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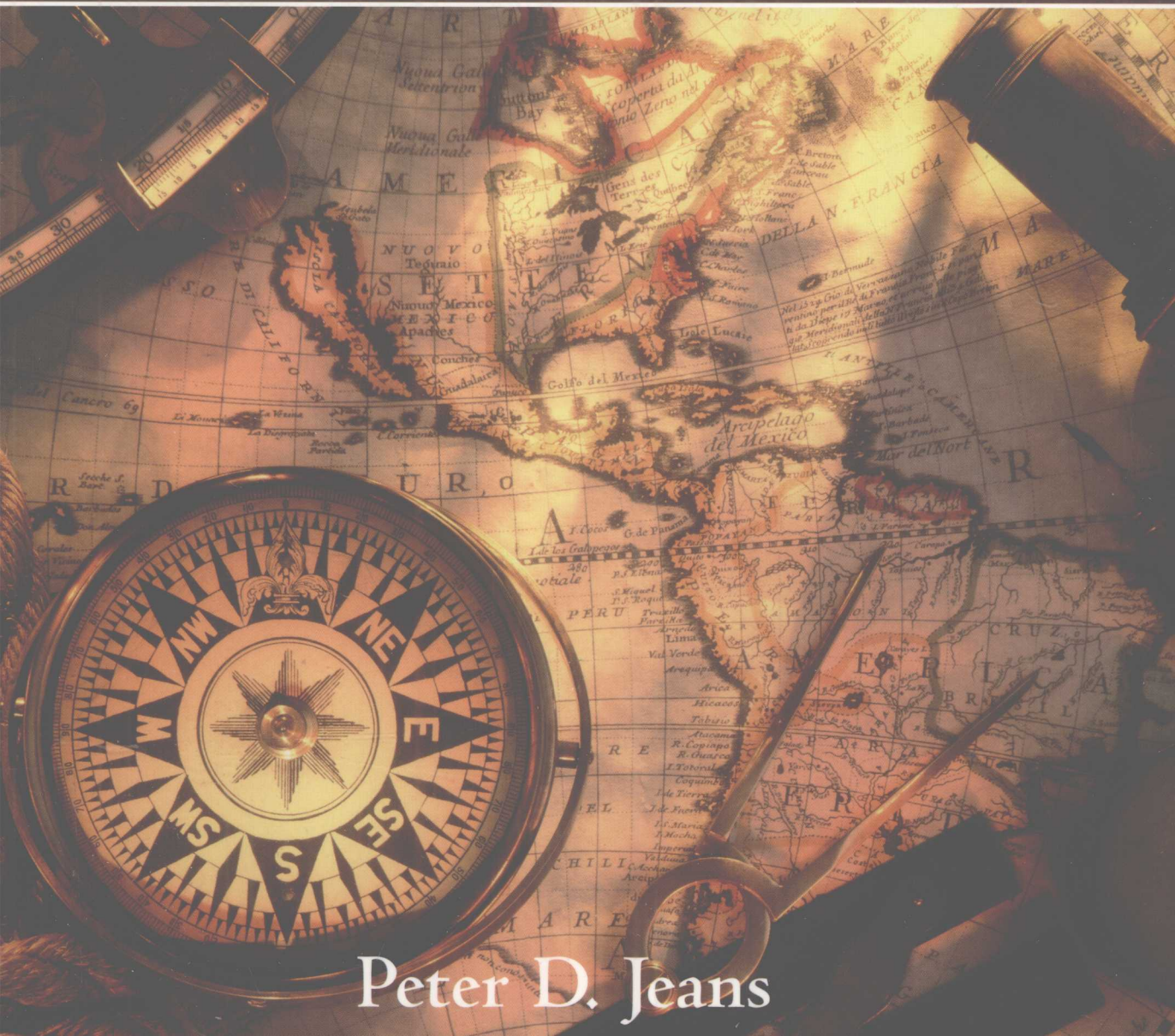
Ship to Shore

A Dictionary of Everyday Words and Phrases Derived from the Sea



Peter D. Jeans

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For Judith, Romony, and Simon

"No man will be a sailor
who has contrivance enough
to get himself into a jail;
for being in a ship is being in a jail,
with the chance of being drowned."

