

Peter H. McCracken. 'SYMBOLIC HISTORY' AND SAILORS: IMAGE DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SONG AT SEA. (Under the direction of Dr. John A. Tilley) Department of History, March 1999.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the meaning of songs used by sailors on board late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Anglo-American sailing ships. Shanties, a type of sea song, were used as tools to coordinate difficult or repetitive aspects of sailing. Forebitters were sung for pleasure, particularly when sailors were not on watch or when they were in port. This thesis explores the differences between the two types of songs, as well as ballads written by non-sailors on shore, and proposes a way of looking at the differences, defined here as "symbolic history."

In this case, symbolic history explores the difference between how sailors presented themselves in song with other sailors and how they presented themselves in song toward non-sailors. In songs sung primarily at sea, and not heard on shore, sailors were more negative about their life at sea than they were in songs they sang on shore in establishments where non-sailors could hear and learn these songs.

The thesis explores how song was used on board merchant vessels, and how the different types of songs expressed different ideas. Work songs rarely appeared on naval vessels, but ballads written by sailors and by composers on shore created a means by which sailors could present their views of life at sea to those unfamiliar with this life. Songs about women also show how sailors used music to express a variety of ideas about the women in their lives. Sailors created a "positive" paradigm for describing women at

home, such as mothers and wives, and employed a "negative" paradigm for describing women they met in the world's ports, such as prostitutes and corrupt boarding-house managers. Although music is no longer needed to coordinate work while sailing, sea music continues to be popular, and such music continues to explore the ways in which sailors represented themselves in song.

“Music at sea ——
I never imagined how beautiful it could be.”

— Franchot Tone, as Roger Byam,
in *Mutiny on the Bounty*, 1935

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IMAGE DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SONG AT SEA

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Peter H. McCracken

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INTRODUCTION

Sailors have long used songs to convey views and ideas about themselves and their environment. Songs express the advantages of life at sea, such as freedom to travel, escape from one's debts, and the various pleasures of ports around the world. Sailors have also used songs to lament the difficulties in their lives, like the poor or nonexistent pay, the brutality and near-slavery conditions of multi-year voyages, and the many dangers inherent at sea and in the world's ports. The various types of songs often express different opinions on the same subject, and a review of many of the works of each type shows a consistent—though not constant—pattern of specific or implied meaning through the course of the work.

Over the last century, many individuals have transcribed the songs they have heard at sea. Passengers, captains' wives, former sailors, and former shantymen have written books or articles that recorded these songs before they were lost. Early collections recorded just the words to songs, so melodies have been lost, and even then the transcribed words or music are often unreliable. Compilers may have misunderstood some words, others may have censored the language used by sailors, and some may have not understood the intent of the songs. Many work songs were quite long, and had many verses; most collections do not reflect the full length of such songs. Stanton H. King, who billed himself in 1918 as America's "Official Government Chantey-man," included just

two or three verses for songs that he apparently thought would be used at sea.¹ While the use of any such songs in 1918 is highly unlikely, such use would have required many more verses than he offered if the songs were to be of value to a ship's crew. Although valuable, and certainly better than not having any record of these songs, many compilations must be used with care.

While numerous songs have been collected, compiled, and reprinted, the songs and the words themselves have undergone little scrutiny. Few individuals have attempted to explore the meaning and value of these songs. While it would be impossible to identify one specific theme or concept running through the entire pantheon of sea music, one can identify some specific threads that appear in a cross-section of songs.

Thousands of songs have been preserved in the last century, and innumerable thousands of songs have been lost. The songs presented in this work are a small sampling of the songs that have been preserved. The more popular songs appear in many versions, and one can carefully select the most appropriate version for inquiry. But even within these admitted limitations, a careful study of the songs and analysis of a collection of the songs can begin to uncover the somewhat tenuous links that may exist. This research is the start of work that could lead to a closer understanding of what sailors thought about their lives at sea, and how they expressed their opinions, both on board and on shore.

Sea shanties and forebitters can help a careful observer better understand the subject of life at sea, but they have limited utility in clearly explicating any maritime

¹ Stanton H. King, *King's Book of Chanties* (Philadelphia: Oliver Ditson, 1918).

history. Naval ballads, while edifying, are not historically reliable. Forebitters can be notorious for their inaccuracy, and close readers of sea shanties will not uncover previously unknown knowledge regarding a particular event, ship, or crew. Although the shanty can and should serve as an historical document, rarely can it play a role in the explication of a specific event.

Shanties are valuable, however, in describing a sailor's view of life. They can identify various aspects of the sailor's social life that might not otherwise be found. Shanties provide a collective diary: most sailors did not keep diaries, and many that were kept have not survived. Captains and mates kept official records of voyages that have come to define a history of a voyage. Court records provide insights only into the few voyages that resulted in legal action, and the records reflect only the views of those called to testify. Shanties, however, describe sailors' views of themselves, and often in ways not explored through other analysis.

Close readings of shanties can show how and where they can guide historians to new information and new understanding of the events of bygone eras. Items traditionally used to provide historical background, such as admiralty court records or captains' logs, do not express sailors' views of their life and work. Shanties, however, can describe what sailors found especially difficult in their lives and what they enjoyed. Compilers have rarely explained how songs were used, where they originated, or why they deserved to be preserved. In many cases, the compiler did not know this information himself. Sea shanties and forebitters, however, can tell historians more about the life of a seaman than

traditional sources alone. Sailors communicated with each other through song, and in song they expressed their opinions of life at sea. With an understanding of life at sea in the age of sail, and a broad view of many different shanties, forebitters, and ballads, the careful historian can begin to take a closer look at the life of a sailor, as expressed through song.

THE ROLE OF MUSIC AT SEA

Music has always been an important part of life at sea, and it has played a role in coastal societies for millennia. Evidence of music at sea extends as far back as about 2450 B.C., in an image of an Egyptian musician playing a “clarinet-like instrument in the bows of a boat in the tomb of Seshemnefer at Giza.”¹ Early Vikings and Chinese had professional musicians at sea, and music served to coordinate work on board ancient Greek vessels. Shakespeare describes the use of “the tune of flutes” in *Antony and Cleopatra*, and Greek oarsmen may have used some type of chant to maintain their rhythm.²

A popular image of English and American seamen during the height of the age of sail—primarily the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries—presents them singing while working. Song on board merchant vessels formed an important part of sailors’ work from the fifteenth century to the age of steam, but particularly came of age in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when technology had developed to a point where the speed of a sailing vessel was limited more by labor than by technology. By then, sailing ships had huge sails that could be handled only by large groups of individuals working together. Weighing anchors on board large vessels required literally hours of monotonous marching around a capstan, and pumping water out of vessels could

¹ David Proctor, *Music of the Sea* (London: HMSO, 1992), 5.

² Proctor, *Music*, 6. The phrase appears in act II, scene ii.

be a continuous project on board many large ships. Song on such vessels appeared in a variety of forms, and for many different functions.

To sailors, these songs had special meaning. The songs contained words people on land did not understand, and the songs created a vocabulary by which sailors could identify each other. Sailors used such songs to express opinions and air grievances while at sea. On land, sailors used entirely different songs to represent themselves in the presence of non-sailors. Work songs did not leave the vessel, but songs sung for pleasure did. Through the latter type of song the view of life at sea that sailors wanted to present to others easily traveled to land with them. The difference can be defined as “symbolic history”—it is the history sailors presented to others and is materially different from the history they recognized among themselves.

Songs that coordinated work, generally called “shanties,”³ are usually broken into several groups.⁴ Some shanties were simply phrases with a coordinated chant in the chorus, at which point all those on the job would pull, push, or drag together. These are often called “sweating-up chants,” or “bunting shanties,” and consist of one line with a response, although they may include several calls and responses if needed. An example of

³ This study will use the terms “shanty” and “shanties,” rather than “chanty,” “chantey,” “shantey,” their respective plural forms, or other terms for work songs set at sea. For discussions of the sources and accuracy of these terms, see Stan Hugill, *Shanties from the Seven Seas* (Mystic, Connecticut: Mystic Seaport Museum, 1994; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), 20-23; Joanna C. Colcord, *Songs of American Sailormen* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1938), 32-35; or John H. Mead, “Sea Shanties and Fo’c’sle Songs, 1768-1906, in the G. W. Blunt White Library, Mystic Seaport, Mystic, Connecticut,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Kentucky, 1973), 34-36. For arguments from those who use “chantey,” see Horace Beck, *Folklore and the Sea* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press for Mystic Seaport Museum, 1973), 134; David W. Bone, *Capstan Bars* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1932), 21-22.

⁴ Stan Hugill, *Songs of the Sea* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977), 20-22.

a bunting shanty of this type is "Paddy Doyle," which may have been one sailor's way of remembering a Liverpool boardinghouse master. The verse was extremely simple:

"Timme way ay-ay-ay high *ya!* / We'll pay Paddy Doyle for his *boots!*" On the word "*boots*" everyone working on the sail would yell and haul together to pull the sail up on the yard, where it would eventually be furled and stowed. Other verses followed with similar refrains, such as "We'll all throw muck at the *cook!*," or "We'll all drink whisky an' *gin!*" Generally, three calls or fewer would be enough to get the sail on the yard.⁵

"Short haul songs," often called "short drag songs" on board American vessels, contained longer calls and responses, with more chance for a melody and a narrative within the song. One example of this type gives a fairly accurate description of the life of Napoleon Bonaparte, called simply "Boney." Like the bunting shanties, these songs placed the haul at the end of a short verse, but unlike the bunting shanties, these lasted much longer, and were more likely to tell a story. While versions of "Boney" changed through the years, some of the most common verses included the following:

Boney was a warrior, Way-aye-yah!
A warrior, a terrior, John Franswor!

.....

Oh, Boney marched to Moscow, Way-aye-yah!
Across the Alps through ice an' snow, John Franswor.⁶

.....

⁵ Hugill, *Shanties*, 246-247.

⁶ Hugill, *Shanties*, 333-334. The verse has been slightly altered from the printed text to reflect the author's experiences when using this song during work on square-rigged vessels.

We licked him in Trafalgar's bay, *Way-aye-yah!*
Carried his main topm'st away, John Franswor!

'Twas on the Plains of Waterloo, *Way-aye-yah!*
He met the boy who put him through, John Franswor!

.....

Boney went a-cruisin', *Way-aye-yah!*
Aboard the Billy Ruffian, John Franswor!

Boney went to Saint Helen', *Way-aye-yah!*
An' he never came back agen, John Franswor!

On the last syllable of each line ("*yah!*" and "*-wor!*") everyone on the line would haul once. The result was much more efficient hauling, even with few sailors on the line.

"Boney" shows some ways that sailors expressed their knowledge of the world. While Napoleon did not travel *through* the Alps to get to Moscow, the winter weather that one might associate with the Alps certainly played a role in Napoleon's defeat in Russia. Sailors had little use for inland geography while at sea, and errors in this part of the story had little importance to them. The topics more familiar to sailors show more accuracy: sailors discuss in specific terms the metaphorical damage done to him at the Battle of Trafalgar, but are much less specific when discussing the damage done to him at Waterloo. The "Billy Ruffian" mentioned in the text refers to sailors' variation on the name of the *Bellerophon*, the English ship that carried Napoleon from France, just before he traveled to his final exile on Saint Helena Island.⁷

⁷ Ralph Korngold, *The Last Years of Napoleon: His Captivity on St. Helena* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1959), 34-36.

“Halliard shanties,” or “fore-sheet songs,” one of the best-known types of work songs, were used in longer projects requiring more pulls of lesser strength. Perhaps the most popular is “Whisky Johnny,” which had many different verses. The most popular extolled the virtues or warned of the vices of alcohol. Several well-known verses went as follows:

Whisky is the life of man, Whisky, Johnny!
Oooh! whisky from an old tin can. Whisky for me Johnny-oh!

Whisky here, whisky there, Whisky, Johnny!
Oooh! whisky almost everywhere. Whisky for me Johnny-oh!

Whisky made me sell me coat, Whisky, Johnny!
Whisky’s what keeps me afloat. Whisky for me Johnny-oh!

Whisky gave me a big, fat head, Whisky, Johnny!
But I’ll drink whisky when I’m dead. Whisky for me Johnny-oh!⁸

Two pulls were incorporated into each refrain of “Whisky, Johnny!” and “Whisky for me Johnny-oh!” Despite the multiple pulls, the amount of work to be done required that such songs have many, many verses. Given the duration of most jobs using these shanties, it was important that a shantyman be able to think quickly and, when necessary, come up with new verses to last to the end of the job.

For particularly long jobs at the capstan or the windlass, where sailors might be working shifts that lasted for several hours in order to pull up an anchor or pump out the bilge, shantymen used special songs that focused on a regular beat as sailors marched

⁸ Hugill, *Shanties*, 202-203. These lyrics have also been slightly altered to reflect the author’s experiences.

around a capstan or heaved away at a windlass. These shanties often had long choruses that all the sailors would sing, separated by many verses sung only by the shantyman. Examples of these shanties include “Old Moke Pickin’ on the Banjo” at the capstan and “The *Ebenezer*” at the windlass or the pumps.⁹

Shanty singer and historian Stan Hugill recalls singing “Rolling Home,” a famous homeward-bound shanty, with a crew of English and German sailors working together to make a ship fast to a Belfast pier, after a long passage from Australia. “All hands manned the anchor capstan,” he recalls. “I sang one verse of *Rolling Home* in English and all hands sang the chorus in English, then a German shantyman sang a German verse and all hands sang the chorus in Low German, and so on, alternating English and German verses and choruses until the long job was done. And then from the crowd of onlookers on the dockside a rousing cheer rang out.”¹⁰

A completely different type of song at sea, which has easily survived to the present day, is the “forebitter.” A forebitter is a song or ballad sung for pleasure, rather than to coordinate work. In this respect, it is wholly different from the shanty. Forebitters are especially important because of their narrative content and style. They were most often sung in the fo’c’sle and during times of rest. Their topics often reflected matters central to a sailor’s life, be it a love ashore, a particularly harrowing passage or battle, or a contemporary political critique.

⁹ Hugill, *Shanties*, 255, 353-355.

¹⁰ Hugill, *Shanties*, 150.

Unlike shanties, forebitters provided an opportunity for sailors to express more of their thoughts about life at sea, and in a broader context. Because they were not limited by the need for specific meter in the manner of shanties, forebitters often exhibited much more complex melodies and meter than did shanties. Also unlike shanties, forebitters did not need to return regularly to a chorus that coordinated hauling, or maintain a beat that allowed coordination of work around a capstan. Forebitters were often sung during the “dogwatch,” a two-hour watch after the evening meal that both allowed for a variation in the watch schedule and also became a popular time for singing and dancing among those not on watch.¹¹ Forebitters described events that sailors preferred to share with lubbers and that showed themselves in a better light than did most shanties.

Forebitters varied dramatically in style and intent. The following example comes from W. B. Whall, a captain who wrote down many of the songs he heard while at sea in the last half of the nineteenth century. He dated it to about 1860 or 1870, and believed that it had never before appeared in print. The given title, “Boston,” has nothing to do with the story of the song, other than being the crew’s point of departure.

From Boston harbour we set sail,
 When it was blowing a devil of a gale,
 With our ring-tail set all abaft the mizen peak,
 And our Rule Britannia ploughing up the deep.

Chor. With a big Bow-wow; Tow-row-row!
 Fal de ral de rid do day!

¹¹ N. A. M. Rodger, *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1986), 39; Roy Palmer, *Oxford Book of Sea Songs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), xxvi-xxvii.

Up comes the skipper from down below,
 And he looks aloft and he looks alow.
 And he looks alow and he looks aloft,
 And it's "Coil up your ropes, there, fore-and-aft."

Then down to his cabin he quickly crawls,
 And unto his steward he loudly bawls,
 "Go mix me a glass that will make me cough,
 For it's better weather here than it is up aloft."

We poor sailors standing on the deck,
 With the blasted rain all a-pouring down our necks;
 Not a drop of grog would he to us afford,
 But he damned our eyes at the very word.

