844," Maritime History 3 (April 1973): 43. K.G.J.C. Knowles maintained the belief that the origin of the term "to strike" was nautical in its derivation through his description of England as a nautical nation: "Sea water flowed in our veins, our speech was salted with nautical metaphors and similes: we knew the ropes, we quickly took our bearings, we got under way, we were seldom taken aback; things went swimmingly with us; if we found ourselves in deep water we tacked, veered or trimmed until all was plane sailing again; we worked like galley slaves, and if we chose to stop work we struck work as one might strike a mast or a sail." Knowles, Strikes: A Study in Industrial Conflict (New York: Philosophical Library Inc., 1952), p. 2.
3. A.E. Musson, British Trade Unions, 1800-1875 (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1972), p. 12; Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Marx and Engels: Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy, ed. Lewis S. Feuer (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1959), pp. 12-20.
4. Dobson, Masters and Journeymen, pp. 15-16; Musson, British Trade Unions, pp. 12-13.
5. Sidney Webb and Beatrice Webb, The History of Trade Unionism (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1907), p. 25.

6. Musson, British Trade Unions, p. 12.
7. Musson, British Trade Unions, pp. 16-19; George Rudé, The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730-1848 (New York: John Wiley and Sons Inc., 1964), p. 68; G.D.H. Cole, A Short History of the British Working Class Movement, 1789-1947 (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1948), p. 35; Pelling, British Trade Unionism, p. 35; T.S. Ashton, An Economic History of England: The 18th Century (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1961), pp. 229, 231; Dobson, Masters and Journeymen, p. 45.
8. Jones, "Community and Organisation," p. 54.
9. Stephen Jones, "Blood Red Roses: The Supply of Merchant Seamen in the Nineteenth Century," Mariner's Mirror 58 (November 1972): 432.
10. Webbs, History of Trade Unionism, pp. 1, 19.
11. D.J. Rowe, "A Trade Union of North-East Coast Seamen in 1825," Economic History Review, second series, 25 (February 1972): 81.



## CHAPTER ONE

### A DISPOSITION TO RIOT

On 5 November 1792, the Home Office received a letter from Rowland Burdon, MP for the county of Durham, describing a strike for higher wages by the collier seamen of Shields.<sup>1</sup> The next day a second letter arrived from North Shields shipowner Thomas Powditch which described in more detail the activities of the collier seamen and the "extreemly [sic] alarming" situation in the port.<sup>2</sup> This strike, which paralyzed the seaborne coal trade from mid-October to mid-November, epitomized the development of the seamen's attitudes and methods of defensive trade unionism during the 1790s.

According to an Act of Parliament, the collier seamen in 1792 were paid a flat rate of 50s. per London voyage regardless of the time of the year, the length of the voyage, the price of coal in London or the cost of living. Even if a seaman could find steady employment in the collier fleet, which was unlikely given the economic vagaries of the coal trade and the many delays in shipping from the Tyne, this wage rate amounted to only about £20 per year. During the eighteenth century, this was the minimum subsistence level for a single male but a family could not be supported on less than £30 or £40 per year. This meant that the collier seamen were not highly paid workers by contemporary

standards or that work in the collier fleet was seasonal employment necessarily supplemented by other sources of income.<sup>3</sup>

By the late summer of 1792, the seamen were threatened with a decline in their standard of living because of rising food prices.<sup>4</sup> As one observer noted, "the Wages of the seamen of this Port have not been encreased [sic] for a Considerable time back since which the price of every article of living has encreased [sic] very much."<sup>5</sup> The price of grain, by which the cost of living in the eighteenth century was measured, had been decreasing. The 1792 harvest, however, was deficient due to the wetness of the summer months and grain prices began to rise. The seamen's peacetime wages were not governed by the free market economy of supply and demand nor were they adjusted for the cost of living. With the approach of winter, the seamen faced the prospect of having their stable wages applied to the frequently longer voyages of the winter season. They were determined to oppose any situation which threatened their rising expectations and diminished what they regarded as the proper standard of living for men of their acknowledged abilities and responsibilities.<sup>6</sup>

The seamen demanded that the shipowners pay £3 per London voyage during the six winter months of November to April.<sup>7</sup> In the eighteenth century it was not uncommon for wages to vary by season; for the collier seamen this demand

could be justified by the greater hazards and longer duration of winter voyages. Wages also varied with the frequency of employment. Winter voyages were notoriously inconstant because of weather, wind and sea conditions and often the seamen faced periods of enforced idleness.<sup>8</sup>

The strike of 1792 was preceded by

a long continuance of Easterly wind [which] had detained the Ships in this port untill [sic] a large fleet (about 400 sail) had accumulated, on [the] appearance [sic] of a change of Wind from the East to the Westward (which is a fair wind for Ships to proceed to Sea) the seamen discover'd a disposition to Riot, . . . [and] assembled in great numbers in different parts of the Towns of N[orth] . . . [and] South<sup>9</sup> Shields, and in boats upon the River Tyne. . . .

The seamen removed the crews, mates and carpenters from all vessels detained in the harbor and persuaded or coerced those on ships newly arriving at the Tyne to join the strike.<sup>10</sup> The disciplinary committees systematically proceeded

in boats . . . [from] Ship to Ship, and compelled the reluctant or willing Seamen and Officers of every Ship in [the] harbour to leave their Ships . . . [and] join the mob, by this means a great number of Seamen were collected.<sup>11</sup>

The collier crews were forced to give up their notes--their individual contracts with the shipmaster. Without these notes the sailors could not claim their wages at the end of the voyage. The strikers also confiscated the articles of agreement, the contracts between the shipmasters and owners, without which the masters could not claim their wages. To

preclude verbal agreements between the shipowners, masters and crews, the strikers had to prevent ships from leaving the harbor.<sup>12</sup> To do this, they

divided themselves into Parties (forming two or more watches,) under chiefs, and took possession of the Port, by stationing a Body of Seamen under one of these Chiefs at the entrance of the harbour on each side of the River where it is very narrow, to prevent any Ships from proceeding to Sea in [the] Nights.<sup>13</sup>

The sails of the ships recently arrived from London were taken away from them and their seamen were removed unless the shipowners agreed to the strikers' demands.<sup>14</sup>

The strikers' disciplinary committees maintained strict control over their proceedings and created, at least in appearance, a united opposition. Burdon predicted that "the Sailors will become a considerable body under exact regulations of their own."<sup>15</sup> The Times reported that "watches are kept with regularity, passwords are established; the streets paraded, traitors punished, and not a ship suffered to leave the harbor. . . ."<sup>16</sup> The strikers

observed the greatest order and regularity--they paraded the streets at night, and would not suffer any apprentice to be on shore after eight o'clock lest disorders committed by these boys might be imputed to them: if they met a group of shipowners and their wives, with servants and lanthorns, the order was immediately given 'clear the way sailors for the ladies and gentlemen.'<sup>17</sup>

Their methods were both successful and long-lasting. As late as 15 November when Captain Alexander Cochrane arrived at Shields, he found "every thing on Shore perfectly Quiet

[and] the seamen every where behaving with the utmost degree of Civility and Regularity. . . ."18

Despite the actions of the disciplinary committees, compliance with the strikers' goals and methods was never complete or always voluntary. In order to impose their authority, or at least enlist the passive acquiescence of the seamen,<sup>19</sup> the committees dealt harshly with those who did not support the strike or failed to abide by its regulations. Some of those who complied did so out of fear for their personal safety. Powditch reported that support for the strike was not unanimous among the seamen and that

when separately applied to, acknowledged themselves satisfied with [the] wages [50s.] they agreed for, and in excuse for their leaving [the] Ships, and becoming a part of [the] mob, said they were obliged to do so, or they would be illtreated by the rest of [the] Seamen.<sup>20</sup>

Shipowner Joseph Bulmer admitted that the seamen "do no personal harm to any Individual that I know of except their own Body, and with them they are extreme [sic] severe."<sup>21</sup> So strict was the committees' control that

scarcely any one dares speak his sentiments openly, and a sharp look out is kept after two persons who have; and because one of them had<sup>22</sup> a ship about to sail, an overhaul was made of it.

Violence against members of their own ranks took the form of customary punishments under an unwritten code of conduct.<sup>23</sup> The Times reported that the strikers' "outrageous cruelties . . . exceed every thing of the kind experienced

on any similar occasion, and are of such a nature as would disgrace any set of men."<sup>24</sup> On a few occasions the transgressors were forced to "ride the stang" by being carried through Shields on a pole.<sup>25</sup> Local observers described the other "shocking" methods by which discipline was enforced. Marching men naked through the streets with halters around their necks was "no uncommon sight," especially in North Shields. This was the strikers' punishment for some seamen who "discovered a reluctance to comply with their proceedings."<sup>26</sup> A roll was called regularly "and the absent punished according to their laws." In South Shields, three sailors, "who had not been quite punctual at their Meetings," were forced to walk naked through the streets and marketplace of the town. This punishment was not confined to seamen; at least one shipmaster also suffered the same ignominy.<sup>27</sup>

The seamen did not commit violent excesses against persons or property, although they certainly had the power to do so. There is no evidence of attacks on the shipowners or their houses. Although the seamen threatened to burn the ships of those owners who refused to agree to their demands,<sup>28</sup> this threat was not carried out. However, those who tried to run the blockade were dealt with severely by the strikers. Nehemiah Blagdon's ship Mary attempted to sail from the harbor on 7 November. Its crew had signed their notes for the usual wage of 50s., although this had

been forbidden by the strike committees. Thirty of the strikers boarded the ship while under sail, let go the topsail and forced the Mary to drop anchor. The strikers demanded the ship's articles, which had been signed by the crew. They tore the articles out of the log book, took them ashore and destroyed them. When Blagdon attempted to run the blockade again, the watch reboarded the ship and confiscated the entire log book.<sup>29</sup>

To settle the strike peacefully and successfully, the seamen needed a sympathetic person of integrity and influence to present their grievances to the shipowners.<sup>30</sup> This was Captain Leckey of H.M.S. Racehorse, a sloop which arrived at the Tyne in late October. Leckey conducted talks with the representatives of the seamen and became "a kind of a mediator" between them and the shipowners. The strikers asked for Leckey's assistance in formulating and submitting a petition of their grievances to the Lords of the Admiralty, on whose decision the seamen promised to abide. How Leckey came to perform this role was unclear even to the shipowners and his involvement in finding a peaceful resolution to the strike earned him the enmity of the more obdurate shipowners.<sup>31</sup> Although Powditch acknowledged that Leckey was "accuated by the best of motives," his interference was also believed to be "highly improper" because it served only to confirm the opinion "that Government is a fraid [sic] of provoking the lower class of

People."<sup>32</sup> Leckey denied his partiality toward the seamen's cause, claiming "that the Ship Owners think that I am more the sailors [sic] friend than theirs; what foundation they have for it I know not; but they are most egregiously mistaken."<sup>33</sup> Leckey believed the seamen's demands were unreasonable, but he had "not been able to convince them they are too exorbitant in their demands" and he refused to sign their petition.<sup>34</sup> This belief, however, did not prevent Leckey from intervening to end the strike peacefully.

At the beginning of the strike, the shipowners underestimated both the intelligence and the determination of the strikers. This miscalculation was clearly evident in the resolutions passed at a general meeting of the shipowners at the Newcastle Trinity House on 24 October.<sup>35</sup> Also present were Burdon, Charles Brandling, MP for the county of Northumberland, James Rudman, the mayor of Newcastle, and Nathaniel Clayton, the town clerk. The shipowners agreed that

it is fair and reasonable that the Sailors should receive a proper Satisfaction for the Toil and Dangers of the Service they perform, but extravagant Wages only produce Mischief to the Sailors themselves, by drawing to the Port a greater Number of Men than can find Employment and by inducing more Persons to follow the Sea than the Trade of the Kingdom can receive; besides, such Wages cannot, in the Nature of Things, last long.<sup>36</sup>

The shipowners claimed that they would have considered a wage increase "had not the Sailors of this Port taken



illegal Measures," but now they could not acquiesce to the strikers' demands without incurring "the Penalty of the Law, as Encouragers of Tumult and Disorder. . . ." The owners insisted that the seamen return to their ships and their proper position of obedience in exchange for £3 per London voyage for the months of November to February. This offer was rejected "with contempt" by the seamen who assumed "a more dareing [sic] appearance" and remained insistent on their original demand of £3 per voyage from November to April.<sup>37</sup>

The seamen continued to remove the crews from ships recently arrived from London and "to occupy the Entrance of the Harbour permitting no Ships to sail in the Night, and only those during the day which had complied with their demands. . . ." <sup>38</sup> In consequence of this and the rejection of the shipowners' offer, the South Shields Committee, which consisted of twenty-one shipowners appointed at the 24 October meeting, met again at the Trinity House. Nothing was resolved except to call another general meeting of shipowners on 31 October.<sup>39</sup>

No magistrate or other civil official attended the 31 October meeting at the Trinity House. Leckey advocated a policy of conciliation and a small majority of the shipowners agreed as it was "impossible for the Trade to bear" the further closure of the port. The unprotected state of the harbor induced these shipowners to offer

concessions to restore peace and order. The owners delegated their representatives to meet with Rudman, Clayton and the strikers' representatives to settle the strike by offering the terms the seamen demanded. Leckey described the offer as "generous," but the shipowners cautioned that the concessions arose "from Motives of Humanity only." The owners' offer was presented to a deputation of the seamen aboard the Racehorse the next day. Leckey and Clayton were also present, but Rudman did not attend. Here the strikers rejected the owners' offer which fulfilled their original demand of £3 per winter voyage.<sup>40</sup>

At the beginning of November, there was no indication that the strikers' control over the port was weakening. They remained in an excellent bargaining position<sup>41</sup> and, "intoxicated with a power too long enjoyed,"<sup>42</sup> they used this opportunity to extend their terms. The seamen now demanded four guineas per winter voyage.

At the outset, the shipowners were unwilling to comply with these "unreasonable Demands." However, the crowded condition of the harbor, "the fear from the mob, the temptation of a fair wind, the great demand for coals in London, and no Support in view" from the local authorities induced some of the shipowners to accede to these new demands. The seamen distinguished their ships by a jack at the masthead and their crews were permitted onboard. These ships were allowed to proceed to sea by day "amidst the

acclamations . . . [and] hurras of the mob."<sup>43</sup> The strikers "made a point to Board all the Ships that sail'd to satisfy themselves that the Crews had not broke [sic] through the General Agreement . . . until the Wages is [sic] settled."<sup>44</sup>

For the "few spirited men" who refused to acquiesce to the strikers' demands, the absence of this jack on their ships "had a wonderful effect by pointing out both the persons and property of [the] persons, who were as they pleased to call them [the] Seamen's Enemy [sic]." These shipowners, including Thomas Powditch, Joseph Bulmer and Nicholas Fairles, would not submit to coercion by their employees. Powditch was a self-described man "of more spirit than prudence" which made him "in some degree obnoxious to the Mob. . . ." Addressing the shipowners at their 31 October meeting, Powditch argued that the "humiliating offer" of £3 per voyage made by "the trembling Shipowners" was "reprehensible." The offer, although "sanctioned by the presence of Members of Parliament[, ] the Magistrates of the Corporation[, ] the Town Clerk and other Persons of importance" (none of whom attended the meeting), succeeded only in increasing the insolence of the strikers and encouraging them to further their demands. Raising the seamen's wages

will not lessen but increase the Evil, as the high wages given at neighbouring Ports are the occasion of many Seamen coming to this Place at this Season who finding all the births [sic] occupied have no other recourse but in creating confusion. . . .

In Powditch's opinion, the shipowners had but two options, either

to encourage future riots by making concessions to the present rioters, or to come forward like men conscious [sic] of living under a mild but effective Government and take such steps as deliberate wisdom shall point out to suppress the present and discourage future mobs.

Instead of negotiation, Powditch recommended offering rewards to "bring the delinquents to Justice."<sup>45</sup>

The local civil authorities' unwillingness or incapacity to intervene against the seamen meant that the harbor facilities and private property at the port were entirely unprotected from the activities of the strikers. Although the use of coercive force was "much to be dreaded," local observers assured the Home Office that it was "the earnest wish of all the people here to have the Mob quelled."<sup>46</sup> The inadequacy of the local civil forces meant that the clumsy weapon of military and naval force was often the only effective means of controlling large disturbances. The Home Office was accustomed to dealing with provincial magistrates who requested military assistance, even on the slightest grounds.<sup>47</sup>

Because of the bureaucratic and jurisdictional limitations of the Home Office,<sup>48</sup> Permanent Undersecretary of State Evan Nepean had no choice but to accept the recommendations of local observers at Tyneside as to the number of troops and naval vessels necessary to control the

strike. The seamen were not to be confronted easily <sup>49</sup> and Rudman believed that peace and order could be restored only by the threat of coercive measures. He warned that the strikers'

numbers and appearance of determined resolution with which they conduct themselves make it absolutely necessary that the force to be used should be so considerable as to leave no Hope of Resistance.<sup>50</sup>

If the requisite force were not provided, Bulmer predicted that the seamen's numbers would increase to three thousand within a few days. He informed the Home Office that the 160 or 170 public houses in South Shields could accomodate an average of three soldiers each and he urged Burdon to use his influence to obtain the construction of a barracks to quarter troops permanently at the port.<sup>51</sup> Burdon suggested that it would be "highly proper" that a sloop or frigate "of as much force as the harbour will admit" with "mooring chains in case of riot to prevent any possibility of cutting her adrift" be permanently stationed at Shields. In addition, he requested that "a proper portion" of troops be quartered in Shields, a request seconded by the Bishop of Durham.<sup>52</sup>

The government responded immediately to these suggestions and requests on 5 November by obtaining an order from the War Office directing three companies of the 57th Regiment of dragoons at Tynemouth Barracks to South Shields. Major Thompson was given command of the detachment and was

authorized to draw more dragoons from Tynemouth Barracks if necessary. Thompson was also informed that two troops of dragoons from York could be ordered to Shields as well.<sup>53</sup> The commanding officer at York was to be prepared to dispatch himself and his remaining two troops if further aid were needed.<sup>54</sup> In addition, the Martin sloop of war, with eighteen guns, was ordered to the Tyne to reinforce the eighteen gun Racehorse already there.<sup>55</sup> By taking these measures, the government assured the civil authorities that "every necessary Step has been taken" to assist them "before any serious mischief shall take place."<sup>56</sup>

On 8 November, Rudman informed the Home Office of the "proper measures" which had been adopted by the local authorities. In response to the Blagdon incident, a general meeting of the magistrates of Durham, Northumberland and Newcastle and Leckey and Thompson was held in the mayor's chambers in Newcastle. At this meeting it was divulged that the magistrates, along with the shipowners of South Shields, agreed that dividing the forces at Tynemouth Barracks by sending three companies of the 57th Regiment to South Shields had weakened it considerably. By Major Thompson's account, after deducting those troops of the regiment at Sunderland, Hartlepool and Newcastle, fewer than 150 remained at Tynemouth Barracks. In consequence of this revelation, Thompson had "been prevailed upon" not to separate the troops under his command because "there would

not be a competent number for each side of the water, if they were called upon to act. . . ." Burdon explained that his original request for "a proper portion" of troops was intended to mean those from outside the area, "for by stating that North Shields was sufficiently protected by the Barracks, I thought it wou'd be understood that the troops were well-stationed already."<sup>57</sup> The magistrates unanimously concluded that the military and naval forces available, even with the addition of the Martin which had not yet arrived at the Tyne, were still insufficient. Such an inadequate display of force would serve only to provoke the strikers without having the power to suppress them. As a result of this determination, Rudman and Burdon requested the detachment of troops from York, three hundred of whom "might be quarter'd commodiously at Shields without being billeted or intermixed with the inhabitants," and they requested that all forces be given discretionary orders which could be deviated from in an emergency.<sup>58</sup>

Acting Home Secretary Lord William Grenville was hostile to both the strikers and the magistrates for failing to suppress them. It would be only "by a proper Exertion on the part of the Magistracy [that] further mischiefs may be prevented, [and] a stop put to the Spirit of Combination which appears to have prevailed."<sup>59</sup> Grenville was "apprehensive" that additional naval and military forces would be necessary to end the strike. He ordered Captain

Cochrane and the twenty-eight gun Hind frigate to proceed immediately to the Tyne, while the Drake sloop and the Niger frigate sailed there from Portsmouth on 9 and 14 November respectively. Together with the Racehorse and the Martin they would form "a respectable force" and because the Martin, Hind, Niger and Drake had detachments of marines aboard, they would be "capable of affording effective Assistance" to the civil authorities. By 16 November, a local observer could report that Shields was "well off in a naval force to protect our property."<sup>60</sup> Because there was no infantry closer to Shields than that at Edinburgh, Lord Adam Gordon, the commander-in-chief in Scotland, was notified to comply with any requisition for troops from the Newcastle magistrates by detaching immediately as many soldiers as could be spared.<sup>61</sup>

Thus by mid-November the government also made available to the civil authorities the five companies of the 57th Regiment of dragoons at Tynemouth Barracks, Sunderland, Hartlepool and Newcastle, the four troops of dragoons at York and the infantry at Edinburgh. The government was forced to rely on the information and recommendations provided by the local authorities as to how these forces were to be used. Because Major Thompson could "have no other object in view, than that of rendering himself useful," he would have to be guided by the mayor and magistrates of Newcastle in the distribution of his troops.



Rudman was the "best Judge" of the situation at Shields and further naval and military assistance could be obtained if the "due consideration" of the local officials deemed the available forces insufficient.<sup>62</sup> To assist the local authorities, on 13 November the Home Office dispatched Assistant Adjutant General Colonel Oliver Delancey to the Tyne to take command of the troops there. Nepean warned Delancey that the Tyneside authorities believed that the military forces available were insufficient. Therefore, Delancey was directed that

upon your making known to the Magistrates the occasion of your arrival, and after collecting their Sentiments, and those of any other Persons you may find it prudent to consult, you will inform me [Nepean] as speedily as possible of . . . the probability of your being enabled with the Force which will be with you effectively to assist the civil magistrates. . . . If you shall be satisfied that you are in a situation to act with effect, you will then acquaint the Magistrates that such is your opinion, and that you are ready with the King's troops under your command to do your duty if called upon. But you will as far as possible avoid exposing Yourself, except on the most urgent necessity to any hazard of an ineffectual attempt.