—Dr. Samuel Johnson

Preface

My aim in this work is to illustrate what I believe is the astonishing debt that our idiomatic speech owes to the nautical language of the past. English is extraordinarily rich in metaphor, and it is the intention of this book to show that many of the figures of speech that we use from day to day derive from the language and customs of the sea.

Some of these expressions are very clearly nautical in origin, such as "to come adrift," "beachcomber," "to lose one's bearings," "to blow over," and so on. The remainder, by far the most interesting in this collection, have more or less successfully concealed their nautical background from the light of day: such expressions as "bowing and scraping," "by and large," "off and on," "the devil to pay," "to rummage," and "to flog a dead horse."

I have also included a relatively small number of nautical terms that in themselves are not part of our daily idiomatic coinage, yet because of their prevalence and importance in the literature of the sea are reasonably familiar to the general reader as belonging to matters maritime, such as "flensing," "mutiny," "marooned," and "Davy Jones's Locker."

Some older nautical expressions have lost their currency in our figurative speech and for the most part I have excluded them, but it would be an unfeeling person indeed who could reject out of hand such gems as "to be stabbed with a Bridport dagger," "all Harry Freeman," and "black's the white of my eye"; hence I have included a selection of these phrases because of their metaphorical impact and their historical importance to the language of the seafarer.

This project began through an almost accidental meeting with the nautical origin of the expression "Between the devil and the deep blue sea," which refers clearly enough to the situation where a person is faced with a choice between two risky or undesirable courses of action. What with being menaced by the devil on the one hand and the perils of the sea on the other, the phrase seemed perfectly self explanatory; but when I happened to come across an account of a ship's crew engaged in recaulking the seams of their leaky vessel, with great emphasis being laid on the difficulty of paying and pitching the two seams known as the devil seams, I was intrigued: perhaps the devil in the metaphor was not Old Nick himself, as I had otherwise always believed.

And indeed, this proved to be the case, as the reader will discover in the two entries under *Devil:* "Between the

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devil and the deep blue sea," and "The devil to pay."

Putting aside the expressions that were quite obviously nautical in origin, I then began to pay particular attention to the language used by such writers as Richard Henry Dana (*Two Years Before the Mast*), Frank Bullen (*The Cruise of the Cachalot),* and the contemporary novelist Patrick O'Brian (the "Jack Aubrey" series), to name but a few. In them I discovered that such ordinary, everyday expressions as "to skylark about," "to rummage," "to flog a dead horse," "to break new ground," and hundreds of others discussed in this dictionary were in fact born at sea as part of the jargon that English-speaking seamen have used for many hundreds of years.

How many other words and phrases that we use in our own daily life, I wondered, are in fact coinages from the very different world of the professional seaman? With this in mind I began a search, first through the literature that deals exclusively with nautical expressions (such as Rogers and Lind), and later through those books that treat the seafaring life in all its many aspects (such as Falconer, Harland, Hakluyt, and Kemp).

Armed with a very lengthy list, I then checked each term that was not obviously nautical against the best general and etymological dictionaries to which I had access. A decision to admit any particular term into this present work (or, of course, to exclude it) depended on a combination of what these reference works had to say and what I had learned over a lifetime of teaching English and, in particular, reading very widely in the nautical field.

Some of the most useful texts that I consulted were *The Country Life Book of Nautical Terms under Sail* by Whitlock and others; Falconer's *Universal Dictionary of the Marine,* Smyth's *The Sailor's Word Book,* Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast,* Hakluyt's *Voyages and Documents,* Harland's *Seamanship in the Age of Sail,* Kemp's *The Oxford Companion to Ships and the Sea,* Masefield's *Sea Life in Nelson's Time,* and Morton's *The Wind Commands.*

There are several books available that deal with nautical terms as they are used in our daily speech, but with the exception of Rogers they tend to be shallow in range, superficial in treatment, and rarely do they treat the language background of their subject. This is where, I believe, this present work has something to offer; it is a serious attempt to document a portion of the linguistic heritage that has been passed down to us by whole generations of seafarers, and it offers a clear indication of where the word came from, hence the inclusion of etymologies for most of the terms in this dictionary.