Now the old beggar's dead and gone,
 Darn his eyes, he's left a son;
 And if to us he doesn't prove frank,
 We'll very soon make him walk the plank.

And one thing which we have to crave,
 Is that he may have a watery grave,
 So we'll heave him down into some dark hole,
 Where the sharks'll have his body and the devil have his soul.¹²

While it certainly has a regular rhythm—and very few shanties or forebitters do not have simple 4/4 rhythm—"Boston" does not fit as well to marching around the capstan as it does to singing on its own. It is also a relatively short song that clearly ends after the sixth verse; shanties needed to be as long as possible to last the length of a particular job. "Boston" celebrates the strength and ability of the "poor sailors standing on the deck," doing their work without complaining, while their captain goes below and asks for something that will make him cough, so he will not need to go back on deck.

¹² W. B. Whall, *Sea Songs and Shanties*. 4th ed. (Glasgow: James Brown & Son, 1920), 28-29.

Forebitters vary from shanties in the stories told, and in the manner in which the stories are told, but all types of songs at sea have some similarities. All have relatively simple musical constructions, and all have relatively simple meter and rhyming. Most complain of life at sea, though shanties tend to contain more complaints than forebitters. Forebitters appeared on shore, where landlubbers might hear them, and in that setting they more often celebrated the strength and ability of sailors than did the various types of shanties. Since shanties stayed on board ship, they tended to be more truthful about life at sea than forebitters. By studying these songs, and the differences between them, historians can gain a better understanding of sailors' views of their lives and their work at sea.

The earliest known words for a European sea song come from the *Complaynt of Scotland*, dating back to 1549.¹³ Dating sea songs, however, is surprisingly difficult, because few were written down at any time close to their first use. Several reasons for this exist; the most significant is probably literacy. Determining sailors' ability to read and write is difficult, but estimates range from one or two of the common sailors¹⁴ to perhaps as many as two-thirds of the crew before the mast.¹⁵ Even if sailors were able to write about their experiences, books and paper did not survive well in the conditions at sea, so preserving the written words of songs used at sea was difficult.

¹³ Proctor, *Music*, 102; Hugill, *Shanties*, 3; and Colcord, *Songs*, 27. Peter Kemp, ed., *Oxford Companion to Ships and the Sea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), s.v. "shanty," dates the shanty to 1450.

¹⁴ Knut Weibust, *Deep Sea Sailors: A Study in Maritime Ethnology* (Stockholm: n.p., 1969), 110.

¹⁵ Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo American Maritime World, 1700-1750* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 158, 307.

Historian Marcus Rediker asserts that “books, tales, and ballads all functioned as important means of communication, education, and entertainment” for men at sea. He presents statistics for rates of literacy among early-eighteenth-century sailors that are remarkably high, however. If the literacy level was any lower, then tales and ballads clearly played greater roles as conveyors of important information.¹⁶ Shanties, unlike ballads, were simply tools to be used as needed, and they had an even smaller chance of being preserved for posterity. Finally, shanties were rarely preserved because few people were particularly known for their singing abilities. Ships almost never specifically hired shantymen; a shantyman often developed as needed from among those on the crew.

Joanna Colcord, in the introduction to her collection of sea shanties, writes somewhat nostalgically that the ship masters she knew would never have thought of collecting shanties in printed form. Although shanties were crucial to the operation of the vessel, she believes that, for the masters, “the bare idea of compiling them in a book would have amused them. What, shanties—those old ribald songs?” they would opine. “They are merely the things we strike up at sea, hoisting topsails or getting the anchor. Some of them aren’t even decent. They belong to the sea, not to the land.”¹⁷

Despite the incantations of Colcord’s imaginary captains, shanties and sea ballads have long served as an important connection between sailors and non-sailors. Those with

¹⁶ Rediker, *Devil*, 158, 307. Rediker’s study group is relatively small, and his definition of literacy is simply the ability to sign one’s name. As he points out (158), the frequency of functional literacy was therefore probably much lower.

¹⁷ Colcord, *Songs*, 20.

little or no experience at sea could rarely, if ever, grasp what life at sea was like. The nomenclature in many songs bore no resemblance to any on shore, and the complexity of work at sea genuinely limited any understanding that might have been able to pass through the barrier of terminology. A square-rigged ship, for instance, had several hundred different lines coming to deck, and the sailor was required to know the name, use, and location of every one.¹⁸ Other aspects of life at sea, such as the work schedule of four hours on and four hours off, made it clear that life at sea was a different environment from that known to landlubbers.¹⁹

Song travels well, however, and once one learns a song one can share the information it contains with others with relatively little loss of detail. Through this effective and reliable method of communication, sailors could describe life at sea to those unfamiliar with it. By describing life at sea in a manner that reflected how sailors wanted to be viewed by others, seamen were able to define a history that may not have reflected their true situations but rather described their work in a manner they saw fit. Similarly, lubbers could use song to share their opinions of sailors and views on life at sea despite their lack of understanding of this lifestyle. The historical descriptions and narratives created by these two groups show how sailors wanted to be viewed, and how landmen wanted to view sailors.

¹⁸ See Rediker, *Devil*, 162-4, for further discussion of the importance of language to seamen.

¹⁹ For lack of a better term, the words "lubbers" and "landlubbers" will be used to describe those individuals not normally associated with life or work at sea.

Interaction between sailors and lubbers is difficult to study, and a determination of whether sailors intended to educate lubbers in a particular manner is probably impossible. A study of a number of songs commonly used at sea, however, shows that sailors recognized that those on shore had an interest in the songs the sailors sang and paid attention to the words they used. As will be seen, sailors varied the lyrics used in songs, and generally avoided the use of particularly harsh language when passengers were on board.

Despite barriers of literacy, some shanties were written down. Certainly many work songs of the sea were lost with the passing of the great age of sail, but a wide variety of individuals gathered many songs as soon as they recognized that the songs were in jeopardy of being lost. Many books and articles appeared around the turn of the century: obvious attempts at collecting these songs that were soon to be lost. Beyond collecting the words and less often the tunes to these songs, compilers of such works rarely analyzed the songs they had preserved. One compiler, who readily admitted that he “[did] not know a note of music,” viewed shanties as a theatrical tool: the sailor “saw his incredible labours lightened by a stirring note that coordinated the muscular power of his ship-fellows.”²⁰ Another compiler identified a complete orchestra at sea: “the songs of the sailor are sung to the accompaniment of the thrilling shrouds, the booming double bass of

²⁰ Bone, *Capstan Bars*, 17, 16.

the hollow topsails, and the multitudinous chorus of ocean.”²¹ Neither compiler, nor few others, discusses any value shanties hold beyond coordinating work for sailors at sea.

Some compilers did not have a first-hand knowledge of life at sea, and one should treat their transcriptions with care. Other authors spent years at sea, and later wrote down the words they had sung. A few authors described the songs they heard after spending several weeks on a particular voyage. Although sailors usually did not recognize the need to preserve these songs—with the notable exception of “singer, raconteur, [and] amateur anthologist”²² Stan Hugill—the songs were preserved, and a judicious study of a wide range of printed sources reveals specific ideas within sea songs and ballads.

²¹ Laura Alexandrine Smith, *The Music of the Waters* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1888), xix.

²² Stuart Frank, “A Remembrance,” in Hugill, *Shanties*, xix.

SYMBOLIC HISTORY AS A MEANS OF INTERPRETING SEA MUSIC

The differences between the views expressed in song and the written views of the conventional historian can help define "symbolic history."¹ Symbolic history is that history presented by individuals or groups that symbolizes how they view themselves or others. It is a form of folklore, in that much of it is grounded in the oral tradition rather than the written tradition. "Folklore" generally refers to the stories of the people, rather than of the historian, and songs of the sea clearly reflect the views of sailors. Folklore often changes such narratives, or they are designed to fit a particular point of view, but of course this phenomenon applies to written history, as well. Folklore is a crucial and often neglected part of history, and can and should be used to identify certain aspects of history that cannot be understood any other way.

Folklore provides points of view that may not otherwise be incorporated into representations of an era. These points of view may support or contradict other points of view, but when they are available they should be utilized in the best manner possible. In the case of sea shanties, these songs have rarely been studied to discover how they might provide more understanding regarding life at sea, but the insights they provide, as the words of those who rarely preserved their opinions elsewhere, can enrich the historical record and one's understanding of it. In the past several decades work that has explored

¹ The term "symbolic history" appears in Carl Lindahl, "It's Only Folklore...": Folklore and the Historian," *Louisiana History* 26 (Spring 1985): 154; but without a definition or specific remarks about the phrase. The phrase is not generally identified as a concept in folklore.

the meaning of folklore has experienced a resurgence, and historians have rediscovered its value.²

Most sea shanties were not written down until long after they had been composed, and the words may have gone through some changes over the course of decades or centuries. It is possible, however, that these changes were not significant. A simple comparison between one's ability to recite verbatim a work of prose versus a work of verse shows the ability of verse to retain its original form. Once verse has been composed and shared with others it can be difficult to change the word choice in a manner that will allow a continued use of the original meter of the verse. In song, the meter is much stronger and limits changes to a greater degree. In shanties and work songs, the rhythm possessed particular importance and in fact played a more important role in the song than did the words. With sailors learning songs from each other in ports around the world, a relatively standardized text developed for many songs.

In an analysis of a ballad first recorded in the early nineteenth century but describing a battle in Scotland in 1411, David Buchan shows that ballads "can be much nearer to the truth than is normally realized."³ Through an analysis of various printed versions of the ballad and a comparison with what is known of the battle through conventional historical methods, Buchan analyzes the historical value of this particular

² E. P. Thompson, "Folklore, Anthropology, and Social History," *Indiana Historical Review* 3 (1977): 250.

³ David D. Buchan, "History and Harlaw," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 5 (June 1968): 66.

ballad, and shows that songs relating to historical events or eras can serve the careful historian as significant sources of reliable information.

More recently, Alexander Fletcher has argued further for the validity of ballads in studies of early modern social history. "Ballads ... are one of the great neglected forms of evidence for early modern mentality," he states. "The ballad mongers wrote for the market, reflecting current and perennial issues about love and marriage, religion and morality, work and leisure: they tell us about the situations, practices and attitudes that absorbed people."⁴ Such reflections equally apply to individuals two centuries later; balladeers continued to publish simple works on broadsheets well in to the early nineteenth century.

In a study of ballads from the border area between Texas and Louisiana, Carl Lindahl attempts to determine the true meaning and value of the Cajun folksongs. "Cajun folksongs, while concerned on their most literal level with brokenhearted lovers, are also often statements of fear for broken families and concern for a threatened culture," he writes.⁵ Lindahl argues that one must consider what the songs do not include, and that these omissions are not a limitation in the study of the society. "Such 'distorted' material is extremely important," he states, "because it gives us an amazingly accurate picture of a

⁴ Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England, 1500-1800* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1995), xix-xx.

⁵ Lindahl, "'It's Only Folklore...'," 149.

group's selfview. What has been 'changed' or omitted is often more important than what remains factually intact."⁶

Lindahl challenges historians to determine what is missing or changed in folklore, a challenge that in many cases could and should be presented to traditional written history as well. Obviously, obtaining and understanding the knowledge of what is not written becomes more difficult as one moves away from the event or subject in question. Any study of a subject is significantly limited, however, by a lack of knowledge of the important missing information.

Lindahl's view of the true significance of a ballad, however, holds more value, and provides a useful tool for studying folklore. It is particularly useful in analyzing work that has developed as a single unit, such as a song, as opposed to open-ended forms of folklore, like oral reminiscences. In vocal music and lyrics of all levels, the "selfview" of the group is often clearly represented. As Lindahl states, important information obviously exists in the background, behind the written story. Finding the information, however, is difficult, and Lindahl suggests that this missing or distorted information provides an "amazingly accurate picture" of the group's image of itself. The contradiction in his argument is clear, however, and it shows that he has unfairly simplified the issue. While the historian can begin to see the group's selfview through the description of its symbolic history, a full, or even relatively comprehensive, understanding of that selfview is not likely to be possible. At sea, this also holds true.

⁶ Lindahl, "It's Only Folklore...," 151.

Marcus Rediker has ably described Anglo-American sailors as members of their own social group and class, distinctly separate from any other class in society. "Once seamen were initiated into the brotherhood of the deep," he writes, "maritime culture and community were expanded and sustained by a variety of activities—singing, dancing, telling tales, and drinking.... Probably the most important cultural form for creating bonds among men of the sea was song."⁷ The difficulty in bridging the gap between sailor and lubber, as previously mentioned, shows that both groups had broad leeway when describing the social class of sailors, sometimes with little regard for accuracy.

Rediker gives no attention to shanties as a valid means of learning about sailors and their lives, and he is certainly not alone in his dismissal of the subject. Most books discussing the USS *Constitution* or her officers, for example, do not mention music—not even the songs composed by members of the *Constitution's* crew describing the events they witnessed. Naval ballads, particularly when their authorship can be determined, should be taken as primary sources of information about their subject.

As Lindahl has shown, shanties and sea ballads can be useful. Shanties and ballads describe what life on board sailing vessels was like, and they provide valuable insights into how individuals in the seafaring classes dealt with the challenges in their lives. Sailors spoke and sang about topics that were important to them, and their words can speak volumes to us if we listen closely.

⁷ Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo American Maritime World, 1700-1750* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 189.

Several sources, for instance, show that sailors routinely changed their behavior when non-sailors were around. W. B. Whall compiled a collection of shanties and sea songs he heard while at sea. Sailing between 1861 and 1872, he heard songs from older sailors who began sailing around 1815, so he considered himself particularly authoritative on the subject. Whall asserted that shanties gathered in collections prior to his were inaccurate, primarily because the compilers were women, he argued, and a woman attempting to collect shanties "is bound to fail. First, sailors are shy with ladies. Secondly, few of these songs have words which a seaman would care to sing to a lady in cold blood. And, thirdly, very few sailors were shanty men." Whall explained more about foul language at sea:

Now, seamen who spent their time in cargo-carrying sailing-ships never heard a *decent* Shanty; the words which sailor John put to them when unrestrained were the veriest filth. But another state of things obtained in passenger and troopships; here sailor John was given to understand very forcibly that his words were to be decent or that he was not to shanty at all. (As a rule, when the passengers were landed and this prohibition was removed, the notorious "Hog Eye Man" at once made its appearance).⁸

Whall makes it clear that different songs were used at different times, dependent only on the presence or absence of non-sailors. Sailors represented themselves in different manners at different locations: they sang songs of "the veriest filth" while at sea, but sang more respectable ones in any situation where others might hear the song and take it as representative of the sailor.

⁸ W. B. Whall, *Ships, Sea Songs, and Shanties* (Glasgow: James Brown & Son, 1910), xii, xiii.

Stan Hugill devotes several pages to the topic. Although he was about two generations removed from Whall, he learned many songs from his father, and has long been considered the last true shantyman. He was certainly one of the best historians of the subject. In addition to quoting Whall, Hugill cites R. R. Terry, who argued that “the choruses—shouted out by the whole working party—would be heard all over the ship and even penetrate ashore if [the vessel] were in port. Hence, in not a single instance do the choruses of any shanty contain a coarse expression.”⁹ While Hugill disagrees with Terry’s argument, and provides an example of a shanty with vulgar language in its chorus, he does not go so far as to suggest that the “coarse” version was sung while in port. Again, he portrays sailors as having one view for themselves and one for the sea. The various arguments show that vulgar shanties did exist, although some chroniclers were led to believe that they did not.

Hugill concludes that “nearly every shanty had its dirty version—there were some exceptions—and two or more shanties had a dirty version only.”¹⁰ Hugill’s suggestion that almost all shanties had several versions fully supports the argument that sailors had songs they used when others were around, and songs they used when they were alone. Some observers and collectors understood that “coarse” shanties did not exist. Those who had not lived on the sea saw the sailors’ symbolic history; those who had, knew the truth.

⁹ Quoted in Stan Hugill, *Shanties from the Seven Seas* (Mystic, Connecticut: Mystic Seaport Museum, 1994; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), 34.