Delancey was also informed that another frigate with a detachment of marines aboard was prepared to sail from Spithead but that its departure would be delayed until Delancey notified the Home Office as "to the probability of the Force already ordered being equal to the performance of any Service which circumstances may be likely to require."<sup>63</sup>

The magistrates probably hoped that the strike could be

settled peacefully without resorting to repressive force.<sup>64</sup> On 8 November, a meeting of the magistrates of Newcastle, Durham and Northumberland, with the concurrence of the naval and military officers present, deputed Rowland Burdon to make another attempt at mediation--the first since the strikers rejected the shipowners' offer aboard the Racehorse a week earlier. Burdon was the obvious choice for this duty. He was well known among the coal and shipping interests and had local popularity among all the classes at Tyneside. At the conclusion of this strike, The Times, which was generally critical of the inactivity of the magistrates, would proclaim that the public was "very much indebted" to Burdon for taking "a very active part" in settling the dispute. Burdon continued playing a role in settling disturbances at Tyneside for more than forty years.<sup>65</sup>

By 13 November, the strikers "gave way a little in their demands" and submitted to Burdon's offer of mediation. Burdon optimistically informed the Home Office that as a result of these changes, "we are in a fair [sic] way of terminating the Riot" and that Shields would be restored to a "State of Security" by the next day.<sup>66</sup>

Despite Burdon's attempts at a conciliatory settlement, some of the shipowners remained intransigent. A "numerous and respectable" general meeting of these shipowners was held in South Shields on 13 November. This meeting, under the chairmanship of Bulmer, resolved that the strikers

should no longer be allowed to assemble, keep illegal watches, board any ship, prevent ships from sailing or punish any of the seamen. All mates and carpenters were ordered to return to their ships immediately, where they would be given provisions as soon as they were shipped and doing their duty. The owners decided that the terms agreed upon at the 31 October meeting, offering £3 per London voyage during the six winter months and the usual 50s. for the six summer months, were "as high as is in [the seamen's] Interest to receive" and that the crews' notes for these wages would be signed according to an Act of Parliament. The owners' resolutions were to be presented to the Newcastle magistracy and the Home Office and would be published. The shipowners believed that the impasse would continue "untill [sic] Government shall cause the Laws to be respected." To this end, a deputation of shipowners was to request the cooperation of the Newcastle magistrates in restoring the peace of the port, while the Northumberland magistracy would "also be requested to keep the Peace in their respective Jurisdictions as unlawful assemblies now exist."<sup>67</sup> These resolutions forced Burdon to concede that the shipowners refused to accept the seamen's terms. Consequently, the strike remained unsettled, "tho the Sailors keep the peace for the present." Although Burdon remained hopeful that "the matter may be adjusted without coming to extremity," Major Thompson sent an express for four more troops of horse

to be sent as far as Durham.<sup>68</sup>

After Burdon's first attempt at reconciling the strikers and shipowners failed, he detected a change in the seamen's behavior. This he attributed as much to the arrival of the Hind frigate on 15 November as to "the speedy and effectual intervention of Government of [which] the People here seem very sensible."<sup>69</sup> With the arrival of the Hind, Captain Cochrane became the senior naval officer at Shields. Cochrane began his career in the merchant service and had a reputation for progressive and humanitarian reforms at the Leith Station--a reputation among seamen that helped in his participation in the settlement of the strike. Despite being diverted from his anti-smuggling duties at the Leith Station, the fact that the Hind was badly in need of a re-fit after it grounded on the bar in the Tyne harbor and that Cochrane had orders to proceed to Sheerness as soon as possible, his desire to end the strike quickly did not mean a resolution by force. Instead, Cochrane used his influence among the seamen to support Burdon's attempts at mediation.<sup>70</sup>

By this time, the strikers also learned that the Lords of the Admiralty refused to consider their petition. The Admiralty informed Leckey that the petition would not be acted upon because it was unsigned and undated and, moreover, "my Lords do not think themselves competent to interfere therein. . . ." <sup>71</sup> On 19 November, three shipowners

and masters, including Powditch, provided information under oath that "a most dangerous Riot" existed and that the seamen "have for many Weeks past violently and by force prevented the Ships [from] sailing" by usurping "the Control and Government of the said port. . . ."72 Lodging this information of a riot with the magistrates now compelled them to take action against the strikers.

Despite this turn of events, Burdon continued to use Cochrane's influence to gain some concessions from the shipowners by which he could again meet with the seamen. Burdon proposed to present Parliament with a statement of the situation at Shields because he believed it would be necessary

to subject the state of this Port to the consideration of [Parliament] in the ensuing Sessions, as I am certain that without the means of establishing a rate of Wages here from time to time We shall perpetually be subject to these scenes of riot and disturbance.

To accomplish this, Burdon proposed that Parliament pass a bill whereby the seamen's wages could be equitably adjusted as circumstances required. If the owners would agree to pay £3 per London voyage until Lady Day (25 March), Burdon would try to create a board of shipowners and seamen to fix annually the rate of wages. Burdon believed he could obtain such legislation to take effect on or before 31 May 1793. In addition, the articles drawn up by Burdon at Clifford's Fort would henceforth serve as the articles for the port of the

Tyne. On 17 November, Burdon had "an interview" with the strikers to discuss these terms which he proposed to present to the shipowners. The seamen promised Burdon and Leckey that they would accept these terms, leaving it up to the shipowners to end the strike.<sup>73</sup>

On the afternoon of 19 November, "a respectable Number" of shipowners met in Shields and agreed to Burdon's proposals. The owners told him that these were "the Ultimate Terms" the seamen could expect and that the owners would inform the magistrates "if the Sailors depart from their Word." Later that day, a prolonged conference between Burdon and the strike leaders was held in Shields. Burdon told the seamen that if his proposals were not accepted by them, the civil authorities would have no choice but to end the strike forcibly. The seamen assured Burdon that they still agreed to his terms. The results of this meeting were anxiously awaited by a crowd of seamen outside and, upon hearing of the strike's peaceful resolution, "the Sailors cheered the Ship Owners."<sup>74</sup> The next day, Cochrane informed the Home Office that the shipowners and seamen had reached an agreement to end the strike but he also suggested that a frigate with 150 marines aboard be detained at Shields until peace was permanently restored.<sup>75</sup> Burdon also remained cautious because "till the Wind and Tide will admit of the Experiment, I can only judge by the words and Resolutions. . . ."<sup>76</sup> The Newcastle magistrates agreed to

meet at Shields on 21 November to protect the ships ready to sail from being boarded or hindered by the seamen. This precaution was unnecessary, however, and the seamen returned to duty without incident. The day after the agreement was reached, twenty-seven loaded ships sailed from the port without interference from the strikers.<sup>77</sup>

Burdon's plan for a regulatory board to determine seamen's wages was not new. In the aftermath of a labor dispute during the Nootka Sound incident of 1790, an anonymous Newcastle shipowner proposed a similar idea because "until some Plan of this Nature is determined upon, we shall forever have our Ships and Property at the Mercy and Caprice of the Sailors."<sup>78</sup> The shipowners of Sunderland, however, were dubious of Burdon's plan, claiming "that it is not in the Power of Man to form an Act of Parliament that will bind the Seamen."<sup>79</sup> Yet it was often the shipowners who refused to honor concessions once the threat of a strike disappeared.<sup>80</sup> Burdon's plan ultimately failed to win parliamentary approval for just this reason--his proposal was opposed by the powerful Tyneside shipping interests and his idea for a regulatory wage board consisting of both seamen and shipowners was not implemented.<sup>81</sup>

As long as trade unions remained local, narrow in occupational interests and legally proscribed, workers like the collier seamen could achieve only short-lived and limited results in labor disputes. The weakness of labor

groups organized only on an ad hoc and temporary basis allowed employers to renege on labor agreements after the conclusion of strikes. These repeated breaches of faith on the part of the shipowners bred disillusionment and disaffection among the seamen in the period after the Napoleonic War. This factor contributed to the further deterioration of the traditionally mutual relationship between the magistrates, shipowners and seamen which began in the 1790s and became a marked feature of Tyneside labor relations in the 1830s. This erosion resulted in attitudes of sustained economic hostility and competition and the eventual permanent ranging of employers and workers in opposite camps which made impossible a continuation of the moderation displayed by the collier seamen in the 1790s.<sup>82</sup>



## NOTES

1. Great Britain, Home Office Papers, 42/22. Public Records Office, London. Burdon to Dundas, 3 November 1792, ff. 261-262.
2. HO 42/22, Powditch to Pitt, 3 November 1792, ff. 247-252.
3. Roy Porter, English Society in the Eighteenth Century (Hammondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1982), p. [13]; Michael Flinn and David Stoker, The History of the British Coal Industry, 1700-1830: The Industrial Revolution (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 395; Ralph Davis, The Rise of the English Shipping Industry (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1962), p. 116.
4. C.R. Dobson, Masters and Journeymen: A Prehistory of Industrial Relations, 1717-1800 (London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1980), p. 29; Norman McCord and David E. Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's in North East England," International Review of Social History 13, part 3 (1968): 367; George Rudé, The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730-1848 (New York: John Wiley and Sons Inc., 1964), p. 218.
5. HO 42/22, Cochrane to Dundas, 20 November 1792, f. 432.
6. T.S. Ashton, Economic Fluctuations in England, 1700-1800 (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1959), p. 181; Chris Cook and John Stevenson, British Historical Facts, 1760-1830 (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1980), p. 182; Robert R. Dozier, "An Eighteenth Century Strike: The Sailors' 'Riots' at Newcastle," paper presented at the North West Conference on British Studies, April 1978, pp. 2, 3; Adam Smith, An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations (New York: Random House, 1937), p. 74; McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," p. 367; Rudé, The Crowd in History, p. 218; T.S. Ashton, An Economic History of England: The 18th Century (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1961), p. 227; Dobson, Masters and Journeymen, p. 29; E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (New York: Random House, 1966), pp. 62-63. The collier seamen were dependent upon grain as a staple in their diet. By 1790, two-thirds of the English population, including Tyneside, was eating wheat bread. E.P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," Past

- and Present 50 (February 1971):79, 80; "The usual diet of . . . labourers in, and near Newcastle, is hasty-pudding and crowdie for breakfast; butcher's meat (whenever they can purchase it,) much butter, bread made of wheat, and rye, or barley, and malt liquor, for dinner, and supper." Frederick Morton Eden, The State of the Poor (London: J. Davis, 1797), p. 560.
7. Both The Times [London] (9 November 1792, p. 3) and The Chelmsford Chronicle (9 November 1792, p. 3) reported that the seamen wanted their wages regulated by the price of coal. According to The Times, their argument was "a curious one": because the shipowners contrived to raise coal prices during the winter, the sailors believed that nothing was "more reasonable" than to demand "a share of the honest gains." However, there is no evidence in the seamen's resolutions to indicate that they wanted their wages determined by the London coal prices.
  8. Ashton, Economic History, pp. 219, 222; Smith, The Wealth of Nations, pp. 74, 104, 221-222.
  9. HO 42/22, Powditch to Pitt, 3 November 1792, f. 247.
  10. HO 42/22, Burdon to Dundas, 3 November 1792, f. 261; HO 42/22, Powditch to Pitt, 3 November 1792, f. 247.
  11. HO 42/22, Powditch to Pitt, 3 November 1792, ff. 247-248.
  12. Dozier, "An Eighteenth Century Strike," p. 5; Tyne and Wear Record Office, CO 37, "Papers Relating to the Seamen's Strike of 1792," 394/35, Shipowners to Chatham, n.d., no f.
  13. HO 42/22, Powditch to Pitt, 3 November 1792, ff. 247-248.
  14. HO 42/22, Burdon to Dundas, 3 November 1792, f. 261; HO 42/22, Powditch to Pitt, 3 November 1792, f. 248; The Times [London], 20 November 1792, p. 4; TWRO, CO 37, 394/35, Shipowners to Chatham, n.d., no f.
  15. HO 42/22, Burdon to Home Office, 8 November 1792, p. 3.
  16. The Times [London], 9 November 1792, p. 3.
  17. The Newcastle Courant, 19 November 1792, as quoted in Jones, "Community and Organisation," p. 51.

18. HO 42/22, Cochrane to Dundas, 20 November 1792, f. 433.
19. Rudé, The Crowd in History, p. 212; Dobson, Masters and Journeymen, p. 17.
20. HO 42/22, Powditch to Pitt, 3 November 1792, f. 247.
21. HO 42/22, Bulmer to Nepean, 9 November 1792, f. 333.
22. HO 42/22, Burdon to Home Office, 8 November 1792, f. 314.
23. Jones, "Community and Organisation," p. 48.
24. The Times [London], 17 November 1792, p. 4.
25. McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," p. 370. The weavers and woolcombers punished transgressors by riding them on a coal-staff, "that is, seated astride a long pole, mounted upon men's shoulders, and held up to the derision of the populace." Hanson's History of the Framework Knitters (1831) as quoted in Dobson, Masters and Journeymen, p. 17. This punishment was known as colting in Dublin and stanging on the Tyne.
26. HO 42/22, Powditch to Pitt, 3 November 1792, ff. 250-251; The Times [London], 15 November 1792, p. 4.
27. HO 42/22, Bulmer to Burdon, 1 November 1792, f. 263; The Times [London], 15 November 1792, p. 4.
28. HO 42/22, Powditch to Pitt, 3 November 1792, f. 250.
29. McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," p. 372; Dozier, "An Eighteenth Century Strike," p. 6; HO 42/22, Bulmer to Nepean, 9 November 1792, f. 333.
30. Dozier, "An Eighteenth Century Strike," p. 6.
31. HO 42/22, Powditch to Pitt, 3 November 1792, f. 248; McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," pp. 370-371; TWRO, CO 37, 394/35, Seamen to Leckey, n.d., no f.; TWRO, CO 37, 394/35, Leckey to ?, 6 November 1792, no f.
32. HO 42/22, Powditch to Pitt, 3 November 1792, f. 247.
33. TWRO, CO 37, 394/35, Leckey to ?, 3 November 1792, no f.

34. TWRO, CO 37, 394/35, Leckey to ?, 6 November 1792, no f.
35. McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," pp. 367-368.
36. The Newcastle Chronicle, 27 October 1792, as quoted in McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," p. 368.
37. McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," p. 368; HO 42/22, Powditch to Pitt, 3 November 1792, f. 248; HO 42/22, Burdon to Dundas, 3 November 1792, f. 261.
38. HO 42/22, Powditch to Pitt, 3 November 1792, f. 248.
39. McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," p. 368; HO 42/22, Powditch to Pitt, 3 November 1792, f. 248.
40. McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," p. 370; HO 42/22, Powditch to Pitt, 3 November 1792, ff. 248-249; HO 42/22, Bulmer to Burdon, 1 November 1792, ff. 263-264; TWRO, CO 37, 394/35, Resolutions of Shipowners, 31 October 1792, no f.
41. McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," p. 370; Dozier, "An Eighteenth Century Strike," p. 8.
42. HO 42/22, Powditch to Pitt, 3 November 1792, f. 249.
43. HO 42/22, Powditch to Pitt, 3 November 1792, ff. 247-248; The Times [London], 16 November 1792, p. 3.
44. HO 42/22, Cochrane to Dundas, 20 November 1792, f. 433.
45. HO 42/22, Powditch to Pitt, 3 November 1792, ff. 248-252.
46. HO 42/22, Rudman to Nepean, 8 November 1792, f. 312; TWRO, CO 37, 394/35, Rudman to Nepean, 8 November 1792, no f.; HO 42/22, Bulmer to Burdon, 1 November 1792, ff. 263-264.
47. Norman McCord, "The Government of Tyneside, 1800-1850," Transactions of the Royal Historical Society fifth series, 20: 12; D.J. Rowe, "A Trade Union of North-East Coast Seamen in 1825," Economic History Review, second series, 25 (February 1972): 85.

48. John Stevenson, Popular Disturbances in England, 1700-1870 (London: Longman Group, 1979), p. 12; Clive Emsley, "The Home Office and its Sources of Information and Investigation, 1791-1801," English Historical Review 94 (July 1979): 532, 536-537; Robert R. Dozier, For King, Constitution and Country (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983), p. 45; McCord, "Government of Tyneside," pp. 6, 10-13, 18-19, 24.
49. Dozier, For King, Constitution and Country, p. 46; McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," p. 369.
50. TWRO, CO 37, 394/35, Rudman to Stephens, 5 November 1792, no f.; HO 42/22, Rudman to Nepean, 8 November 1792, f. 313.
51. HO 42/22, Bulmer to Burdon, 1 November 1792, f. 264.
52. HO 42/22, Burdon to Home Office, 3 November 1792, f. 262; HO 42/22, Burdon to Nepean, 13 November 1792, f. 362; HO 42/22, Bishop of Durham to Dundas, 7 November 1792, f. 296. John Okey of North Shields suggested that a press tender with a complement of sixty troops be permanently stationed in the harbor "in order to secure for a time such of the Ringleaders of those Rioters to be delt [sic] with. . . ." The strikers' "first attempt might be niped [sic] in the Bud, and by holding out to the Seamen . . . that it was the Intention of Government to send to the East Indies the Ringleaders it would strike them with more terror than the Royal George being brought into the Harbour to quell them. . . ." Okey also offered his services as the lieutenant in command of such a vessel, promising to "endeavour to do all that may be necessary, without giving the magistrates any trouble." TWRO, CO 37, 394/35, Okey to ?, 7 November 1792, no f.
53. HO 42/22, Nepean to Bishop of Durham, 7 November 1792, f. 303.
54. HO 42/22, Nepean to Rudman, 10 November 1792, f. 345.
55. HO 42/22, Nepean to Burdon, 5 November 1792, f. 274; HO 42/22, Nepean to Bulmer, 5 November 1792, f. 276; HO 42/22, Nepean to Rudman, 5 November 1792, f. 283; HO 42/22, Nepean to Bishop of Durham, 7 November 1792, f. 302.
56. HO 42/22, Nepean to Bishop of Durham, 8 November 1792, f. 320.

57. HO 42/22, Rudman to Nepean, 8 November 1792, f. 312; TWRO, CO 37, 394/35, Rudman to Nepean, 8 November 1792, no f.; McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," p. 372; HO 42/22, Bulmer to Nepean, 9 November 1792, f. 333; HO 42/22, Burdon to Home Office, 8 November 1792, f. 314; The Times [London], 15 November 1792, p. 4; HO 42/22, Burdon to Home Office, 3 November 1792, f. 262.
58. HO 42/22, Rudman to Nepean, 8 November 1792, f. 312; TWRO, CO 37, 394/35, Rudman to Nepean, 8 November 1792, no f.; HO 42/22, Burdon to Home Office, 8 November 1792, ff. 314-315; TWRO, CO 37, 394/35, Resolutions of Magistrates, 8 November 1792, no f.
59. McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," pp. 371-372.
60. HO 42/22, Nepean to Rudman, 10 November 1792, ff. 345-346; The Times [London], 20 November 1792, p. 4; HO 42/22, Nepean to Delancey, 13 November 1792, f. 367; The Times [London], 16 November 1792, p. 2. The Niger's sudden departure from Portsmouth and the secrecy of its destination "occasioned some alarm" and much conjecture about its mission. The Times believed it necessary to explain to its readers that its mission to quell the disturbance at Shields and to restore order there was "no new cause for alarm." Reports that the Niger's sailing was an indication that Britain was going to war were vehemently denied and The Times warned that "if people will attend to all these absurdities, they may be alarmed at every instant." The Times [London], 22 November 1792, p. 2.
61. HO 42/22, Nepean to Rudman, 10 November 1792, ff. 345-346; HO 42/22, Fawcett to Gordon, 10 November 1792, f. 343.
62. HO 42/22, Nepean to Rudman, 10 November 1792, ff. 345-346.
63. HO 42/22, Nepean to Delancey, 13 November 1792, ff. 366-368.
64. McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," p. 369.
65. McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," p. 372; The Times [London], 26 November 1792, p. 2; McCord, "Government of Tyneside," pp. 17-18.

66. HO 42/22, Rudman to Home Office, 14 November 1792, f. 383; HO 42/22, Burdon to Nepean, 13 November 1792, f. 362.
67. HO 42/22, Bulmer to Nepean, 16 November 1792, ff. 389-393; The Times [London], 20 November 1792, p. 4.
68. HO 42/22, Burdon to Nepean, 14 November 1792, f. 374;
69. HO 42/22, Burdon to Nepean, 16 November 1792, f. 387.
70. McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," p. 374; J.A. Sullivan, "Naval Lieutenants in Merchant Service," Mariner's Mirror 66 (August 1980): 269.
71. McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," pp. 372-373.
72. TWRO, CO 37, 394/35, Magistrates' Meeting, 19 November 1792, no f.; TWRO, CO 37, 394/35, Information of Thomas Powditch, Stephen Wright and William Clarke, 19 November 1792, no f.
73. McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," p. 374; HO 42/22, Cochrane to Dundas, 19 November 1792, ff. 426, 433; HO 42/22, Burdon to Nepean, 19 November 1792, f. 429.
74. The York Courant, 26 November 1792, p. 2; HO 42/22, Burdon to Rudman, 19 November 1792, f. 427; McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," p. 374.
75. HO 42/22, Cochrane to Home Office, 20 November 1792, ff. 425-426.
76. HO 42/22, Burdon to Rudman, 19 November 1792, f. 427.
77. HO 42/22, Cochrane to Home Office, 19 November 1792, ff. 433-434; The York Courant, 26 November 1792, p. 2.
78. TWRO, CO 37, 394/35, Handbill of Newcastle Shipowner, 1 November 1790, no f.
79. HO 42/24, Sanderson to Burdon, 21 January 1793, f. 159.
80. Conrad Dixon, "Signing On," Mariner's Mirror 70 (August 1984): 312-313.
81. Brewster and McCord, "Some Labour Troubles of the

1790's," p. 380.

82. Rudé, The Crowd in History, p. 259; McCord, "The Seamen's Strike of 1815 in North-East England," Economic History Review, second series, 21 (April 1968): 142-143; G.D.H. Cole, A Short History of the British Working Class Movement, 1789-1947 (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1948), pp. 35-36.



## CHAPTER TWO

### THE ENERGY AND ORDER OF A SYSTEM

In the strike of 1792, the collier seamen brought the coastal and coal shipping trades to a halt and their organization enabled them essentially to control the port of the Tyne for several weeks. These methods were already a tradition in Tyneside labor disputes and would remain so until the early nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> The seamen's ability to do this demonstrated the moderation and effectiveness of their leadership and the severe limitations of local government in controlling large disturbances in the eighteenth century.

Despite the rapid growth of Tyneside, the arrangements for the maintenance of public order remained archaic and inadequate. These communities were very turbulent places and it was rare for a year or two to pass without some manifestation of public disturbance.<sup>2</sup> Even in the late eighteenth century the North was still "too prone to outrage" and "notorious for its continuing lawlessness and insecurity."<sup>3</sup> Disturbances among the pitmen and keelmen were endemic and the ship-carpenters were

rough, lawless, fiery-tempered men and youths, foremost in revelry, row, and riot, or, what was equally dreaded, public jubilation,--these were the terror of the populace and the irresolvable difficulty of the town authorities.<sup>4</sup>

Shipowner Thomas Powditch complained that the inability of the local magistrates to maintain order was a recurring problem at Tyneside and was not new in 1792. According to him,

the successful Riots of thirty years are sufficient encouragement for . . . [the seamen] to continue the practice, thirty years have the Inhabitants of N[orth] and S[outh] Shields been under the dominion of Mobs. Thirty years has the River Tyne been the Theatre of their depredations and the place of their security--and Thirty years has the Magistracy of that district been disgraced by their<sup>5</sup> . . . incapacity to preserve the peace of the Port.

The Corporation of Newcastle's magistrates claimed, and were allowed to possess, exclusive jurisdiction over the entire tidal length of the Tyne from seven miles above Newcastle to ten miles below it, including the harbor at Shields. The Newcastle magistrates therefore played an important role in any disturbance affecting the Tyne or the harbor, which was the center of disputes involving the collier seamen. This arrangement also meant that North Shields (including Tynemouth) with a population of 13,000 and South Shields with 11,000 inhabitants in 1801 had no resident magistrates of their own. If force were used to quell a disturbance at the harbor, there was no magistrate within several miles of Shields to read the Riot Act or to authorize the billeting of troops. Although the Tyne bordered Durham and Northumberland, the magistrates of these counties had no authority to act on the river. It was not

unusual, however, for the magistrates of Newcastle to meet with those of Durham and Northumberland during times of serious trouble to coordinate activities for the restoration of order.<sup>6</sup>

In the eighteenth century, labor strikes had not yet been legally distinguished from riots. The suppression of these disturbances comprised nearly the entire regulative responsibility of the local authorities.<sup>7</sup> The duty of a magistrate was to appear even on the rumor of a riot or strike and to disperse it by reading the Riot Act. Such "timely interference" by the civil authorities could prevent a disturbance from getting out of control.<sup>8</sup> Rowland Burdon, a member of Parliament who was also a magistrate for the county of Durham,

conceived that the duty of Magistrates wou'd have carried them to the Spot on the rumour of a Riot, if such thing was found to exist the Magistrate [sic] wou'd have recorded it [and] have proceeded to quel [sic] it.