Examples are provided of how these nautical expressions might be used in our ordinary daily speech, together with citations from our literature showing their usage at some particular era in history.

I have tried to position this work for a readership that has an interest in language not necessarily as linguists or language specialists, but as reasonably informed readers who sometimes wonder about the words and expressions that they use in their daily speech. I have also endeavoured to write for those readers who have an interest in the sea, perhaps the professional seafarer, or the sometime voyager, or that much-maligned species, the armchair sailor.

Language has always been of concern and interest to people; it is my hope that this dictionary will encourage an even greater interest in what I consider to be a rich and fascinating topic: the idiom and metaphor that, over the centuries, has been passed on from ship to shore.

A Note on the Organization of This Book

The entries in this dictionary are arranged in alphabetical order (the terms appear in large, bold roman type in the left-hand column of the page). In many cases, various phrases and expressions in which a particular term is used are treated in subentries following the main term (such phrases and expressions are in bold, italic type in the left-hand column). Thus, for example, the term **About** is followed by subentries for ***To bring about, To come about, To go about,*** and so forth.

Cross references often appear at the end of entries to direct the reader to terms that are related by their meaning or etymology. The cross references give the main term to which the reader is directed, and are followed, where appropriate, by a phrase or expression separated from the main term by a semicolon. Thus, for example, the cross reference "See also *About, To come about*" directs the reader to the subentry ***To come about*** under the main term **About.**

Many examples of the modern usage of terms and expressions occur in the text of the entries. In addition, occasional examples from various historical and literary sources appear in the left-hand column, adjacent to the terms they illustrate.

The bibliography includes selected works that were consulted, including such standard references sources as dictionaries; books on the language of seafaring, such as Rogers and Lind; general reference books for those who are interested in various aspects of sailing and seamanship, such as Chapman, Harland, and Whitlock et al.; social histories of the Royal Navy, such as Garrett and Lloyd; first-hand accounts of sea-going experiences, like Dana and Gaby; and seafaring novels that have become classics of their kind, such as Marryat and Smollett.

There are four appendixes. Appendix 1 deals with some two dozen or so prepositional phrases that begin with the Old English *a,* for *on, in, into, to,* or *toward;* a group of words rather peculiar to nautical speech, but not wholly so. They represent the economy of words that is so typical of orders given aboard ship.

Appendix 2 is a sampling of the many words that have had their form and pronunciation altered and modified over centuries of use at sea.

Appendix 3 indicates the extent to which the seaman named the various parts of his ship from the human anatomy, and Appendix 4 similarly lists the words taken from his domestic environment, general environment, and the animal world.

Acknowledgments

I would like to record my deep appreciation to my family for their encouragement and forbearance during the four years that I worked on this book. It takes a certain kind of understanding to be able to live with a person whose passion of the moment demands that the family home be endlessly littered with dictionaries, histories, novels, and the like—anything and everything, as long as it has to do with the sea.

For rather similar reasons I thank my colleagues of the '80s in the English Department at Willetton Senior High School, Perth, Western Australia, each of whom maintained a stoic patience far beyond the demands of duty and loyalty when their every utterance was subjected to an immediate litmus test for nautical parentage.

I warmly thank my original typist, Mrs. Pat Bishop, whose personal interest and professional concern with the original draft made my task of editing so much easier. My daughter Romony has earned my everlasting gratitude for her cheerfulness and skill in keyboarding the whole of the large typescript into the family computer. The title of this book is the result of a brilliant flash of serendipity on the part of my wife Judith.