¹⁰ Hugill, *Shanties*, 34; see also Ed Cray, *The Erotic Muse: American Bawdy Songs*, 2nd ed., (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 64-71, 315-318.

As various authors have stated, sometimes between the lines, the shanty with vulgar language in the chorus was most likely not used while a vessel was in port or when it was sailing with passengers. Again the argument for a symbolic history holds value. In addition, one must remember that shanties were used only when necessary; once the vessel was docked or at anchor, sailors rarely had any reason to use shanties for any work. The songs were stowed when they were not needed.

Symbolic history may or may not reflect conventional written history, but it always serves as a valuable supplement to conventional history. Symbolic history is generally found in folklore, because that is where the history of the populace is preserved and presented. In the case of sailors, sea shanties and sea songs serve as excellent examples of their symbolic history. In work songs, sailors describe their exploits or their feelings about a particular topic. The work songs communicate these ideas and thoughts to other sailors; often they invoke terms and concepts unknown or unintelligible to landlubbers. In songs sung simply for pleasure, usually called forebitters, sailors take a different tack, often discussing topics with which non-sailors may be familiar, and presenting a view of themselves that does not necessarily reflect the view they share among their colleagues. Through the course of time, many sea songs have come ashore, and when they are studied carefully, with more attention to their intent and effect than to their melody and tempo, they can be valuable tools in understanding life at sea.

SONG ON BOARD MERCHANT SHIPS

A seaman's life has never been easy. The sailor is constantly battling nature, and he always knows that a relatively thin skin of wood (or, today, a thinner skin of iron, steel, or fiberglass; the concept remains the same) is the only thing separating Jack Tar from the depths of Davey Jones' locker. Before the age of steam, nature made most of the decisions regarding a vessel's direction, and nature did not look out for land or reefs that might sink the vessel. Life at sea was hard enough that most people knew well enough to stay away. Seamen faced—and met—death with alarming frequency in sailing ships.¹ Force, deception, and blatant seizure were common methods of getting men to sea; any industry that relied so heavily on such recruitment practices must have presented its practitioners with difficult labor conditions.²

The hard life of the sailor was a popular topic for those writing songs while at sea. Forebitters, the songs to be sung during times of rest, varied greatly in their views of life at sea, and several songs stand out. These songs, some of which worked their way into the contemporary popular music of the era, presented the sailors' views of life at sea, or at least those he was most interested in sharing with others.

¹ Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo American Maritime World, 1700-1750* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 92-93, 154.

² See Rediker, *Devil*; Stan Hugill, *Sailortown* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1967).

The English forebitter “Barney Buntline,” for instance, humorously describes the “safe” life of sailors at sea, as opposed to life on shore:

One night came on a hurricane, the sea wuz mountains rollin’,
When Barney Buntline chew’d his quid an’ said to Billy
Bowline,

“A strong nor-wester’s blowin, Bill, hark don’t ye hear it roar
now.”

Lord help ’em; ’ow I pities ’em unhappy folks on shore now.”

Chorus. With a tow, row, row, Right to me addy, Wi’ a tow,
row, row!

“An’ as for them what lives in towns, what dangers they all be in,
An’ now lay quakin’ in their beds for fear the roof should fall in;
While you an’ I, Bill, on the deck are comfortably lyin’.
My eyes! What tiles an’ chimney pots about their heads are
flyin’!”

“An’ as for them what’s out all day on business from their
houses,
Returnin’ home so late at night to cheer their babes an’
spouses,
Poor creatures how they envy us an’ wishes, I’ve a notion,
For our good luck in such a storm to be upon the ocean.”

“Both you and I have oftimes heard how men are killed an’
undone,
By overturn of carriages, by thieves, and fires of London,
We know what risks all landsmen run, from noblemen to tailors.
Then, Bill, let us thank Providence that you and I be sailors.”³

Despite its sarcasm and irony, this song allows the careful reader to begin to see with the eye of its author. These sailors see themselves as special individuals: they are braver, tougher, and stronger than their counterparts on land. Barney Buntline and Billy Bowline are sharing an experience of which landlubbers know nothing. By enduring this storm

³ Stan Hugill, *Songs of the Sea* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977), 139.

together—apparently a powerful one, if it was strong enough to inspire a song—they reinforce their sense of membership in a special and exclusive community, with a set of feelings and experiences unknown to the lubber.

At the same time, it seems clear that jealousy is playing an important role in the song. One expects that, were they actually given an opportunity of trading their spots “comfortably lyin’” on the hard, pitching, slippery, soaking wet deck with people “quakin’ in their beds” ashore, Barney and Billy would jump at the chance. Tiles and chimney pots may not be flying around their heads, but large, heavy blocks and tackles are, as are numerous other potentially lethal items. Billy and Barney would probably welcome an opportunity to “cheer their babes an’ spouses,” given half a chance. And of course they know that the dangers of a roof falling in, or of the carriages, thieves, and fires of London are negligible compared to the dangers of being blown off a yard while furling a frozen, sodden sail in the middle of a strong nor’wester.

“Barney Buntline” is a forebitter, a song sung for pleasure, rather than for work. In contrast is “Leave Her, Johnny, Leave Her,” a shanty used at the capstan or at the pumps. Stan Hugill states that it was most commonly sung at the end of a voyage, because it is so negative. One author states that “to sing it before the last day or so was almost tantamount to mutiny.”⁴ Many “unprintable” verses existed; all provide a contemporary view of a sailor’s true feelings about a particular voyage:

⁴ Frank T. Bullen, quoted in Stan Hugill, *Shanties from the Seven Seas* (Mystic, Connecticut: Mystic Seaport Museum, 1994; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), 216.

Oh, the times wuz hard, an' the wages low,
Chorus. Leave her, Johnny, leave her,
 But now once more a-shore we'll go,
Chorus. An' it's time for us to leave her.

Oh, I thought I heard the ol' Man say,
 Tomorrow ye will get your pay.

The work wuz hard an' the voyage wuz long,
 The sea wuz high an' the gale wuz strong.

The wind wuz foul an' the sea ran high,
 She shipped it green an' none went by.

The grub wuz bad an' the wages low,
 But now once more ashore we'll go.

Oh, our Old Man he don't set no sail,
 We'd be better off in a nice clean gaol.

We'd be better off in a nice clean gaol,
 With all night in an' plenty o' ale.⁵

Hugill lists over thirty “printable” verses. All are the words of sailors at the end of a long and difficult voyage, and they contrast well with those in “Barney Buntline.” The sailors in both songs want to get off their vessels, but in the first song they are putting up a good face in light of their situation. They sang the song while they were relaxing and they could have taken the lyrics ashore. In “Leave Her, Johnny,” however, the sailors know that, finally, freedom is not far away. To the sailor singing these songs, even life in jail appears preferable to life at the pumps. The uneducated sailor seems to agree with Dr. Johnson's famous quotations that “No man will be a sailor who has contrivance enough

⁵ Hugill, *Shanties*, 218.

to get himself into a jail; for being in a ship is being in a jail, with the chance of being drowned,” and “A man in jail has more room, better food, and commonly better company.”⁶ Men took up this song while working one of the long, difficult periods at the pumps, but rarely while ashore, or in the presence of landlubbers.

Like “Leave Her, Johnny,” “Rolling Home” was a homeward-bound song, reserved for the final leg of a voyage. Hugill describes it as “the most famous homeward-bound song of them all.”⁷ He writes that this song was a shanty, rather than a forebitter, although he states that some authors consider it a forebitter. The song had a specific purpose: English crews sang the song as they marched around the capstan, hauling up the ship’s anchor for the last time before sailing for England. It was a signal to other sailors that the ship was headed back to England and could carry letters and packages directly home. It is still used in such situations, despite its obvious superfluity in the age of mechanical power; Hugill writes that “[e]ven nowadays this tune is played by the ship’s band on foreign stations when a naval vessel is leaving for home at the end of a commission.”⁸

The words to “Rolling Home” make it clear that it was written by someone who knew specifics of the sea. The song was written either by a sailor or by poet Charles Mackay while at sea in 1858. Whether Mackay composed or transcribed the words, the

⁶ George B. Hill, ed., *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, rev. ed. L. F. Powell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934), I:348.

⁷ Hugill, *Shanties*, 145.

⁸ Hugill, *Shanties*, 145-146.

intent is clear: this song is for sailors. The song does not simply represent or symbolize sailors, as other songs do. The verses describe the experience at sea in words and images any sailor would recognize:

Call all hands to man the capstan, See the cable flaked down
clear,
Heave away, an' with a will, boys, For ol' England we will
steer.

Chorus. Rollin' home—rollin' home—, Rollin' home across
the sea,
Rollin' home to dear old England, Rollin' home, fair land, to
thee.

Let us all heave with a will boys, Soon our cable we will trip,
An' across the briny ocean, We will steer our gallant ship.

Man the bars with perfect will, boys, Let all hands that can
clap on;
And while we heave round the capstan, We will sing that well-
known song.

.....
Up aloft amidst the rigging, Blows the wild and rushin' gale,
Strainin' every spar and backstay, Stretchin' stitch in every sail.

Eighteen months away from England, Now a hundred days or
more,
On salt-horse and cracker-hash, boys, Boston beans that made
us sore.⁹

Other verses, many added since the song's initial composition, also reflect the anonymous composers' knowledge of the sea. This song, which is a work song rather

⁹ Hugill, *Shanties*, 146-147.

than a celebratory ballad, reflects the seaman's desire to return home and indicates his knowledge of life at sea.

The song describes specific actions that a lubber would not recognize, such as tripping the anchor from the seabed and flaking out the anchor cable as it is hauled in. It describes actions within the ship and identifies items on board, such as spars and backstays, that have no equivalent on shore. When the shantyman calls the men to "man the bars with perfect will, boys," they all know that he is referring to the as-yet-unnamed capstan bars, whereas a lubber might think he is referring to a final trip to the pubs on shore. Seamen also know what is required of them when they do man those bars, and how it will get them home sooner.

The sailors hearing and singing the song know full well what to expect from one hundred days or more of salt-horse, cracker-hash, and "Boston beans that made us sore." They know, perhaps unlike the individual ashore, that salt-horse is beef, although sailors often claimed it could be any meat. The Boston beans have made them sore before, and will do so again. Although food on shore might have been similarly as bad as food at sea, sailors tended to believe, as this shanty shows, that their foodstuffs were much worse than those on shore.

At the beginning of a voyage, food could be quite good, and the ships' stores provided sufficient quantity and quality to sustain many a sailor. As voyages continued, however, food often turned bad, encouraging comments such as those in "Rolling Home." William Abbe, a Harvard-educated whaleman who went to sea to improve his health,

found that the food quickly turned terrible. The bread was "sour & wormy," and the molasses used to sweeten it was "2-3 inches deep in cockroaches." Sailors could not keep down the water they were served.¹⁰ While those on shore might have enjoyed the food served in the first month at sea, landlubbers would never choose to eat what was served in the later months during a voyage around Cape Horn or seeking whales. Such terms and concepts contained within the text indicate the song's ownership in the sailor's community.

Food, as much as any subject, shows the value of shanties for gaining a greater understanding of the life of a sailor. In N. A. M. Rodger's standard history of the Georgian Navy, *The Wooden World*, he writes that, "by the standards of the poor[,] naval food was good and plentiful.... The seaman who had a hot dinner daily, with beef and beer, bread and cheese, and sometimes vegetables and fruit, was eating well by his standards, and it seems he knew it, for in an age when seamen could and did complain freely, it is remarkably difficult to find them grumbling about the food (cheese perhaps excepted)."¹¹ Rodger ignores diaries, songs, and numerous other sources of complaint about food, such as Abbe's previously quoted comments, which he expressed a full hundred years after the era of Rodger's book. One doubts that food quality and the technology to store it diminished in the century before Abbe's observations.

¹⁰ Quoted in Margaret S. Creighton, *Rites and Passages: The Experience of American Whaling, 1830-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 125.

¹¹ N. A. M. Rodger, *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1986), 86.

Rodger asserts that, with the exception of stockfish, no naval foodstores in the middle of the eighteenth century had a spoilage rate of more than 1%, and that food in the Georgian navy was probably better than its counterpart in the merchant service.¹² But certainly enough grumbling appears in diaries to question these statistics, and diaries reflect only the thoughts of a few of the rare literate sailors. Shanties provide an insight into the thoughts of the numerous functionally illiterate and otherwise unheard sailors.

Diaries such as Abbe's show historians the fallacy of Rodger's views on food, for example, but they only speak for those who were literate or for those whose words survived. Sea shanties provide a valuable source for the memory of those who did not or could not record their thoughts, or those whose writings have been lost. Shanties provide a voice to those who otherwise would not be heard, as the composition of song does not require an ability to write.

Whale ships were a popular place for music at sea, as the nature of whaling made these ships an ideal place for the growth of sea music. Whaling ships often carried crews much larger than were required to work the vessel, because each relatively small ship had to man five or six fully equipped whale boats of six to seven men each. As a result, whaling ships probably did not use many hauling shanties, because they were not needed to coordinate or organize the work.¹³ Occasionally, the difficult work of cutting up a whale and hauling its blubber aboard while some whale boats were still hunting probably

¹² Rodger, *Wooden World*, 84-85, 116-117.

¹³ Hugill, *Songs*, 126. Clifford W. Ashley, *The Yankee Whaler*, 2nd ed. (Garden City, New York: Halcyon House, 1942), ix.

required the use of a hauling shanty. While hauling shanties were relatively rare, whale ships provided an excellent spot for the development of forebitters. The ships generally travelled to a specific area, and then slowly wandered around, awaiting whales. Even while sailing to the whaling grounds, sail handling was often minimal, since speed was not crucial on a four or five year voyage. This type of travel gave crews extensive time to sing songs for pleasure, and collections of sea songs are filled with those about life on whale ships.

Because of the diminished use of hauling shanties on board whalers, whalemens had fewer occasions to express their opinions in song. Shanties provided seamen with their primary outlet for expression at sea, but whaling ships had limited use for them, and, as a result, offered limited opportunity for seamen to say their piece while working. In comparison with forebitters on board other merchant ships, the collection of whaling forebitters shows a marked turn toward negative songs. Songs of whaling voyages express the intensely difficult lives these men led, in conditions of frigid cold, terrible food, the horrid stench of whale blubber, and occasional moments of extreme danger while trying to kill a whale.¹⁴ These forebitters describe a range of pessimism and discouragement that makes one wonder why anyone would ever go whaling. Perhaps such negative songs were meant as implicit warnings about the dangers of whaling. Experienced whalers might have sung these forebitters as they came ashore in port-side

¹⁴ Lance E. Davis, Robert E. Gallman, and Karin Gleiter, *In Pursuit of Leviathan: Technology, Institutions, Productivity, and Profits in American Whaling, 1816-1906* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 47-50; Briton Cooper Busch, "Whaling Will Never Do for Me": *The American Whaleman in the Nineteenth Century* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 12-14, ch. 6, *passim*.

bars and boarding houses, with the intent of either scaring or warning young would-be sailors away from the profession.

One forebitter that presents life on the whaling grounds is "Rolling Down to Old Maui," which begins by describing the difficult life of a whaler, but ends on a somewhat more positive note, as the sailors look forward to their experiences on shore. For many years Maui was the primary provisioning and entertainment port for the Pacific whaling fleet, and, after months at sea in the icy northern Sea of Okhotsk, a sailor could imagine little better than arriving in Maui.

Tis a rough, tough life of toil and strife, we whalemen undergo,
 We don't give a damn when the gale is done, how hard the
 winds do blow,
 We're homeward bound, 'tis a damn fine sound, with a good
 ship taut and free,
 We don't give a damn when we drink our rum with the girls of
 old Mau-ee.

Chor: Rolling down to old Mauee, me boys,
 Rolling down to old Mauee,
 We're homeward bound from the Arctic ground,
 Rolling down to old Mauee.