In the case of the collier seamen's strike of 1792, however, such action was not "thought proper." Any one of the magistrates had the power to intervene on his own but collectively they had not "thought the time had come to shew themselves" and Burdon continued "to act under the determination of the majority" by not intervening.<sup>9</sup>

The obdurate shipowners attributed the reluctance of the Newcastle magistrates to intervene to a policy of intentional neglect. Newcastle's "unjust privileges and

chartered rights"<sup>10</sup> had been a point of contention and a source of animosity between the Corporation and the towns within its jurisdiction for several centuries and would remain so until the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835. The administrative problems created by the jurisdictional arrangements on the Tyne were exacerbated by the rapid growth of the towns downriver and the growing importance of the coal and shipping trades in the eighteenth century. The increased wealth and population of these communities were achieved only at the expense of the Corporation of Newcastle.<sup>11</sup> Shipowner Joseph Bulmer claimed that South Shields was "quite neglected" by the Corporation despite its responsibilities on the Tyne. Bulmer attributed this neglect to jealousy on the part of the Corporation toward the new and thriving towns. North and South Shields

contain near forty thousand Inhabit[ants] among which are many opulent Ship Owners and Merchants, we are daily increasing in point of Inhabitants and are well situated for Trade having one of the best natural Harbours in England, tho' much impaired by the <sup>12</sup>negligence of the Corporation of Newcastle. . . .

Powditch's opinions, which made him "obnoxious to the Mob," also made him "no favorite with [the] Magistrates" either. He thought "the supiness of the Magistrates very reprehensible" and he criticized their inability or unwillingness to put down the strike, by force if necessary, because they seemed to prefer to humor the seamen rather than suppress them. According to Powditch, the experience

of thirty years of riots on the Tyne convinced the shipowners

that no reliance could be placed on the Magistrates of the River Tyne for the Protection of their property or on the County's Magistrates for the Protection of either Persons or property. . . .<sup>13</sup>

Bulmer accused the magistrates of being "either diffident of their power or unwilling to exert it" because they felt "little anxiety about this Riot."<sup>14</sup>

Permanent Undersecretary of State Evan Nepean acknowledged that there had been "some difficulty" in procuring the cooperation of the Newcastle magistrates in settling the strike.<sup>15</sup> However, from the magistrates' perspective, the reasons for their decision not to intervene were justifiable. On a practical level, such intervention could escalate a peaceful strike into a violent riot. A riot was a calamity to be avoided even at high cost because the resulting social dislocation could disrupt a community for years. The magistrates had to live in their community and would face possible retribution from the seamen for grievances unjustly left unredressed or for using force to suppress a strike. By the end of the eighteenth century, negotiation and conciliation in labor disputes had become a major part of the magistrates' duties. In this capacity the magistrates sought to encourage the growth of responsible organizations among both employers and workers.<sup>16</sup> The Newcastle magistrates' reluctance to intervene on behalf of

the shipowners may be partly attributable to the belief that the seamen had legitimate economic grievances which required peaceful settlement by negotiation rather than by the use of coercive force.

Despite the government's build-up of an overwhelming naval and military force, the Tyneside magistrates refused to use it to coerce the strikers into a settlement. Although The Times criticized the magistrates because they did "not seem much inclined to exert the arm of power,"<sup>17</sup> such force was reluctantly wielded by local authorities and then only as a last resort because the order imposed by violence could be as calamitous as the disturbance itself. Moreover, the use of such force was not an alternative as long as the magistrates refused to intervene. Troops could not take action against civilians until the Riot Act was read and the government refused to issue definitive orders which would have compelled the local authorities to use the available military and naval forces to end the strike.<sup>18</sup> Military and naval officers like Captains Leckey and Alexander Cochrane in 1792 and Captain Peter Rothe in 1793 played a crucial role in the resolution of social conflict in the eighteenth century. The history of Tyneside labor disputes reveals that employers and the civil authorities invariably requested the dispatch of troops and naval vessels to control the river and intimidate the strikers. This internal security duty was perceived by naval and

military officers as resulting from the ineptitude or neglect of the local authorities and as a distraction from their regular duties. Their participation in assisting the civil authorities was further complicated by the fact that the powers of naval and military officers in civil disturbances were vague and ambiguous. Despite their distaste for anti-riot duty, these officers showed little inclination to be the passive supporters of obdurate employers. In fact, they often criticized employers if the strikers' grievances were legitimate. Neither were these officers willing to suppress labor disputes quickly by the use of force. They showed common sense, sagacity and moderation in their approach to local labor problems and, naval officers in particular, often functioned as mediators between the seamen, shipowners and magistrates.<sup>19</sup>

Although the naval and military forces were not used to put down the strike, their presence was decisive in the resolution of the dispute. Until these forces were increased to overwhelming proportions, the meeting between the shipowners and strikers were only opportunities to present their demands, not bargaining sessions, and both sides refused to give in. As the naval and military forces increased, the seamen lowered their demands. The presence of these forces destroyed the discipline necessary to maintain the strike because the seamen could no longer blockade the harbor and control the port.<sup>20</sup>

On another level, some of the magistrates' reluctance to intervene must be attributed to the organization and discipline of the seamen themselves. While the strikers may have been unlawfully assembled, their behavior was not riotous and tumultuous as required by definition in the Riot Act.<sup>21</sup> As Burdon explained,

there has been thru the whole of this affair, a degree of system and order unknown in former riots, so much so, as to make the Part the Magistrates<sup>22</sup> had to act, embarrassing and difficult.

Thus the magistrates' reluctance was not simply due to indulgence or indolence but to the fact that the anomalies of the interpretation and operation of the Riot Act were confusing and they could not decide whether or not a riot was actually occurring.<sup>23</sup>

James Rudman, the mayor of Newcastle and its chief magistrate, refused to acknowledge the seriousness of the strike because, according to Bulmer, "he affects to believe a Riot does not exist." While it was "true that Men do not set fire to the Town, or Ships in the Harbour," Rudman would not concede that lesser activities were riotous. Even when a Newcastle official related the difficulty he had in reaching his house in North Shields because of the strike, Rudman would not admit the occurrence of a riot. He did not attend the shipowners' meeting on 31 October or the presentation of their offer to the strikers aboard the Racehorse the next day. The shipowners feared they would



have "much difficulty" in getting Rudman to come to Shields even on the arrival of a large military force despite the fact that as mayor he controlled the local militia.<sup>24</sup>

Rudman would not intervene until information of a riot was lodged with him. The shipowners, however, did "not appear at all willing to come forward to aid the Civil Powers in settling these disputes in which they are so deeply concerned." Rudman complained that the shipowners could not be prevailed upon to provide such information out of "dread of the Vengeance of the Rioters."<sup>25</sup> In fact, it was almost impossible for the shipowners to prove an act of riot against any of the seamen. The strikers did not appear in person when negotiating with shipowners of known hostility to their cause but sent strangers unknown to their employers instead. These strangers may not have been seamen at all which would protect them from later economic retaliation by the shipowners and their anonymity prevented the owners from filing information of a riot with the local authorities. It was not until 19 November that three shipowners and masters provided such information--but only after the build-up of an overwhelming naval and military force and just when Burdon's mediation appeared to be successful in ending the strike peacefully. The seamen thus succeeded in using their methods of moderation and effective leadership skillfully to avoid major provocations while still stopping the seaborne coal trade and thereby prevented

the local authorities from using the full force of the law against them.<sup>26</sup>

Powditch's assertion that the collier seamen suddenly and spontaneously "discover'd a disposition to Riot"<sup>27</sup> was a typical contemporary interpretation of labor disputes. In labor historiography, these disputes have been defined by E.J. Hobsbawm and other historians as a primitive mode of "collective bargaining by riot" in which the workers behaved as an undisciplined "crowd, not an army." Because formal labor unions were expressly forbidden by English statute and common law as illegal combinations in restraint of trade, to combine openly was a legally precarious undertaking. Early labor organizations were necessarily secret or disguised and workers were inclined to a certain furtiveness of behavior. Neither enlightened, orderly, bureaucratic strikes nor peaceful petitioning could achieve the workers' demands. According to this interpretation, the working classes were inarticulate and without effective leadership; they could defend their interests only by means of demonstration, verbal intimidation and violence.<sup>28</sup> The workers, according to Adam Smith,

have always the recourse to the loudest clamour, and sometimes to the most shocking violence and outrage. They are desperate and act with the folly and extravagance of desperate men, who must either starve, or frighten their masters<sup>29</sup> into an immediate compliance with their demands.

Strikes, despite all efforts to reduce them to the level of

bilateral conciliatory negotiation, remained a form of industrial warfare. Acts of violence were the rule and labor disputes tended to devolve into riots.<sup>30</sup>

The collier seamen's ability to organize themselves, even on a temporary or ad hoc basis, did not conform to this interpretation of pre-industrial labor disputes. In their strike of 1792 the seamen developed an organization which worked to their advantage by disciplining members of their own ranks and by creating an orderly and united front against both the shipowners and the magistrates. The "determined systematic manner"<sup>31</sup> in which the seamen's methods were implemented clearly indicated that the concept of an executive strike committee predated the development of formal and legal trade unionism.<sup>32</sup>

Despite their sophisticated organization, local observers continually referred to the seamen as a riotous mob. By modern standards, the seamen's activities could be called riotous only in that they willfully and successfully defied the local authorities. In contemporary parlance, however, the term "mob" was applied indiscriminately to any unlawful assembly of the lower social orders which engaged in riots, strikes or political demonstrations whether or not these were accompanied by violence. Such mobs were assumed to be the passive instruments of outside parties and to have no particular motives or interests of their own. This belief necessarily oversimplified the basic causes of

disturbances because social idealism, political consciousness or legitimate economic grievances were not considered to be motivations for crowd actions. Central to this attitude was an intrinsic fear of conspiracy behind all manifestations of popular discontent because mobs were believed to be hired and deliberately used by interests "above" or apart from the crowd itself.<sup>33</sup> The seamen's activities in 1792 were described as having "the energy and order of a system"<sup>34</sup> and that they conducted themselves "with much greater Propriety than could be expected from the Nature of their agitated Situation."<sup>35</sup> To some, the seamen's numbers, the quality of the declarations they composed and published and the "apparent Firmness of their Proceedings" appeared to be regulated "by men of better Education in a higher Sphere. . . ."<sup>36</sup>

The seamen made no demands beyond the redress of their specific economic and occupational grievances and their strike was completely devoid of any open association with political objectives. Many local correspondents concurred in this by reporting that the seamen were striking only to increase their wages.<sup>37</sup> Burdon informed the Home Office that "there seems nothing of a Political nature in this present matter [and] that the Sailors appear heartily attached to the Government of the Country."<sup>38</sup> The loyalty of the seamen was reaffirmed by a story circulated as being "no less than extraordinary." When Captain Duff's Martin sloop became

stranded on the beach at Shields the sailors, "in great numbers," boarded the ship. These seamen told Duff, "we know, well enough, by G--, Captain, what you've come about, but damp [sic] it, we'll save his Majesty's ship for all that" and they extricated the Martin from its predicament. As The York Courant proclaimed, "no class of Men but British Tars could have acted so generously."<sup>39</sup>

However, when the shipowners capitulated to the original demand of £3 per voyage on 31 October, the strikers refused the offer and raised their demand to four guineas. This action led some to suspect that the true motivations behind the seamen's discontent was more ominous than a simple desire to increase their wages.<sup>40</sup>

Throughout 1792 and 1793 reports of industrial disorders and provision shortages suggested that widespread and dangerous disaffection existed among large segments of the lower classes. It appeared that this discontent, although arising ultimately from specific economic or social grievances, was being transformed by radical agitators into a massive campaign for major political reforms designed to change drastically the existing structure of English society and government. William Pitt argued that the internal threat of the radical societies was inseparable from the external threat of France and its revolutionary principles. It appeared to the government that

the utmost industry is . . . employed by evil-disposed persons in this kingdom, acting in

concert with persons in foreign parts, with a view to subvert the laws and established constitution of this realm and to <sup>41</sup>destroy all order and government therein. . . .

Speeches from all sides in Parliament, with the exception of the Foxite Whigs and the radicals at the end of 1792 and in 1793, made reference to radical societies endeavoring to subvert the constitution and accused these groups of fomenting disturbances among the lower classes.<sup>42</sup> It was in this climate of fear and suspicion that the collier seamen had to act in their strike of 1792 and the anti-press riots of 1793.

Throughout this period local correspondents informed the central government of the circulation of seditious propaganda at Tyneside<sup>43</sup> and of the "dissatisfaction prevalent among the labouring ranks arising from Principles industriously propagated among them"<sup>44</sup> by outsiders. It was reported that one thousand copies of the sixpence edition of Thomas Paine's The Rights of Man were sold on Tyneside during the summer of 1792<sup>45</sup> despite the Royal Proclamation against seditious publications. The shipowners believed

that the Civil Power seems very inadequate to the infording [sic] a due observance of order and subordination among so unruly a body especially [sic] when such Pains is [sic] taking [sic] to sow the seeds of disafection [sic] to our excellent government by cheap<sup>46</sup> publications of the most dangerous principles.

Powditch was alarmed by the

thousands of Pittmen [sic][,] Keelmen, Waggonmen, and other labouringmen, hardy fellows strongly

impressed with the new doctrine of equality, and at present composed of such combustible matter that the least spark will set them in a blaze. . . .<sup>47</sup>

The Times informed its readers that the "spirit of riot" among the seamen did not arise from legitimate grievances over wages, but that their demands were directly "in imitation of the French" example.

The general cry among the rioters is--let us have a more equal division of property, for why should one man be richer than another? A pretty strong symptom this of what our wealthy Citizens and Landholders<sup>48</sup> are to expect from any change in our Government!

The fear of political disaffection and popular turbulence among the lower classes led the Pitt administration to view such alarmist information with much less scepticism than would otherwise have been the case.

From the central government's perspective, one of the most alarming aspects of the seamen's strike of 1792 was the dilatory reporting of the disturbance by local observers. The Home Office had neither the bureaucracy nor the authority to maintain its own agents in all parts of Britain. Instead, it functioned as a channel for information about the situation in the provinces supplied to the central government by local government officials, naval and military officers and men of local importance. The strike of 1792 apparently indicated, however, that neither local officials nor private citizens could be relied upon to report even large-scale disturbances to the central government.<sup>49</sup> Except

for an intimation of problems at Tyneside contained in a letter from Charles Townsend on 31 October,<sup>50</sup> Nepean claimed that "His Majesty's Servants were entirely uninformed of these circumstances previous to the receipt of Mr. Burden's [sic] letter"<sup>51</sup> on 5 November. Burdon had already received two letters about the impasse between the seamen and the shipowners including one from Bulmer which Burdon forwarded to the Home Office. Burdon believed it was his duty to inform the central government but, as a Durham county magistrate, he also believed that such information should "come with more Propriety" from the Newcastle magistrates. Unfortunately, none of these magistrates thought it necessary to inform the central government. Burdon arrived in Newcastle for the shipowners' meeting on 24 October but he waited eleven days to write to the Home Office. He now felt compelled to do so because of the inability or unwillingness of the Newcastle magistrates to settle the strike which had already paralyzed the port and the seaborne coal trade for "near 3 weeks."<sup>52</sup> On the same day, 3 November, Powditch also wrote to the Home Office but he had not bothered to do so until one of his own ships was detained by the strikers.<sup>53</sup> Despite the government's assertion of its confidence in the ability and judgment of the Tyneside authorities, it was disappointed and alarmed in the quality and quantity of the information they provided about the strike. According to Nepean,



this information appears to be in many respects extremely defective and insufficient, particularly in regard to the reasons of the magistrates for being unwilling to lessen the Force at Tynmouth [sic] Barracks, although no intelligence has ever been transmitted to Government of any disturbances among the Seamen at Newcastle. It is extremely necessary that some further information should be obtained. . . .

To remedy this deficiency, the Home Office ordered Assistant Adjutant General Colonel Oliver Delancey to the Tyne to take command of the troops there and, equally important, "for the purpose of furnishing the Government with such information" about "the real nature and extent of the Proceedings" of the collier seamen.<sup>54</sup> Once informed, however, the central government acted immediately by dispatching naval and military forces to the Tyne.<sup>55</sup>

Pitt described the reports from Shields as being "not pleasant"<sup>56</sup> and the Home Office papers pertaining to the seamen's strike indicated the seriousness with which the government took such reports--they were often labelled "Seditious Proceedings on acct. of Wages."<sup>57</sup> In the King's Speech, when Parliament convened on 13 December, Pitt described "a spirit of tumult and disorder . . . [which] has shewn itself in acts of riot and insurrection"<sup>58</sup> which led him to consider calling out the militia, apparently for domestic police duty.<sup>59</sup> During the debate in the Commons on the Address of Thanks, Charles James Fox admitted the occurrence of "some slight riots" but he expressed incredulity that the government believed that the riots were

"used only to cover an attempt to destroy our happy constitution." Fox asked the other members of the Commons if they too believed that

the avowed object of the complaint of the people, was not the real one--that the sailors at Shields . . . did not really want some increase of their Wages, but were actuated by some design of overthrowing the constitution? Is there a man in England, who believes this insinuation to be true?<sup>60</sup>

Fox in the Commons and Lansdowne in the Lords challenged the Pitt administration to produce evidence of insurrectionary intent in this disturbance.<sup>61</sup> In defending the government, Home Secretary Henry Dundas admitted that he could not precisely define "insurrection" but that he considered what had occurred at Shields to be "nothing less than insurrection" and that the measures taken by the government to restore public order were fully justified under these circumstances.<sup>62</sup>

Thus by the end of 1792 there was a general stiffening of attitude among those responsible for public order against any manifestation of popular discontent. Previously, the central government and the local magistrates could adopt a restrained or even tolerant attitude toward simple demands for the redress of obvious social or economic grievances. This posture was no longer tenable when it seemed that such disaffection might work for a radical transformation of society. Whatever the economic reasons behind the sterner attitude displayed toward labor combinations at the end of

the eighteenth century, after the 1780s the decisive factor was the government's concern for domestic security and public order under the belief that such combinations often produced social unrest and could easily disguise revolutionary conspiracies.<sup>63</sup> The government's response to the seamen's strike of 1792 indicated it feared "something more serious"<sup>64</sup> than a labor dispute--it feared workers motivated by political grievances as well. It is therefore not surprising that the government responded in the manner and with the force it did. While this might be deemed an overreaction, the Pitt administration chose to err on the side of caution by dispatching naval and military forces too formidable to be opposed by the strikers.<sup>65</sup> This response ultimately broke the seamen's organization and the discipline necessary to maintain the the strike and forced them to settle the dispute by lowering their demands.

The Tyneside collier seamen provided a cogent example of the combination of moderate methods, skillful leadership and effective organization which were necessary to successful labor activities in the eighteenth century. One of the most obvious features of their organization and methods was the remarkable degree of restraint displayed by the seamen in 1792. The seamen were able to control the port of the Tyne for several weeks and present a united front to both the magistrates and the shipowners and they did so with very little violence, as even observers hostile to their

cause reported. Because of this, the local magistrates, the Home Office and the military and naval officers present were reluctant to initiate decisive action against the strikers and were markedly unsympathetic toward the intransigence displayed by some of the shipowners. As a result, the shipowners were forced to offer considerable concessions to the strikers' demands. This pattern of moderation and nonviolence was not unknown in eighteenth century labor disputes and it was a recurring feature in disputes on the Tyne, dating back as least as far as the Newcastle riots of 1740. These methods would continue to be used through the Tyneside seamen's strike of 1815 which followed a course remarkably similar to the strike of 1792.<sup>66</sup>

A primary reason for this attitude was that the seamen's activities and objectives were completely devoid of any association with ulterior political motivations. The seamen did not defy the established order by demanding radical social or political reforms. These seamen did not represent a working class alienated from the established order and there is no evidence of any acute class conflict in their labor disputes. The effectiveness of their leadership is evident by the seamen's recognition that they had a greater chance of success by working within the existing social and political structure. The strikers' response was not overtly to challenge or abandon the existing institutions but to make them work to their

advantage by drawing attention to specific economic and occupational grievances in hopes of obtaining redress from those who held positions of authority. Until the 1790s it was possible for disinterested opinion among men of local importance and even those who held positions of power to display considerable sympathy with the seamen's objectives and methods. However, the fear of radical political agitation and the perceived association of the seamen's activities with the cause of social and political reform sharpened official suspicion of all manifestations of discontent, however legitimate the strikers' grievances.<sup>67</sup>

## NOTES

1. Norman McCord and David E. Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's in North East England," International Review of Social History 13, part 3 (1968): 367; Norman McCord, "The Government of Tyneside, 1800-1850," Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, fifth series, 20: 25-36.
2. Henry Pelling, A History of British Trade Unionism (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 24; Stephen Jones, "Community and Organisation: Early Seamen's Trade Unionism on the North-East Coast, 1768-1844," Maritime History 3 (April 1973): 38; Norman McCord, "Tyneside Discontents and Peterloo," Northern History 2 (1967): 91.
3. Edward Hughes, North Country Life in the Eighteenth Century: The North-East, 1700-1750 (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), pp. xiv, 16.
4. George H. Haswell, The Maister: A Century of Tyneside Life (London: Walter Scott Ltd., 1895), p. 36.
5. Great Britain, Home Office Papers, 42/22. Public Records Office, London. Powditch to Pitt, 3 November 1792, ff. 251-252.
6. The Picture of Newcastle upon Tyne (Newcastle: D. Akenhead and Sons, 1807), p. 67; Jones, "Community and Organisation," p. 38; Sidney Webb and Beatrice Webb, English Local Government from the Revolution to the Municipal Corporations Act: The Manor and the Borough, part 1 (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1908), p. 372n; Norman McCord, "The Seamen's Strike of 1815 in North-East England," Economic History Review, second series, 21 (April 1968): 127n; McCord, "Tyneside Discontents and Peterloo," p. 92; D.J. Rowe, The Records of the Company of Shipwrights of Newcastle upon Tyne, 1622-1967 (London: Surtees Society, 1970), p. 4. Rowland Burdon described South Shields as having "at least 14,000 inhabitants" (HO 42/22, Burdon to Dundas, 3 November 1792, f. 261), while Joseph Bulmer claimed that North and South Shields had a combined population of 40,000 in 1792 (HO 42/22, Bulmer to Nepean, 9 November 1792, f. 334). Frederick Morton Eden estimated the population of North Shields to be 10,000 and that of South Shields to be 15,000, estimates which he believed could have been exaggerations. Eden, The State of the Poor (London: J. Davis, 1797), pp. 164-165, 562.

7. Robert R. Dozier, "An Eighteenth Century Strike: The Sailors' 'Riots' at Newcastle," paper presented at the North West Conference on British Studies, April 1978, p. 2; Webbs, The Manor and the Borough, p. 4.
8. 1 Geo I, Stat. 2, cap. 5 (The Riot Act, 1715); Charles Lush, An Abridgement and Concise Explanation of the Laws Relating to Riots, Tumults, and Insurrections and of the Duty and Power of Magistrates and Others Respecting Such Offences (London: J. Downes, n.d. [1792-1793?]); HO 42/22, Nepean to Bishop of Durham, 8 November 1792, f. 320.
9. HO 42/22, Burdon to Home Office, 8 November 1792, f. 315.
10. William Tomlinson, Tomlinson's Comprehensive Guide to Northumberland (New York: Augustus M. Kelley Publishers, 1969), p. 44.
11. Haswell, The Maister, pp. 16, 21-22; Eden, The State of the Poor, p. 562n; McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," p. 371n; John T. Taylor, The Archaeology of the Coal Trade (Newcastle: Frank Graham, 1971), pp. 60-61. The antagonism between Newcastle and the other Tyneside towns began with the founding of Shields. In 1290, the burgesses of Newcastle brought suit against the priors of Tynemouth and Durham claiming "that the Prior of Tynemouth had raised a town on the bank of the water of Tyne at Sheles on the one side of the water, and that the Prior of Durham had raised another on the other side of the water, where no town ought to be, . . . to the great injury of the whole borough." Tomlinson, Guide to Northumberland, pp. 44-45; Rowe, Records of the Company of Shipwrights, pp. 4-6; Hughes, North Country Life, pp. 12, 57, 69n, 202; S. Middlebrook, Newcastle upon Tyne: Its Growth and Achievement (Newcastle: Kemsley House, 1950), pp. 111, 142; The Picture of Newcastle, pp. 70-71; C.M. Fraser and K. Emsley, Tyneside (Newton Abbot, Devonshire: David and Charles Ltd., 1973), p. 33; David Bean, Tyneside: A Biography (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1971), pp. 60-61.
12. HO 42/22, Bulmer to Nepean, 9 November 1792, f. 333.
13. HO 42/22, Powditch to Pitt, 3 November 1792, ff. 249-250.
14. HO 42/22, Bulmer to Burdon, 1 November 1792, f. 263.
15. HO 42/22, Nepean to Bishop of Durham, 7 November 1792,

- ff. 302-303.
16. C.R. Dobson, Masters and Journeymen: A Prehistory of Industrial Relations, 1717-1800 (London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1980), pp. 89, 91-92; E.P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," Past and Present 50 (February 1971): 120-121, 126.
  17. The Times [London], 20 November 1792, p. 4.
  18. McCord, "Tyneside Discontents and Peterloo," p. 92; Thompson, "The Moral Economy," pp. 120-121; McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," p. 372; McCord, "The Seamen's Strike of 1815," p. 139n; Albert Goodwin, The Friends of Liberty: The English Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 234, 236; J.L. Hammond and Barbara Hammond, The Town Labourer, 1760-1832 (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1920), pp. 83-87; Clive Emsley, British Society and the French Wars, 1793-1815 (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1979), p. 39; E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 81.
  19. McCord, "Government of Tyneside," pp. 10-13.
  20. Dozier, "An Eighteenth Century Strike," pp. 11, 14-15.
  21. The Riot Act defined a riot as "any persons to the number of twelve or more, being unlawfully, riotously and tumultuously assembled together, to the disturbance of the publick peace . . . [who] being requested or commanded by any one or more justice or justices of the peace, or by the sheriff of the county, or his under-sheriff, or by the mayor, bailiff or bailiffs, or other head-officers, or justices of the peace of any city or town-corporate, where such assembly shall be, by proclamation to be made in the King's name . . . to disperse themselves, and peaceably to depart to their habitations, or their lawful business, shall, to the number twelve or more . . . unlawfully, riotously and tumultuously remain together by the space of one hour after such command or request made by proclamation. . . ." D.B. Horn and Mary Ransome (eds.), English Historical Documents, vol. 10, 1714-1783 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957), pp. 271-275.
  22. HO 42/22, Burdon to Nepean, 20 November 1792, f. 447.