Various friends have read through parts of the manuscript for me and have made a number of valuable suggestions as to how it might be improved. I am indebted to the following people for their interest and specific ideas: Donald Burnside, Rob and Denise Main, Brendan Mulvey, David Price, and Judy Semple. Terry Woodings went to painstaking lengths in tracking down information about conditions of life in the sailing navy of Olde England, and I thank him here most warmly for his enthusiastic help.

The illustrations that greatly enhance this book were done by Ross Shardlow. His beautiful line drawing of the *Edwin Fox,* which graces the dust jacket, is reproduced here by the kind permission of Challenge Bank Limited, which commissioned the illustration as one of a series of prints depicting vessels with historical connections to Fremantle and Perth. The drawing of the clipper *Flying Cloud* on the endpapers is also from Mr. Shardlow's pen. Ross has given me many hours of his time in enlightening me on some of the finer points of ship design and construction; he has also suggested the inclusion of a dozen or more of the main dictionary entries, and I will always remain grateful for his friendship and for the fact that he so readily shared his extraordinary maritime knowledge with me.

Finally, I gladly acknowledge the encouragement given to me very early in the project by my friend Dr. Andrew Ong, whose enthusiasm for hard work helped to keep me going at my own task.

I would be pleased to hear from readers who have comments, corrections, or contributions that would enhance any possible future edition of this book.

Peter D. Jeans
Perth, Western Australia

Introduction

Words are not simply distilled from the air that we breathe whenever we need them. Rather, language is a living entity, ever-changing to suit different circumstances, moulded not only by its own internal laws of development but also by the influences and demands of the human society that it serves. We are constantly inventing new words and borrowing old ones from other languages, then reshaping them to suit our own needs. As a consequence English is by far the most flexible and fertile of tongues, and its force and variety reflect the character of those individuals and classes of people who have helped create it.

One such group that has profoundly influenced the development of English as a living language are the seafarers—the masters, mates, and matelots—who spent their lives wresting a precarious living from the sea in tall ships driven by the four winds across the oceans of the world. We shall not see their like again, but as a reminder of their passing they have left behind them—those "iron men in wooden ships"—a rich heritage of the metaphor and idiom with which they have written so much of the world's history. It is this *lingua franca* of the sea that has contributed so significantly to the ebb and flow of the landsman's daily speech, a sea-flavoured manner of phrase which it is the purpose of this book to celebrate.

What manner of man was it, then, who had such an impact on the language that we shore-bound folk speak? Where did he come from—unlettered, of obscure birth, and possessed of the most meagre of aspirations? What sort of life did he lead, such that the English-speaking world has raised to him that most noble and enduring of monuments, an honoured place in the ranks of English idiom?

He was many men.

He was the hardy British seaman who ventured into the ice-bound waters of Greenland in the early 17th century to hunt the whale, and a hundred years later he was the seafarer from New England and Newfoundland who pursued the same great beast south to the Antarctic and thence into the Pacific and Indian oceans; he was the grizzled fisherman from Maine and Massachusetts and Nova Scotia, cold and alone in his dory, adrift on the fabled cod grounds of the Grand Banks; he was the maintopman in the South China Sea, driving his tea clipper under a full press of canvas across the heaving oceans to the impatient markets of London; he was the British tar who

roared with excitement when ordered to engage the enemy at Trafalgar, and he was the American foremast jack who, serving under John Paul Jones, rejoiced at the victory of the *Bon Homme Richard* over the British frigate *Serapis* in the war that won independence for his country; he was the mate of the slaver slanting its way across the Atlantic from the Gold Coast to the Caribbean with its cargo of human misery; and he was to be found in the fishing smacks of the Dogger Bank in the North Sea, in the stately full-rigged grain ships working up to Port Pirie in South Australia, in the nitrate and guano carriers beating across the remorseless Pacific, and in the steamers, tramps, and coasters, and thousands of other vessels that since time began have fought their battles or laboured for a livelihood across the seven seas.

He was the man who long, long ago lashed some logs together and paddled out to the distant horizon, where he has remained from that time to the present day patiently practising that most demanding of arts, the conduct of a ship at sea.

