

SONS OF THE WAVES: THE COMMON SEAMAN IN THE HEROIC AGE OF SAIL

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Among the first books I read, when around five years of age, were some written by my great uncle, Charles Frye Haywood, after whom I am named. He was a lawyer in Lynn, Massachusetts, but his life's interest was men and events related to Colonial times, especially sailing vessels. This is no surprise, perhaps, given that one of our ancestors, also Charles Haywood, was a minuteman in Concord in 1785. My great uncle wrote two fictional works set in colonial America, *No Ship May Sail* and *Eastward the Sea*, along with a nonfiction work, *Minutemen and Mariners*. Books read as a small child sink deep into one's psyche, and so, in a sense, I inherited his interest. This book, *Sons of the Waves*, I therefore found fascinating.

It is not a technical book. In fact, I would have liked quite a bit more technical detail about the construction and operation of sailing ships of the time. But as the subtitle says, this is a book about the life and times of common seamen, not about sailing ships as such. Taylor's basic mechanism is to interweave the relatively few journals kept by such men during this period, retelling their stories, and combining them with a broader exposition of the relevant historical events of the period. His focus is exclusively on British and American sailors, primarily the former, although the boundary in much of this time between Britons and Americans was very porous indeed.

The "heroic age of sail," as Taylor defines it, was 1740 to 1840. The common seaman was a workman, with specific skills and gradations of skill. Many of his jobs were dangerous, and the more dangerous, the more skill required. The most prestigious job for a common sailor was, therefore, topman—one of the men who furled and unfurled the sails from the tops of the masts, even in raging storms. But a sailor at this time was, crucially, a fighter. His fighting was somewhat different from a soldier's, in that he was rarely idle—sailing work was his daily activity, while fighting was relatively rare. When it did occur, it was ferociously intense and very brief, but it was still one of his primary duties. On a warship, fighting was more likely and firepower a greater

part of a ship's purpose. However, merchantmen also carried cannon and fought when necessary, as well as sometimes opportunistically.

This period is known to many today from the novels of Patrick O'Brian, and from the 2003 movie *Master & Commander*, a film version of the first of his twenty novels. That movie, a celebration of masculine achievement with no attempt to include any historically-false instances of the gross vice of so-called inclusion, could not be made today. Maybe such movies will again be made in the future, if we are lucky. I have not read any of the novels, but they are supposedly accurate depictions, and I really should get around to reading them. At a minimum, I will put them in my new home library, now holding 10,000 books and capable of holding 25,000. No ebooks for me; I tried that, and there is more downside than upside.

Sailors were a tight-knit and proud brotherhood, men of low social standing and often known to civilians primarily from their uproarious behavior when they returned to shore, loaded with money and pent-up energy. But over the century Taylor narrates, at least in Britain, they also became idealized national heroes, reaching their peak of popularity during and after the Napoleonic Wars, when Britain's control of the oceans was seen as essential to national survival. The figure of "Jack Tar" thus became a British archetype, back when there was a Britain to have archetypes. *Sons of the Waves* narrates the development of Jack Tar, once known throughout the world. To achieve this, Taylor carefully describes numerous specific voyages, nearly all through the eyes of one of the men serving below decks on the voyage.

To some extent, this is a revisionist work, meant to confound what Taylor calls the "miserabilist school" of historiography. Certainly, a sailor's life was hard and dangerous. He had little volition in his daily life; a ship was an autocracy under the unquestionable command of the captain and his officers. And he even often was denied a choice of when and with whom to sail, of which more later. But most sailors liked the life of the sea. Many had "a condition identified by Norse seafarers as *aefintyr*—a spirit of adventure brought on by restless curiosity." And as British and American vessels in this period increasingly sailed all over the world, not just across the Atlantic but to India, China, and the South Seas, this spirit was often satisfied. There are always men who prefer something different from others, most of all in the sailor's case a life

of the unexpected. For these men, sailing held its attractions, not least the possibility of sharing in the rewards of prize money.