23. Dozier, "An Eighteenth Century Strike," p. 16; George Rudé, The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730-1848 (New York: John Wiley and Sons Inc., 1964), p. 263.
24. HO 42/22, Bulmer to Nepean, 9 November 1792, ff. 333-334; HO 42/22, Cochrane to Dundas, 20 November 1792, f. 433; HO 42/22, Burdon to Home Office, 8 November 1792, f. 315; The Picture of Newcastle, p. 64; Fraser and Emsley, Tyneside, p. 52.
25. HO 42/22, Rudman to Nepean, 8 November 1792, f. 313; Tyne and Wear Record Office, CO 37, "Papers Relating to the Seamen's Strike of 1792," 394/35, Rudman to Nepean, 8 November 1792, no f.
26. McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," pp. 369-370; Dozier, "An Eighteenth Century Strike," pp. 6, 16; McCord, "The Seamen's Strike of 1815," p. 142.
27. HO 42/22, Powditch to Pitt, 3 November 1792, f. 247.
28. Dobson, Masters and Journeymen, p. 16; E.J. Hobsbawm, Labouring Men (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co. Inc., 1967), pp. 5-17.
29. Adam Smith, An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations (New York: Random House, 1937), p. 67.
30. K.G.J.C. Knowles, Strikes: A Study in Industrial Conflict (New York: The Philosophical Library Inc., 1952), p. 5; Rudé, The Crowd in History, p. 68.
31. HO 42/22, Burdon to Dundas, 3 November 1792, f. 261.
32. Dozier, "An Eighteenth Century Strike," p. 4; Jones, "Community and Organisation," p. 51.
33. Robert R. Dozier, For King, Constitution and Country (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1983), p. 44; George Rudé, "The London 'Mob' of the Eighteenth Century," The Historical Journal 2 (1959): 1-2, 7-8; Dobson, Masters and Journeymen, p. 18; Rudé, The Crowd in History, p. 198; Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class, pp. 62-63, 68.
34. The Times [London], 9 November 1792, p. 3.
35. The York Courant, 19 November 1792, p. 2.

36. Great Britain, Home Office Papers, 42/23. Public Records Office, London. Rudman to Dundas, 4 February 1793, f. 756.
37. Dozier, For King, Constitution and Country, p. 47.
38. HO 42/22, Burdon to Nepean, 16 November 1792, f. 387.
39. The York Courant, 26 November 1792, p. 2.
40. Dozier, For King, Constitution and Country, p. 47.
41. Clive Emsley, "The London 'Insurrection' of December 1792: Fact, Fiction or Fantasy?," Journal of British Studies 17 (Spring 1978): 66-86; Robert R. Dozier, "Democratic Revolution in England: A Possibility?," Albion: Proceedings of the Conference on British Studies 4 (Winter 1972): 183-192; The Annual Register, or a View of the History, Politics and Literature for the Year 1792 (London: G. Woodfall, 1799), "State Papers," p. 166.
42. McCord, "Tyneside Discontents and Peterloo," pp. 92-93; Emsley, "The London 'Insurrection'," p. 70. The Hammonds dismissed any connection between the English working classes and the new political consciousness which had manifested itself in France. "There was no resemblance between the spirit of the working classes in the north and Midlands, and the spirit of the Paris democrat, on fire with vivid and emancipatory enthusiasm. The English working classes . . . were conservative, insular, [and] Philistine. . . . The working classes . . . in the north and the Midlands were profoundly indifferent to ideas or causes. As long as they could drink, watch a cock-fight or bull-baiting or horse-race, and earn a reasonable living they were . . . contented. . . ." Hammonds, The Town Labourer, p. 288.
43. Tyneside's association with the propaganda of the French Revolution began in 1774 when Marat published Chains of Slavery in Newcastle. The French edition of 1792 did not differ materially in content from this earlier English version. Thomas Spence, editor of the radical Pig's Meat, or Lessons for the People, alias the Swinish Multitude, was a member of the Newcastle Philosophical Society. P.M. Horsley Eighteenth Century Newcastle (Newcastle: Oriel Press, 1971), pp. 206-217.
44. HO 42/23, Bishop of Durham to Dundas, 25 February 1793, f. 768.

45. McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," p. 382.
46. TWRO, CO 37, 394/35, Shipowners to Chatham, n.d., no f.
47. HO 42/22, Powditch to Pitt, 3 November 1792, f. 250.
48. The Times [London], 3 December 1792, p. 3.
49. Dozier, For King, Constitution and Country, pp. 44-45; Clive Emsley, "The Home Office and its Sources of Information and Investigation, 1791-1801," English Historical Review 94 (July 1979): 532, 536-537; John Stevenson, Popular Disturbances in England, 1700-1870 (London: Longman Group, 1979), p. 12; McCord, "Government of Tyneside," pp. 6, 7, 10-13, 18-19; Roy Porter, English Society in the Eighteenth Century (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1982), p. 135; R.R. Nelson, The Home Office, 1782-1801 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1969). During the seamen's strike of 1792, Home Secretary Henry Dundas was in Scotland. Foreign Secretary William Wyndham Grenville and Permanent Undersecretary of State Evan Nepean were in temporary charge of the Home Office.
50. HO 42/22, Townsend to Grenville, 31 October 1792, f. 219.
51. HO 42/22, Nepean to Bishop of Durham, 7 November 1792, f. 302.
52. HO 42/22, Burdon to Dundas, 3 November 1792, ff. 261-262; Dozier, "An Eighteenth Century Strike," p. 11.
53. HO 42/22, Powditch to Pitt, 3 November 1792, ff. 247-252.
54. HO 42/22, Nepean to Delancey, 13 November 1792, ff. 366-368.
55. Dozier, For King, Constitution and Country, p. 45.
56. Great Britain, Historical Manuscripts Commission, Fourteenth Report, Appendix V, Dropmore MSS, Pitt to Grenville, 5-12 November 1792, p. 328.
57. McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," p. 382.
58. The Annual Register, p. 167.

59. Emsley, "The London 'Insurrection'," p. 71.
60. Hansard's Parliamentary History, vol. 30, 1792-1794 (London: T.C. Hansard, 1817), pp. 14-15.
61. Emsley, "The London 'Insurrection'," p. 84.
62. Hansard's Parliamentary History, pp. 47-48; Emsley, "The London 'Insurrection'," p.84. The York Courant, 12 November 1792, p. 2, also described the strike as an "insurrection."
63. McCord, "Tyneside Discontents and Peterloo," pp. 92-93; Pelling, History of British Trade Unionism, p. 24.
64. The Chelmsford Chronicle, 23 November 1792, p. 1.
65. Dozier, "An Eighteenth Century Strike," p. 14.
66. McCord, "The Seamen's Strike of 1815," pp. 128n, 141-142; "An Impartial Account of the Late Proceedings of the Seamen of the Port of Tyne" by A Tar (Newcastle upon Tyne: K. Anderson, 1815) in Trade Unions Under the Combination Acts, 1799-1823, ed. Kenneth E. Carpenter (New York: Arno Press, 1972).
67. McCord, "Government of Tyneside," pp. 24-26; McCord, "The Seamen's Strike of 1815," p. 142; McCord, "Tyneside Discontents and Peterloo," pp. 91-92.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE NURSERY OF SEAMEN--AND THEIR TRADE UNIONISM

The Tyneside collier seamen did not conform to the traditional interpretation of the eighteenth century labor "aristocracy". Yet their strike of 1792 indicated that skilled workers employing moderate methods under effective leadership could achieve considerable success in labor disputes. The collier seamen's organization and methods did not originate spontaneously, but developed out of the peculiar economic nature of the seaborne coal trade and the vital function which the seamen performed within its structure, and out of the social basis of the Tyneside maritime community. An examination of these factors does much to explain the seamen's ability to organize themselves so consistently and successfully in labor disputes during the late eighteenth century.

Clark Kerr and Abraham J. Siegel formulated an "isolated mass" hypothesis to explain why certain occupations are consistently more strike-prone than others. According to this theory, the workers most likely to strike are those who live in their own separate communities bound by their own collective set of moral and behavioral codes, traditions, social expectations and economic interests. The members of such a community form a cohesive but isolated mass, almost "a race apart," from the larger culture or

society.<sup>1</sup> As a group, the Tyneside merchant seamen displayed the requisite characteristics of an isolated mass. Kerr's and Siegel's hypothesis is consistent with data on eighteenth century labor disputes. According to C.R. Dobson's calculations, the merchant seamen were the second most strike-prone workers during the century.<sup>2</sup>

Tyneside was geographically isolated<sup>3</sup> from the rest of England. The region was

shut out from all but the most limited communication with other parts of England by the almost impassable roads, intense local jealousies, and precariously uncertain vagrancy laws of the time. . . . [The] population, wholly seafaring, or drawing its means of subsistence from the sea, knew less of England and its people than of countries across the main and their multifarious inhabitants.

Tyneside may have been cut off from access to the interior of England but, as a seaport, it attracted its share of "the extraordinary and ever-changing variety of sea-folk bearing up for the shelter, or trade, or protection" of the harbor. Tyneside was a distinctly maritime community by the end of the eighteenth century and perhaps "no other seaport . . . presented so bewildering a variety of folk and character and speech and costume in so concentrated a form. . . ."4

In the eighteenth century, the collier seamen could not be described as cut-off as a class. In the port, the entire community centered upon, and lived by, the river and the sea.<sup>5</sup> The collier seamen formed a large and integral part of

this maritime community and yet they retained the distinctive characteristics and traditions of their particular trade. The coal trade was "an arduous and dangerous calling [which] through so long a period developed a highly characteristic and so strongly differentiated human being. . . ." The collier seaman was "a strange being"<sup>6</sup> and

if his breeding has been north of Yarmouth, he is distinguished with the title Collier's nag; and indeed he is a rare horse that will never fail you in bad Weather, being as insensible to Rain, Cold or Thunder as a Cannon-Bullet. He is generally above the common size of other Tars, in Bulk, Strength and Courage, which is mainly owing to his northern Diet, which he thinks on with a heavy Heart every time he sees a good Coal Fire. He is a great Admirer of North-country Beef and Pease-Pudding, yet allows Newcastle Ale and Salmon to be the most Superlative Diet in the Universe.

The distinctiveness of the collier seamen was noted by others engaged in the shipping trades. The Tyne became a port for the Baltic and Continental trades and as more foreign sailors became familiar with the collier seamen they called them "North Sea Chinamen" because of their rather difficult Geordie dialect and voice inflections.<sup>8</sup>

The collier seamen were also distinguished from others in the Tyneside maritime community by their own particular customs and traditions. One custom which bound the seamen was the singing of their local anthem, a ballad by Doctor Fitch entitled "The Cliffs of Old Tynemouth" sung to the tune of "The Meeting of the Waters." This song was sung, weather permitting, on every ship manned by the Tyneside

collier seamen on each day of the month that their half-pay was due. This was called "White Stocking Day" because it was a custom for the sailors' "Judies" or "Mary Ellens," the wives and girlfriends of the crew, to wear white cotton stockings and present themselves at the shipowner's office with the half-pay notes to draw the allotment which the seamen had left them.<sup>9</sup>

The collier seamen were selective as to those who would be admitted into the ranks of their trade. Despite the cosmopolitan nature of those who frequented the port of the Tyne, a "foreigner" in contemporary parlance was not a man from another country but one from another district. The seamen did not readily accept those "Scotch Bobs" or "Norfolk Alecs" who sought employment in the collier fleet. This was not simply a reflection of the geographical insularity of Tyneside or quaint regional prejudices. In the labor history of Tyneside, such foreigners were often used as scab labor and strike-breakers. The goals of the early trade unions and friendly societies often reflect this experience in their attempts to restrict employment in a particular trade. Similarly, London youths were not welcome as apprentices in the collier fleet although, for some reason, Danish youths apparently were. Knock-kneed and squint-eyed seamen were unpopular aboard ships but bow-legged seamen were preferred to straight-legged men,<sup>10</sup> presumably because bow-leggedness was a mark of experience



in the shipping trades.

Unlike the deep-water or "Sou' Spainer" shipping trade, the coasting trade from the Tyne to London was dominated by ships manned by members of the same family. This "family ship" system insured that the common economic and professional interests of the collier seamen were reinforced by immediate family ties and connections to seamen in the other Tyneside communities. This factor also helps explain why the collier seamen did not commit the violent excesses they often had the power to do during their labor disputes. These seamen were not waterfront rabble but respected family men<sup>11</sup> with a recognized importance of status and function within the local community and economy.

The strength of custom and tradition which bound the collier seamen was bolstered by the knowledge that they performed a vital function within the structure of the coal trade which was important not only locally but to the national economy as well.

Tyneside was economically dependent upon the commercial interests of the coal trade and its allied industries, the shipbuilding and shipping trades. Early in the eighteenth century the collier fleet was owned or controlled by masters from ports south of the Tyne. Gradually the building and operation of the fleet moved northward until, by the 1760s, it became possible to speak of the northeastern collier fleet, built in the Northeast by northeastern capital and

manned by northeastern seamen. In 1740, there were only four ships of an estimated total of eight hundred tons belonging to South Shields. In the thirty years prior to 1792 the number of ships in the port of Shields increased from thirty to "not less than 120" sail. By 1809, there were five hundred ships totalling more than forty thousand tons belonging to Shields and over six hundred in the entire Tyneside merchant fleet. At the end of the eighteenth century, the port of the Tyne became the third largest in England by ships, tonnage and seamen.<sup>12</sup> Frederick Morton Eden described the region in this period as composed of those "chiefly engaged in various occupations and trade relative to commerce" which were "carried on with great vigour" by the sailors, coalminers, keelmen, shopkeepers, merchants, tradesmen and gentlemen of independent fortunes "usually found in a sea-port town."<sup>13</sup>

The predominance of the seaborne coal trade meant that the collier seamen possessed considerable influence at Tyneside. Any labor dissatisfaction among them could bring the local economy to a standstill. The seamen recognized that they were highly trained craftsmen who were skilled in manning the complicated sailing ships of the collier fleet. The collier seamen were considered to be superior even to others engaged in the maritime trades because "the active Employ they have in the Coal Trade, with the difficulty of Navigation, sooner brings them to Perfection."<sup>14</sup> This high

level of expertise meant that the collier seamen could not be easily replaced by inexperienced workers in consequence of a labor dispute.

The collier seamen's unionism did not fill a vacuum of labor organization on the Tyne.<sup>15</sup> Two other maritime trades were also pre-eminent in early labor organization: the keelmen and the shipwrights. These trades provided the collier seamen with cogent examples of the economic self-respect attainable through defensive trade unionism and precedents for developing their own unionism.

The seamen were not the first laborers to organize themselves on the Tyne. J.U. Nef believed that modern trade unionism in Britain began with the Tyneside keelmen. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the keelmen established their own charity and hospital financed by contributions from their wages. The keelmen also demonstrated a history of militant labor activities in a series of strikes (in 1708, 1710, 1719, 1738, 1740, 1749, 1750, 1771, 1794, 1803, 1809, 1819 and 1822) which usually focused on grievances over wages and the size and method of loading the keels.<sup>16</sup>

Occupationally closer to the collier seamen were the shipwrights. The expansion of shipbuilding and the collier fleet on the Tyne enhanced their economic bargaining position and increased the need to defend their interests through the formation of friendly societies. In 1795 the

Shipwrights Association of South Shields was formed, followed by the Amicable Association of Shipwrights in 1798.<sup>17</sup>

The functions of the keelmen, shipwrights and collier seamen within the structure of the coal trade resulted in a tradition of mutual hostility and economic competition between these workers which precluded any possibility of sustained sympathetic support in labor disputes. The coal trade was concentrated in a limited geographical area at Tyneside, it was confined to workers with specialized skills and there was an assured market for its product in the Metropolis. Because of these conditions, any particular labor group, such as the keelmen, shipwrights or collier seamen, which controlled an essential process in the overall structure of the coal trade could act to defend or improve its particular economic interests not only at the expense of their employers but also at the expense of the other workers within the coal trade. It has been estimated that more than 38,000 persons at Tyneside were supported directly or indirectly by the coal trade in 1792.<sup>18</sup> Thus a strike by any one group of workers which halted the coal trade jeopardized the livelihoods of thousands of other workers and their dependents.

This competitive and unsympathetic attitude among the keelmen, shipwrights and collier seamen toward the economic grievances of each other was typical in the labor history of

the eighteenth century. Trade unions in this period had very limited objectives and there was little sense of inter-trade working class solidarity. The interests of labor groups remained local and concentrated on working conditions and wage grievances within a particular specialized trade. There was as yet no organizational link between different trades or even within the same trade in different localities. Given these conditions and attitudes, it would have been difficult to organize labor on a large scale because the differences between trades or even between various grades of workers within the same trade were often as acute as the differences between the workers and their employers.<sup>19</sup>

In The Wealth of Nations, Adam Smith claimed that employers in the eighteenth century had the advantage over their employees because they were fewer in number, were bound by the common economic interests of their particular trade and, moreover, combinations among employers were not legally proscribed as were those of workers. Furthermore, employers were strongly united against all labor combinations. According to Smith,

masters are always and every where in a sort of tacit, but constant and uniform combination, not to raise the wages of laborers above their actual rate. To violate this combination is every where a most unpopular action.

Smith's arguments do not hold true for the Tyneside shipowners who did not represent a monolithic opposition

against the seamen's attempts to improve their wages and working conditions. The shipowners varied considerably in their attitudes, motives and actions towards the seamen's combinations. The division within the shipowners was most clearly seen in the strike of 1792 when some owners were willing to capitulate to the seamen's demands, even after they were raised to four guineas, while others remained opposed to any concessions to their employees.

The shipowners were not bound together, but rather were divided by the economics of the coal trade. The shipowners were in a weak position between the well-organized coalowners and the powerful London coal buyers, both of which had ships which competed with those of the independent Tyneside shipowners. The Tyneside collier fleet was controlled by many small independent shipowners who owned shares in ships or owned one or two ships outright. This system increased the shipowners' profits by dividing the risks of the sea-borne coal trade. However, the economic competition between these numerous shipowners also made it difficult for them to unite, even against the seamen. The small investors and owners were well aware that their economic interests would suffer as a result of collective wage bargaining. These shipowners could view a short stoppage in the shipping trade with equanimity because one of its effects would be to increase the coal prices in London, but a long stoppage was something completely

different. With their relatively few capital reserves, a long strike could be economically devastating for the small shipowners. This was especially true if the seamen were successful in obtaining higher wages because, in addition to wages, the Tyneside shipowners were responsible for the subsistence of the collier crews, payments for repairs of the ships, maritime insurance and the upkeep of the lighthouses on the Tyne, the purchase of ballast for the return trip from London and the commissions paid to the London coal factors.<sup>20</sup>

In the strike of 1792, the seamen insisted upon the shipmasters "employing a greater number of seamen" on each voyage.<sup>21</sup> This demand may have arisen out of the technological changes which were affecting the collier trade at the end of the eighteenth century. At this time, two masted brigs were replacing the older flyboat-type collier. The absence of a mast amidships enabled a larger hatch to be developed which facilitated the loading of coal and allowed a reduction in the size of the collier crews.<sup>22</sup>

The competition between the numerous small shipowners encouraged the employment of apprentices and this demand may also have been a means to end the shipmaster's practice of employing them instead of able-bodied seamen.<sup>23</sup> There were several incentives for the shipmasters to engage in this practice. In 1704, an "Act for the Increase of Seamen and Better Encouragement of Navigation and Security of the Coal

Trade" authorized local parish overseers to bind any pauper boy over age ten "to the sea service" until age twenty-one. Shipmasters were obliged to accept these apprentices or pay a £10 fine.<sup>24</sup>

Apprentices were also economically beneficial to the shipmasters. They were hired in certain ranks and paid accordingly, although the apprentices had to turn their wages over to their masters.<sup>25</sup> Captain Alexander Cochrane explained that

it is the Interest of many of the Ship Masters to foment these disturbances as They are allow'd by custom to receive the same wages for their Apprentices that is paid the seamen consequently it is Their Interest that it should be as high as possible.<sup>26</sup>

Those shipowners and masters who could hire more apprentices had a distinct economic advantage over those who could not. Testimony presented to the House of Commons Committee on the Coal Trade in 1800 explained that

those who have a great Number of Apprentices encourage high Wages, because that enhances the general Price of Coals at the Market, and the Loss falls upon those Ship Owners who have but few Apprentices.<sup>27</sup>

In 1790, an anonymous Newcastle shipowner published a handbill in which he criticized his fellow owners for abusing this practice. It was

a fact of too obvious Notoriety, that raising the Wages of Sailors to an exorbitant price, has not constantly arisen from themselves altogether, but frequently by the influence of Masters and Owners of small Shares of Ships, who have the Benefit and



Emolument of Apprentices, to the great Injury of all other Parties, who are concerned or connected with them; for it is certainly a very palpable Fraud and repugnant to all Principle of Justice or Equity, that the Master or Acting-Owner, should be allowed to charge to the Ship's Account 6 or 8 times higher Wages, than he actually and bona fide pays; which, I am sorry to add, is the common Practice, in rating the Wages of an Apprentice at Five Guineas a Voyage, to whom he does not in fact pay more than Ten or Fifteen Shillings. . . .<sup>28</sup>

In addition, by a charter granted by Henry VIII in 1510, one means of becoming a free burgher of the Corporation of Newcastle was to serve a seven-year apprenticeship. The Society of Masters, Pilots and Seamen of the Trinity House had the privilege of making the sons and apprentices of its members freemen of the Corporation which entitled them to vote for its parliamentary representation.<sup>29</sup> The anonymous Newcastle shipowner also criticized this policy, claiming that apprenticeship had become merely a facade to benefit both the shipmasters and those who sought freeman status. Those masters and owners

who are Freemen of the Corporation of Newcastle perhaps do not pay any Thing, many of Them having Apprentices who serve Seven Years, without any pecuniary Reward, but solely for the Purpose of obtaining the Freedom of the Corporation.<sup>30</sup>

By 1790, the supply of collier seamen exceeded the demand and "the Number of Sailors now at Shields are full 1-3d more than can be employed."<sup>31</sup> The economic competition between the shipowners made some form of defensive labor organization by the seamen essential if they were to combat the cost-cutting activities in which the shipowners

engaged.