This, however brief and ill-told, is the story of all those seafarers who left the English-speaking world a priceless legacy—their language.

During the many conflicts that have engaged the maritime nations of Europe in the past thousand years or more, naval authorities experienced the greatest difficulty in finding crews to man their warships. For one thing there was no such notion as an established, permanent naval force; for another, conditions of service were generally so appalling that having once tasted the rigours of naval life very few men were eager to reenter that service; and finally, when hostilities had ceased, governments had no further use for their seamen so they were then cast ashore in their thousands, to fend for themselves as best they could.

If a man survived his service at sea, and if somehow he did get into port before peace was declared, he still had to run the gauntlet of the much-feared press-gangs.

In England these gangs—groups of ruffians for the most part but given official sanction by the authorities and usually under the command of a naval lieutenant—scoured coastal towns and villages for suitable men to make up the desperately needed ships' crews in time of war. Often these press-gangs operated far inland, and many a country lad enjoying an ale in his local public house after a day in the fields found himself in the clutches of the press gang that evening and on board the naval tender a few days later.

For many such a recruit (he was usually rated as *landsman* until he had acquired the necessary skills of a seaman) this was his first sight of the ocean, let alone a ship, and his introduction to the seafaring life was immediate, usually rough, and often brutal. The bosun's mates would literally beat a certain raw understanding into the newly pressed man with their hated ropes' ends and rattan canes. Every order was accompanied by a curse and a blow to the seaman's shoulders in the belief that each man needed instant corporal encouragement to go about his appointed tasks. Thus to a greater or lesser extent the pressed seaman, and with him the apprenticed midshipman, the fisherman's son, the greenhorn newly shipped into the grain trade, and all those countless other men and boys for whom the sea beckoned—each of them learned the art of seafaring. The vast majority of them came to accept the life and some perhaps to enjoy it, despite the often galling and frequently despotic conditions under which they lived.

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Ever since the epochal discoveries of Christopher Columbus (who in 1492 discovered an astonishing new world in the Caribbean and set the scene for later Spanish hegemony in that part of the hemisphere); of Bartholomew Diaz (who rounded what is now called the Cape of Good Hope in 1488); and of Vasco da Gama (who, following the route pioneered by Diaz, reached India in 1498), the world's trading nations have understood that mercantile—and therefore political—power lay in their ability to maintain some measure of strategic control over their sea lanes. Within a decade of Diaz' first tentative foray into the Indian Ocean, the need for dominance at sea assumed an importance in world affairs that has been challenged successfully only in the second half of the 20th century by the superior technology of air power.

In the American War of Independence, for instance, fought between Britain and the 13 American colonies that had opted to sever their ties with England, naval power was of crucial importance in determining the outcome of the conflict. It is an interesting comment on the social forces at play in England and America at that time to note that the American ships were for the most part manned by volunteers, whereas the crews of the British vessels were frequently made up of men who had been forcibly pressed into the king's service.

The merchant marine, however (with one exception, noted below), never had any need to adopt the press-gang practices that so characterised the navies of the European maritime nations. The British tea traders that raced each other to be first home from China to the London Docks—vessels such as *Cutty Sark* and *Thermopylae*—had crews that were, on the whole, composed of volunteers who for one reason or another preferred that kind of life.

The same can be said of the American whaling ships that scoured the oceans of the world for whale oil, and of the British and American grain ships and nitrate ships—the magnificent square-riggers that have now almost disappeared forever—that added so much to the development of Australia and the Pacific coast of South America in the 19th century: all of them were crewed by men who for the most part had chosen to go to sea.

The fishing fleets of the North Sea and the Atlantic—the drifters, cod-bangers, smacks, schooners, and trawlers that put out in every weather from Hull, Grimsby and Bristol, Halifax, Boston and St John's, and a thousand other ports in between—were manned by men and boys who were fishermen by vocation as were their fathers before them.