Once more we sail with a northerly gale through the ice and
 sleet an' rain,
 And them coconut fronds in them tropic lands, oh, we soon
 shall see again,
 Six hellish months have passed away, in the cold Kamchatka
 Sea,
 But now we're bound from the Arctic ground, rolling down to
 old Maui!

We'll heave our lead where old Diamond Head looms up on ol'
 Wahoo,
 Our masts and yards are sheathed in ice, and our decks are hid
 from view,

The horrid ice of the sea-cut tiles that deck the Arctic Sea,
 Are miles behind in the frozen wind since we sailed for old
 Maui.

How soft the breeze of the tropic seas now the ice is far astern,
 And them native maids in them tropic glades are awaiting our
 return,
 An' their big brown eyes even now look out, hoping some fine
 day to see,
 Our baggy sails running 'fore the gales, rolling down to old
 Maui.

An' now we sail with a favorable gale toward our island home,
 Our mainyard sprung, all whaling done, an' we ain't got far to
 roam;
 Our stuns'l booms are carried away, what care we for that sound?
 A livin' gale is arter [sic] us, thank God we're homeward bound.

An' now we're anchored in the Bay with the Kanakas all around,
 With chants and soft alohaoes they greet us homeward bound;
 An' now ashore we'll have great fun, we'll paint them beaches
 red,
 Awakin in the arms of an island maid, with a big, fat, achin
 head.¹⁵

The sailors singing this song start by describing their difficult life, but spend most of the rest of the song thinking about and looking forward to their arrival in Maui. Interestingly, the story develops through the song: it does not tell a story in the past, but rather explains the events as they occur. In the second verse, after six months up north, the sailors are “bound from the Arctic ground, rolling down to old Maui.” In the third verse, the masts and yards are still covered in ice, but by the fourth verse the ice is past and the sailors can feel the “soft breeze of the tropic seas.” By the final verse the sailors are anchored in the

¹⁵ Hugill, *Songs*, 120-121.

bay at Lahaina, and though they haven't gotten there yet, they know that by tomorrow morning they'll be "awakin' in the arms of an island maid, with a big, fat, achin' head." The descriptions of life at sea that sailors express through this song suggest the difficulties associated with such work. In comparison with other whale ship forebitters, however, they only begin to touch on the challenges of whaling life.

Other songs offer less positive—or perhaps more realistic—visions of what to expect during a voyage. "Blow Ye Winds," copied from a logbook in the New Bedford Public Library, describes some of the challenges facing men headed toward the whaling grounds. The composer of this song also dreads life at sea, and specifically refers to the lies told by boarding and whaling masters.

'Tis advertised in Boston, New York and Buffalo,
Five hundred brave Americans, awhaling for to go.

Chor. Blow, ye winds in the morning, And blow ye winds,
high-o!
Clear away your running gear, And blow, ye winds, high-o!

They tell you of the clipper-ships a-going in and out,
And say you'll take five hundred sperm before you're six
months out.

It's now we're out to sea, my boys, the wind comes on to blow;
One half the watch is sick on deck, the other half below.

But as for provisions, we don't get half enough;
A little piece of stinking beef and a blamed small bag of duff.

Now comes that damned old compass, it will grieve your heart
full sore.
For theirs is two-and-thirty points and we have forty-four.

Next comes the running rigging, which you're all supposed to
 know;
 'Tis "Lay aloft, you son-of-a-gun, or overboard you go!"

The cooper's at the vise-bench, a-making iron poles,
 And the mate's upon the main hatch a-cursing all our souls.

The Skipper's on the quarter-deck a-squinting at the sails,
 When up aloft the lookout sights a school of whales.

"Now clear away the boats, my boys, and after him we'll
 travel,
 But if you get too near his fluke, he'll kick you to the devil!"

.....

But now that our old ship is full and we don't give a damn,
 We'll bend on all our stu'nsails and sail for Yankee land.

When we get home, our ship made fast, and we get through our
 sailing,
 A winding glass around we'll pass and damn this blubber
 whaling!¹⁶

This song may contain an inside joke, lost in time, that could suggest terminology specific to sailors. In the 1924 and 1938 editions of Joanna Colcord's collection of songs, she writes that "no modern whaleman has been able to say what is meant by the reference to forty-four points in the whaler's compass."¹⁷ The whaling bark *Wanderer* set out in 1924 on the last whaling voyage by a square rigger;¹⁸ though her cruise ended the next day on the rocks of Cuttyhunk Island outside New Bedford, whalemen were around when

¹⁶ Joanna C. Colcord, *Songs of American Sailormen* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1938), 191-2.

¹⁷ Colcord, *Songs*, 190-1. Joanna C. Colcord, *Roll and Go: Songs of American Sailormen* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1924), 103.

¹⁸ Ashley, *Yankee Whaler*, 117.

Colcord transcribed the verses to "Blow Ye Winds." Nevertheless, she was unable to find an answer; the challenge of fitting eleven points into 90 degrees of the compass shows why this riddle remains "one of the great mysteries of the shantyman."¹⁹

Like "Rolling Down to Old Maui," this song appears to contain warnings for those considering life at sea. The song mentions, in the second stanza, clipper ships going in and out, as if whalers would be working on these majestic ships rather than the small, bulky, stinking factory ships where they were actually to be employed. The song also enumerates some of the dangers of life at sea, perhaps again in an attempt to scare away those considering a job on a whale ship.

Colcord notes that "there were many versions of 'Blow Ye Winds,' some too scandalous to print," and also reprints one "probably of shore composition," which tells the story of a ship that has anchored near a coral reef. A merman appears at the bow of the ship, quite upset because the ship's anchor is blocking the only door to his house, and his wife and four children are trapped inside.²⁰

In "The Whale," life becomes still more tenuous for the whaleman, as the Skipper's warning about whales in "Blow Ye Winds," that "if you get too near his fluke, he'll kick you to the devil!" comes true for some sailors. This song, sometimes titled "The Greenland Whale Fishery," relates the fate of more than just a few whalemen, who

¹⁹ "Stormy Weather" (*alias*) <stormy@stormy.ca>, "Re: 32 vs. 44 points on a whaler's compass." Marine History Information Exchange Group <MARHST-L@POST.QUEENSU.CA>. 28 October 1998. Message text available at <<http://post.queensu.ca/cgi-bin/listserv/wq?A2=ind9810&L=marhst-l&F=&S=&P=144189>>.

²⁰ Colcord, *Songs*, 193.

were put to the test in the small open boats from which they launched harpoons, often literally beached on the backs of enormous sperm whales. This version, recorded by a sailor with a background in music, takes place itself at the end of the eighteenth century:

O, 'twas in the year of ninety-four,
 And of June the second day,
 That our gallant ship her anchor weighed,
 And from Stromness bore away—brave boys!
 And from Stromness bore away!

.....

And when we came to far Greenland,
 And to Greenland cold we came,
 Where there's ice, and there's snow, and the whalefishes blow,
 We found all open sea—brave boys,
 We found all open sea.

.....

Now the boats were launched and the men a-board,
 With the whalefish full in view;
 Resolv-ed were the whole boats' crews
 To steer where the whalefishes blew—brave boys,
 To steer where the whalefishes blew.

And when we reached that whale, my boys,
 He lashed out with his tail,
 And we lost a boat, and seven good men,
 And we never caught that whale—brave boys,
 And we never caught that whale.

Bad news, bad news, to our captain came,
 That grieved him very sore,
 But when he found that his cabin-boy was gone,
 Why it grieved him ten times more—brave boys,
 Why it grieved him ten times more.

O, Greenland is an awful place,
 Where the daylight's seldom seen,

Where there's ice, and there's snow, and the whalefishes blow,
Then adieu to cold Greenland—brave boys,
Then adieu to cold Greenland.²¹

The end of life is not something to be trifled with, and often it was far too common, as the song attests. In this version the captain is crushed by the loss of his cabin boy; the texts of other versions force one to wonder if it is the trivial loss of his servant that upsets the captain so much, or if it is the loss of someone much closer to him.

Like most shanties and forebitters, "The Whale" has evolved through a variety of textual incarnations. This is the earliest extant version known, though some versions date from 1801 to 1901.²² Although verses might change from version to version, the story lines remain the same, and the captain grieves the loss of certain individual sailors, or the loss of the whale, more than he mourns the loss of seven admittedly brave sailors.

Life was obviously as difficult for whalers in the North Atlantic, near Greenland, as it was for those headed around Cape Horn to the Pacific, north of Maui. The theme of loss appears often in these songs, and many others sing of the dangers and tribulations of life at sea. In the mournful song, "Wings of a Goney," the sailors lament the challenges of life at sea, and end on a note that once again warns future would-be whalers of the probable outcome of their trip. If they were not killed on the voyage, common sailors on board whalers could expect to find that, after several years of life at sea, their earnings had been completely eaten up by purchases of supplies or tobacco from the ship's slop

²¹ W. B. Whall, *Sea Songs and Shanties*. 4th ed. (Glasgow: James Brown & Son, 1920), 69-71.

²² Roy Palmer, *Oxford Book of Sea Songs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 162.

chest, which charged usurious interest against the sailors' wages. Some sailors came back to discover that after a four or five year voyage they actually owed the ship money.²³

Occasionally, they were forced to sign back on board to pay off their debts.

Oh, if I had the wings of a Goney, my boys,
I would spread 'em and fly home,
I would leave old Greenland's icy grounds,
For the right whale here is none.

The weather's rough and the winds do blow,
There's little comfort here.
Oh, I'd rather be snug in a New Bedford pub
A-drinkin' of strong beer.

Now a man must be mad or be wantin' money bad
For to venture catching whales.
For he might be drowned when the fish turns around
Or his head smashed in with its tail.

The work sounds grand to the young green hand,
And his heart is high when he goes.
But in a very short burst he would rather hear a curse,
Than the cry of "There she blows!"

Now it's "Up on deck, now, for gods sake,
Move briskly if you can."
And he stumbles on the deck so dizzy and so sick,
For his life he don't give a damn.

High o'er his head the wide fluke spreads,
And the mate gives the whale the iron.
And soon the blood, in a purple flood,
From his spout all comes a-flying.

These trials we bear for nigh on four years
Till our flying jib points for home.
We're supposed for our toil, to get a bonus on the oil,

²³ Briton Cooper Busch, *"Whaling Will Never Do for Me": The American Whaleman in the Nineteenth Century* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 9.

And an equal share of the bone.

We go to the agent to settle for the trip.
 And there we find cause to repent.
 For we've slaved away four long years of our lives,
 And we've earned not one red cent.²⁴

Like "The Whale," this song is based on experiences in the Greenland whaling industry, and like the earlier song, it relates both the thoughts of a greenhand and a veteran sailor, who knows better the life at sea. As with other forebitters by whalers, "Wings of a Goney" might have been a warning to young sailors to stay away from the whalers: although advertisements mentioned in "The Whale" promise that "you'll take five hundred sperm before you're six months out," this song might more closely approach the truth. In a theme present in other forebitters, the narrator wishes he might have wings, in this case the wings of a Goney bird, in order to leave his ship and get home.

Whaling ships, like other merchant ships, had songs specific to their work environment. Unlike other merchant vessels, however, most forebitters sung on whalers seem to have been quite negative in their depiction of life at sea. Most merchant ships, short-handed to begin with, required hauling shanties to get the most out of the few men on board. As they sang songs to coordinate their work, sailors often developed lyrics that expressed negative feelings toward their captains, mates, and life at sea in general. In forebitters, however, they often described themselves in words that suggested they

²⁴ Forebitter, *Unmooring* (Mystic, Connecticut: Mystic Seaport Museum, 1995), "Wings of a Goney." Sound recording. Liner notes indicate that the ballad has also been recorded with the title "The Weary Whaling Grounds," with some slight variations in wording.

enjoyed their lives at sea, and much preferred them to life on land. For whalers, however, this was rarely the case: life on a whaling ship was so difficult that forebitters, sung on board because crew almost never had opportunities to leave the ship, were much more negative in their portrayal of life at sea.

SONG ABOUT AND ON BOARD ANGLO-AMERICAN NAVAL VESSELS

Although shanties were rarely used on board Anglo-American naval vessels,¹ ballads shared the exploits of a nation's navy with its respective reading public. The large number of sailors and marines provided ample hands to haul on a line, while in merchant vessels crews were smaller, and the coordination of the shanty was necessary in order to get the job done. Shanties, after all, were tools, and were not used when they were not needed.

Ballads, however, were a popular form of expression for poets and publicists ashore. Some sailors also described their exploits in verse, but ballads were primarily the work of landlubbers. They expressed a form of symbolic history similar to that which appeared in forebitters, though they differed in some respects. Like forebitters, they were designed to be sung on land, but they rarely used nautical terminology or contained references to shipboard items. While the events they described might have occurred at sea, ballads often had little maritime content. Many ballads were written quickly and for immediate publication, while forebitters were rarely published and could develop over the length of a sailor's voyage.

Ballads were relatively easy to write, and patriotic ones could earn large sums for their composers. Unlike forebitters, which were generally written and sung by and for sailors, ballads were almost always meant for the general public. Few were intended to

¹ Laura Alexandrine Smith, *The Music of the Waters* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1888), 5.

last beyond the moment; the lines “were merely intended to convey to the people the news of the day, or to represent what the people felt at the moment.”² As such, they offer an excellent opportunity for historians to learn something about what interested people when the ballads were printed. A comparison with academic and popular histories written in later years shows what parts of history were particularly likely to be glorified and what parts ignored.

Most ballads were written by individuals with little knowledge of the sea, sailing, or its terminology. In 1805 an individual proposed that the poet Walter Scott “compose a poem in the nature of the old minstrelsy, and make our gallant Nelson the subject of it. He would indeed weave into it, by episode and digression, all the naval achievements of this and the last war, and make it not only the most interesting, but if set to appropriate airs adapted to common capacity, the most useful incentive to national ardour.”³ Such was the power that many ballads carried. Well-written or not, many achieved levels of popularity that did boost the “national ardour.”

Because of his lack of knowledge about the sea, Scott promptly refused to help write such an epic work. Unlike many contemporary composers, Scott recognized the importance of accurate terminology when discussing naval operations. When replying to the invitation, Scott wrote that

my total and absolute ignorance of everything of and
belonging to the sea would lay me under the necessity of

² C. H. Firth, *Naval Songs and Ballads* ([London]: Navy Records Society, 1908), [vii].

³ Charles Napier Robinson, *The British Tar in Fact and Fiction* (London: Harper and Brothers, 1909; reprint ed., Detroit, Michigan: Singing Tree Press, 1968), 402.

either generalising my descriptions so much as to render them absolutely tame, or of substituting some fantastic and, very probably, erroneous whims of my own for the natural touches of reality which ought to enliven and authenticate the poem.⁴

Would that more composers of nautical verse were so discriminating! While Scott felt he did not have the necessary background to write such works, many others felt that despite their lack of first-hand knowledge, they were qualified to write nautical verse. The result is that most naval ballads have little nautical accuracy. Few, if any, are known for their ideas or introspection, and the lack of nautical accuracy removes even more credence in the eyes of some. But this is the value of these works, as they present ideas that are, in many ways, in direct opposition to the standard histories.

Regarding a collection of songs and ballads from the War of 1812, Gardner Allen declares that “the songs are nearly all anonymous, and few will deny, after reading them, that oblivion is a kinder fate for most of the writers than would be the reputation of their authorship.”⁵ Nevertheless, they are valuable. Despite their questionable artistic qualities, these ballads played an important role in defining the emotions of the public. These ballads provide a view into the lives and opinions of people contemporary with the event.

“Heart of Oak,” considered “the greatest of all sea-songs” by one social maritime historian,⁶ has long outlived the era of its composition. First sung in 1759, it

⁴ Robinson, *British Tar*, 403.

⁵ Gardner W. Allen, “Naval Songs and Ballads,” *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* n.s. 35 (1925), 65.