Not all of the obdurate shipowners' intransigence resulted from economic motives--the refusal to grant higher wages. A concern for the dignitas of the owners was also involved. To concede under pressure from employees was not simply a matter of labor relations, but something which struck at the the entire principle of due subordination as the basis of the established social order.<sup>32</sup> Shipowner Thomas Powditch defended his opinions during the strike of 1792 by arguing that

tampering with a Mob, treating with Rioters or offering terms to People illegally assembled for the purpose of extorting high wages from their employers are Crimes little inferior in magnitude to rioting itself. . . .<sup>33</sup>

The development of a united front of shipowners was furthered hampered by the fact that these employers could not depend upon the unquestioned support of the local and national governments in making common cause against the seamen. The government displayed no monolithic disposition to act as the mere agent of local employers attempting to hide behind its authority and there was no significant tendency of authority designed to keep the working classes in subjection. Attempts by labor groups to exercise coercive means were not looked upon with favor by the government, but this did not preclude contacts with labor leaders who could identify blatant injustices by their employers. Local labor leaders became, like their

employers, another group of "men of influence" and part of the unofficial government of Tyneside to whom the government looked for information and solution to local problems. Overall, the government displayed a willingness to avert or damp down possible social or economic conflict by conciliatory mediation rather than unilaterally supporting employers against labor.<sup>34</sup>

Because of the competitive economics of the coal and shipping trades, the seamen knew the value of public opinion and they attempted to marshall it to their cause. The early trade unions were fully conscious of the need for their proceedings to be open and public in order to rob their opponents, their employers or the local magistrates, and workers in other trades of the opportunity to misrepresent their opinions or to misconstrue their immediate plans or ultimate objectives. By publicizing their cause, the seamen hoped to gain community consensus and support. This concern for public relations required the publication of their resolutions, addresses and declarations either as handbills or by their insertion in local newspapers. For this, however, workers were dependent upon the goodwill of the editors or proprietors of the newspapers. Local hostility toward the actions of the workers could exert public pressure and make the cooperation of the editors more problematical.<sup>35</sup> During the Tyneside press riots of 1793 the seamen published a handbill entitled "Friends and Fellow

Seamen!"<sup>36</sup> which carefully explained their grievances against impressment to both seamen and non-seamen in the Tyneside community. They also resolved to publish their declarations in the London and Newcastle newspapers<sup>37</sup>--an action which proved unpopular with the vested interests of Tyneside. According to Charles Brandling, MP for the county of Northumberland, "if the Editor of the Newcastle Chronicle who has published the resolutions of the Sailors can be laid hold of by the Law, He deserves the most condign Punishment."<sup>38</sup>

The coal trade was one of Britain's most valuable resources and thus the influence of the collier seamen also extended far beyond Tyneside. Any work stoppage by them was not only a local economic crisis but had national implications because of its ultimately detrimental effects on the fuel supply of the Metropolis. This factor explains the interest taken by the central government in any labor dispute which affected the seaborne coal trade.

London was dependent upon seaborne imports from the great northern coalfield which was almost the sole supplier of the Metropolitan market. The absence of any efficient means of overland transportation made any serious competition from other coalfields economically unfeasible. Moreover, the quality of inland coal was generally inferior to the standard grades produced in the North. In addition, the London coal dealers often had vested economic interests

in the seaborne trade and thus discouraged imports from the inland coalfields.<sup>39</sup>

The improvement of inland waterways and canal construction in the eighteenth century were largely the result of the increased demand for fuel in the Metropolis. Of the 165 Acts passed between 1758 and 1802, ninety were for canals whose primary objective was the transport of coal. One reason for these improvements was to obtain better access to the ports for seaborne coal but another was to avoid the hazards and delays involved in the maritime coal trade. These improvements were not geographically distributed, however, and as late as 1800 the northern counties, unlike those farther south, remained virtually unaffected by canal construction because of engineering difficulties and the opposition of the shipping interests.<sup>40</sup>

London was also prevented from reaping the full benefits of these improvements in inland transportation. The collier fleet was still considered to be the nursery of British naval seamen and any policy which threatened the maritime coal trade also threatened the security of the country. The City of London also received substantial revenue from a sixty percent tax on the colliery price of seaborne coal and it was thus considered impolitic to allow coal to be transported overland beyond several miles from London. Thus the canals brought no such benefits to London as the construction of railways was to bring in the

nineteenth century--the primary factor which ultimately broke Durham's and Northumberland's monopoly on the Metropolitan coal trade.<sup>41</sup>

Because of these factors, London was vulnerable to interruptions in the distribution of coal. A labor dispute at any stage of the coal vend had serious repercussions in the Metropolis. Coal was not stored at Tyneside and London had no wharves or depots to store coal during delays in shipping from the Tyne. The collier seamen could use their specialized skills and the vital function they performed in the coal trade to blackmail the coal and shipping interests into acquiescing to their demands while the shipowners could justify higher coal prices at the London market as necessary to repay them the higher wages paid to the collier seamen.<sup>42</sup>

The Webbs argued that the early trade unions did not develop "from any particular institution, but from every opportunity for the meeting together of wage earners of the same trade."<sup>43</sup> The collier seamen had ample opportunity to meet with each other because of the sporadic nature of the seaborne coal trade. The collier seamen had an organizational advantage over the deep-water merchant seamen because delays in shipping from the Tyne meant that there were often many idle seamen in the port. This situation facilitated the development of seamen's trade unionism by increasing their contact with each other and by providing them with the time and numbers necessary to organize

effectively.

These delays could also form the basis for the seamen's economic grievances. Because the seamen were paid by the voyage, any delay in shipping necessarily reduced the number of voyages which could be completed and thus decreased the seamen's annual wages. The average duration of a roundtrip voyage between the Tyne and London was about six weeks, although this varied according to the size of the ship. Small colliers of about 220 tons could make up to fourteen voyages per year while larger ships rarely made more than eight, although the average was about four per year.<sup>44</sup>

The coal industry was, to some extent, a seasonal trade. The movement of the coal wagons was possible only in dry weather and it was more difficult and expensive to maintain the roads and wagonways during the wet winter months. In addition, winter-wrought coals quickly deteriorated and were unprofitable to mine, transport and sell. It was not until the construction of railways on a large scale that coal mining became a year-round industry.<sup>45</sup>

The weather was also the most obvious cause of delay in the sailing of the collier fleet. Until the gradual introduction of steam power and screw propulsion in the nineteenth century,<sup>46</sup> the sailing ships of the fleet were subject to the vagaries of wind and weather. Before 1760 the collier fleet did not sail during December and January because of adverse winter wind and sea conditions.

Prevailing easterly winds could prevent the sailing of the ships from the Tyne harbor and their return from London,<sup>47</sup> a condition which occurred before the seamen's strike of 1792.<sup>48</sup>

Tides<sup>49</sup> presented an additional problem in navigating the Tyne because "frequently large Ships are detained for want of Water on the Bar, even when the Wind is fair and the Sea smooth."<sup>50</sup> The bar was a ridge of sand at the mouth of the river<sup>51</sup> which

was then as potent as any contrary wind in governing the movements of the fleets sailing to and from the Tyne . . . and it contributed by far the great of the perils of 'making the harbour' in a storm. . . . The 'bar' was at certain tides so near the surface as to be visible. . . . The 'bar' undoubtedly ruled the sailings of the Tyne fleet, and as the depth of the water due to the state of the tide was in turn modified by the amount of 'sea' . . . there was at all times some uncertainty as to when a ship might safely leave or come into the harbour.<sup>52</sup>

The delays resulting from the natural navigation hazards on the Tyne and the problems of operating efficiency created by the huge collier fleet<sup>53</sup> were exacerbated by the policies of the Corporation of Newcastle. Newcastle's responsibilities as Conservator of the Tyne included maintaining the river in a navigable condition. To maintain the navigation and shipping facilities on the Tyne, the Corporation imposed a tax on shipping, which was a major source of its revenue.<sup>54</sup> In 1792, shipowner Thomas Powditch asserted that for thirty years the Newcastle magistrates had



"been disgraced by their rapacity in collecting the revenue" from shipping on the Tyne.<sup>55</sup> Shipowner Joseph Bulmer complained that the £16,000 in revenue which the Corporation collected was far in excess of the amount required for the purpose and that little was actually done by the Corporation to improve navigation on the Tyne, a situation which Bulmer believed was "worthy [of] the attention of Government."<sup>56</sup> Constantine Phipps (later Lord Mulgrave), naval captain, polar explorer and "a man of great knowledge in nautical matters," who stood for a seat in Parliament for Newcastle in the General Election of 1774, declared that he considered the Tyne capable of becoming one of the finest navigable rivers in the world but that the "ignorance, inattention and avarice" of the Corporation transformed it into a "cursed horse-pond." In 1800, local opposition to Newcastle's policies became so acute that the Tyneside shipowners attempted to indict the Corporation for not repairing the river.<sup>57</sup>

The economic imperatives of the coal trade also produced numerous delays in shipping. In 1800, the House of Commons Committee on the Coal Trade investigated the causes of the detention of the coal ships at the Tyne and the effects of the Limitation of the Vend on the coal supply of the Metropolis. By this agreement, the Tyneside coalowners limited their monthly output of coal production in order to control the supply, and thereby the price, of coal in the

London market. The coalowners loaded only a certain number of keels per day so as not to exceed their stipulated monthly quota. When this limit was reached, no further supply of coal was available until the following month. The shipowners registered their ships with the coal fitters, who acted as middlemen between the coalowners and shipowners, and specified the quality of coal which was to be loaded. The ships were then loaded in rotation according to the availability of the coal requested and the ships' positions on the fitters' lists.<sup>58</sup>

This system caused delays if the specified quality of coal was not immediately available for loading.<sup>59</sup> It was more profitable for shipowners to carry high quality coal because "the inferior Coals . . . bore so low a Price in the London Market, that it would not have answered to the Ship Owner to have imported any of that Sort. . . ." <sup>60</sup> Rather than risking their ships on unprofitable voyages, the Tyneside shipowners "procure only eight voyages of the superior coals, [because] they get more profit than risking twelve voyages of the inferior."<sup>61</sup> There was

always some Detention at Shields in waiting for the best Coals, there being greater Profit upon them. . . . With a View to that Profit, Ships wait on an Average a Fortnight; sometimes they get their Cargoes in a Day, at other Times in a Month or Five Weeks<sup>62</sup>

although some had "been delayed sometimes 6 Weeks, which is not uncommon."<sup>63</sup> A ship's high position on the fitter's list

was no guarantee of a short delay because detentions were also attributed in

great Measure, to the Practice of loading small Ships under the Spouts out of their Turn, while the large Ships are waiting in the Harbour. . . . This is a great Prejudice to the Consumers of Coal in London, as the large Ships come constantly to London, and the smaller Ships go mostly coastwise.<sup>64</sup>

The seamen did not share in the economic advantages which accrued to the coalowners and shipowners as a result of these delays. The profitability of detaining ships at the Tyne was further enhanced by the fact that the shipowners were not responsible for the seamen's wages during delays. As a result, any detention at Shields was

attended with little or no Expence, on account of the Sailors being shipped for the Voyage; and not coming on board till the Ship is loaded; whereas the Delay at any other Part of the Voyage is so material as to be nearly equal to any Advantage . . . [the shipowner] could receive by Delay.<sup>65</sup>

One of the demands made by the seamen in the strike of 1792 was that they be provided subsistence during these delays so "that when a Ship has a long turn the Seamen is not to be Turn'd on those but to have their Victuals on Board the same as though the Ship was at Sea."<sup>66</sup>

The nature and provisions of the seamen's contracts also insured that there were often many idle seamen in port waiting to be paid. Until the early eighteenth century, the contract between the seaman and his employer was informal

and verbal and each agreement was for a single voyage. Seamen's contracts came under legislative authority with the "Act for the Better Regulation and Government of Seamen in the Merchant Service" in 1729. This Act decreed that all merchant seamen, except apprentices, were to sign written contracts with the ship's owner or master within three days of going on board. This written contract would provide conclusive evidence in legal disputes over wages which had been a recurrent problem when the contracts were verbal. Wages were to be paid, unless contrary terms were written into the contract, on the final discharge of the seaman or within thirty days of the ship's clearing the Customs House, whichever was earlier. This delay in payment became the basis for crimping in the seaports because it kept the seamen in port and short of money until the final settlement of wages. It was not until after the Napoleonic Wars were ended and there was a substantial surplus of seamen that further attention was given to this problem. In 1819 it was recognized that the waiting period for final wage settlement was too long, and by the "Act for facilitating the Recovery of Wages of Seamen in the Merchant Service" it was reduced to two days.<sup>67</sup>

The written contract required under the Act of 1729 was an improvement over the earlier informal agreements in resolving wage disputes. However, the relative inflexibility of the written contract came under economic

pressure during the wars of the eighteenth century. While the demand for seamen tended to be geographically disproportionate in peacetime, the demand was greatly distorted in wartime. War-induced inflation made merchant seamen dissatisfied with wages established a year or more earlier. As a result, shipowners and masters attempted to bind the seamen to fixed rates of wages over longer periods of time by written contracts.<sup>68</sup> As one sympathetic naval officer observed, the Tyneside collier crews had "much reason" to complain about their contracts.<sup>69</sup> The seamen quickly learned that desertion or strikes were the only means to increase their wages.<sup>70</sup>

Although the collier seamen enjoyed a distinctive status within the seaborne coal trade and the Tyneside maritime community, they were not highly paid workers by contemporary standards. Adam Smith described the economic position of these workers by explaining that although the seamen's

skill and dexterity are much superior to that of almost any artificer's, and though their whole life is one continual scene of hardship and danger, yet for all this dexterity and skill, for all those hardships and dangers, while they remain in the condition of common sailors, they receive scarce any other recompense but the pleasure of exercising the one and surmounting the other. Their wages are not greater than those of common labourers at the port which regulates the rate of seaman's wages. As they are continually going from port to port, the monthly pay of those who sail from all the different ports of Great Britain is more nearly upon a level than that of any other workmen in those different places. . . . The sailor, indeed, over and above his pay, is

supplied with provisions. Their value, however, may not perhaps always exceed the difference between his pay and that of the common labourer; and though it sometimes should, the excess will not be clear gain to the sailor, because he cannot share it with his wife and family, whom he must maintain out of his wages at home.<sup>71</sup>

The pressures of these delays in shipping could be economically devastating for the collier seamen, who were hired and paid by the voyage. Thus the economics of the coal trade in general and the Limitation of the Vend in particular caused the "occasional cessation of work, and consequent riots and disorders" arising from the detrimental effects on the seamen's wages.<sup>72</sup>

However, these delays also meant there were many idle seamen in the port, often for long periods of time. This situation would provide a basis for an almost continuous association among the seamen and the time and numbers to organize on a large scale, if necessary, to resolve their labor grievances. Once they were in port, meetings of seamen were simple to arrange--all that was required to get them together was to send a bellman around the town or to announce the meeting by a placard or handbill. The collier seamen probably discussed their grievances with the seamen from other ports while in London, where delays were sometimes even longer than in the North. When the collier seamen acted, however, it was always in their home port on the Tyne.<sup>73</sup>

During these delays, whether

locked in by an adverse wind, a bad tide, or 'too many feet [of] sea on the bar,' there was nothing for it but to wait for a change and while away the time in frolic and revelry among <sup>74</sup>the squalid drink-shops and crimping dens ashore.

The coal and shipping trades were strenuous and dangerous occupations which demanded violent forms of relaxation. In addition to the brutal sports which these workers enjoyed,<sup>75</sup> the men of the coal and maritime trades "were notoriously heavy drinkers."<sup>76</sup> Those historians who have emphasized the legal or conservative development of the working class movement have sometimes overlooked or minimized its more rowdy and robust features. Yet the development of organized labor in the eighteenth century was often inextricably tied to the public house because both the friendly societies and early trade unions served an important social, as well as economic, function. The earliest organized labor groups were those with a permanent base for continuous association, which was not necessarily the workplace. It was in the local pubs that many supposedly inarticulate seamen learned to discuss their economic and occupational grievances with each other.<sup>77</sup> This aspect of pub life was recognized by Adam Smith who claimed that

people of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public,<sup>78</sup> or in some contrivance to raise prices [or wages].

At Tyneside there was ample opportunity for the seamen to do this. South Shields had 160 to 170 public houses in 1792,

North Shields had 97 and Newcastle had 196.<sup>79</sup> Despite the advantages of using pubs as communal meeting places, the stigma of heavy drinking remained a social and economic liability to the seamen because it allowed their employers and the local authorities to dismiss their militant labor activities as mere drunken rioting. In the nineteenth century, the seamen became more cognizant of the economic and social benefits of Victorian moral respectability and the rules of their trade unions meted out fines for drunkenness.<sup>80</sup> Pubs provided a means for workers to preserve and transmit the values, social conventions and traditions of their particular community and occupation and provided an opportunity for communal activities and the creation of mutual loyalties. These habits of working class solidarity and cohesiveness became the foundation of effective trade unionism.

The collier seamen had several socio-economic advantages over other workers which explain the early development of their trade unionism. The seamen were highly skilled workers who were able to garner considerable community support for their activities because of the vital function they performed within the structure of the seaborne coal trade. Their expertise in manning the complicated sailing ships of the collier fleet allowed them to extract concessions from the shipowners in labor disputes. Their organization and the methods they employed in labor disputes



were determined by the fact that many seamen were often detained in port for long periods of time because of the numerous delays in shipping from the Tyne. However, these same factors which resulted in the creation of a rudimentary trade union also meant that the collier seamen were the primary victims of impressment into the Royal Navy.

## NOTES

1. Clark Kerr and Abraham J. Siegel, "The Interindustry Propensity to Strike: An International Comparison," Labor and Management in Industrial Society, ed. Clark Kerr (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1964), p. 109.
2. According to Dobson, the weavers participated in the most strikes in the eighteenth century. C.R. Dobson, Masters and Journeymen: A Prehistory of Industrial Relations, 1717-1800 (London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1980), p. 30.
3. C.M. Fraser and K. Emsley, Tyneside (Newton Abbot, Devonshire: David and Charles Ltd., 1973), p. 68; S. Middlebrook, Newcastle upon Tyne: Its Growth and Achievement (Newcastle: Kemsley House, 1950), pp. 103, 112.
4. George H. Haswell, The Maister: A Century of Tyneside Life (London: Walter Scott Ltd., 1895), pp. 33, 38.
5. After the French Wars, the merchant seamen came to be seen in a completely different light. In Redburn, Herman Melville described them as "shunned by the better classes of people, and cut off from all access to respectable and improving society, . . . generally friendless and alone in the world." This social isolation was exacerbated by a growing physical isolation which resulted from the expansion of dock-building in the nineteenth century. The waterfront became an increasingly working class environ and its inhabitants were looked down upon by polite English society. Stephen Jones, "Blood Red Roses: The Supply of Merchant Seamen in the Nineteenth Century," Mariner's Mirror 58 (November 1972): 432-433.
6. Haswell, The Maister, pp. 35, 42.
7. Edward Ward, The Wooden World, ed. Geoffrey R. Callender (London: E. Chappell, 1929), p. 97.
8. Stan Hugill, Sailortown (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1967), p. 38.
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10. Jones, "Community and Organisation," pp. 43, 64; Runciman, Collier Brigs and Their Sailors, pp. 122-123, 267.
  11. Hugill, Sailortown, p. 38; Jones, "Community and Organisation," pp. 43, 49.
  12. Jones, "Community and Organisation," pp. 35-36; Arthur Young, A Six Months Tour Through the North of England, vol. 3, (London: W. Strahan and W. Nicoll, 1770), pp. 11-12; Middlebrook, Newcastle, p. 142; T. John Taylor, The Archaeology of the Coal Trade (Newcastle: Frank Graham, 1971), p. 61; Great Britain, Home Office Papers 42/22. Public Records Office, London. Burdon to Dundas, 3 November 1792, f. 262; Christopher Lloyd, The British Seaman, 1200-1860: A Social Survey (Rutherford NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1968), p. 285; T.S. Ashton, An Economic History of England: The 18th Century (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1961), p. 145.
  13. Frederick Morton Eden, The State of the Poor (London: J. Davis, 1797), pp. 550-551, 562.
  14. Great Britain, Parliament, Sessional Papers (Commons), 1799-1800, Reports From the Committees, vol. 26, "Second Report From the Committee Appointed to Consider of the Coal Trade," p. 29.
  15. Jones, "Community and Organisation," p. 42.
  16. Jones, "Community and Organisation," pp. 38, 40; J.U. Nef, The Rise of the British Coal Industry, vol. 2 (London: Frank Cass, 1966), p. 180; J.M. Fewster, "The Keelmen of Tyneside in the Eighteenth Century," Durham University Journal, 50, new series, 19 (1957-1958): 24-33; J.M. Fewster, "The Last Struggles of the Tyneside Keelmen," Durham University Journal, 55, new series, 24 (1962-1963): 5-15; D.J. Rowe, "The Strikes of the Tyneside Keelmen in 1809 and 1819," International Review of Social History, 13 (1968): 58-75; D.J. Rowe, "The Keelmen of Tyneside," History Today 19 (April 1969): 248-254; Edward Raymond Turner, "The Keelmen of Newcastle," American Historical Review, 21 (April 1916): 242-245; Henry Pelling, A History of British Trade Unionism (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963), pp. 20-21; Fraser and Emsley, Tyneside, pp. 63-65; T.S. Ashton and

- Joseph L. Sykes, The Coal Industry of the Eighteenth Century (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1929), pp. 195-199.
17. Jones, "Community and Organisation," p. 41; D.J. Rowe, The Records of the Company of Shipwrights of Newcastle upon Tyne, 1622-1967, vol. 1 (London: Surtees Society, 1970), p. 6; Haswell, The Maister, p. 36.
  18. Norman McCord, "Tyneside Discontents and Peterloo," Northern History 2 (1967): 97; Ashton, Economic History, pp. 229-230. The figure of 38,000 included pitmen, keelmen, seamen, shipwrights, trimmers, ballast-heavers, coal factors, clerks, workers in ancillary trades and their dependents. A.E. Smailes, North England (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., 1960), pp. 140-141.
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  20. Adam Smith, An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations (New York: Random House, 1937), pp. 66-67.
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  22. HO 42/22, Bulmer to Nepean, 9 November 1792, f. 333.
  23. Jones, "Community and Organisation," p. 37.
  24. Robert R. Dozier, "An Eighteenth Century Strike: The Sailors' 'Riots' at Newcastle," paper presented at the North West Conference on British Studies, April 1978, p. 11.
  25. E.G. Thomas, "The Old Poor Law and Maritime Apprenticeship," Mariner's Mirror 63 (May 1977): 154.
  26. Ralph Davis, The Rise of the English Shipping Industry

- (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1962), p. 113.
27. HO 42/22, Cochrane to Dundas, 20 November 1792, f. 433.
  28. Great Britain, Sessional Papers (Commons) 1799-1800, Reports From the Committees, vol. 26, "Report From the Committee Appointed to Consider of the Coal Trade," p. 92.
  29. Tyne and Wear Record Office, CO 37, "Papers Relating to the Seamen's Strike of 1792," 394/35, Handbill of Newcastle Shipowner, 1 November 1790, no f.
  30. Eneas Mackenzie, A Descriptive and Historical Account of the Town and County of Newcastle upon Tyne, vol. 1 (Newcastle: Mackenzie and Dent, 1827), p. 607; The Picture of Newcastle upon Tyne (Newcastle: D. Akenhead and Sons, 1807), p. 68; Sidney Webb and Beatrice Webb, English Local Government from the Revolution to the Municipal Corporations Act: The Manor and the Borough, part 1 (London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd., 1908), pp. 294-296.
  31. TWRO, CO 37, 394/35, Handbill of Newcastle Shipowner, 1 November 1790, no f.
  32. TWRO, CO 37, 394/35, Handbill of Newcastle Shipowner, 1 November 1790, no f.
  33. McCord, "Government of Tyneside," p. 23; McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," pp. 368-369.
  34. HO 42/22, Powditch to Pitt, 3 November 1792, ff. 249-250.
  35. McCord, "Government of Tyneside," pp. 7-9, 19, 22, 24; McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," p. 369.
  36. Albert Goodwin, The Friends of Liberty: The English Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 220-221.
  37. Great Britain, Home Office Papers 42/24. Public Records Office, London. "Friends and Fellow Seamen!," 2 February 1793, f. 356.
  38. HO 24/24, Resolutions of Newcastle Seamen, 30 January 1793, f. 321.