The American whalers, too, were a tough breed who went to sea by choice on long voyages that could last up to three years; Herman Melville's novel about Captain Ahab's hunt for the white whale "Moby Dick" is based on his own earlier experiences on the whaler *Acushnet* in the 1840s, and it describes accurately and vividly the hard and unrelenting life that these men led in the whale fishery.

There were, of course, some exceptions to this generalisation about the relative democracy of life in the merchant service of the English-speaking world.

For instance, conditions on many of the 19th century American clippers that plied the Cape Horn route between the American east and west coasts were so brutal (in a livelihood that was already dangerous to begin with), that many a master or his agent had to resort to "shanghaiing"—kidnapping—men into their ships, usually by means of strong liquor or drugs. Only in this way could

shipping owners secure a full complement of men who would otherwise never have chosen to serve in these hard-driving a nd hard-driven hell-ships. Some captains and their officers (the infamous "bucko mates") drove their men with a tyrannical ruthlessness that is difficult to match elsewhere in the annals of the sea. Richard Henry Dana's classic *Two Years Before the Mast* details the horrors that he endured on the brig *Pilgrim* on a voyage from Boston to the Pacific seaboard in 1834.

The shanghaiing of men was in effect little different from the press-gang methods so notably pursued by the British Navy in earlier times; but vicious though it might have been, the system flourished for only a relatively short period in the 19th century when sailing ships, in order to compete efficiently as cargo carriers against tramp steamers, had to acquire crew by any possible means so as to keep up their sailing schedules.

But life on board a sailing ship—whether under the relentless discipline of a naval code or as a result of the usually more benign (but rarely slack) rule of the merchant service—was still one dominated by the pressing needs of war or commerce, and often both at the same time, as well as by the ever-present dangers of the sea.

It was an intense, cheek-by-jowl existence.

In the naval service each man was allotted about fourteen inches of space in which to sling his hammock from the deck beams overhead; for his part the merchant seaman found rest and refuge of a kind on a thin straw palliasse in a bunk, one of a series of narrow wooden shelves arranged in tiers in the forecastle, the dark and dingy and reliably damp quarters assigned to seamen in the ship's bows.

The naval seaman messed in a group of four to eight men in the narrow spaces (known as berths) between the guns; the merchant seaman took his meals in the only space that was specifically allotted to him—the fo'c'sle, his sleeping quarters. In these cramped areas, lit only by a stinking candle or a smoky oil lamp and hemmed in on all sides by the tools of his trade, the seaman ate and drank, made merry, danced, got drunk and, in port, entertained his female acquaintance. He whiled away his off-watch hours by sleeping, yarning with his mess-mates, or by repairing his usually pitiful store of clothing and other personal effects.

The seaman was, above all, a social being, a gregarious animal. He had to be; the conditions of his day-to-day life demanded it. On board a sailing ship it was quite impossible for a man to be alone, to enjoy a private moment of peace or solitude. He necessarily shared with his fellows all the rigours of shipboard life: the wretched food, the sometimes oppressive discipline, and the ever-present dangers of the sea. It is no accident that the concept of male fellowship, what the seaman might have called "mateship," found its greatest expression in the intense confines of the mess and the fo'c'sle.

In a man-o'-war the noise, heat, stench, and violence of a sea-fight was enormous and the labour prodigious. The slaughter was often horrific and it was common for a hard-pressed ship to have her decks running rivers of blood. This was known as the "butcher's bill," the "Price of Admiralty." The merchant seaman, on the other hand, though rarely confronted with exigencies of this kind, nevertheless faced other pressing problems.

On board a grain ship or a nitrate ship, for example, tracking across the wastes of the Indian or Pacific oceans, or a tea clipper racing for home in a bid to be first to market, or a Cape Horner battling the Southern Ocean carrying miners and

mails to California, the search for speed and more speed pushed men, ships, and gear to the limits of endurance and sometimes beyond. Ship owners, beset by rising costs and increasing competition from steamships, sought to offset the one and meet the other by cutting down on food rations, engaging the smallest possible number of men to work their vessels, and demanding even shorter passage-making times from their captains.