⁶ Peter Kemp, *The British Sailor: A Social History of the Lower Deck* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1970), 132.

commemorated three victories of the Royal Navy in that year, and eventually became the “semi-official”⁷ march of the Navy, and remains so to the present day. The verses to “Heart of Oak” make clear its appeal to British sailors who represented themselves as being as strong and sturdy as the characters in the verse:

Come cheer up, my lads, 'tis to glory we steer,
To add something new to this wonderful year:
To honour we call you, not press you like slaves,
For who are so free as we sons of the waves?

Chorus. Hearts of oak are our ships, Hearts of oak are our
men,
We always stand ready, Steady, boys, steady,
We'll fight and we'll conquer again and again.

We ne'er see our foes but we wish them to stay;
They never see us but they wish us away:
If they run, why we follow, and run them on shore.
For if they won't fight us, we cannot do more.

They swear they'll invade us, these terrible foes,
They'll frighten our women, and children and beaux;
But should their flat-bottoms in darkness get o'er,
Still Britons they'll find to receive them on shore.

We'll still make them run and we'll still make them sweat,
In spite of the Devil and Brussels Gazette.
Then cheer up, my lads, with one voice let us sing,
Our soldiers, our sailors, our statesmen, and King.⁸

The strength and fortitude of these sailors, as they see themselves, comes through clearly in this work. The romantic image of the sailor, free like “sons of the waves,” is undeniable. Through the development of a symbolic history that describes them as they

⁷ Kemp, *British Sailor*, 132.

⁸ Firth, *Naval Songs*, 220.

want to be seen, these navy men present a positive image they want to develop and cultivate on land. When one considers the role given to these sailors, namely as protectors of the British nation, it is no wonder the words are still considered an anthem of the Royal Navy.

The last line also shows the relative position of various groups, as viewed by the sailor. The sailor sees himself as above the soldier; undoubtedly if the composer initially placed the soldiers closer to the king than the sailors, the latter would have reversed them quickly. This song was written by David Garrick, the English actor, manager, and dramatist, rather than by a sailor, and the lack of any mention of the use or handling of a vessel is obvious. The importance laid upon this song, even to sailors despite its authorship, is also clear when one notes the many other songs composed to be sung to the original tune.⁹

Like the British, Americans had songs that celebrated their naval victories at sea, and again these served to represent the successes and strengths of the American sailor to the American landlubber. American successes, both before and during the War of 1812, were nothing short of remarkable, and these successes are perhaps best exemplified by the USS *Constitution*, the nation's oldest commissioned naval vessel, and in many ways the flagship of the American historic fleet. The *Constitution* was one of six original warships Congress authorized at the end of the eighteenth century, as the federal government recognized the need to protect its merchant fleet from various depredations

⁹ See Firth, *Naval Songs*, 304; David Proctor, *Music of the Sea* (London: HMSO, 1992), 98.

off the North American coast and at various points in Europe, particularly in the area roamed by the Barbary Pirates. Builders in Boston rushed to make the *Constitution* the first of the six vessels to launch, but the *United States*, a 44-gun frigate, was launched June 10, 1797, in Philadelphia, and the smaller 36-gun frigate *Constellation* was launched in Baltimore on September 7. When Boston finally got its turn a dozen days later, the *Constitution* was not ready. The story of the ship's difficult voyage down its ways is well-known; suffice it to say that the *Constitution* did not make it to the water on the nineteenth or on the twentieth, and in fact was not launched until the next sufficiently high tide, a month later.

Balladeers wrote a song about these events, as they did about many episodes in the life of the *Constitution*. The meanings of much of the text of these ballads now seems hidden. Some of the subjects are obscured among words now misunderstood due to the passage of time, but other points are clear. "On the Launching of the Frigate *Constitution*," originally from the poems of Philip Freneau, describes not only some facts surrounding this event, but also the reactions of some of those opposed to the building of these vessels. The fourth stanza presents the reactions of these people:

Each anti-federal, with a smile
Observed the yet unfloating pile
As if he meant to say,
Builder, no doubt, you know your trade,
A constitution you have made
But should her ways have better laid.¹⁰

¹⁰ Robert W. Neeser, ed., *American Naval Songs & Ballads* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1938), 53-54.

A ballad such as this relates many of the feelings of individuals in that era, and through careful study coupled with a thorough understanding of the era, these words can tell the researcher much about life at the time of publication.

Having had experience as a sailor himself, Freneau brought remarkable accuracy of nautical terminology to his poetic works. While this ballad does not display his use of technical nomenclature, it does, unlike a number of other works to be presented, accurately describe the events. The lack of idiomatic terminology indicates that perhaps this work was written to be sold to the public, many of whom—particularly the anti-federalists opposed to a working navy—knew little or nothing of naval terminology, and may have been turned off from buying a broadside of this work, were it filled with naval terminology.

Another ballad totally devoid of nautical terminology is an effusive patriotic piece entitled “The Siege of Tripoli.”¹¹ The ballad recollects one of the *Constitution*’s earliest campaigns, that of the siege of Tripoli in August and September of 1804, under the command of Commodore Edward Preble.¹² This song serves as an excellent example of the use of these ballads: the song celebrates the “bright genius victory” of the Siege of Tripoli and eight times declares “Huzza, huzza, huzza, huzza, huzza boys.” The ballad celebrates the command of then-Lieutenant Stephen Decatur, who led a division of

¹¹ Neeser, *American Naval Songs*, 67-68.

¹² Tyrone G. Martin, *A Most Fortunate Ship: A Narrative History of “Old Ironsides,”* rev. ed. (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1997), ch. 6 *passim*.

gunboats during one part of the siege, rather than the *Constitution's* captain, Commodore Preble. "Decatur's, brave Decatur's name, remembered be with joy," the song exclaims.

The ballad does not refer to any specific action from the siege, preferring to make broad generalizations about how "Haughty and proud the tawny sons of Tripoli, / Had long been a pest to our independent sailing." It certainly does not refer to the numerous days and nights of unsuccessful action or to the disaster of the *Intrepid*, an "infernal"—basically a gigantic floating bomb—designed to finally defeat the city of Tripoli. When the *Intrepid* exploded far too early, the city sustained no damage at all, and although the bodies of the thirteen Americans on board were eventually found, none could be positively identified.¹³ The ballad uses broad, non-specific terms to suggest and celebrate a great victory. In fact, the siege was a failure: the coming of the stormy season forced Preble and the *Constitution* to leave Tripoli without securing the release of those American sailors taken captive from the *Philadelphia* ten months earlier.

When the War of 1812 broke out, with many Americans opposed to it, the young government needed support in its belief that its actions were appropriate. While Britain was generally more successful than America at sea, several spectacular successes showed a nation that its young navy could defeat the greatest naval power afloat. The USS *Constitution* played a major role in the war, and naval ballads helped the nation celebrate several decisive naval victories.

¹³ Martin, *Most Fortunate*, 102-114.

“The *Constitution* and the *Guerrière*” describes the famous battle off the coast of Nova Scotia between the *Constitution*, Captain Isaac Hull, and the *Guerrière*, Captain James Dacres, on August 19, 1812. The success of the American frigate convinced the American people that its navy was strong enough to match the best the British had to offer. This long ballad describes the American success and suggests that the British were not as powerful as they appeared:

It oft times has been told, That the British seamen bold
 Could flog the tars of France so neat and handy, oh!
 But they never found their match, Till the Yankees did them
 catch,
 Oh, the Yankee boys for fighting are the dandy, oh!

.....

The first broadside we poured, Carried her mainmast by the
 board,
 Which made this lofty frigate look abandon'd, oh!
 Then Dacres shook his head, And to his officers said,
 “Lord! I didn’t think those Yankees were so handy,” oh!

Our second told so well, That their fore and mizzen fell,
 Which dous’d the royal ensign neat and handy, oh!
 “By George!” says he, “we’re done,” And they fired a lee gun,
 While the Yankees struck up Yankee doodle dandy, oh!

Then Dacres came on board, To deliver up his sword,
 Tho’ loth was he to part with it, it was so handy, oh!
 “Oh! keep your sword,” says Hull, “For it only makes you dull,
 Cheer up, and let us have a little brandy, oh!”

Now, fill your glasses full, And we’ll drink to Captain Hull,
 And so merrily we’ll push about the brandy, oh!
 John Bull may toast his fill, But let the world say what they
 will,

The Yankee boys for fighting are the dandy, oh!¹⁴

One can almost see, in the last two lines, the composer thinking of the view of British sailors in songs such as “Heart of Oak,” and laughing as he prepares to demolish that historical vision. Some of the importance popularly attributed to this event can be seen in the fact that one compiler presents seven more ballads about this same incident.

This ballad, a fairly long one at nine stanzas, has survived to this day and—unlike many others from the era—still holds some measure of popularity.¹⁵ The ballad provides a fairly straightforward description of the battle, and its patriotic value comes more from the views of the respective captains than it does from any patriotic description of the battle itself. While a few errors of fact immediately jump out at the reader, generally the song evokes strong patriotic feelings for the experience of the sailor on board the *Constitution*. Interestingly, the frigate is never named in the song.

The most egregious error of fact in the ballad is that it was not the *Guerrière*'s mainmast that was taken down first, but its mizzen, after fifteen to twenty minutes of gunfire between the two ships.¹⁶ Still inaccurate, but less literally incorrect, is the next line, stating that the missing mast “made this frigate look abandoned, oh!” The *Guerrière* could not have looked abandoned, given the some three hundred people on board and the two masts still standing. In his official letter to Secretary of the Navy Paul Hamilton

¹⁴ Neeser, *American Naval Songs*, 97-98.

¹⁵ See, for example, the recent recording of the song by Don Sineti and Friends. Don Sineti, with Chris Morgan and Gary Buttery, *Traditional Songs from the Dogwatch* (Boston: Boxer Rebellion Music, 1996). Sound recording.

¹⁶ Tyrone G. Martin, “Isaac Hull’s Victory Revisited,” *Mariner’s Mirror* 47 (1987), 14-21.

describing the engagement, Hull reported that the *Guerrière* sported “an English Ensign at the Mizzen gaff, another in the Mizzen Shrouds, and a Jack at the Fore, and Mizentop-Gallant mast heads.”¹⁷ Clearly, to Yankee tars the *Guerrière* did not appear abandoned.

The seventh stanza, however, is more accurate in that after the final two masts fell, the Americans did not know whether the British had yet struck their flag. Hull recounted in his official letter that after “seeing the Enemy totally disabled, and the *Constitution* received but little injury I ordered the Sails filled, to hawl off..., not knowing whither the Enemy had struck, or not.”¹⁸ As night fell, Hull “could not see whether she had any colours, flying or not, but [I] could discover that she had raised a small flag Staff or Jurymast forward.”¹⁹ Apparently, the loss of masts due to the American bombardment, as mentioned in the seventh stanza, did handily douse the *Guerrière*'s ensign.

The effects of such naval victories were electrifying. Many who previously opposed the war with Britain soon changed their minds, and popular ballads were a useful tool for pro-war propaganda. In the end, one historian has written,

It would thus appear that Federalists' hearts were stirred by these feats of naval arms and that the songs and ballads inspired by repeated victories were the spontaneous utterance of genuine feeling rather than propaganda instigated by Anti-Federalists for the purpose of influencing public opinion.²⁰

¹⁷ Captain Isaac Hull to Secretary of the Navy Hamilton, 28 Aug. 1812, quoted in William S. Dudley, ed., *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History*, (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, Department of the Navy, 1985), 240.

¹⁸ Hull to Hamilton, quoted in Dudley, *Naval War*, 240.

¹⁹ Hull to Hamilton, quoted in Dudley, *Naval War*, 241.

²⁰ Allen, “Naval Songs,” 69-71.

A number of naval victories, including the *Constitution's* victories over the *Guerrière* and the *Java*, as well as Commodore Oliver H. Perry's victory on Lake Erie, contributed to this view. Without efficient methods of advertising these victories, supporters would have been unable to spread their views effectively. Naval and patriotic ballads were a popular way of spreading such views. Ballads often followed theatrical productions in Boston playhouses; in the winter of 1812-1813 short sketches called "Patriotic Effusions," consisting primarily of naval and patriotic songs, followed the main production.²¹

Many songs were written to be sung to the tune of other established songs. In America, the tune to "Yankee Doodle Dandy" was understandably a common one. Well known throughout the states, "Yankee Doodle" was written in 1775, and was an important song with nationalistic overtones during the Revolutionary War. Publicists wasted no time in writing numerous ballads to be put to this popular tune. One example of these works is "The America *Constitution* Frigate's Engagement with the British Frigate *Guerrière*, Which after an Action of 25 minutes, Surrendered, and being completely Shatter'd, was blown up, it being impossible to get her into port." The song contains eight stanzas, and every chorus varies, as well, so it must have taken some time to learn to sing the entire work. Some of the more notable stanzas include the following:

The *Constitution* long shall be
 The glory of our Navy,
 For when she grapples with a foe,
 She sends her to old Davy.
Yankee Doodle keep it up,
Yankee Doodle Dandy,

²¹ Allen, "Naval Songs," 69n.

*We'll let the British know that we
At fighting are quite handy.*

Not long ago Five British Ships
Unto her gave a chace sir,
But spite of all their quips and cranks
She beat 'em in the race, sir.
*Yankee Doodle keep it up,
Yankee Doodle Dandy,
Though ten to one, the Yankee boys
At fighting are quite handy.*

At length the British ship Guerrière,
Quite proudly came across her,
And Dacres said, in half an hour,
In air he'd surely toss her.
*Yankee Doodle keep it up,
Yankee Doodle Dandy,
He counted chickens ere they hatch'd,
Because the eggs were handy.²²*

Unlike many naval ballads of this era, this particular work seems to show original thought, and at least some consideration. Many other songs were written to the tune of "Yankee Doodle" and in this basic style, allowing composers to write songs quickly, fitting every situation. In this case, however, the lyrics appear to have required a significant amount of thought or imagination.

Many composers simply copied each other, or used particular ballads for multiple purposes, just by changing one or two phrases. "Yankee Doodle" is an excellent example of this type of appropriation. Composers reused tunes constantly, and some compilers have found it a challenge to select the most appropriate version of a song for inclusion.

²² Neeser, *American Naval Songs*, 102.

The compiler of one significant collection of American naval ballads compared English and American versions of one particular ballad:

Nothing could be easier than to take a good English song and adapt it by such changes as were necessary to make the patriotic allusions refer to this country instead of Great Britain. The popular song of the "Red, White and Blue" is a conspicuous example of this form, for it is word for word the English song of the same name, with the word "Columbia" substituted for "Britannia" wherever the latter occurs. "Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean!" is a manifest misstatement, for neither a continent as vast as North America nor the territory of the United States would be justly designated a "gem" even with the freest poetical license.²³

With sailors working on vessels of both nations, and on vessels of many other nations around the world, it is no wonder that these songs—which were nowhere recorded in some "definitive form" and were therefore open to interpretation and revision—spread throughout the world with the better ones surviving in slightly different forms in different locations.

An occasional source for original songs was the sailors themselves. These songs were rarely written down, and most of the songs of a particular ship or voyage passed away with the last of the ship's crew. James Campbell, however, "A Boatswain's Mate on Board the *Constitution*," according to the subtitles, wrote several songs about his experiences on board the *Constitution* during some of its most famous actions. In "A New

²³ Neeser, *American Naval Songs*, xiv-xv.

Song” about the battle with the *Guerrière*, Campbell describes the action in a manner that emphasizes the view of the sailor in the battle:

We had not sail'd many leagues, the truth you now shall hear,
Till we fell in with a frigate, and she prov'd the *Guerrière*,
We came up along side of her, and they were forc'd to beg,
And glad was Captain Dacres to put the boot on t'other leg.
So come rouze ye yankee tars, let it never be said,
That the sons of America should ever be afraid.

She gave us two broadsides, and long did they fall short,
And our brave yankee heroes, gave three cheers at the sport,
We called for our captain along side for to lye,
Never mind my hearty fellows a little neare we will try.
So come rouze ye yankee tars, firm united let us be,
Resolv'd to fight, or nobly die, for the rights of America.²⁴

Interestingly, Campbell uses little sailing terminology. Because this work survived in the form of a broadside published for distribution soon after the event, it may be that Campbell had a specific public audience in mind. If so, his songs for his fellow sailors probably provide material of greater historical interest, but the problems involved in preserving these songs—most notably the need for a printer, a seller, and a buyer—make it clear why so few actually did survive.