39. HO 42/24, Brandling to Burdon, 5 February 1793, f. 365.
40. Ashton and Sykes, Coal Industry, p. 194; "Report of the Committee on the Coal Trade," p. 66. According to Middlebrook, the average overland transport charge for coal from the North to London was one shilling per ton per mile in 1750. Newcastle upon Tyne, pp. 105, 112.
41. Ashton, Economic History, pp. 72, 74; Middlebrook, Newcastle upon Tyne, p. 139; Smailes, North England, p. 156.
42. "Second Report of the Committee on the Coal Trade," p. 17; Ashton, Economic History, pp. 72, 89-90; The Times [London], 16 November 1792, p. 3; Ashton and Sykes, Coal Industry, p. 194.
43. "Report of the Committee on the Coal Trade," p. 95; The Times [London], 9 November 1792, p. 3. In May 1785, the Tyneside collier seamen struck and two months later the shipowners increased the London price of coal to 33s. per chaldron. The London coal merchants refused to buy at this price and, for more than a fortnight, two hundred coal ships lay at anchor in the Thames. The unemployed lightermen resolved to charter their own ships to transport coal from Newcastle and the Lord Mayor asked Pitt for a special Act "to regulate the sale of coals whilst on shipping on the river." The Court of Common Council resolved that "whereas the Lord Mayor hath received information that contracts and combinations have been formed and entered into, to restrain and hinder the free selling, buying and unloading, navigating and disposing of coals, thereby to enhance the price," the Lord Mayor be asked "to take immediately such measures as shall be found necessary to defeat and put an end to all such unlawful contracts and combinations." The shipowners defended themselves as "a body of men individually and collectively respectable, as valuable as the Corporation of London." There was "a combination to prevent the shipowners from procuring the hard-earned bread which their industry demands." Parliament remained in session until late July to pass the necessary legislation and, on 29 July, the water-bailiff ordered all ships in the Thames to unload immediately or face prosecution for "combinations to obstruct the sale of that necessary commodity and enhance the price thereof." Dobson, Masters and Journeymen, p. 118.
44. Sidney Webb and Beatrice Webb, The History of Trade Unionism (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1907),

- pp. 21-22.
45. "Report of the Committee on the Coal Trade," pp. 38, 56, 72, 92.
  46. Middlebrook, Newcastle upon Tyne, p. 108; Ashton and Sykes, Coal Industry, pp. 12-13; Hughes, North Country Life, p. 251.
  47. Jones, "Community and Organisation," pp. 37-38.
  48. Ashton, Economic History, pp. 67, 72; Ashton and Sykes, Coal Industry, pp. 12-13; "Report of the Committee on the Coal Trade," pp. 46, 95; Jones, "Community and Organisation," p. 37; Haswell, The Maister, p. 39; The Times [London], 16 November 1792, p. 3; The Times [London], 21 March 1793, p. 3.
  49. HO 42/22, Powditch to Pitt, 3 November 1792, f. 247.
  50. Mackenzie, Descriptive and Historical Account of Newcastle, pp. 740-742; The Picture of Newcastle, pp. 69-70. The perpendicular rise of the spring tide at Newcastle Bridge was eleven to twelve feet and about eighteen feet at Tynemouth Bar. At spring tide the bar was covered by twenty-one to twenty-three feet of water and at neap tide from sixteen to eighteen feet at high water. In 1723 Captain Collins, the Royal Hydrographer, surveyed the Tyne and found only seven feet of water at Tynemouth Bar at low water of the spring tide and a similar depth at Newcastle, eleven miles upriver. Jones, "Community and Organisation," p.36.
  51. "Report of the Committee on the Coal Trade," p. 74.
  52. Picture of Newcastle, pp. 69-70.
  53. Haswell, The Maister, pp. 38-39.
  54. Jones, "Community and Organisation," p. 36; The Picture of Newcastle, pp. 69-70; Hughes, North Country Life, pp. 12, 57, 69n; Fraser and Emsley, Tyneside, p. 33; David Bean, Tyneside: A Biography (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1971) pp. 60-61; "Report of the Committee on the Coal Trade," pp. 46, 56; Mackenzie, Descriptive and Historical Account of Newcastle, p. 738.
  55. The Picture of Newcastle, pp. 62, 65-66, 70; Fraser and Emsley, Tyneside, p. 53.
  56. HO 42/22, Powditch to Pitt, 3 November 1792,

- ff. 252-252.
57. HO 42/22, Bulmer to Nepean, 9 November 1792, f. 334.
  58. Haswell, The Maister, p. 35; Fraser and Emsley, Tyneside, p. 54; Middlebrook, Newcastle upon Tyne, p. 112; Mackenzie, Descriptive and Historical Account of Newcastle, p. 74; David Bean, Tyneside: A Biography, p. 61; James Guthrie, The River Tyne: Its History and Resources (Newcastle: Andrew Reid, 1880), p. 56;; Eden, The State of the Poor, pp. 165-166.
  59. "Report of the Committee on the Coal Trade," pp. 15, 24-25, 51; "Second Report of the Committee on the Coal Trade," pp. 4-7; The Times [London], 16 November 1792, p. 3.
  60. "Report of the Committee on the Coal Trade," p. 26; The Times [London], 16 November 1792, p. 3.
  61. "Report of the Committee on the Coal Trade," p. 72.
  62. Robert Edington, A Treatise on the Abuses of the Coal Trade (London: W. Smith, 1817), p. 21.
  63. "Report of the Committee on the Coal Trade," pp. 38-39.
  64. "Report of the Committee on the Coal Trade," p. 72.
  65. "Report of the Committee on the Coal Trade," p. 96.
  66. "Report of the Committee on the Coal Trade," p. 45.
  67. TWRO, CO 37, 394/35, Seamen's Proposals, 30 October 1792, no f.
  68. Davis, The Rise of the English Shipping Industry, p. 142; Conrad Dixon, "Signing On," Mariner's Mirror 70 (August 1984): 311-313; 59 Geo III c. 25 (Act for Facilitating the Recovery of Wages of Seamen in the Merchant Service, 1819). 2 Geo II c. 36 (Act for the Better Regulation and Government of Seamen in the Merchant Service, 1729). This Act was to run for five years, but it was renewed periodically until it was finally made perpetual by 2 Geo III c. 5 (1762).
  69. Dixon, "Signing On," pp. 312-313; Norman McCord, "The Seamen's Strike of 1815 in North-East England," Economic History Review, second series, 21 (April 1968): 142.
  70. HO 42/22, Cochrane to Dundas, 20 November 1792,



ff. 432-433.

71. Under the Act of 1729, desertion was punished by forfeiture of all back pay and the deserter was liable to arrest on a justice's warrant. The penalty was fourteen to thirty days in a house of correction with hard labor and fines for the lesser offense of absence without leave. Under the Act of 1797, desertion was defined as an absence without leave of more than twenty-four hours and masters could be fined up to £100 for hiring known deserters. Dixon, "Signing On," pp. 312-313.
72. Smith, The Wealth of Nations, pp. 109-110.
73. Edington, Treatise on the Abuses of the Coal Trade, p. 7.
74. "Report of the Committee on the Coal Trade," pp. 39, 51, 70, 72, 83-84; The Times [London], 16 November 1792, p. 3; Jones, "Community and Organisation," pp. 42, 53; Raymond Smith, Sea Coal for London: The History of the Coal Factors in the London Market (London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd., 1961), chs. 17-21.
75. Haswell, The Maister, p. 39.
76. Jones, "Community and Organisation," pp. 38-39; Haswell, The Maister, p. 5; Middlebrook, Newcastle, pp. 152-153.
77. Hughes, North Country Life, p. 56.
78. E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 59; Hugill, Sailortown, pp. 38, 136; Dobson, Masters and Journeymen, p. 25; Cole, History of the British Working Class Movement, p. 35; Jones, "Community and Organisation," p. 39; E.J. Hobsbawm, Labouring Men (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co. Inc., 1967), p. 12. Haswell described these "public houses leaning side by side or lurching towards each other across the street. . . . [They] were open at all hours, and from the crazy tap-room with its sanded or sawdusted floor came the scratching rhythm of a hornpipe, the discordant uproar of a sea-song with tipsy chorus, or the clamour of a drunken fight. Jack Tars with bared hairy breast, pig-tail, and long pipe in hand, capered to wretched fiddle or hurdy-gurdy with poor flaunting, bear-headed ribbon-bedecked girls. . . ." The Maister, p. 34.

79. Smith, The Wealth of Nations, p. 128.
80. HO 42/ 22, Bulmer to Burdon, 1 November 1792, f. 263; Eden, The State of the Poor, pp. 166, 551, 562. According to Eden, there were "162 public houses in South Shields, but only one church. . . ."
81. During the strike of 1844, the radical Tyne Mercury (27 February 1844) reported that the seamen were conducting their strike "on teetotal principles." Jones, "Community and Organisation," p. 39.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### NO MAN WILL BE A SAILOR

The substantive existence of early collier seamen's trade unionism can also be detected in their defensive resistance to naval impressment. Impressment outraged these proto-labor organizers because of the social and economic conditions which this practice led to in the Royal Navy. Using their past experience of unity and organization, the Tyneside collier seamen applied their proven methods to create a formidable opposition to the unprecedented intensity of impressment at the outbreak of war with revolutionary France.

From December 1792 until the Convention's declaration of war on 1 February 1793, there was in Britain a growing expectancy of war with France. Much of the effort in preparing for war during this period focused on the mobilization of the Royal Navy. Despite the Navy's function as its first line of defense, Britain had neither the wealth nor the manpower to maintain the senior service at its optimal fighting capacity in peacetime. A nucleus of the fighting fleet was maintained in ordinary by a small complement of ship-keepers. Officers were retained on half-pay status and crews consisted solely of volunteers for summer voyages and outfitting cruises. The threat of impending war with France required a rapid and drastic

increase in the Navy's manpower from a peacetime level of 16,613 in 1792 to 45,000 in 1793. Sir Charles Middleton (later Lord Barham), Comptroller of the Navy Board from 1778 to 1790, had prepared for such a contingency by reorganizing the Impress Service and by establishing recruiting offices in the major ports. By 1793, there were proportionately more merchant seamen in the Northeast than in the Southwest ports and the Navy expanded its recruiting tactics accordingly.<sup>1</sup>

On 15 December 1792, Regulating Captain Peter Rothe of the Impress Service arrived in Newcastle under orders from the Admiralty to begin the recruitment of merchant seamen on the Tyne. Houses of rendezvous were opened in Newcastle and Shields to accept volunteers for the Royal Navy.<sup>2</sup> In this period of emergency mobilization, impressment was not used as it was hoped that the first battle fleet sent into the Channel would be manned entirely by volunteers. Some merchant seamen did volunteer, probably reasoning it was better to do so and receive the government's bounty than to risk possible impressment later.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately the efforts to recruit volunteers through bounties were not successful on Tyneside. The volunteers entered slowly and their numbers remained "very inconsiderable"--only 320 able-bodied and 77 ordinary seamen out of the estimated 8,000 employed in the Tyneside collier fleet volunteered before the war began.<sup>4</sup> Clearly their numbers were inadequate to meet the manpower

demands of Britain's wartime fleet.

Impressment remained as the government's alternative for manning the Navy.<sup>5</sup> This practice had certain distinct advantages over recruiting volunteers--it was cheap and could quickly mobilize many seamen. The Impress Service relied on the element of surprise for its success by its use of undated general press warrants (another of Middleton's innovations) ready for issue upon an Order in Council. However, it was difficult to preserve the secrecy of its preparations from the local seamen, especially in time of imminent war.<sup>6</sup> The Tyneside seamen would have heard or read gossip and rumors of war while in London. This information and the presence of Rothe and the opening of the houses of rendezvous on the Tyne would have alerted the seamen to the likelihood of impressment. In organizing themselves against this possibility, the Tyneside seamen had an advantage over other English merchant seamen because a press could be implemented immediately at the outbreak of war only in the ports of the South--on the Thames, at Sheerness, Portsmouth and Plymouth. Accounts of the press would reach the extreme outports in three days, before local gangs could be formed and tenders hired, manned and outfitted to receive the pressed seamen. A delay of three weeks or a month was possible before a press occurred in the outports<sup>7</sup> of the Northeast, giving the Tyneside seamen advance notice and adequate time for their preparations.

Although Rothe had not yet received orders from the Admiralty to issue the warrants, he informed a gathering of Newcastle seamen that it would be his duty to press if so ordered. This threat mobilized the merchant seamen "to associate for the purpose of resisting an Impress." On 29 and 30 January, one hundred or more seamen assembled peacefully three times in Newcastle and resolved to oppose impressment even at the risk of their lives.<sup>8</sup>

This united response by the seamen was neither spontaneous nor unprecedented. The merchant seamen lived in constant dread of impressment into the Navy, an inevitable concomitant of their maritime occupation.<sup>9</sup> This fear was transmitted to the customs of Tyneside, where songs told of the fact that "the [press] tender's at the Bar o' Shields" or that some young seaman was "snatched away on his wedding night . . . by the dirty press gang."<sup>10</sup> For much of the eighteenth century on Tyneside "the popular mind was kept excited and inflamed by repeated tumults arising out of ferocious encounters between the gangs and the classes on whom they preyed."<sup>11</sup> Opposition to impressment had a long history on the Tyne and the merchant seamen clashed violently with the press gangs in 1755, 1756, 1759, 1771, 1774, 1777, 1779 and 1783. In 1790, the Tyneside seamen again united against the press during the emergency mobilization which accompanied the increase of Anglo-Spanish friction over the Nootka Sound incident.<sup>12</sup> At the end of

1792, the seamen had just emerged victorious after a successful strike for higher wages at Shields. In bringing their grievances to the attention of the government in 1793, the methods of opposition learned in these earlier disputes allowed the seamen to offer a more strenuous and effective resistance than would otherwise have been possible.<sup>13</sup>

From their past experience, the seamen learned the value of discipline and organization. They vowed to "associate for the purpose of defending ourselves by every legal Method" and to "preserve Peace and Order; no violence shall disgrace the Conduct of Men who are engaged in so good a Cause."<sup>14</sup> The seamen, whose numbers varied in estimates from one hundred to over six hundred, were under the control of recognized leaders. At their meeting, "they had a regular Roll call and subscribed their Names or Marks to a paper."<sup>15</sup> This self-regulation was a marked feature of the strike of October and November 1792 and it probably prevented extreme actions and violence on both sides. It permitted the seamen to discipline members of their own ranks and to present a united front of opposition to the civil and naval authorities.

The seamen sent delegates to meet with Rothe, James Rudman, the mayor of Newcastle, and the town's magistrates. At Rothe's request, the seamen composed written resolutions of their grievances to be forwarded by him to the Lords of the Admiralty for their consideration. These resolutions

were formalized a week later into a petition addressed to Parliament. Within a few days, this petition was signed by "a great Number" of the local seamen.<sup>16</sup> After adopting the idea of petitioning Parliament, the seamen discontinued their meetings and their activities became calmer. Rudman hoped that this meant they had abandoned the idea of resistance in favor of nonviolent means of redress. Those familiar with the seamen's disposition, however, anticipated "fatal Consequences" if the attempt to press were made. As a result, Rudman and the magistrates hoped that Parliament would consider their petition before the press warrants were issued.<sup>17</sup>

Although the seamen gave their assurance that it was to remedy the abuses of impressment and "not to create Disturbances" that they united,<sup>18</sup> their assemblies were illegal under the terms of the Riot Act.<sup>19</sup> At the outset, when the magistrates ordered the seamen to disperse and return to their ships as they "would not be suffered to meet again," the sailors refused until the press gangs were removed from Newcastle. The "audacity"<sup>20</sup> of the seamen and their ability to defy the magistrates again revealed the serious limitations of local civil government in controlling large disturbances in the eighteenth century.

Two concurrent developments strained the already limited capabilities of the local authorities to maintain order. Their consternation was further increased by



evidence of a simultaneous combination of Northeast seamen against impressment. Rudman believed that the Newcastle seamen were prompted by the example at Whitby where, earlier in February, the press gangs were attacked and driven out of town by the local seamen. Two of the ringleaders of that incident were seen in Shields shortly thereafter. The Newcastle seamen resolved to communicate their declarations to the sailors in other ports as they hinted they were not alone in their sentiments against impressment<sup>21</sup>--becoming one of the first English labor groups consciously to think in national terms.<sup>22</sup> The seamen of Sunderland informed William Abbs, the lieutenant of the Impress Service on the Wear, that there was "no Call for any Gang for We will not be pressed." These seamen threatened to "take Care" of the press gangs "and the sooner they are out of the way the better for themselves for we are determined to be resolute." There were rumors that the seamen of Sunderland and Shields intended to unite with those of Newcastle at a general meeting to be held in Newcastle on 6 February. The meeting was not held, although the petition issued in Newcastle was purported to have come also from the seamen of Sunderland and Shields.<sup>23</sup>

Second, in mid-February, "the Rage for increase of Wages" spread to the smiths and colliers of the Tyneside coalworks. Now the magistrates were forced to divide their energy and attention to control both the seamen and the

striking coalworkers. To assist them, three troops of the Inniskilling Dragoons arrived from Whitby, where they had been stationed since the altercation between the seamen and the press gangs three weeks earlier. James Rudman, the mayor of Newcastle, now feared that the seamen would be only "too ready" to join in a general labor combination if the smiths and colliers "shall persevere in their Measures."<sup>24</sup> However, the seamen's discontent was not merely another manifestation of the local labor problems which had plagued Tyneside for the past thirty years.<sup>25</sup> Their united refusal to man the Royal Navy had national consequences for Britain's security in wartime.

From their resolutions it is clear that the collier seamen were not refusing to serve in the Royal Navy because of its notorious conditions of service. As Samuel Johnson observed,

no man will be a sailor who has contrivance enough to get himself into a jail, for being in a ship is being in a jail with the chance of being drowned. . . . A man in a jail has more room, better food, and commonly better company.<sup>26</sup>

Danger and strict discipline were not unknown in the merchant service.<sup>27</sup> However, because the collier seaman was a volunteer and because the ship's master could not resort to the same sanctions against desertion which were operative in the Royal Navy, the wages and conditions of the merchant service had to be of a reasonable standard to attract and retain seamen.<sup>28</sup> Despite these better conditions in the

merchant service, the harsh realities of naval life in the eighteenth century--poor and insufficient food, overcrowding, high disease and mortality rates, strict discipline and an indefinite term of service--did not become issues with British seamen until the naval mutinies at Spithead and the Nore in 1797.<sup>29</sup>

Neither did impressment itself form the basis of the seamen's grievances. Few in the eighteenth century challenged the principle underlying impressment--the power of a sovereign state to require its citizens to defend the nation in time of danger or war.<sup>30</sup> Even most seamen shared the prevailing belief that impressment, in principle, was an unfortunate, but necessary, evil in wartime.<sup>31</sup> It was the method and application of the principle which caused the seamen to resist. They were conscious that their resistance might be misconstrued as a manifestation of disloyalty in wartime or political disaffection. In their declarations they were careful to guard themselves against such charges by professions of veneration and admiration for the constitution, "the boast and Glory of Britain."<sup>32</sup> It was on basic constitutional grounds that the seamen challenged the practice of impressment. Impressment was perceived by them as the government's arbitrary and unjust interference in their personal liberty.<sup>33</sup>

The manpower pool for impressment consisted solely of "person using the sea." In 1378, this definition included

only sailors of the sea and of nearby rivers. By the late eighteenth century, however, this definition had been expanded to encompass sailors of the sea and of rivers, streams and canals any distance from the sea.<sup>34</sup> The manpower available was further limited by those legally exempt from impressment--masters, chief mates, boatswains and carpenters on ships over fifty tons and apprentices with less than two years' maritime experience. Traditionally, while the collier fleet was perceived as the nursery of British seamen, its crews were also protected from impressment by immunities granted by Parliament. Organized trades like the collier seamen were able to negotiate additional exemptions and were allowed four free men per one hundred tons of shipping. Because of the vociferous opposition of the local coal and shipping trades and consumer interests in the Metropolis, any infringement of these immunities was avoided as long as possible, but not in a crisis.<sup>35</sup> The manpower demands for 1793 meant that immediate naval concerns overrode these traditional protections. The Admiralty withheld all immunities for the Northeast ports while the seamen resisted in an attempt to blackmail them into compliance. It was only through the repeated protests of local representatives both in and out of Parliament that the protections were reinstated later.<sup>36</sup>

The Tyneside seamen recognized that it was not a lack of industry or social usefulness which singled them out as

the victims of impressment.<sup>37</sup> On the contrary, the collier were important and respected members of the Tyneside maritime community, not waterfront rabble or the dregs of English society who would later be conscripted as quota-men. It was their experience and expertise in manning the complicated sailing ships of the collier fleet which rendered them so valuable to the Royal Navy.<sup>38</sup> The collier seamen's

value is not altogether to be estimated by their Number; the Difficulties of the Navigation in the Coal Trade, are admitted to give the Seamen derived from it, in Point of Skill, Expertness, Patience of Fatigue and Hardship, an incontestible Superiority over those drawn from<sup>39</sup> the other Maritime Trades of the Kingdom. . . .

Training landsmen to sail and fight was a difficult task, especially when sailors were needed in wartime. Even more than the fisheries, the collier fleet had long been recognized as the principal nursery of British seamen<sup>40</sup> because it provided a ready source of trained and disciplined sailors.