The book is full of interesting facts. Grog, for example, the name given to the mixture of rum and water rationed to sailors, comes from the nickname of an admiral, Edward Vernon—"Old Grogam," from his cloak, made of grogam, a distinctive ribbed fabric. Vernon, worried about alcoholism in sailors (which was common), ordered the dilution of the sailor's daily straight rum ration, to a 4:1 ratio of water to rum. This both prevented hoarding, by making it harder to keep fresh for long, and slowed down intake when imbibing. Another notable fact is that sailors were rarely religious men. Captains typically held stripped-down religious services, at a minimum for the dead, but the sailors themselves were mostly indifferent to the specifics of Christianity. Taylor ascribes this to a type of pantheism, or perhaps primitivism, the results of being surrounded by awesome forces which took on the immediate aspect of the divine. Maybe, but it has always intrigued me that British soldiers in World War I were similarly largely indifferent to religion, giving the lie to the old aphorism about atheists in foxholes. You would think that a man under artillery bombardment would instinctively feel the need to get right with God, but apparently this was not the case. Why, I am not sure. Perhaps in this latter case it was tied to theodicy, a problem for many people.

When a sailor's career was over, usually by the time he was in his forties and had lost the physical stamina of a young man, often incurring injuries along the way, he frequently struggled in his later life. About 100,000 British sailors died during the Napoleonic Wars, the vast majority from disease, so he was lucky to get home at all. Even if he had a wife or family at home, and that wife had not died in his absence, his physical strength was not what it had been, and he had gained few skills useful on land. And often when peace broke out, the Navy simply dismissed tens of thousands of sailors, who often struggled to find any work at sea at all.

The government did offer a pension to those who had served on warships, but actually obtaining a pension depended in many cases on being able to get a testimonial of good character from the captain of a ship on which one had served, whom it might not be possible to locate or who might have died himself. Thus, many sailors (and their

families, before and after they sailed) ended up relying on local poor relief, a far from ideal position. In the nineteenth century, as the legend of Jack Tar grew and the public felt a newfound sense of obligation, the British government addressed this problem more directly. Among other things, it built or expanded homes for elderly retired sailors, including Greenwich Hospital. Nonetheless, sailing was always an occupation best suited to young men who had little concern for the future. As John Nichol, one of the sailors whose journal Taylor uses, said toward the end of his life, "I have been a wanderer and the child of chance all my days, and now only look for the time when I shall enter my last ship and be anchored with a green turf upon my breast, and I care not how soon the command is given."

Aside from factoids such as these, several themes run throughout the book. One is the British practice of impressment—forcible conscription of sailors by Royal Navy warships, either at sea or on land. The practice was entirely legal and a royal prerogative (and also not limited to sailors; it was very occasionally used for soldiers and even for craftsmen needed by the Crown). Impressment was supposed to be limited to men with sailing experience, and generally was, but in wartime even men who had never been to sea were sometimes impressed.

The Navy, as well as merchantmen, often faced a chronic shortage of seamen. Sailors would frequently quit berths, whether warship or merchantman, if offered a better deal on another ship, or simply if unhappy on a particular ship. Exacerbating problems for the Crown, merchant ship wages increased dramatically during wartime, meaning desertion also increased at the worst possible time for military readiness. Very often, especially in periods when the Navy needed sailors, any merchantman returning to port would be boarded and many of the sailors simply transferred to warships, never being allowed to land and not even being allowed to collect their pay. In theory the warship would in return dump its least desirable crew members on the merchantman, but during wartime the Navy was desperate for men, often having ships that lacked crews, so this rule was regularly ignored. Impressment officers also haunted ports and grabbed sailors off the street or in pubs—those just returned, those arriving to ship out, or those simply unwise enough to hang around sailors' haunts.

The exact number of men impressed is unclear, in part because many men facing impressment instead “volunteered” so that they would be paid the bonus due to volunteers. Yet Taylor makes clear that although sailors grumbled about impressment, and sailors’ families were often very unhappy about impressment (occasionally leading to riots ashore), most of them simply treated it as a fact of life, another challenge that could strike unexpectedly and merely had to be dealt with as best one could, not much different than storms or French warships. The personality of most sailors was accepting of random chance, after all. On ship, at least he was fed regularly and might even become rich, and a job was a job. Prize money sometimes, though rarely, exceeded \$100,000 in modern currency, and many sailors thought the chance worth the hardship.

It was Americans who most objected to impressment, because the British habitually boarded American ships and seized sailors on board. Sometimes the men they seized were British, for many Britons, both deserters and not, sailed on American ships, before and after the War of Independence. Often, however, British captains effectively viewed all Americans as British subjects, and cared little about American protests. Impressment was one of the grievances listed in the Declaration of Independence, and also part of what led to the War of 1812. *No Ship May Sail* revolves around the Embargo declared by Thomas Jefferson in 1807, in part meant to prevent American seamen from being impressed. (*Eastward the Sea* revolves around the Barbary pirates, North African Muslims, scourge of American sailors, whose depredations resulted in the United States Navy being created in 1794.)