Campbell also published a broadside containing a song regarding the *Constitution's* battle with HMS *Java*, on December 29, 1812, which he titled “Glorious Naval Victory, Obtained by Commodore Bainbridge, of the United States Frigate *Constitution* over His Britannic Majesty's Frigate *Java*.” This piece is similar in style to Campbell's other ballad printed here, in that it also uses little jargon and generally paints

²⁴ Neeser, *American Naval Songs*, 104.

a rosy picture of the engagement. Campbell's story of the *Java* is more effusive than his ballad concerning the *Guerrière*, and generally less successful:

Our ensign and pendant we hoisted to let them understand.
 They hoisted their colors, they were them of old England;
 With their union jack being hoisted, it was their British pride,
 Which they were forc'd to strike to us, or sink along our side.

.....

It was at two o'clock the bloody fray begun,
 Each hardy tar and son of mars was active at his gun,
 Until their fore and mizzenmast was fairly shot away,
 And with redoubled courage, we gave them three huzzas.²⁵

Campbell's notes of the engagement roughly coincide with Captain Bainbridge's "minutes of the battle," which he indicates "Were Taken during the Action."²⁶

Commodore Bainbridge reported that at about 3:05 in the afternoon, the *Java*'s foremast was shot away, and fifty minutes later the mizzenmast also fell. After a pause to repair damage to the *Constitution*, and thinking that the *Java*'s officers had struck their colors although they had not, the *Java*'s mainmast collapsed, "falling over the side from the heavy rolling of the Ship."²⁷

Campbell's songs provide another valuable source of information about *Constitution*'s life as an American naval frigate. His ballads reflect the views that sailors aboard *Constitution* wanted to portray of the event, and deserve to be considered with all

²⁵ Neeser, *American Naval Songs*, 130.

²⁶ Journal of Commodore William Bainbridge, 29 Dec. 1812, quoted in Dudley, *Naval War*, 641.

²⁷ Lieutenant Henry D. Chads to Secretary of the Admiralty John W. Croker, 31 Dec. 1812, quoted in Dudley, *Naval War*, 647.

other sources of history about the vessel. The most detailed history of the *Constitution*, by former *Constitution* Captain Tyrone G. Martin, does not list Campbell anywhere in the index to his book. Naval ballads, particularly when their authorship can be determined, should be taken as primary sources of information about their subject.

In contrast to Campbell's recollection is "Bainbridge's Victory, or, Huzza for the *Constitution*, Once More!, Engagement between the United States Frigate *Constitution*, and the British Frigate *Java*," an anonymously-written broadside ballad, which in one stanza declares,

At length through the wave as she plow'd in her pride,
The *Java* our seamen exultingly spied,
And as usual, all strangers to cowardly fear,
To the brazen-fac'd huzzy, we quickly drew near.²⁸

Lieutenant Henry Ducie Chads, who took command of *Java* following the wounding of Captain Henry Lambert, stated that the British vessel spotted and began chasing *Constitution*.²⁹ Even Campbell, who had a vested interest in appearing bold and successful, stated in his song "A frigate bore down on us, she was called the *Java*; We took her to be a seventy-four, and from them bore away."³⁰ Campbell described his view of what happened, while the author of "Bainbridge's Victory" was willing to write what would best sell, namely that the *Constitution* pursued the *Java*, rather than vice versa.

²⁸ Neeser, *American Naval Songs*, 133.

²⁹ Chads to Croker, quoted in Dudley, *Naval War*, 646.

³⁰ Neeser, *American Naval Songs*, 130.

Impressment was a topic that brought forth many ballads of varying quality. Americans were not threatened by impressment at home, although the possibility of being taken from an American ship and pressed into a British naval vessel was a real concern, and one of several causes of the War of 1812. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, the British Navy was forced to use impressment as a means of manning its ships, because the number of men the navy needed always exceeded the number of men willing to join the navy voluntarily. Sailors took exception to the system, but did not have the political clout to find or implement a permanent solution.³¹ The dangers of being impressed soon became a popular topic among ballad writers on shore and at sea. Ballads about impressment probably informed those unfamiliar with the service about its dangers. Again, these ballads became a form of transmitting information, however inaccurate or imperfect.

Ballads of impressment often came from those who had lost sailors to the Impress Service, rather than from just sailors or publicists. Like many of the other ballads considered here, they may have been written by someone lamenting the impressment of a loved one, or they may have been written by a composer hoping to sell the song to someone in that situation. An example that dates from the turn of the nineteenth century, but was probably sung until the impressment of sailors finally ended, comes from Northumberland:

³¹ Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo American Maritime World, 1700-1750* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 31-34; N. A. M. Rodger, *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1986), ch. 5 *passim*.

O! the lousy cutter,
 They've ta'en my laddie frae me,
 They pressed him far away foreign
 Wi' Nelson ayont the salt sea.

They always come in the night,
 They never come in the day,
 They always come in the night,
 And steal the laddies away.³²

This assessment of the broad reach of the Impress Service disagrees with a major history of the British Navy of the era; historian N. A. M. Rodger states that Impress officers found it “very dangerous to enter private houses without a press warrant (that would have been a very quick way to get thrown into prison).”³³

Other authors disagree with Rodger's view,³⁴ and it does seem to approximate the expected “official” government position. Those who lacked political strength could express their opinions in song. Once an individual learned a particular song, that song became an effective method of moving such a message quickly and reliably. Songs such as this one on impressment can shed light on historical interpretations, and can assist historians in better understanding the era and the political and social aspects of methods such as impressment.

³² Smith, *Music*, 112.

³³ Rodger, *Wooden World*, 172.

³⁴ Hugill, *Sailortown*, 26; Christopher Lloyd, *The British Seaman, 1200-1860: A Social Survey* (Rutherford, New Jersey: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1970), 139.

Most historians agree that impressment dealt harshly with those caught in its path,³⁵ and the composers of these songs believed that their works described the dangers facing their impressed loved ones. Some ballads warned sailors what life might be like if they were pressed. One song clearly warned sailors away from the press, and certainly offered advice that young sailors should carefully avoid being impressed:

Cheerily, lads, cheerily! there's a ganger hard to wind'ard;
 Cheerily, lads, cheerily! there's a ganger hard a-lee;
 Cheerily, lads, cheerily! else 'tis farewell home and kindred,
 And the bosun's mate a-raisin' hell in the King's navee.
 Cheerily, lads, cheerily! the warrant's out, the hanger's drawn;
 Cheerily, lads, cheerily! we'll leave 'em an R in pawn!³⁶

The author of this text could have been writing just for young George Price, who was taken by an Impress Service tender that approached his inward-bound vessel, and eventually abandoned the king's ship on board which he served without leave and without his pay.

Price was a butcher pressed into service on board HM sloop *Speedy* in 1803 and served on board until 1805. When pressed he gave his name as George Green, in hopes that he might eventually have an opportunity to escape. He had been working as butcher on board the Indiaman *Walmer Castle* when he was taken to join *Speedy*, and he was none too pleased about the switch when he first wrote to his brother about the incident:

³⁵ While Rodger, *Wooden World*, suggests that impressment was not as common or as difficult as many have suggested, other historians believe that impressment was dangerous and a significant threat to many landsmen. See Rediker, *Devil*; Ralph Davis, *The Rise of the English Shipping Industry in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Newton Abbot, England: David & Charles, 1962); Daniel A. Baugh, *British Naval Administration in the Age of Walpole* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1965).

³⁶ Lloyd, *British Seaman*, 144.

Decbr 18th 1803

Dear Brother...

I had the Misfortune to be Prest out of the *Walmer Castle* Indiaman and Was Very unwell at the time took me On board the *Speedy* Brig and there I Got So Bad that they Was Oblig'd to Send Me On board the *Sesex* [sic, *Sussex*] Hospital Ship Lying at Sheerness.... After I Was On board the *Speedy* a few days I Got So Bad that I did not Knowe were I was no more than you did and in that state I lost every Article Belongin to Me Even the Shirt of My Back Now I will Leave you to Gess What Miserable State I am Now in and So Conclude from Your Brother and Well Wisher

George Price³⁷

Price spent several miserable years on board the *Speedy*, writing to his brother and often complaining that his brother did not write back.

After almost two years Price found an opportunity to leave the ship. A fellow foremast hand wrote to Price's brother that George had "Eloped from they [sic] ship," while the vessel was in the Downs. As the ship's butcher, Price may have had several opportunities to escape. He could have gone to town under the guise of checking the quality of meat among suppliers ashore, and then simply disappeared into the crowds before eventually leaving town on foot. Whereas most sailors no longer with a vessel were marked in the muster books as "D" for Discharged, "DD" for Discharged Dead, or "R" for Run, by Price's name (Green, in the muster books) only the same date as that of his friend's letter appears. Perhaps the keeper of *Speedy*'s books expected him to return;

³⁷ George Price, *Pressganged: The Letters of George Price of Southwark, Alias "George Green."* (Royston, England: Ellisons' Editions, 1984 [i.e., 1994]), 7.

Rodger asserts that "by the time a man had been in the ship eighteen months, the chances of his running were negligible."³⁸

Price, however, apparently planned continuously to escape the Navy. Apart from one jubilant letter written after taking "a Valuable Prise," in which he declared that "a Man of War is More Like a Gin Shop than Aney Thing Ells,"³⁹ Price's letters indicate he always sought a chance to leave. Fifteen months after being pressed onto *Speedy*, Price wrote "You Must Suppose that my Case is very hard to Be on Board of a Man War Exposed to the Greatest Dangers and not a Soul in the World that I can Git Letter from to hear of my Relations or Aney body that I know."⁴⁰

One song that may reflect Price's experiences on board a warship describes life on board naval vessels in general. In the first stanza the narrator describes being overtaken by a press gang:

As I walked out on a London street,
A pressgang there I chanced for to meet.
They asked me if I'd join the fleet,
On board of a man o' war, boys.

and after asking what life on board such a vessel is like and deciding to join, he discovers the sailors have told him nothing but lies:

The first thing they did, they took me in hand:
They flogged me with a tarry strand;
They flogged me till I could not stand
On board of a man o' war, boys.

³⁸ Rodger, *Wooden World*, 197.

³⁹ Price, *Pressganged*, 30-31.

⁴⁰ Price, *Pressganged*, 28.

They hung me up by my two thumbs
And they cut me till the blood did run;
And that was the usage they gave me
On board of a man o' war, boys.⁴¹

Songs like this one made the dangers of impressment clear to anyone listening, and their goal may have been to warn away anyone considering a walk around the docks and port of London. They also contradict some well-known historical discussions of impressment, and support others. These songs clearly have some value to historical research on impressment.

Naval ballads offer a different face of the past for the historian to study. These ballads hold important historical information, and when used in conjunction with conventional written histories, they can assist individuals in better understanding the history of specific maritime events and concepts. When naval songs and ballads are considered alongside conventional histories, they may identify new areas of research or elucidate old ones. In the case of the USS *Constitution*, songs about the vessel come in many different forms, and although they may contradict one another, they can provide a history that is otherwise not accessible.

The history of a vessel or a concept through relevant ballads will not provide a complete assessment of the topic, but will open new doors of understanding to an otherwise difficult subject. Social and folk histories are notoriously difficult to uncover,

⁴¹ Roy Palmer, *The Valiant Sailor: Sea Songs and Ballads and Prose Passages Illustrating Life on the Lower Deck in Nelson's Navy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 16.

as they necessarily describe the lives of those who were often considered not worth describing. Their histories, however, are often found in ballads and song. As a reflection of ideas and opinions that were current at the time of their writing, ballads provide a history other than facts. This history is nevertheless valuable, because it demonstrates the contemporary attitudes of the society in which it was created.

Ballad writers worked to make the testimonies to the battle as patriotic and nationalistic as possible, creating martyrs out of the American commanders who led a poorly-prepared vessel into action. Songs that chronicle defeats, such as the loss of the US frigate *Chesapeake* to HMS *Shannon* in June 1813, focus on the bravery of the American commanders in a battle in which songwriters felt the odds were heavily against the Americans. As Lindahl states, certain aspects of some of the events that are not mentioned are at least as important as those that are. It is not surprising that events surrounding this disappointing battle are described in a more positive light than they may deserve. Symbolic history never claims to be complete, as it necessarily consists of those events that individuals at the time take pains to describe and present to others.

SAILORS' VIEWS OF WOMEN IN SONG

Sailors are well-known for having sung of three things: women, whiskey, and home. Occasionally, they sang of all three at the same time. More often, however, they chose just one topic. Each subject could be interpreted in many different ways by different individuals, and sailors often expressed these varying thoughts through the use of song. In singing about women, sailors displayed diverging opinions and great contradictions. Women were a mystery to sailors. Women represented something that sailors sought but rarely found, and generally could not understand. Women at sea were rare, and those who did sail usually spent their time aft, away from the sailors in the fo'c'sle. Thoughts of women dominated sailors' songs, plus many other aspects of a sailor's world. For example, ships were, and are still, referred to with a feminine pronoun, even if their name is *Charles W. Morgan* or *Edmund Fitzgerald*.

On shore, women could either be a sailor's salvation or his doom. One way in which men at sea expressed their varying thoughts and concerns was through song, which was either used as a tool, to complete the ship's work, or as a toy, to entertain themselves and others when not on watch or when in port. As a result, sailors viewed different groups of women in different ways. These differences appear in the songs sailors sang, and are another form of symbolic history.

When singing about women, sailors developed a dichotomy of "positive" versus "negative" views of women. Women associated with home, such as mothers, wives, and

lovers, nearly always represented reliability, security, and loyalty, while women associated with the world's ports and its dangers, such as prostitutes and boarding-house managers, often represented some of the shore-bound dangers of the sailor's profession, such as venereal disease and the rapid loss of one's earnings. The songs that sailors sang show this polarity in their views of women, and identify sailors' varying interpretations of different groups of women. This chapter will explore these views of women and the songs about women that sailors sang while working and playing, at sea and on shore.

Feminist musicology creates fertile ground for the interpretation of women in sailors' shanties. Feminist musicology is not a large field; to one author writing in 1991, "it almost seems that musicology managed miraculously to pass directly from pre- to postfeminism without ever having to change—or even examine—its ways."¹ The field has expanded since that time, but work remains to be done. Exploration of women in ballads of the nineteenth century shows that they are rarely described in a positive manner. Through analysis of an oft-published ballad describing the tragic consequences of a love triangle in which one male suitor kills another and then is hanged, Susan C. Cook has written that

North American balladry has been largely a male-dominated form of discourse that privileged the male voices and experiences of the community while muting, or even silencing, its women. Although both men and women sang ballads, they did so often in very different circumstances across the public and private continuum and with different results. Male-only occupations, such as

¹ Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 5.

lumbering or cowboy life, took men away from their families and communities for months at a time, providing segregated forums, in which certain men achieved particular fluency as performers or creators, and common sources of experiences and events to retell. When men returned home, they brought new songs to share with their families, though some songs were reserved as a gendered repertory, considered appropriate only for an all-male audience.²

Sailors fit perfectly into this paradigm: even coastal voyages could take sailors away from home for long periods of time, while voyages around Cape Horn, such as whaling voyages from New England to the North Pacific, or merchant voyages from England to India, could take many months or years. Usually with no women on board, sailing vessels provided perhaps the most gender-segregated society imaginable. Sailors collected songs from all around the world, through interaction in foreign ports and by traveling with others for months or years at a time. Without question, many of the songs sailors learned were not to be shared with their families when they returned home, and would remain in the repertoire of men alone.