The collier seamen's expertise was so valuable that this resulted in an inexorable infringement of their personal liberties which would not have been tolerated if applied to other segments of English society. The Navy's recruiting tactics would not have been countenanced if used even by the British Army because

Englishmen would rise in arms, should the military impress for the army, citizens of every rank, from the fields, the streets and public roads; but one particular class of men seem abandoned by society, and relinquished to perpetual imprisonment, and a

slavery, which, though honourable, cuts them off from most things which men hold dear.<sup>41</sup>

The seamen argued that this "cruel mode" of manning the Navy, although "countenanced by precedents and supposed to have been a part of the Common Law," had never been sanctioned by the authority of Parliament.<sup>42</sup> In this assertion the seamen were technically correct--innumerable statutes since the fourteenth century tacitly recognized the legality of impressment, but none formally enacted it.<sup>43</sup> It was impressment's impending threat to their personal liberty which justified the seamen's resistance as they could not "conscientiously, either as Men, Britons, or Christians, any longer countenance by Compliance such a shocking Abuse of Power."<sup>44</sup>

It was no fear of danger or of death that made the sprightly Shields turn with disgust from the thought of serving his king and country . . . but the knowledge that every element appealing to the instincts of a brave and free man must be outraged the moment he put his foot on the deck of a British man-o'-war. The merchant service brought him as much, perhaps more, danger; perhaps greater risk of violent death. It was a hard, cruel life, but . . . it left him at the end of each voyage a free man, and with some of the privileges of an Englishman. In the navy, as he knew it, the short story was one of bondage, of harsh intolerance, of mutilation, and not seldom of a convict's death.<sup>45</sup>

It was not until Pitt's Quota Acts of 1795 that non-seamen from all parts of Britain were conscripted into the Royal Navy. Until then, the responsibility for manning the senior service fell upon a small and easily recognizable<sup>46</sup> seafaring class which believed it was unjustly deprived of

the rights of personal security and protection enjoyed by other Englishmen.<sup>47</sup>

Impressment created another "calamity"<sup>48</sup> for the seamen. Not only were they compelled against their will to sail and fight in the Royal Navy, but they were forced to do so at wages considerably lower than those paid in the merchant fleet. The wages of the collier seamen rose in the eighteenth century. The sailors of Shields struck for higher wages in October and November 1792 and won 55s. per London voyage. The periodic demands of war depleted the collier fleet and caused wages to increase even more.<sup>49</sup> The Royal Navy, however, did not base its pay on the free market economy of supply and demand or the cost of living. Its monthly wages had remained stable since 1653 at 19s. per ordinary and 24s. per able-bodied seaman and would remain so until the mutinies at Spithead and the Nore raised them to 25s.6d. and 33s.6d. respectively. Not only were wages higher in the merchant service, but the seamen were paid with more certainty at the end of a voyage than could be expected in the Royal Navy.<sup>50</sup> The Newcastle seamen considered the Navy's wages, "which is not Half what we receive in the Merchant's Service," derisory compensation for the risks involved and woefully inadequate to provide a decent standard of living for men of their acknowledged experience and expertise.<sup>51</sup>

The "melancholy experience" of "the increase of the

price of provisions and every necessary of life" convinced the collier seamen that they could not subsist on naval wages. The seamen were faced with the prospect of being paid lower wages in the Navy in a period of a rising cost of living. They did not want to intensify the economic "evils and burdens" of war by demanding the same wages in the Royal Navy that they could receive in the wartime merchant fleet. Instead they insisted on 40s. per month, a sum they believed would not be a burden among the other expenses of war and to which their fellow Englishmen would not object. To justify this demand, the seamen cited the increase of the pay of the soldiery and of the French seamen in the British Navy as "Reasons why their Wishes should be attended to." In addition, the sailors argued that an increase in naval wages would stimulate volunteering and eliminate the need for the Impress Service. The money thus saved would almost compensate for the higher wages they demanded.<sup>52</sup>

To counteract the seamen's demands, local interests offered bounties to volunteers as an additional inducement to join the Navy. The Corporation of Newcastle, the local Loyalist Association and the Newcastle Trinity House contributed to the bounties. In addition to the government's bounty offered by a royal proclamation on 1 December 1792, an able-bodied seaman from Newcastle would receive £9.4s.0d. and an ordinary seaman £4.0s.12d. for volunteering. Many of those who subscribed to these



bounties were Tyneside shipowners whose motives were not merely charitable or patriotic. The threat of impressment made it difficult to procure crewmen for the collier fleet. The Register General of Shipping estimated in 1792 that 245,893 sailors would be needed to man the 462 ships of the Royal Navy. In Great Britain and its dominions only 118,286 men were employed in the merchant service. The growth of the population was outpaced by the expansion of the shipping industry in the eighteenth century which made the competition between the shipowners and the Royal Navy for wartime manpower and shipping more acute.<sup>53</sup> The merchant seamen "made extraordinary efforts to avoid capture, by hiding themselves away in remote out-of-the-way holes and lurking places"<sup>54</sup> or by fleeing into the countryside to elude the press until protections were granted. Others left the country by enlisting on foreign ships--a practice usually prohibited at the outbreak of war. By offering the additional bounties to volunteers, the pressure would be lessened on the collier crews.<sup>55</sup>

Despite the shipowners' intentions of using the additional bounties to ease the pressure on the remaining collier seamen and to protect the collier fleet from further depletion, the seamen interpreted such bounties as a justification of their grievances because "does not the Offer of additional Bounty plainly shew, that the [Loyalist] Association and others are of Opinion that our present Pay

is not sufficient?" Besides,

Bounties, however large they may appear at first, do not last long; and when they are expended in Cloaths [sic] and other Necessaries, we are obliged to live upon the same Pay as before which we well know from experience we cannot live upon.<sup>56</sup>

These additional bounties did not produce "the expected effect" of increasing volunteering because the "Idea most dwelt on" by the seamen was an augmentation of naval wages with some means of remitting a portion to their families.<sup>57</sup>

Until the press warrants were issued and the seamen actually resisted the press gangs, their activities remained a local dispute. In that case, Rudman assured the government that the Impress Service would "receive from the Magistrates every Protection [and] assistance in their power to afford."<sup>58</sup> On 11 February the Pitt government received France's declaration of war. The government now had a stake in the outcome of this disturbance and it spared little effort in providing the force necessary to resist the seamen. Thus it was not a coincidence that the arrival of the troops corresponded with the first issuance of the press warrants on Tyneside. The magistrates of Durham, Northumberland and Newcastle concluded that the 57th Regiment of dragoons at Tynemouth Barracks was insufficient for restoring order. There was fear that the seamen's discontent would spread to the militia of Durham and Northumberland and it was recommended to the Home Office

that troops "which are not locally [sic] attached" be substituted. The seamen's activities remained virtually unchecked for almost two weeks before the North York Militia arrived from Richmond on 13 February. Their arrival provided little consolation to the local authorities, however, because, Rudman complained, "tho their Numbers are considerable We learn four fifths of them are so undisciplined as not to be much depended upon." As a result, the magistrates requested an additional two or three troops of horse to be sent to Durham and Chester-le-Street.<sup>59</sup>

On 14 February, the first general press under the command of Captain Leckey of the Racehorse took place in Shields. Although deemed a success because "a great Number of useful hands were procured" for the Royal Navy, Rudman warned that the seamen's appearance of determined resolution did not fade at the arrival of the press gangs as some had predicted. On the contrary, the seamen remobilized by assembling "in large bodies" and they "beat off several press gangs" in Newcastle. On 19 February, the Newcastle seamen again expelled the press gangs from North Shields

with the highest marks of contempt,--with their jackets reversed. They were conducted by a numerous mob to Chirton-Bar, and who, on parting, gave them three cheers, but vowing, that should they ever attempt to enter Shields, they should be torn limb from limb.<sup>60</sup>

Rothe attempted to quiet the seamen by addressing them

the next day. "From his assurances and the manner in which it was received" by the sailors, the Newcastle authorities had "great reason to hope that all disquietude with the gallant tars will be removed." The magistrates believed Rothe had succeeded in quelling the seamen because he secured a promise from them that they would not violently resist again--although the seamen of Shields broke a similar promise to Rothe by again dismissing the gangs from Shields on 22 February. The magistrates believed Rothe's assurances because he had earned a reputation as the seamen's "favourite" through his sympathetic involvement in their cause. The seamen respected Rothe because he made their case very clear to the Home Office and the Admiralty by recounting conversations he had with their leaders and by presenting their grievances to the central government.<sup>61</sup> As a regulating captain, Rothe was responsible for examining volunteer recruits and pressed men and he could discharge those physically unfit or wrongfully pressed.<sup>62</sup> Impressment "was almost as cordially hated by officers of the Navy . . . as by the people whom it so cruelly oppressed"<sup>63</sup> because of the type of man it could procure for naval service. Officers of the Impress Service had to be careful not to overstep the bounds set by the press warrants because of the possibility of charges of unlawful pressing. Rothe proved not to be one of the notoriously corrupt and disreputable "yellow admirals" whose sole interest was the

head money paid for each seaman accepted. Rothe did not abuse his power on the Tyne and he abided strictly by the rules of impressment in accepting or rejecting sailors for the Royal Navy.<sup>64</sup> On 26 April

the most extraordinary preparations for impressing were made by the crews of the armed vessels lying in the harbour. That night, the regiment lying at Tynemouth Barracks was drawn up and formed into a cordon round North Shields, to prevent any persons from escaping. The different press gangs then began, when sailors, mechanics, labourers, and men of every description, to the number of about two hundred and fifty, were forced on board the armed ships.<sup>65</sup>

Of the 250 captives, only 40 were retained after Rothe's examination.<sup>66</sup> During a press at North Shields on 16 and 17 March, the gangs seized 60 men, of whom 22 were released by Rothe because they were mates, carpenters and apprentices exempt from impressment.<sup>67</sup>

On 25 February, eleven days after the first press at Tyneside, Charles Brandling presented the seamen's petition to Parliament. By this time, the interposing exigencies of war and the seamen's reputation for resistance doomed their cause to failure. Pitt spoke against receiving it "considering the place from which the petition came." After a brief discussion, the House of Commons declined to accept the petition on the technical grounds that it related to Money for Public Service but it had not been recommended by the Crown. Pitt did not "feel himself disposed" to recommending it and "of course it was not received."<sup>68</sup>

Parliament's rejection of the petition had immediate consequences at Tyneside. In March, the seamen's resistance continued, but in much more violent forms. Following the press at Shields on 16 and 17 March, five hundred "Sailors in Arms" assembled "in a riotous manner, armed with swords, pistols and other weapons" and attempted to seize the Eleanor press tender anchored at Peggy's Hole at the mouth of the harbor at Shields. Their attempt to rescue the pressed men held aboard was thwarted by thirty troops of the 57th Regiment of dragoons from Tynemouth Barracks. On 19 March, the seamen of Shields tried to unite with those of Newcastle but were prevented from doing so by the intervention of a large military force sent to oppose them. They dispersed, but not before "having treated George Foster, one of the press gang, with the utmost cruelty at Howden Pans."<sup>69</sup> It was only through a massive and long-term build-up of military force, which "made the condition of the seaport more resemble that of a seat of war in an enemy's country than a portion of His British Majesty's dominions,"<sup>70</sup> that order was restored at Tyneside.

Despite their defeat, the seamen continued to resist impressment. From 1793 to 1797, they failed to bring their grievances to the attention of the government by legitimate means. In 1796 the seamen attempted to recreate their successful strike of 1792 by forcibly preventing the sailing of ships from the port. However, the intervention of the

press gangs in armed boats ended the strike and 42 strikers were seized and detained in the press tender moored on the river. Rothe retained only three of these seamen for naval service. In 1797, there were three more conflicts over impressment at Tyneside. Although the government made no attempt to improve naval conditions during this period, it did not ignore the problems of naval recruitment. However, Pitt's solution, the Quota Acts of 1795, failed as an alternative to impressment because it did not address the basic social and economic problems which caused the Tyneside seamen to resist in 1793. The government's continued intransigence in its refusal to grant timely concessions eventually drove British seamen to extreme measures in 1797. The mutinies at Spithead and the Nore, occurring at such a critical period in the war, should not have surprised the British government--it had been informed of the seamen's grievances since 1793.<sup>71</sup>

Both the collier seamen's success in the strike of 1792 and their failure in the press riots of 1793 demonstrated the organization of these workers into a rudimentary trade union. The press riots again revealed the severe limitations of workers organized only on an ad hoc basis without the structure of a formal and legal trade union. Although the immediate exigencies of the wartime emergency overrode all considerations for the economic and occupational interests of the collier seamen, this did not

preclude their attempt to defend these interests even against the forces of the Royal Navy.



## NOTES

1. Clive Emsley, British Society and the French Wars, 1793-1815 (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1979), pp. 16, 33; Michael Lewis, A Social History of the Navy (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1960), p. 97; Christopher Lloyd, The British Seaman, 1200-1860: A Social Survey (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1968), pp. 118, 288; P.L.C. Webb, "The Rebuilding and Repair of the Fleet, 1783-1793," Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research 50 (November 1977): 194-209; Adam Smith, An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations (New York: Random House, 1937), p. 352.
2. The Times [London], 26 December 1792, p. 2; Norman McCord and David E. Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's in North East England," International Review of Social History 13 (1968): 377.
3. Emsley, British Society and the French Wars, pp. 33-34.
4. Great Britain, Home Office Papers, 42/24. Public Records Office, London. Clayton to Brandling, 7 February 1793, f. 400; Great Britain, Home Office Papers, 42/23. Public Records Office, London. Rudman to Dundas, 7 February 1793, f. 751; Eneas Mackenzie, A Descriptive and Historical Account of the Town and County of Newcastle upon Tyne, vol.1 (Newcastle: Mackenzie and Dent, 1827), p. 70; C.M. Fraser and K. Emsley, Tyneside (Newton Abbot, Devonshire: David and Charles, 1973), p. 66. The inadequacy of offering bounties as an inducement to volunteers was recognized as a failure of policy. Even Junius, an ardent champion of personal liberties, urged more coercive measures for naval recruitment by arguing that bounties should "be increased as far as the public purse can support them. Still they have a limit, and when every reasonable expense is incurred, it will be found in fact that the spur of the press is wanted to give operation to the bounty." Christopher Lloyd, "The Press Gang and the Law," History Today 17 (October 1967): 690.
5. A draft of men chosen by ballot from a register of the English seafaring population, based on the French inscription maritime, was tried for a few years after 1696 but it proved to be an expensive failure. Lloyd, "The Press Gang and the Law," p. 685.
6. Lewis, A Social History of the Navy, pp. 103-104;

- Emsley, British Society and the French Wars, p. 33.
7. Patrick Holland, "A Plan for Manning the Navy" in J.S. Bromley ed.), The Manning of the Royal Navy: Selected Public Pamphlets, 1673-1873 (London: Navy Records Society, 1974), pp. 151-152. This pamphlet was first published in North Shields in 1804, but "this Plan was hastily wrote [sic] when there was a riot at Shields and the seamen stoped [sic] the ships six weeks and turned the Impress gangs out of the town with their jackets inside out" in 1793. Both Henry Dundas and Charles Middleton recommended Holland's plan to the Pitt government and it has been suggested by Christopher Oprey in his MA thesis, "Schemes for the Reform of Naval Recruitment, 1793-1815" (Liverpool, 1961) that Holland's ideas were the basis of the Port Quota Acts of 1795.
  8. HO 42/24, Rudman to Dundas, 31 January 1793, ff. 319-320; HO 42/24, Rudman to Dundas, 30 January 1793, f. 315.
  9. George H. Haswell, The Maister: A Century of Tyneside Life (London: Walter Scott Ltd., 1895), p. 42.
  10. Stan Hugill, Sailortown (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1967), p. 38.
  11. Haswell, The Maister, p. 53.
  12. Stephen Jones, "Community and Organisation: Early Seamen's Trade Unionism on the North-East Coast, 1768-1844," Maritime History 3 (April 1973): 45-47; D.J. Rowe, "A Trade Union of North-East Coast Seamen in 1825," Economic History Review, second series, 25 (February 1972): 81; McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," pp. 366-367, 377; Lloyd, "The Press Gang and the Law," pp. 53-54, 60.
  13. Robert R. Dozier, For King, Constitution and Country (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1983), p. 108.
  14. HO 42/24, Resolutions of the Newcastle Seamen, 30 January 1793, f. 321; HO 42/24, "Friends and Fellow Seamen!," 2 February 1793, f. 356.
  15. HO 42/24, Rudman to Dundas, 30 January 1793, f. 315; HO 42/24, Sanderson to Burdon, 1 February 1793, f. 328; HO 42/24, Rudman to Dundas, 31 January 1793, f. 319.
  16. HO 42/23, Rudman to Dundas, 9 February 1793, f. 754;

- HO 42/24, Rudman to Dundas, 30 January 1793, ff. 315-316; HO 42/24, Rudman to Dundas, 31 January 1793, ff. 319-320.
17. HO 42/23, Rudman to Dundas, 14 February 1793, f. 756; HO 42/23, Rudman to Dundas, 9 February 1793, f. 754; HO 42/24, Rudman to Dundas, 4 February 1793, f. 352.
  18. HO 42/24, "Friends and Fellow Seamen!," 2 February 1793, f. 356.
  19. 1 Geo I, Stat. 2, cap. 5 (The Riot Act, 1715).
  20. HO 42/24, Rudman to Dundas, 31 January 1793, ff. 319-320.
  21. HO 42/24, Rudman to Dundas, 4 February 1793, f. 352; HO 42/24, Resolutions of the Newcastle Seamen, 30 January 1793, f. 321; HO 42/24, Rudman to Dundas 31 January 1793, f. 319; Haswell, The Maister, p. 54.
  22. M. Swainton, "Early Combinations Among Seamen," (unpublished) as cited in Jones, "Community and Organisation," p. 46.
  23. HO 42/24, Rudman to Dundas, 4 February 1794, f. 354; HO 42/24, Clayton to Brandling, 7 February 1793, f. 400; HO 42/23, Rudman to Dundas, 9 February 1793, f. 754.
  24. HO 42/23, Rudman to Dundas, 14 February 1793, ff. 755-756; The Times [London], 27 February 1793, p. 3.
  25. Great Britain, Home Office Papers, 42/22. Public Records Office, London. Powditch to Pitt, 3 November 1792, ff. 251-252.
  26. James Boswell, The Life of Johnson (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 86.
  27. Haswell, The Maister, p. 47.
  28. Lloyd, The British Seaman, p. 56; Hugill, Sailortown, p. 136.
  29. Lewis, A Social History of the Navy, pp. 99-100; McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," pp. 380-381.
  30. Michael Lewis, The History of the British Navy (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1959), p. 162. Lord Mansfield, in *Rex v. Tubbs* (1776), summarized

this principle by arguing that pressing "can have no ground to stand on, nor can it be vindicated or justified by any reason but the safety of the state. And the practice is derived from the trite maxim of the constitutional law of England, that private mischief had better be submitted to, than that public detriment and inconvenience should ensue. . . ." Lloyd, "The Press Gang and the Law," pp. 684, 686.

31. McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," p. 377. In *Rex v. Broadfoot* (1743), Sir Michael Foster, the Recorder of Bristol, explained that "the practice of pressing is one of the mischiefs war bringeth with it. But it is a maxim of law, and good policy too, that all private mischiefs must be borne with patience preventing a national calamity. And as no greater can befall [sic] us than to be weak and defenceless at sea in time of war, so I do not know that the wisdom of the nation has hitherto found out any method of manning our navy less inconvenient than pressing. . . ." Lloyd, "The Press Gang and the Law," p. 685.
32. HO 42/24, Resolutions of the Newcastle Seamen, 30 January 1793, f. 321.
33. Jones, "Community and Organisation," p. 46.
34. Lewis, A Social History of the Navy, p. 106; 15 Ric II, cap. 2 (1378). The standard warrant issued to officers of the Impress Service on the Tyne authorized them to take "seamen, seafaringmen, and others, whose occupations and callings are to work in vessels and boats upon rivers." Norman McCord, "The Impress Service in North-East England During the Napoleonic War," Mariner's Mirror 54 (May 1968): 167.
35. Lewis, A Social History of the Navy, p. 106. The Act of 1779 exempted seamen below age 18 and over 55, foreigners and Greenland fishermen from impressment. Of the 14,800 protections granted, about 7,000 were held by seamen in the Tyneside collier fleet. Lloyd, "The Press Gang and the Law," pp. 684, 686.
36. McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," p. 378. In May 1803, the Admiralty resorted to an emergency measure, the "press from protections," which authorized regulating officers to press seamen normally considered immune and even to disregard protections already issued by the Admiralty. McCord, "The Impress Service," p. 167.
37. HO 42/24, Resolutions of the Newcastle Seamen, 30

- January, 1793, f. 321.
38. Jones, "Community and Organisation," p. 49; Douglas Hay, "War, Dearth and Theft in the Eighteenth Century: The Record of the English Courts," Past and Present (May 1983): 139-146; Lewis, A Social History of the Navy, p. 118.
  39. Great Britain, Parliament, Sessional Papers (Commons), 1799-1800, Reports From the Committees, vol. 26, "Report From the Committee Appointed to Consider of the Coal Trade," p. 46.
  40. Frederick Morton Eden, The State of the Poor (London: J. Davis, 1797), p. 165; Ralph Davis, The Rise of the English Shipping Industry (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1962), pp. 114-115; Lloyd, The British Seaman, p. 55; Great Britain, Parliament, Sessional Papers (Commons), 1799-1800, Reports From the Committees, vol. 26, "Second Report From the Committee Appointed to Consider of the Coal Trade," p. 17; T.S. Ashton, An Economic History of England: The 18th Century (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1961), p. 89; Robert Edington, A Treatise on the Abuses of the Coal Trade (London: W. Smith, 1817), p. 100; Elspet Fraser-Stephen, Two Centuries in the London Coal Trade: The Story of Charringtons (London: Curwen Press, 1952), p. 7.
  41. G.J. Marcus, A Naval History of England: The Formative Centuries (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1961), p. 374.
  42. HO 42/24, Resolutions of the Newcastle Seamen, 30 January 1793, f. 321.
  43. Although Robert Walpole argued that it could not "be affirmed this method of raising seamen is either eligible or legal," impressment was legal in principle and sanctioned by both custom and common law. Thomas Corbett, Secretary of the Admiralty in 1740, claimed that no other example of royal prerogative "appears to be better warranted, or founded on more solid authorities, being established upon the principle of Common Law and virtually confirmed by several statutes." Sir Michael Foster, the Recorder of Bristol, asserted in *Rex v. Broadfoot* (1743) that "the right of impressing mariners for the public service is a prerogative inherent in the Crown, grounded upon Common Law, and recognized by many acts of Parliament." Lloyd, "The Press Gang and the Law," pp. 683-685.
  44. HO 42/24, Resolutions of the Newcastle Seamen, 30

- January 1793, f. 321; HO 42/24, "Friends and Fellow Seamen!," 2 February 1793, f. 356.
45. Haswell, The Maister, pp. 47-48.
  46. Lewis, A Social History of the Navy, p. 163; Emsley, British Society and the French Wars, p. 35.
  47. HO 42/24, Resolutions of the Newcastle Seamen, 30 January 1793, f. 321. Thomas Corbett, Secretary of the Admiralty in 1740, replied to the suggestion that only one segment of English society was subject to impressment by arguing that "irregularity of rank is inseparable from society, and in the distribution of the duties of society, those that are offensive and disagreeable public duties (among which we reckon personal service in the armies and navies of the state) must fall to the lot of that part of mankind which fills the lower ranks of life. . . . In the advanced state of government which the British nation has reached, personal service is not, nor ought to be, the duty of every citizen." Lloyd, "The Press Gang and the Law," p. 685.
  48. HO 42/24, Resolutions of the Newcastle Seamen, 30 January 1793, f. 321.
  49. HO 42/24, Resolutions of the Newcastle Seamen, 30 January 1793, f. 321; HO 42/24, "Friends and Fellow Seamen!," 2 February 1793, f. 356; Davis, English Shipping Industry, pp. 135-137; Ashton, Economic History, p. 226; Tyne and Wear Record Office, CO 37, "Papers Relating to the Seamen's Strike of 1792," 394/35, Handbill of Newcastle Shipowner, 1 November 1790, no f.
  50. Lewis, A Social History of the Navy, p. 300; William Laird Clowes, The Royal Navy: A History from the Earliest Times to the Present (London: Sampson Low, Marston and Co., 1899), p. 169; Lloyd, The British Seaman, pp. 56, 250.
  51. HO 42/24, "Friends and Fellow Seamen!," 2 February 1793, f. 356; McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," p. 377.
  52. HO 42/24, Resolutions of the Newcastle Seamen, 30 January 1793, f. 321; HO 42/24, "Friends and Fellow Seamen!," 2 February 1793, f. 356; HO 42/23, Rudman to Dundas, 7 February 1793, f. 751; The Times [London], 26 February 1793, p. 2.
  53. HO 42/24, Rudman to Dundas, 30 January 1793,

- ff. 315-316; HO 42/24, Rudman to Dundas, 4 February 1793, f. 353; Emsley, British Society and the French Wars, p. 34; McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," p. 378; Lloyd, "The Press Gang and the Law," p. 683 ; T.S. Ashton and Joseph L. Sykes, The Coal Industry of the Eighteenth Century (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1929), pp. 215, 218, 220; Edington, A Treatise on the Abuses of the Coal Trade, p. 14; Eden, The State of the Poor, p. 165; "Report of the Committee on the Coal Trade," p. 38.
54. Haswell, The Maister, p. 50.
55. Holland, "A Plan for Manning the Navy," p. 152; Lloyd, The British Seaman, p. 126.
56. HO 42/24, "Friends and Fellow Seamen!," 2 February 1793, f. 356.
57. HO 42/24, Rudman to Dundas, 4 February 1793, ff. 352-353.
58. HO 42/23, Rudman to Dundas, 9 February 1793, ff. 754-755.
59. HO 42/23, Rudman to Dundas, 14 February 1793, f. 756; HO 42/24, Brandling to Clayton, 5 February 1793, f. 365; Mackenzie, Descriptive and Historical Account of Newcastle, p. 70; Haswell, The Maister, p. 54.
60. HO 42/23, Rudman to Dundas, 16 February 1793, f. 762; The York Courant, 18 February 1793, p. 2; HO 42/24, Rudman to Dundas, 4 February 1793, f. 352; The Times [London], 27 February 1793, p. 3; Haswell, The Maister, p. 54.
61. The Times [London], 27 February 1793, p. 3; McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," pp. 378-379. Rothe's reputation among the seamen was a sharp contrast to that of the press gangs he commanded. "It is not difficult to realise that the system was regarded by the populace with hatred and detestation, but it is impossible now to appreciate the loathing and abhorrence in which its instruments were held. Recruited, as they deliberately were, from the most degraded and, not seldom, criminal class--for even in that dark time the work was too base to be touched by any other--no man, woman, or child living within the scope and ken of their operations hesitated to accredit them with any crime, however cruel and treacherous." Haswell, The Maister, p. 53.