Discipline was strict on all ships, and is another pervading theme of the book. Punishments, carefully recorded by captains, whose log books are used as a primary source by Taylor, were mostly for drunkenness. Neglect, insolence, and disobedience made up the vast remainder. Surprisingly, fighting among the sailors was uncommon. And, despite Winston Churchill’s famous quip about the Navy being nothing more than “rum, sodomy, and the lash,” homosexual behavior was almost completely unknown on sailing ships. All common sailors regarded homosexual acts as disgusting and beneath contempt; they instead saved up their heterosexual energy for returning to port (whereupon endless boatloads of prostitutes shuttled out to the ships to service

the men while they waited for their final pay). Once a decade or so in the entire Royal Navy, men were hanged for homosexual acts (or other equally disgusting sexual perversions, one involving a goat), and over the century there were several instances of officers being either hanged or cashiered for sexual abuse of boys, who sometimes served on ships as young as twelve years of age. But the myth of normalized homosexuality on board is just that.

Another theme is the wide variation among ship captains and their relationship to the men. A bad captain, meaning one who lacked the respect of the crew, invariably resorted to frequent use of flogging, thereby increasing the dissatisfaction of the men. (The lash was not as common as Churchill said, but it was far more common than homosexuality.) It was not a question, as Taylor makes clear, of whether the men liked a captain. The very question would have been thought bizarre. They either respected him, or they did not. Such respect flowed from the character of the captain, most of all his leadership ability, and that was always inborn, or not. The most admired captains cared for their men while they also demanded their best work product, and naturally a successful captain, meaning one whose men were victorious and well-paid, whether of a warship or a merchantman, was likely to be the most respected. Martinets were common, though, even if despite what films often show, sadists were rare. Over time, the Navy became better at selecting captains, so the general quality of ship administration improved significantly over the period Taylor discusses.

Mutinies were infrequent, but not exactly rare. Almost invariably these resulted in the ringleaders being hanged; mutiny was very rarely successful, and when it was, as famously on the *Bounty*, the mutineers had to disappear forever, because the Navy worked hard to track them down. In 1797, however, there was an anomalous multi-ship mutiny at Spithead, near Portsmouth, the Navy's center of operations. The details of its origin are obscure, in part because, in an exception to the general rule, most of the ringleaders were never identified, but it appears that sympathy for the ideals of revolutionary France played a part in the sailors' demands. In this, as in all mutinies, the majority of sailors on any given ship played no part and had no interest; it was always a vociferous hotheaded minority which browbeat or threatened the other sailors into not opposing the mutiny. That said, the demands

were legitimate—a raise in pay (which had not changed since the reign of Charles II, despite inflation); better food; more shore leave; less corruption by the paymasters.

The Admiralty was in a quandary. This was the height of the Napoleonic Wars and while the sailors promised to sail to fight if the French sailed from their ports on the opposite side of the Channel, the mutiny was nonetheless an existential threat to military capacity. There were eighty British ships with 30,000 men at Spithead, all of whom might potentially join the mutiny, although only fourteen ships were active in it. Therefore, Parliament quickly passed bills to raise pay and address other concerns, and removed some captains and officers odious to the men. This ended the mutiny, and pardons were issued for all the sailors. But then, led by other men drunk on power and ideology, a second mutiny immediately began at another major naval anchorage, near London, where the demands expanded to ludicrous ones such as the dissolution of Parliament and peace with France, and the mutineers blockaded London. Losing patience, the Navy threatened any man who continued to mutiny with execution, whereupon support for the mutiny collapsed, resulting in thirty executions.

For Taylor, the years after the end of the Napoleonic Wars are almost an afterthought, as the age of sail gave way to the age of steam, and Jack Tar became less an actual person one might see on shore and more a mythic creature. The Royal Navy remained important for more than a hundred years, slowly evanescent to the toothless creature it is today—maybe in part because the grog ration was ended in 1970, but probably because all of “Great” Britain is a shadow of its former self, soon to sink entirely beneath the waves of alien migrants and a feminized populace. That’s too bad, but at least we can read this book and learn about Britain at the apogee of its now-vanished power and glory.