Although sailors chose not to share many songs with women upon their return home, women were one of the primary topics of sailors' songs. Sailors sang about women in many different ways, either in "positive" songs that celebrated mothers, sisters, wives and daughters, or in "negative" songs that described the dangers and pleasures of prostitutes and female boarding-house masters. Mothers and lovers represented home,

² Susan C. Cook, "'Cursed was She': Gender and Power in American Balladry," in *Cecelia Reclaimed: Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Music* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 205.

and the protection it provided, as well as the common sense not to go sailing. In the short-haul shanty "John Dameray," the sailor remembers that "My ma she wrote to me, 'My son, come home from sea.'"³ In a ballad describing the fictitious pirate ship "The *Flying Cloud*," the sailor thinks of his love at home, after he has been found guilty of piracy:

Adieu to dear old Waterford and the girl that I love dear.
Her voice like music soft and sweet I nevermore shall hear.
No more will I kiss those ruby lips or press her lily-white hand,
For on the gallows I must die by the laws of a Spanish land.⁴

The stay-at-home women who appeared in these songs were images that sailors used to remember their past lives on land, or the lives they sought if they could leave the sea.

Often, sailors had no specific place to call home. Once a ship had arrived in a port, a sailor was generally free to do as he pleased until that ship, or another, sailed with him on board. Songs about the women sailors met in such situations often describe embarrassing and unfortunate situations that one might think sailors would rather forget. "Maggie May," for example, tells the story of a "very famous Liverpool 'judy,'" who regularly emptied the pockets of sailors just arrived on shore. Despite having exacted a toll on the singer, Maggie May eventually got her come-uppance:

Oh, you thievin' Maggie May, ye robbed me of me pay,
When I slept wid you last night ashore,
Oh, guilty the jury found her, for robbin' a homeward-bounder,
An' she'll never roll down Paradise Street no more.

³ William Main Doerflinger, *Shantymen and Shantyboys: Songs of the Sailor and Lumberman* (New York: Macmillan, 1951), 8.

⁴ Doerflinger, *Shantymen*, 137-8.

After being caught and convicted, Maggie May was sent to the penal colonies of Australia, much to the delight of Liverpool's "sailor boys."⁵

A survey of shanty verses shows that sailors tended to glorify women they knew as individuals, and denigrate those they knew for their profession. Sailors may have attempted to bring themselves up to the level of perfection they identified in songs about mothers, wives, and other female relations, while disparaging themselves or others for risking their health and wallets among prostitutes and less-than-moral boarding-house managers. The dramatic variations in how sailors sang about women are remarkable. The words alone say a great deal about how sailors saw women; closer reading helps one better understand what a sailor's life was like.

Although much of their time ashore was spent in business districts that varied little from port to port, some sailors did have a place to call home, and they may even have had—or thought they had—someone special there waiting for them. In such cases, sailors looked forward to seeing their loved ones again, and some songs, such as "Swansea Town," describe the sailors' desire for returning home to their true love:

Intro. Now, the Lord made the bee and the bee did make the
honey,
Oh, the devil sends the girls for to spend the sailor's money,
And around Cape Horn we'll go!
And when my money's all spent, old girl,
Then I'll go round Cape Horn for more, old girl, old girl.

Chorus. You're the one that I do adore. And all I am living in
hopes to see

⁵ Stan Hugill, *Shanties from the Seven Seas* (Mystic, Connecticut: Mystic Seaport Museum, 1994; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), 307-8.

Is old Swansea town once more, old girl, old girl!
 You're the one that I do adore, And all I'm in hopes to see
 Is old Swansea town once more, old girl.

Now I'm outward bound around Cape Horn
 For Frisco and afar.
 I'll write you letters when I land there,
 And you'll know then I'm homeward bound, old girl, old girl.

Now, when we're homeward bound, old girl,
 I'll buy you dresses of silk,
 And I'll buy you silk lingeree by the score
 So that you will wear the weed no more.

.....

Oh, when I'm leaving Frisco town,
 Outside of the *Faralleones*,
 I'll write my last letter to you, old girl,
 And you'll know that I'm homeward bound, old girl, old girl.
 You'll know that I'm homeward bound.
 And when I wander into the Bay,
 You will pray for me day by day, old girl, old girl.⁶

The song continues for several more verses, plus a final stanza, all of which continue to celebrate the old girl in Swansea. But a closer look reveals a contradiction within the song. Although the vast majority of this song is about a sailor's girl at home, it is not his "old girl" whom he mentions at the start of the song. In the first line the singer celebrates a gift of bees and honey from the Lord, and in the second line he laments of those girls sent by the devil "for to spend the sailor's money." Even as he starts to sing of his true love, he's thinking of those women he more recently left behind. And, in his own words,

⁶ Doerflinger, *Shantymen*, 154. Emphasis in original.

“all [he’s] in hopes to see” is Swansea town, not his old girl. Such contradictions appear with some regularity in songs sung by sailors.

For the homeward-bound song “Rolling Home,” raconteur and shanty historian Stan Hugill gives two separate versions of fourteen stanzas each, plus several extra stanzas. Hugill dates the song to about 1858. In Hugill’s (a) version, the fourth and twelfth verses mention two different types of women:

1. Call all hands to man the capstan, See the cable flaked down
clear,
Heave away, an’ with a will boys, For ol’ England we will
steer,

Chorus. Rollin’ home—rollin’ home—, Rollin’ home across
the sea,
Rollin’ home, to dear old England, Rollin’ home, fair land, to
thee.

4. To Australia’s lovely daughters, We will bid a fond adieu,
We shall ne’er forget the hours, That we spent along with you.
12. An’ the gal you love most dearly, She’s been constant, firm,
and true,
She will clasp ye to her bosom, Saying, “Jack, I still love
you.”⁷

Like the composer of “Swansea Town,” Jack in “Rolling Home” is not concerned by his indiscretions in Australia, trusting at the same time that his girl at home will always be thinking of him alone. No one can claim that sailor Jack was consistent in his views on women or the world. An earlier collector, William Main Doerflinger, presents another version of the song, gathered before World War II from Dick Maitland, an old salt at

⁷ Hugill, *Shanties*, 146-7.

Sailor's Snug Harbor. In Maitland's recollections, the twelfth stanza, above, ends with the line "When you press her to your bosom, All your fondest vows renew," and is then immediately followed by the fourth stanza quoted above, about "Australia's lovely daughters." It would seem that Mr. Maitland objected even less to such conflicting arrangements!⁸

"The First of the Emigrants" describes, in a dozen verses, one sailor's voyage to and expectations about his return from a long hiatus in Australia during the gold rushes there starting in 1851. The first nine verses relate the voyage from England to Australia, while the last three verses describe the trip home, and what the sailor hopes to find when he returns:

Now, I've worked hard in Australia for thirty long years,
And today, sure I'm homeward bound,
With a nice little fortune to call me own.
I'm bound home, but not the same way I came out.

Chorus. So fill up your glasses and drink what you please,
For no matter's the damage, oh, I'll pay.
So be aisy and free whilst you're drinking with me.
Sure I'm the man you don't meet ev'ry day!

Oh, I'm sorry I'm leaving you all today,
For I'm homeward bound, don't you see?
But a different way to the way I came out;
I am going home on a steamboat, you see.

Then it's good-bye to one and it's good-bye to all,
For I'm bound home for England's merry countree,
And my girl I will find, the one I left behind,
And I'll make her as happy as can be!⁹

⁸ Doerflinger, *Shantymen*, 155-6, 322, 350.

⁹ Doerflinger, *Shantymen*, 149-151.

One wonders if she is in fact still waiting for him, and, indeed, if all the money he brings back will make up for the thirty years he was away in Australia!

As in other songs, the woman mentioned in “The First of the Emigrants” appears only once and is not named. The song’s first line reads, “Now, I’m leaving old England, the land that I love,” and does not mention any woman he loves—just the country. Many songs that mention women seem to add them as secondary or tertiary subjects.

Occasionally, however, sailors sang songs about specific women. These women varied from loves on shore to prostitutes and boarding-house managers known around the globe. Sailors sang about women of specific nationalities or from certain ports, as in Liverpool’s “Maggie May,” or the famous homeward-bound song “Spanish Ladies,” whose chorus celebrates the imminent arrival at home, while the verses celebrate women left behind. The first verse and chorus are as follows:

Farewell and adieu, to you fair Spanish ladies,
 Farewell and adieu, to you ladies of Spain,
 For we’ve received orders to sail for old England,
 An’ hope very shortly to see you again.

Chorus. We’ll rant and we’ll roar, like true British sailors,
 We’ll rant and we’ll rave across the salt seas,
 Until we strike soundings in the Channel of Old England,
 From Ushant to Scilly is thirty-four leagues.¹⁰

¹⁰ Hugill, *Shanties*, 293.

One song, which celebrates a love left behind in Liverpool, is among the most beautiful shanties the author knows. Some of the many verses of "The Leaving of Liverpool" include the following:

Fare you well, the Prince's Landing Stage,
River Mersey, fare you well.
I'm off to California,
A place I know right well.

Chorus. So fare you well, my own true love,
When I return united we will be.
It's not the leaving of Liverpool that grieves me,
But me darling, when I think on you.¹¹

I'm off to California,
By the way of stormy Cape Horn,
And I will send to you a letter, love,
When I am homeward bound.

Farewell to Lower Frederick Street,
Anson Terrace and Park Lane;
Farewell, it *will* be some long time
Before I see you again.

I've shipped on a Yankee clipper ship,
Davy Crockett is her name;

And Burgess is the captain of her,
And they say she's a floating [shame]¹²

¹¹ Lyrics of shanties often vary from source to source. This author learned the chorus as ending with "...think on thee," which obviously rhymes better with "...we will be." This wording also appears in some recordings of the shanty: *The Irish Breakdown, Roll Alabama Roll* (Alexandria, Virginia: Wren Records, n.d.), "The Leaving of Liverpool," uses "thee," while Louis Killen, *Sailors, Ships & Chanteys* (Poulsbo, Washington: Knock Out Recording, 1995), "Leaving of Liverpool," uses "you." See also note 12, below.

¹² Doerflinger's text (*Shantymen*, 105) curiously quotes "floating hell" in his reprint of this song. "Floating shame" obviously rhymes better with "her name," and the author learned the song with the latter words in this verse. It seems curious that Doerflinger, who, like other collectors, regularly replaced "inappropriate" or "unprintable" words, would replace "shame" with "hell." The Irish Breakdown, "The Leaving of Liverpool," and Stan Hugill, *Songs of the Sea* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977), 35, use "hell" at the end of the equivalent verse, while Killen, "Leaving of Liverpool," uses "shame."

It's my second trip with Burgess in *Crockett*,
 And I think I know him well.
 If a man's a sailor, he can get along,
 But if not, he's sure in hell.

The tug is waiting at the pierhead
 To take us down the stream.
 Our sails are loose and our anchor secure,
 So I'll bid you good-bye once more.

I'm bound away to leave you,
 Good-bye, my love, good-bye.
 There ain't but one thing that grieves me;
 That's leaving you behind.

Now, fare you well, the Prince's Landing Stage,
 River Mersey, fare you well.
 I'm off to California,
 A place I know right well.¹³

This haunting song tells clearly the story of a sailor who does miss his love, and who seems honestly to look forward to seeing her again.

Although home could mean seeing a true love or a familiar hearth, it could just as easily mean simply returning to the port from which the voyage began. In such cases, there might be no friend or family member to greet Jack at the dock. As a result, a less positive theme runs through many homeward-bound songs. Most songs on this theme have a variety of verses and melodies, but they come to the same conclusion as is found in this popular song, variously named "Homeward Bound" or "Fare-ye-well":

We're homeward bound I heard them say;
Chorus. Good by, fare ye well, goodbye, fare ye well!

¹³ Doerflinger, *Shantymen*, 104-5.

We're homeward bound to Liverpool Bay.
Chorus. Hooraw me boys, we're homeward bound!

We're homeward bound to Liverpool Town,
 Where them gals they will come down.

An' when we gits to the Salthouse Dock,
 Them pretty young gals on the pierhead will flock.

An' one to the other ye'll hear them say,
 Here comes Johnny with his three years' pay.

Then we haul to the *Bull an' the Bell*,
 Where good liquor they do sell.

In comes the landlord with a smile,
 Saying, "Drink up, lads, while it's worth yer while!"

But when the money's all spent an' gone,
 Not even a cent for to call yer own,

In comes the landlord with a hell o' a frown,
 It's "Get up, Jack—let John sit down."

Then poor ol' Jack must understand,
 There's ships in port all wanting hands.¹⁴

The roar from the landlord, "Get up Jack, let John sit down," occurs in many sailors' songs as a refrain describing the hospitality sailors received when they ran out of money. The prompt loss of funds kept sailors on board ships, since their only source of money, once they had spent their six or eighteen months' pay in a few days, was from a shipping master who gave them an advance on their wages for the next voyage.

¹⁴ Hugill, *Shanties*, 105. Doerflinger, *Shantymen*, gives a similar version at 87-88, but his presentation of lines is questionable, given the rhyming and sentence endings that run between them. Nevertheless, the intent is clear.

Sailors heard the refrain described above far too often. As author Stuart Frank writes, in many of these songs, “the text mobilizes comic nautical, commercial, romantic, and theological imagery to express the unrelenting regularity with which ‘When your money’s all gone, it’s the same old song, “Get up, Jack! John, sit down!””¹⁵

Occasionally, however, sailors had the last laugh. Frank presents a song in which Sailor John seeks lodging and a visit with the landlady’s daughter, Polly, but claims to be completely broke as a result of an unsuccessful voyage. Although the landlady had earlier assured John that Polly had dreamt of him just the night before, she suddenly refuses to call her daughter downstairs, and also refuses to offer John food or lodging. John, knowing full well what is happening and how things work, replies

How much then do I owe you tell down it shall be paid
 How much then do I owe you tell down it shall be laid
 It is eight and forty shillings John you owe me of old
 Young Johnny he pulled out two handfuls of gold

The sight of the gold made the old woman stare
 The sight of the gold made the old woman swear
 She cried forgive me Johnny for I was but in jest
 And don’t you know young Johnny I love you the best

I’ll call down my daughter Polly and set her on your knee
 I’ll call down my daughter Polly and set her down by thee
 For my green bed it is empty John and has been so this week
 And if you wish young Johnny can go take a [restful] sleep

Before I would lie there I would lie in some dark cave
 Before I would lie there I would [first] lie in my grave
 [With] money in his pockets [a man] can rant and roar

¹⁵ Stuart M. Frank, *Oooh! You New York Girls!: The Urban Pastoral in Ballads and Songs about Sailors Ashore in the Big City* (Sharon, Massachusetts: Kendall Whaling Museum; Perth, Australia: Australian Association for Maritime History, 1996), 11.

[But] without that [bright] companion they will kick you out of doors¹⁶

In this case, John seems to have survived with at least some of his money intact.

For the vast majority of sailors, who were not as quick as the sailor just mentioned, one of their most serious and debilitating problems came from those who drugged Jack and took his two years (or more) pay in one night, preventing him from ever escaping from the sea. "The New York Gals" is indicative of the problems Jack faced, and it describes how he dealt with them and shared his misadventures with others.

As I rolled down ol' South Street, A fair maid I did meet,
Who axed me then to see her home, She lived down Fourteenth
Street,

Chorus. And away, you Johnny! My dear honey,
Oh! You New York gals, ye love us for our money!

Sez I, "My dear young lady, I'm a stranger here in town,
I left me ship only yesterday, From China I am bound."

"Now come wid me, me dearie, An' I will stand ye treat,
I'll buy ye rum an' brandy, dear, An' tabnabs for to eat."

"My friend she has a brother, Just now away at sea,
The last time that she heard from him, His ship was in
Shanghee."

When we got down to Fourteenth Street, We stopped at
Number Four,
Her mother and her sister came To meet us at the door.

An' when we got inside the house, The drinks wuz handed
round.
The liquor wuz so awful strong, Me head went round an'
round.

¹⁶ Frank, *Oooh!*, 12.

Before we all sat down to eat, We had another drink.
The liquor wuz so very strong, Deep sleep came in a wink.

When I awoke next morning, I had an achin' head,
An' there wuz I Jack-all-alone, Stark naked on the bed.

My gold watch and' me pocket-book An' lady friend was gone.
An' there wuz I with nary a stitch, All left there on my own.