- 62.- Emsley, British Society and the French Wars, p. 34.
63. Haswell, The Maister, p. 59.
64. Emsley, British Society and the French Wars, p. 34; McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," p. 377; Lloyd, "The Press Gang and the Law," pp. 684, 690; Lloyd, The British Seaman, pp. 128-129.
65. Haswell, The Maister, pp. 54-55.
66. McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," pp. 377-378.
67. McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," p. 377.
68. The Times [London], 26 February 1793, p .2; House of Commons Journals, 1792-1793, vol. 48, p. 278; McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," p. 380.
69. Great Britain, Home Office Papers, 42/25. Public Records Office, London. Bulmer to Burdon, 19 March 1793, f. 165; The Times [London], 28 March 1793, p. 4; Haswell, The Maister, p. 54.
70. Haswell, The Maister, p. 55.
71. McCord and Brewster, "Some Labour Troubles of the 1790's," pp. 380-381.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### TO 1800--AND BEYOND

From 1793 to 1800, the war's effects on the seaborne coal trade changed the entire nature of the collier seamen's trade unionism. The failure of their opposition to naval impressment throughout the decade indicated that their prewar methods and organization were not effective when used against the forces of the Impress Service. However, defensive trade unionism was also no longer as necessary because of the war's positive effects on the economics of the coal trade. While the immediate results were economically advantageous for the collier seamen, the war had ultimately detrimental effects as the seamen faced new problems unknown in the peacetime coal trade.

The peacetime wages of the collier seamen were established by an Act of Parliament but their wartime wages were regulated by the economic laws of labor supply and demand. From 1793 to 1800 the collier fleet was depleted by the manpower demands of the Royal Navy. Out of the estimated 8,000 merchant seamen in the prewar collier fleet, 1,273 Tyneside seamen volunteered and 1,892 were pressed into the Royal Navy by November 1800. Others left the collier fleet to avoid impressment or to engage in lucrative wartime privateering.<sup>1</sup> As a result, "merchant ships lay in the harbour for long periods at vast cost because of depleted

crews . . . [with] wages lost, ships lost, ships damaged, [and] cargoes destroyed through undermanning. . . ."2

Perhaps nowhere were the effects of war on wages more clearly evident than in the example of the collier seamen. Without doubt, this particular group of workers did well economically out of the French Wars. The wages of the remaining collier seamen fluctuated in the period from 1793 to 1800 but the general trend was upward.<sup>3</sup> In 1792, the collier seamen were paid 50s. per London voyage. In their strike of October and November, the seamen won 55s. per voyage. At the outbreak of war with France in February 1793, their wages rose to £3.10s., by April to £7.17s.6d. and at the end of 1793 their wages stood at £8.1s.6d. In July 1794, their wages fell to £5.5s. (summer wages were always lower than winter wages), but by November they had again risen to £8. In 1796, £10 per voyage was paid and, by April 1800, the collier seamen were receiving "the enormous rate" of eleven guineas per voyage<sup>4</sup>--an increase of 362% over the prewar rate of 50s.

By 1800, the collier seamen became some of the highest paid workers at Tyneside. The seamen's wages of £10 per six week voyage in 1796 represented as average rate of 33s. per week. According to Frederick Morton Eden's figures for the same period, other laborers at Tyneside earned considerably less. A pitman earned about 16s., a keelman 15s. to 20s., an agricultural laborer 14s. and a common laborer 9s. to

12s. per week.<sup>5</sup> A collier seaman serving in the Royal Navy as an able-bodied seaman earned 6s. and an ordinary seaman earned 4s.9d. per week until 1797.<sup>6</sup>

The cost of living rose during this period due to the combined pressures of wartime inflation and provision shortages. Despite this increase, the cost of living did not exceed the increase in the seamen's wages during this same period. The price of wheat, by which the cost of living was measured, was 43s. per quarter in 1792. It rose steadily to a peak price of 78s.7d. in 1796, declined until 1799 and again rose to 113s.10d. in 1800.<sup>7</sup> The only labor dispute among the collier seamen during this period, their attempted strike of 1796 which was defeated by the intervention of the press gangs, reflected the experience of the increase in the price of wheat and the resultant bread crisis which afflicted Britain in the middle years of the decade.<sup>8</sup> The almost complete absence of any labor disputes during the period from 1793 to 1800 can be partially explained by the fact that the collier seamen were enjoying the benefits of the wartime economy without the need for recourse to strikes to increase their wages and their standard of living.

The obvious advantages of the increase of seamen's wages were negated to some degree by the peculiar conditions of the wartime seaborne coal trade. Employment in the collier fleet remained inconstant and uncertain. The

situation was made more precarious by the presence of French warships off the English coast and the threat of capture by French privateers in the North Sea. The delays caused by the vagaries of weather and the economics of the Limitation of the Vend were increased by the necessity of organizing military convoys to protect the collier fleet from the Tyne to London.<sup>9</sup> Employment in the collier fleet was also less secure because fewer collier seamen were needed during the war. The large colliers were commandeered for use in the military transport service, leaving only a few old or small ships in the collier fleet. In 1789, there were 1,300 ships in the northeast collier fleet but by 1800 this number had dwindled to only 597.<sup>10</sup>

Not only were fewer seamen enjoying the economic benefits of high wartime wages, but the composition of the collier crews changed drastically during this period. By 1800, few of the seamen who organized themselves in 1792 and 1793 remained in the collier fleet.

Because the British Navy was manned at the expense of the shipowners, Parliament in April 1793 eased their manpower predicament by suspending part of the Navigation Acts and authorizing British merchant ships to have three-fourths of their crews comprised of foreign sailors for the duration of the war. This measure, and the wartime increase of wages in the collier fleet, encouraged foreigners, landmen and other non-seamen to enter the

merchant service. To protect these seamen from the press, the shipowners began to rely on the crimping system which replaced the free-bargaining labor agreements of the eighteenth century after the French Wars.<sup>11</sup>

Although by 1800 the shipowners complained that "the only Persons we can engage, are those who labour under some bodily Infirmity: All young Seamen would be immediately taken from us,"<sup>12</sup> there were other seamen who were protected from impressment and filled the ranks of the depleted collier fleet. Crews consisted of

Apprentices, from Twelve to Twenty-one Years of Age, indentured for either Three or Seven Years, . . . they are chiefly obtained from the Country, many from Scotland, and even from Shetland, at a great Expence[;] . . . Foreigners, but not so numerous[;] . . . Men rejected from the King's Service, who are generally known by the Description of protected Seamen; and . . . during the Autumn and Winter, by Men protected for the Greenland Whale Fishery.<sup>13</sup>

The high wartime wages of seamen encouraged the shipowners to employ apprentices who were protected by an Act of Parliament for the period of their indenture. Despite this immunity, the shipowners had difficulty maintaining the supply of apprentices because their protections were

so often violated, and that in a most wanton Manner, whereby we cannot get Servants even at high Wages; we give from £50 to £60 for the Three Years Servants, which high Price proceeds from the little security they have of being protected from the Impress.<sup>14</sup>

The shipowners recommended to the House of Commons Committee on the Coal Trade in 1800 that all maritime apprentices be protected from impressment because this would

tend greatly to increase the Number of Seamen, and prevent the enormous Rate of Wages, not only in the Coal Trade, but also in the Baltic Trade; but the Protection to the Three Years Servants ought to be more particularly attended to, as they are in general from 16 to 20 Years of Age, and often leave <sup>15</sup> other Professions to come into the Coal Trade.

The Greenland fishermen's protections also granted them immunity from impressment, a notorious method of strike-breaking whereby the shipowners could encourage the selective pressing of known labor leaders. Because of this, the shipowners considered them to be "the Ringleaders of all Disturbances for raising Wages. There are hardly any instances of Detention [of ships], but when the Greenland Men are in Port."<sup>16</sup> Despite this belief, these seamen comprised only "a very small Proportion to the Whole, formerly there were from 12 to 17 Ships from Newcastle employed in that Trade; at present [1800] there are not more than Three."<sup>17</sup> It therefore seems unlikely, given the fishermen's relatively small numbers and temporary annual residence in the port, that they could have been "the principal Movers"<sup>18</sup> of all labor disturbances involving hundreds of collier seaman. Labor disputes among the seamen occurred in response to immediate economic and occupational grievances and did not necessarily correspond to the autumn

and winter months when the Greenland fishermen were in port.<sup>19</sup> The Committee on the Coal Trade, however, concurred in the shipowners' opinions about

an Evil which . . . is productive of great Delays and Embarassments [sic]: the Evil . . . is, the Combinations that have repeatedly formed amongst the Mariners for an Augmentation of their Wages. . . . The success of these Combinations is stated to be owing in a great Degree to the Protections enjoyed by the Greenland Fishermen, who during Part of the Year are employed in the Coal Ships.

The Committee proposed to submit to the Commons a request for "some Provision, that may render, under given Circumstances, their Protections unavailable, [which] might . . . contribute to remove this Evil."<sup>20</sup>

The change in the composition of the collier crews was a further explanation for the lack of labor disputes between 1793 and 1800. Those seamen who had led the strike of 1792 may have been pressed or volunteered for naval service, leaving the remaining collier crews without the effective leadership and experience necessary to organize successfully.

Despite the immediate economic benefits which war brought to the collier seamen, they recognized as early as 1793 that such gains would be only temporary and would accrue only to those who remained in the merchant service. Those seamen who volunteered for naval service or failed to elude the press gangs faced the additional problems of low naval wages, the maintenance of their dependents in their

absence and the resultant dislocations of postwar demobilization.

In 1793, the collier seamen complained that "it was very hard to be compelled to serve when the [Navy's] Wages would not support their Families." Although they had "at Heart the Interest of our most Gracious Sovereign and our Nation in general," the seamen could not "at the same time forget our little ones and wives."<sup>21</sup> One of the problems faced by pressed men was the maintenance of their families in their absence. Unlike the special allowances granted to the families of militiamen, the rate and nature of poor relief for seamen's families were the same as that granted to ordinary parish paupers. War put additional strains on the poor rates. In the parish of All Saints, where most of the Newcastle seamen lived, the poor rate doubled during the first year of the war and it rose to as high as 6s. in the pound. The collier seamen's concern for the economic fates of their families was well-founded. By the mid-1790s North Shields was

burthened with the families of 76 impressed men: their usual weekly allowance is 9d. for the wife and 1s. a week for each child. The whole weekly charge, at present, arising from their maintenance, amounts to £8. Tinmouth [sic] township supports 33 families of impressed men, at the rate of £3.10s. a week

and South Shields supported 74 wives and 113 children of pressed seamen at a cost of £8.6s.3d. per week.<sup>22</sup> Faced with the possibility of having their families become "a



Burden to the rest of our Fellow Subjects," the sailors insisted that provisions be made to allot one-half of their naval pay to be remitted to their families at home,<sup>23</sup> as was the custom in the merchant service.<sup>24</sup> A form of this provision would not be achieved by British naval seamen until 1795 and then it applied only to sailors who voluntarily entered the Royal Navy.<sup>25</sup>

The experience of the demobilization at the conclusion of the American War a decade before probably led the seamen to condemn the social and economic crises which would again result from the eventual demobilization of the British Navy.<sup>26</sup> After being compelled to serve in the Navy and possibly "to ruin our Families, to lose our Limbs or Lives," the seamen faced "at the end of War . . . to be paid off . . . [and] to be turned adrift, at a Distance from our Friends without the Means of Procuring an honest Livelihood."<sup>27</sup> This situation resulted from the policy of paying off the seamen as quickly as possible in order to avoid the additional expense and discipline problems of keeping them in the Navy after the conclusion of a war. This was seldom an orderly procedure and often thousands of seamen were kept waiting, indigent and riotous, for their pay, as were the families of those seamen killed by battle or disease. The seamen were discharged at Portsmouth or London and were forced to return home by their own means.<sup>28</sup>

Contemporary observers also criticized the potentially

detrimental effects such a massive and disorganized demobilization policy had on English society, especially the increase in postwar crime. War had a recognized utility for absorbing the idle, destitute and dangerous poor in the eighteenth century. The professional seamen of the collier fleet recognized as early as 1793 that they would be joined by thousands of non-seamen and perhaps be forced to steal by unavoidable circumstances at the conclusion of the war.<sup>29</sup>

During the Peace of Amiens the size of the Navy was quickly reduced to almost half, from 130,000 to 70,000 seamen, with a proposed reduction to 30,000 by 1803. Between 1813 and 1817, 120,000 seamen were demobilized.<sup>30</sup> Legislation attempted to alleviate the postwar economic problems of ex-naval seamen and to reabsorb this sudden labor surplus with a minimum of social disruption. Seamen were exempt from the apprenticeship clauses of the Elizabethan Statute of Artificers and those "wanting subsistence" were permitted to beg if they could prove their bona fides under the provisions of the Vagrancy Act of 1744. The returning seamen would be forced to compete with the landmen, foreigners, apprentices and Greenland fishermen for their former jobs in the collier fleet. To ease this problem, the Navigation Acts were reinstated to compel British ships to be manned by British sailors. Although employment registers were established for ex-naval seamen in 1800, demobilized sailors were said to be the largest group

of beggars in London for a number of years after the French Wars.<sup>31</sup>

After the war, the colliers used in the military transport service returned to the collier fleet. This augmentation of the fleet increased the demand for seamen but it also increased the coal supply to the Metropolis to one-third more than could be consumed and reduced the price of coal to a level which was unprofitable to the shipowners. A committee of shipowners from Shields and Sunderland investigated the condition of the postwar coal trade and concluded that because "victuals and every other necessary of life is [sic] considerably cheaper . . . there may be a great reduction of wages from most of the people employed in the coal trade." The wages of the collier seamen were summarily reduced to £3.10s. per voyage<sup>32</sup>--the level at which they stood at the outbreak of war in February 1793. The resulting postwar economic distress was the precipitating factor in the Tyneside seamen's strike of 1815.<sup>33</sup>

The strike of 1792 demonstrated the inherent difficulties faced by workers organized on only an ad hoc basis and in the succeeding years the nature of their organization changed. Their increased wages now allowed them to contribute to a friendly society. In 1798, nineteen Tyneside seamen founded the Sailors' Fund at the Hope and Anchor pub in South Shields. The seamen subscribed £400,

elected a committee of nine to govern the organization and employed the services of a local schoolmaster for its secretarial duties. The burial provisions of the Sailors' Fund represented an attempt by the seamen to achieve a degree of respectability for their members which was previously unavailable. This organization also became the foundation for the more economically powerful and legal seamen's trade unions of the nineteenth century.<sup>34</sup>

The methods and organization developed by the collier seamen in their labor disputes of the 1790s and the economic security and social respectability attainable by the creation of their friendly society were proscribed by the passage of the Combination Acts of 1799 and 1800. Although these Acts protected legitimate friendly societies, they also formalized the general stiffening of attitude of employers and government in the 1790s against workmen's organizations which could disguise illegal trade unions or revolutionary conspiracies. These statutes reinforced existing common law prohibitions by which active trade unions could be repressed as conspiracies in restraint of trade but their provisions made convictions of labor organizers more speedy and certain.<sup>35</sup>

After the repeal of the Combination Acts, the Tyne again became the center of seamen's trade unionism with the formation of the "Seamen's Loyal Standard Association for Mutual Relief, for the Tyne and Wear" in 1824. The creation

of this association also represented a drastic change in the attitudes and methods of their defensive trade unionism as the seamen sought to gain legitimation for their organization and respect for their goals. It is ironic that to accomplish this the seamen had to disavow the very methods which had served them since the 1790s. The rules of the Seamen's Loyal Standard Association warned that

should any member or members of this Association muster on the river Tyne, in a tumultuous or riotous manner, to stop or detain any ship or vessel, on any pretence whatever, or to take the crew of such ship or vessel out of her against their own consent, such member or members shall be fined 10s each. And should any member or members be committed to prison for such disorderly conduct, they shall not be supported or relieved by the Association. . . .<sup>36</sup>

From 1793 to 1800, the nature of the Tyneside seamen's organization changed drastically due to the economic conditions of the wartime coal trade. Defensive trade unionism to achieve higher wages was no longer as necessary because of the general increase in the seamen's standard of living and their proven methods of organization were ineffective under wartime conditions. In the attempted strike of 1796, the seamen could not gain control of the port, as they had in 1792, because of the permanent presence of the forces of the Impress Service on the Tyne. Their methods and organization were essentially nullified for the duration of the French Wars, but they were quickly and successfully resurrected in the seamen's strike of 1815,

which followed a course very similar to the strike of  
1792.<sup>37</sup>

## NOTES

1. C.M. Fraser and K. Emsley, Tyneside (Newton Abbot, Devonshire: David and Charles Ltd., 1973), p. 66; Great Britain, Parliament, Sessional Papers (Commons), 1799-1800, Reports From the Committees, vol. 26, "Second Report From the Committee Appointed to Consider of the Coal Trade," p. 41; T.S. Ashton, An Economic History of England: The 18th Century (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1961), p. 226.
2. George H. Haswell, The Maister: A Century of Tyneside Life (London: Walter Scott, 1895), p. 60.
3. Ashton, Economic History, p. 226.
4. Great Britain, Parliament, Sessional Papers (Commons) 1799-1800, Reports From the Committees, vol. 26, "Report From the Committee Appointed to Consider of the Coal Trade," pp. 46, 72-73, 92; "Second Report of the Committee on the Coal Trade," p. 8; Ashton, Economic History, p. 226; Clive Emsley, British Society and the French Wars, 1793-1815 (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1979), pp. 32-33.
5. Frederick Morton Eden, The State of the Poor (London: J. Davis, 1797), pp. 166, 551, 562.
6. Michael Lewis, A Social History of the Navy (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1960), p. 300.
7. Chris Cook and John Stevenson, British Historical Facts, 1760-1830 (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1980), p. 182.
8. John Stevenson, "Food Riots in England, 1792-1818," in R. Quinault and John Stevenson (eds.), Popular Protest and Public Order: Six Studies in British History, 1790-1920 (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1974), pp. 33-74.
9. Emsley, British Society and the French Wars, pp. 32-33; The Times [London], 23 February 1793, p. 3.
10. Robert Edington, A Treatise on the Abuses of the Coal Trade (London: W. Smith, 1817), p. 14; T.S. Ashton and Joseph L. Sykes, The Coal Industry of the Eighteenth Century (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1929), p. 200.
11. Stephen Jones, "Blood Red Roses: The Supply of

- Merchant Seamen in the Nineteenth Century," Mariner's Mirror 58 (November 1972): 431-432.
12. "Report of the Committee on the Coal Trade," p. 73.
  13. "Second Report of the Committee on the Coal Trade," pp. 29-30.
  14. "Report of the Committee on the Coal Trade," p. 73.
  15. "Report of the Committee on the Coal Trade," p. 73.
  16. "Second Report of the Committee on the Coal Trade," p. 30
  17. "Report of the Committee on the Coal Trade," p. 73.
  18. "Report of the Committee on the Coal Trade," p. 30.
  19. Labor disputes among the Tyneside collier seamen occurred in April 1768, March 1775, May 1785, early spring 1790, October and November 1792, and May 1796.
  20. "Second Report of the Committee on the Coal Trade," p. 8.
  21. Great Britain, Home Office Papers, 42/24. Public Records Office, London. Rudman to Dundas, 31 January 1793, f. 319; HO 42/24, "Resolutions of the Newcastle Seamen," 30 January 1793, f. 321.
  22. Emsley, British Society and the French Wars, p. 40; Eden, The State of the Poor, pp. 552, 563.
  23. HO 42/24, "Resolutions of the Newcastle Seamen," 30 January 1793, f. 321; HO 42/24, Rudman to Dundas, 31 January 1793, f. 319; HO 42/24, Rudman to Dundas, 4 February 1793, f. 353.
  24. A.G. Credland, "White Stocking Day," Mariner's Mirror 68 (February 1982): 56; Walter Runciman, Collier Brigs and Their Sailors (London: T.F. Unwin Ltd., 1926), p. 214.
  25. William Laird Clowes, The Royal Navy: A History from the Earliest Times to the Present (London: Sampson Low, Marston and Co., 1899), p. 156.
  26. Douglas Hay, "War, Dearth and Theft in the Eighteenth Century: The Record of the English Courts," Past and Present, May 1983, pp. 138, 145.
  27. HO 42/24, "Friends and Fellow Seamen!," 2 February



- 1793, f. 356.
28. Hay, "War, Dearth and Theft," p. 140.
  29. Hay, "War, Dearth and Theft," pp. 138-146.
  30. Steven Watson, The Reign of George III, 1760-1815 (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1960), p. 412; E.L. Woodward, The Age of Reform, 1815-1870 (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1938), p. 261.
  31. Hay, "War, Dearth and Theft," pp. 139-140; Jeffrey Dennis, An Address to the Honourable Committee for the Relief of Distressed Seamen (London: Mary Dennis, 1818), pp. 1-11.
  32. Edington, A Treatise on the Abuses of the Coal Trade, pp. 14-15.
  33. Norman McCord, "The Seamen's Strike of 1815 in North-East England," Economic History Review, second series, 21 (April 1968): 127-143; "An Impartial Account of the Late Proceedings of the Seamen of the Port of Tyne" by A Tar (Newcastle upon Tyne: K. Anderson, 1815) in Trade Unions Under the Combination Acts, 1799-1823, ed. Kenneth E. Carpenter (New York: Arno Press, 1972).
  34. Stephen Jones, "Community and Organisation: Early Seamen's Trade Unionism on the North-East Coast, 1768-1844," Maritime History 3 (April 1973): 54.
  35. G.D.H. Cole, A Short History of the British Working Class Movement, 1789-1947 (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1948), p. 36; Watson, The Reign of George III, p. 362.
  36. Jones, "Community and Organisation," p. 54; D.J. Rowe, "A Trade Union of North-East Coast Seamen in 1825," Economic History Review, second series, 25 (February 1972): 81-98.
  37. McCord, "The Seamen's Strike of 1815," p. 128n; "An Impartial Account of the Late Proceedings of the Seamen of the Port of Tyne."

## CONCLUSION

The example of the Tyneside collier seamen in the 1790s challenges the traditional interpretations of eighteenth century labor history. The seamen clearly demonstrated that a rudimentary form of defensive trade unionism preceded the repeal of the Combination Acts by at least a half a century. More importantly, the seamen demonstrated that such organization existed among workers who did not conform to the standard accepted notions of an eighteenth century labor "aristocracy." Although highly skilled, the seamen were not highly paid (at the beginning of the 1790s) or necessarily literate, and they were without the social and economic support of a legal friendly society until the end of the decade.

Both the seamen's successes and failures are evidence of their recognition of the need to defend their economic and occupational interests against the shipowners, the local magistrates and the naval and military forces of the central government. The seamen's expertise, moderate methods and skillful leadership, in conjunction with the support of the Tyneside maritime community, enabled them to extract concessions from the shipowners successfully in their labor disputes.

The seamen's failures, however, also demonstrated the inherent weaknesses of labor groups organized only on an ad

hoc basis without the support of a formal and legal trade union. The methods which allowed them to control the port of the Tyne and to paralyze the seaborne coal trade for weeks at a time were ineffective when opposed by overwhelming naval and military forces. However successful these methods might be in achieving their immediate economic demands, the seamen had no legal recourse to insure that the shipowners would honor concessions once a strike was over.

Despite the intrinsic weaknesses of their organization, the legal proscriptions on formal trade unions and the suspicions of popular disturbances during the 1790s, the example of the Tyneside collier seamen demonstrated that the attitudes and methods, if not the ultimate form, of defensive trade unionism existed among this particular group of workers at the end of the eighteenth century.

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