These sorts of constraints, coupled with the ever-present threat of fire in such cargoes as grain and coal and wool, made life in the merchant marine just as demanding and dangerous as it was in the naval service; indeed, frequently more so because of the unrelenting pressure of the dictates of commerce on the one hand and, on the other, the smaller crews that were employed, thus placing great burdens on their capacity to handle their ship in time of emergency.

Broadly speaking, sailing ships were worked under a two-watch system (port watch and starboard watch) of four hours each, so that half the ship's company was on duty while the other half was below sleeping or relaxing. In an emergency all hands would be called on deck. The ship's working day began at noon, and the following 24-hour period was divided into four-hour segments of duty. However, the evening watch from 1600 to 2000 (4:00 P.M. to 8:00 P.M.) was broken into two-hour watches so that the men did not have to keep the same watches every day.

The men in each watch were further subdivided into several divisions whereby each group was allotted a particular task, such as working the mainmast, overhauling and cleaning various items of gear and rigging, and so on. Many of the crew did not stand a watch but instead worked at special crafts and tasks about the ship; these people were known as "idlers," although no scorn or contempt was implied by the name.

The men were generally fed abundantly but badly. For hundreds of years nothing was known about the art of preserving food other than the age-old practice of using salt. Consequently the bulk of the provisions taken aboard a sailing ship consisted of salt beef, salt pork, and salt fish. Ship's biscuit—a kind of bread known as hard tack and baked ashore, sometimes many years earlier—was the other staple of the seaman's diet. Weevils soon infested the whole stock and it was necessary to tap each biscuit vigorously on the mess table so as to dislodge the maggots and casts. Quite often the biscuit was yellow and stinking from the urine of rats. Fresh food was rarely obtainable, certainly never on a daily basis; hence the prevalence of scurvy, which was otherwise so easily cured with the vitamin C of fresh fruit and vegetables.

Drinking water was kept in casks where it soon became foul and slimy. Vast quantities of beer were carried to offset the water problem, but it too soon suffered the same fate because of the unreliable means of storage.

Peas, cheese, butter, sometimes raisins, oatmeal, and a few other items also formed a part of the seamen's diet, but in many instances he was defrauded of his proper allowance by dishonest victuallers ashore and a scheming ship's cook afloat. Many a cask of foul green meat, crawling with maggots and swimming in the ooze of putrefaction, had to be thrown overboard within only a week of a ship's setting sail from port. Other foodstuffs were often so old and stale that they were inedible long before they became part of the ship's stores; indeed, one of the seaman's hobbies was carving dry, iron-hard cheese into serviceable buttons and other knick-knacks for his own use. Occasionally livestock was carried on a

long voyage and slaughtered for fresh meat.

It was a hard life—harder, perhaps, than any life ashore. All seamen, whether serving in their country's navy or in the merchant marine, understood the absolute need for discipline afloat. They knew that a slovenly run ship was a hell-ship, where each tier of authority was permitted by default to bully and tyrannise the echelon next below.

Ship-board life was certainly hard and often degrading, but insofar as the men themselves (often referred to by their officers as "the people") were concerned, theirs was not a gratuitous cruelty. Confronted by the unrelenting elements and the dangers of disease and battle, the seaman was forced to adopt a certain hard-nosed attitude toward his lot. Sometimes his life was barbarous and disgusting: he got drunk whenever possible and he conducted his social life aboard on the lowest level of humanity. But for all his ignorance, superstition, simple-mindedness, and brute-like attitude to life, society at sea was never artificial. In at least this one great respect the seaman differed from, and became superior to, his fellow man ashore.

One of the curious things about the seaman of the age of sail—and one comes across this frequently in the literature of the sea—was that no sooner was he ashore, often after a hateful voyage in an unhappy ship, than he was longing to be away to sea again. For the most part they loved their calling, or if "love" is too strong a term, at least they took an inordinate pride in their skills, in their ability to "hand, reef and steer"; and in their own grudging and inarticulate way they respected the sea and could know the beauty of a ship under a full press of canvas.