On lookin' all around the room, Oh, nothing could I see,
But a lady's shift an' pantaloons, Not worth a damn to me.

With a flour barrel for a suit, I wisht I'd ne'er bin born.
A boarding master then I met, Who shipped me round the
Horn.

Now all ye bully sailormen, Take warnin' when ashore,
Or else ye'll meet some charmin' gal, Who's nothing but a
whore.

Yer hard-earned cash will disappear, Your rig an' boots as
well,
For Yankee gals are tougher than The other side o' Hell!¹⁷

Sailor Jack's moral at the end of the song warns other sailors that they should heed his advice and stay away from such situations, but for most sailors such problems were all too common. While they may not have lost all of their money on the first night in port, it certainly was a time when they were the most attractive prey for those who lived off sailors ashore. Liquor and prostitution were never far from sailing vessels—in many

¹⁷ Hugill, *Shanties*, 283-5.

ports, these vices came directly to the ship.¹⁸ The invariable results were numerous sailors with a wide variety of diseases.¹⁹

Whall claimed that “sailors are shy with ladies.” Without question, he was referring to any ladies except “ladies of the night”—with prostitutes sailors were all too familiar, and among themselves they almost took pride in these relations. As a result, venereal diseases were a serious problem for sailors. They rarely tried to hide the fact that they were plagued by a wide variety of sexually transmitted ailments. They did, however, attempt to portray their battles with these diseases through verses that differ significantly from written historical records. The problem of venereal disease got to be so great that sailors on board British naval vessels had to pay about fifteen shillings, roughly two weeks’ pay in the late eighteenth century, when they were diagnosed. This charge—sailors were not charged for any other medical service—got to be so onerous that sailors often went as long as possible before reporting the disease, obviously making it much more painful and difficult to cure.²⁰ Careful studies based on records of this charge show that at any given time venereal disease afflicted over eight percent of the crew on average, with some ships averaging over twenty percent.²¹

¹⁸ Knut Weibust, *Deep Sea Sailors: A Study in Maritime Ethnology* (Stockholm: n.p., 1969), 148; Peter Kemp, *The British Sailor: A Social History of the Lower Deck* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1970), 143.

¹⁹ Stan Hugill, *Sailortown* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967), 144.

²⁰ Kemp, *British Sailor*, 181; Christopher Lloyd, *The British Seaman, 1200-1860: A Social Survey* (Rutherford, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1970), 262.

²¹ N. A. M. Rodger, *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1986), 80, 367.

While sailors readily admitted in song to having contracted a disease, their reactions varied. Some felt they had done wrong and had gotten the punishment they probably deserved. Others paid little attention to the experience, once they had been cured, and swore they would repeat their actions. Few songs are lacking in double entendres. The most descriptive song about the experience is probably "Ratcliffe Highway," referring to the sailortown area of London. The middle verses are, without question, beyond "coarse"; the first and last few are enough to convey the style of the entire song:

As I wuz a-rollin' down the Highway one morn,
 I spied a flash packet from ol' Wapping town,
 As soon as I seed her I slacked me main brace,
 An' I hoisted me stuns'ls an' to her gave chase.

Chorus. Oh, me riggin's slack, Aye, me rattlin's are
 frayed,
 I've rattled me rigging down Ratcliffe Highway!

.....

She set fire to me riggin', as well as me hull,
 An' away to the lazareet I had to scull;
 Wid me helm hard-a-starboard as I rolled along,
 Me shipmates cried, "Hey, Jack, yer mainyard is sprung!"

Now I'm safe in harbour, me moorings all fast,
 I lay here quite snug, boys, till danger is past;
 With my mainyard all served, boys, an' parcelled an' tarred,
 Wasn't that a stiff breeze, boys, that sprung me mainyard?

Here's a health to the gal wid the black, curly locks,
 Here's a health to the gal who ran me on the rocks;
 Here's a health to the quack, boys, who eased me from pain,

If I meet that flash packet I'll board her again.²²

The verses that are not reprinted here do not skimp in their description of the events that led Jack to this poor predicament. The candor of the unprinted verses makes the start of the final verse all the more surprising, since it clearly does not reflect the original words. The line "Here's a health to the gal who ran me on the rocks" simply does not fit into the rhythm of the song as well as the likely original line, "Here's a health to the gal who gave me the pox."

One more type of songs about women at sea certainly deserves attention. Women dressed as sailors represented a significant fantasy for many men at sea, and sailors often sang of such rare characters. Though some women did, in fact, dress themselves as men and find positions in the British Navy, such behavior was extraordinarily rare.²³ They certainly occurred in song more often than in real life.

One of the classic tellings of such an event is the song "The Handsome Cabin Boy." In this humorous song, life at sea ruins the young cabin boy, though not without a certain amount of surprise among the crew:

It's of the pretty female, as you may understand,
 Who had a mind for roving into a foreign land,
 Attired in sailor's clothing, she boldly did appear,
 And she engaged with a captain, to serve him for a year.

²² Judith Fingard, *Jack in Port: Sailortowns of Eastern Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 76-77.

²³ Suzanne Stark claims the presence of "verified accounts of more than twenty women who joined the Royal Navy or Marines dressed as men in the period from the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth century," among a population of sailors amounting to 70,000 to 80,000 per year in the 1750s alone. Suzanne J. Stark, *Female Tars: Women Aboard Ship in the Age of Sail* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1996), 82; Rodger, *Wooden World*, chap. 5 *passim*, 369.

The captain's lady being on board she seemed in great joy,
 So glad the captain had engaged the handsome cabin boy.
 Many's the time she cuddled and kissed, that she wouldn't like
 to toy,
 But twas the captain found the secret of the handsome cabin
 boy.

Her cheeks appeared like roses and her locks all in a curl;
 The sailors often smiled and said he looks just like a girl.
 But eatin' them captain's biscuits her complexion did destroy,
 And the waist did swell of pretty Nell, the handsome cabin boy.

As through the Bay o' Biscay our gallant ship did plow;
 One night amongst the sailormen there was an awful row;
 They bundled from their hammocks, for their rest it did
 destroy;
 And they cursed about the groaning of the handsome cabin
 boy.

"Doctor! Dearest, doctor!" the cabin boy did cry;
 "Me time is come, I am undone, surely I must die."
 The doctor ran with all his might, a-smilin' at the fun,
 For to think a sailor boy should have a daughter or a son.

When the sailors heard the joke, they all began to stare;
 "The child belongs to none of us," they solemnly did swear.
 The lady to the captain said, "My dear, I wish you joy,
 It was either you or I betrayed the handsome cabin boy!"

So they all took up a bumper, and they drank success to trade.
 And likewise to the cabin boy, who was neither man nor maid,
 And if the war should rise again, our sailors to destroy,
 We'll ship some more of them sailors like the handsome cabin
 boy.²⁴

Other songs celebrate women who commanded vessels or who did their part for the duty of the nation. "The Female Smuggler" describes the adventures of young Jane,

²⁴ Louis Killen, *Sailors, Ships & Chanteys* (Poulsbo, Washington: Knock Out Recording, 1995), "Handsome Cabin Boy." Sound recording. See Hugill, *Songs*, 86, for a slightly different text.

who followed in her father's smuggling footsteps, killing pirates as necessary, until she was caught in England. When she was brought to court to be tried and convicted, "This young female smuggler stood dress-ed like a bride," and the naval official who had captured her immediately fell in love with her, refused to prosecute her, and asked her father for her hand in marriage, "so the commodore / ... And the female smuggler are one for evermore."²⁵ Despite her strength and power and success in battle, the text does not record that the pirate Jane was offered an opportunity to agree to or oppose a marriage to the naval official.

In "The Female Warrior," the main character of the story does not have the familial knowledge of sailing that appeared in the life of the Female Smuggler.

This damsel was brought up to read and to write,
But this damsel was never brought up for to fight,
But being gallantly dressed in her royal estate,
She shipp'd on board of the *Union* as mate.

The *Union* came upon a French pirate, off the coast of England, and the captain was killed in a broadside from the pirate, making the young woman captain after just one year of sailing. Battling valiantly against the French, she held on as long as she could, and when the French pirates begged for mercy, she showed them none:

For quarters, for quarters, this French Turk did cry;
But "No quarters! No quarters!" this damsel replied.
"You've had all the quarters that I can afford.
You must fight, sink, or swim, or die by the sword."²⁶

²⁵ W. B. Whall, *Sea Songs and Shanties*. 4th ed. (Glasgow: James Brown & Son, 1920), 30-32.

²⁶ Doerflinger, *Shantymen*, 143-4.

Songs about women at sea are less common than songs about women on shore, but not rare. Like songs about women on shore, the interpretation of their subjects varies dramatically.

As a subject for sailors' songs, women offered an extremely broad range of topics, and sailors' songs easily reflect that range. Sailors sang about women from particular ports or nations, about mothers, sisters, and lovers, and about prostitutes and boarding-house keepers. As they sang about each, they invested their subjects with visions that emphasized the positive or negative aspects of the women. Lovers at home were assumed to be loving, loyal, and true—despite Jack's own activity while at sea—and descriptions of those who made their livings off of sailors invariably carried all the negative stereotypes Jack could incorporate into his song.

When Jack did sing about a loved one, he sometimes included the mention of an individual as another item in an inventory of things that his life at sea lacked, and sometimes he wrote thoughtful, meaningful songs that seem honestly to carry thought and concern for his love at home. Some of these songs still resonate today, and exploration and analysis of these songs can give modern-day historians a better idea of the nature of life at sea.

THE MODERN SHANTY

Sea music is still sung today, though vessels with mechanical propulsion and powerful winches certainly do not need to use hauling shanties. A crew of modern sailors may occasionally need to coordinate their strength and haul together, and in those cases they may use some type of yell. The continuous coordinated hauling work of earlier vessels, however, no longer exists, and sailors have no need for long shanties to keep them pulling together. Today, a coordinating yell like “Two, Six, *Heave!*” will do, even on board reconstructions of historic vessels.¹ Forebitters, however, are experiencing somewhat of a regeneration: many modern shanty singers record albums of their work, travel to sing at international sea shanty festivals, and return with stories of thousands of Polish youths all singing rock versions of “Poor Old Horse” together.

Modern shanty singers not only resurrect and record versions of songs of old, they also write new work, and some examples of this work can express, in a way, a form of symbolic history. Tom Lewis, who has penned many shanties in the past twenty years, often writes of the challenges and pleasures of being a sailor, from the points of view of an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century sailor, and from the eyes of a modern sailor. In “A Sailor Ain’t a Sailor,” Lewis plays with multiple levels of meaning in his terminology:

Well, me father often told me, when I was just a lad,
A sailor’s life was very hard, the food was always bad.
But now I’ve joined the Navy, I’m on board a man-o-war,

¹ Crew on the US Brig *Niagara*, of Erie, Pennsylvania, for example, use this yell when getting a group of volunteer and paid crew to haul together.

And now I found a sailor ain't a sailor any more.

Chorus. Don't haul on the rope, Don't climb up the mast.
If you see a sailing ship, it might be your last.
Just get yer civvies on, for another run ashore,
A sailor ain't a sailor ain't a sailor any more.

The killick of our mess, he says we've got it soft.
It wasn't like this in his day, when he was up aloft.
We like our bunks and sleeping bags, but what's a hammock
for?
Swingin' from the deckhead, or lyin' on the floor.

They gave us an engine, the first went up and down.
Then with more technology the engine went around.
We're good with steam and diesel, but what's a mainyard for?
A stoker ain't a stoker with a shovel any more.

They gave us an Aldis lamp, so we could do it right.
They gave us a radio, we signal day and night.
We know our codes and ciphers, but what's a semaphore?
A bunting tosser doesn't toss a bunting any more.

Two cans of beer a day, and that's yer bleedin' lot,
But now we get an extra one because they've stopped the tot.
So we'll put on our civvie clothes and find a pub ashore,
A sailor's still a sailor, just like he was before!²

The intentional contradictions in this song show how the composer is playing with convention and presenting different ways of describing even fictional sailors of the past. Although this sailor is certainly aware of some nautical terminology, as evidenced by the use of older terms like "killick," "semaphore," and "bunting," the sailor does not know the most basic terms. He calls a "line" a "rope," and speaks of climbing up the "mast,"

² Tom Lewis, *Surfacing* (Salmo, British Columbia: Self Propelled Music, 1987), "A Sailor Ain't a Sailor." Sound recording. The lyrics printed here more accurately reflect the words in the song than do the lyrics printed in the album insert; the latter contain a variety of misspellings and bizarre stylistic conventions that probably do not reflect Lewis' intended lyrics.

rather than up the “shrouds.” He is concerned about falling to the “floor,” rather than to the “sole,” as it is called on board ships. All of these mixed terms must be intentional, and they describe—through song—a new breed of sailors: those who do not know their maritime heritage, much less the terms that sailors of an earlier age have used to identify critical items.

Many modern recordings of true sea shanties present them as traditional folk music, without any type of historical background or contextual placement or description. These songs may be presented in beautiful versions by wonderful singers with professionally trained voices; in such cases the songs are usually sung much slower than would be needed for work, and never with the hardened emphasis that came with the heavy physical labor associated with the song. When shanties or forebitters are sung with instrumentation that did not appear at sea, the works are once again removed from their original nautical element. In nearly all such cases, the lyrics are changed to fit modern norms, and many sexual, racial, or even confusing technical references are modified or removed in performance or in recordings.

Sea music is the work of earlier generations, and it has no practical use on board vessels today. Close reading of the words it presents, however, can be useful in helping social historians to learn more about the lives of sailors during the great age of sail. A still closer reading reveals that sailors expressed themselves differently through different themes in different types of songs. In songs used to coordinate work, sailors described their lives in more negative terms than in songs in which they attempted to celebrate and

brag about their work and their lifestyle. Singing to and amongst themselves, they were more likely to describe life as they actually saw it, and as they knew their fellow sailors saw it. They did not try to hide the myriad difficulties of life at sea, but rather recognized those challenges, and looked forward to trying to get away from the life that was often destroying them.

In songs they sang when they came on shore, however, sailors often tended to present themselves in a manner that more closely approached the way in which they wanted to be presented. On land, having just been paid off and often feeling better with a few drinks in them, they preferred to sing songs that celebrated their lives and made their work look more appealing and interesting than they saw it when they were at sea. Such songs made fun of those less familiar with the sea, and made themselves look more powerful and effective than they probably felt when they were actually at sea.

Of those songs, shanties, forebitters and ballads that have survived to the present day, one can find many different themes running through them, and one might argue nearly any thesis. In fact, sailors expressed many emotions through song, and they discussed numerous ideas and themes that have not been explored in this study. From an overview of the large collection of extant shanties, however, one does see a broad theme, running throughout the works, regarding the manner in which sailors expressed their views of themselves at sea.

The way in which these songs are interpreted can be described as "symbolic history": it is a history that one draws from between the gaps and omissions of recorded

matter, and it explores the varying ways in which people expressed themselves in a range of situations. Perhaps unintentionally, sailors tended to make themselves look better in the songs that came on shore than they did in the songs they sang amongst themselves. The songs of pleasure and of the shore generally depict sailors in a much more positive light than do the songs of work that were used while a ship was at sea. In these songs, sailors tended to focus on the difficulties of their lives and how they hope that things will improve when they get to their next port.

These differences apply to songs written for use on board merchant ships and for songs about women. Although rarely at sea themselves, women played an important role in the lives of sailors and for that reason they are often featured in sailors' songs. Sailors' views of women appear in a variety of manners: sailors wrote "positive" songs that celebrated specific individuals, such as mothers, wives, and lovers left behind, and "negative" songs that described the dangers they saw in groups of women, like prostitutes and others out to steal the little money sailors had when they came on shore.

Sea music today continues to change, grow, and develop, as new musicians apply their musical abilities and interpretations to stories and events of the past. It will never carry the implications of the heavy physical work that it once did, however, and in that way a certain sense of how it was used, and what it meant to the people who used it, whether at sea or on shore, has been lost.

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