What brought the seaman low was his love of liquor and his need for female society, both available in endless quantity and variety throughout the bars and bordellos of every seaport in the world. When they had sated themselves what else was there for them? They were different—not of the land. People marked them and pointed them out and took advantage of them. The seaman spoke in the only language he knew, which was the sometimes incomprehensible jargon of the sea. His dress was outlandish, his manners coarse, and he embraced life with a touching but foolish naivete. He did not belong to the society of men ashore. He yearned to be away at sea, and was even willing to accept the rotten food, poor pay, and frequently brutal, man-killing conditions, because then and only then could he be among people he understood.

He was a simple soul: superstitious, God-fearing, profane, uncouth, and often illiterate, gentle with his fellow men on occasion, and strangely moralistic and conservative in his attitude (considering his own prodigious physical appetites), with a strict code of honesty that enabled him to endure the privations of the sea and the fearsome impositions of close-quarters living that marked his life as being so very different from that led by men ashore.

The essential simplicity of the seafaring man (an astonishing trait, considering that many of these seamen were literally men of the world) made him an easy prey for the swindlers, the sly-grog sellers, and the good-time girls, all of whom constituted the only society that he knew, or could possibly know, ashore. He hated these people but he couldn't avoid them. His training and his background—his very life and nature—made him unfit for any but the most basic levels of human society.

His was a different life. He valued above all else the openness and simple if crude honesty of his shipmates. At least he knew where he stood with them. It

was a mateship that he never achieved with men who lived ashore.

The would-be seaman brought aboard with him customs, attitudes, and dialects that often were in marked contrast with those of his fellows. In a relatively short space of time he began to fathom the rudiments of seafaring. The bosun and his mates saw to that. What he learned was the art and sometimes the science of managing ("conducting") a ship at sea. What he contributed in return was a particular kind of speech, a jargon that marked it as being utterly different from the occupational discourse of any other livelihood. Because he was personally so close to the exigencies of life (or death: the two are so nearly the one at sea) he named and peopled his environment with the things that were known to him.

This is a natural reaction. When a man is engaged upon an enterprise—"doing business in great waters" as Psalm 107:23 puts it—that might very well (and frequently did) spell his ruin, he tends to surround himself with the familiar, as a sort of talisman of hope and security.

Hence he sought to interpret events at sea in the light of his previous experiences. He named names from what he already knew. He invented a language and an idiom within that language, and when necessary adapted his own vocabulary so as to enable him to maintain his connections with his past and the now very different present. Various parts of the ship were named from the human body: waist, buttocks, cheeks, eyes, ribs, belly, and dozens more. Gear and rigging were given the names of things from the earlier familiar environment of farm and manor, hearth and village: shoe, floor, hog, lizard, feather, castle, yoke, crown, and many other such homely words.

The jargon of the sea still contained much that was esoteric and just plain gibberish to the landsman newly entered in the ship's books; what, for example, was he to make of "Stand by to wear ship!," "mains'l haul!," "pass the earring!," and a hundred others like these? But he mastered it and in the process of doing so gave to the English tongue perhaps the world's most colourful and expressive idioms.

When he went ashore he spoke in the only way he knew; consequently his discourse was a salty distillation of the sea-going phraseology that came so naturally to him. The oft-quoted story of the sailor's visit to the dentist is not as apocryphal as it might seem; when asked which tooth it is that hurts he replies, "'Tis the aftermost grinder aloft, on the starboard quarter."

The influence of the nautical experience on the English language has been enormous. Whenever seamen forgathered to share a drink or to swap a yarn, and in all their ordinary daily social intercourse with the rest of society, the vernacular of the sea—though it necessarily had to change and adapt to varying circumstances—slowly found its way into everyday speech.

The enduring greatness of the seafarer over the centuries is best typified by the fact that the very coinage of his working life, the verbal warp and weft of his everyday existence, is firmly embedded in the fabric of our native tongue. It is hoped that in some small measure this book will contribute toward an understanding and appreciation of that greatness.

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