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Isaac Land

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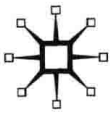

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For Stephanie

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Acknowledgments

This book is a much-revised version of my Ph.D. dissertation, "Domesticating the Maritime" (University of Michigan—Ann Arbor, 1999). Some portions of the dissertation were published as articles or book chapters and do not appear again here. "Bread and Arsenic," "Sinful Propensities," and "Humours of Sailortown" should, perhaps, have found a home between these covers instead. Their omission inevitably leads to a change of emphasis, but my hope is that readers who find this book of interest will eventually seek out those other publications. I moved in new directions after the dissertation was finished; the third and sixth chapters in this book, in particular, are the fruits of that process.

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It is not always an easy matter to obtain permissions to use pictures, as I have learned to my dismay. It seems to be more difficult, not less, in this digital age. I am grateful for the exceptional institutions, such as the Lewis Walpole Library at Yale University, that are fully cooperative with historians and their publishers. Sue Walker at the Walpole deserves special thanks, as does Gabrielle Ganther at the University of Michigan Museum of Art.

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List of Abbreviations

ADM	National Archives (PRO), ADM documents (Admiralty)
BL	British Library
BMC	British Museum Catalogue: M. Dorothy George, *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires Preserved in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum*, vols. 5–11 (London, 1935–1954. Reprint. London: British Museum Publications, 1978).
HO	National Archives (PRO), HO documents (Home Office)
NMM	National Maritime Museum
OIOC	British Library, Oriental and India Office Collection
ODNB	Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (online resource)
POB	Proceedings of the Old Bailey (online resource)
SRO	Scottish Record Office
T	National Archives (PRO), T documents (Treasury)
TWAS	Tyne and Wear Archives Service

Contents

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Introduction

J. E. Cookson, in the opening pages of his book *The British Armed Nation, 1793–1815,* concedes that he spends little time on sailors, but excuses this neglect on the grounds that "the navy does not seem to have impinged on politics, government, and society to nearly the same extent as the land forces, perhaps mainly because of the physical remoteness of seamen in comparison with soldiers and auxiliaries."[1] This is an extraordinary claim. At the height of the struggle with Napoleon, the Royal Navy reached its peak at around 140,000 men.[2] To appreciate the scale of that mobilization, in this same time period a town of just 10,000 people was considered a substantial urban conglomeration. Although London—the great exception—was passing the one million mark, just a few other cities in the British Isles had more than 50,000 inhabitants. Nelson's sailors were drawn from a constellation of occupations—fishing, whaling, and merchant shipping—each of which was a major national industry in its own right. It is hard to see how such a vast mobilization of maritime workers would not "impinge" on society, or would appear in any way "remote" from the daily life of a nation in which the largest cities were, almost without exception, ports. These conscripts and volunteers formed an integral part of a war effort that necessarily centered upon defending *islands* and maintaining contact between those islands and a far-flung *seaborne* empire.

The presumption that seafarers were somehow peripheral has deterred work on sailors and nationalism. Another not very plausible, but still influential, assumption is that a degree of nationalist fervor in the context of military service is self-explanatory. Certainly war loomed large in the experience of sailors for most of the long eighteenth century. H. V. Bowen has remarked that "from 1739

the frequency of war was such that periods of peace could almost be regarded as exceptions to the wartime norm."[3] The thrill of serving on the winning side obviously boosted morale, although participants—facing the vicissitudes of battle—could not know in advance that Britannia *would* rule the waves. It is striking, however, that historians of the French army in revolutionary and Napoleonic France—another military force with a long string of victories to its credit—have found a high degree of draft-dodging and desertion.[4] With that in mind, it is surprising that neither John Brewer, in his work on Britain's fiscal-military state, nor Linda Colley, in her searching analysis of British patriotism, inquired closely into impressment (the Royal Navy's method of conscription) or into the broader problem of the sailor's loyalty.[5]

In fact, many sailors fought the press gang, ran away, or went into hiding, aided by sympathetic members of their communities. Consider the events of August 15, 1811, on the Isle of Man. Thirty-three Manxmen had just been seized by a press gang in the town of Douglas. Following the usual procedure, the gang confined the conscripts in a small holding vessel known as a tender. Lieutenant Commander Thomas Hawkes reported that his tender came under attack from the population of the town. Five hundred people advanced on the pier, armed with sharp sticks and shouting "burn her, sink her, burn her." The tender was immobile in low water, so Hawkes ordered his men to fire into the crowd.[6] The Admiralty and the Home Office could hardly believe that the townspeople had the audacity to assault a King's ship. The people of Douglas, however, believed they were righting an injustice, and sought to retrieve their own kin and family members, which is why the community easily united to confront the officers of the Crown.

On the Isle of Man, "tradesmen of all kinds" left their work in the summer for the herring fishery and subsisted on preserved fish through the winter months.[7] The islanders had explained, in repeated angry petitions over a period of 20 years, that they were only occasional fishermen who did not meet the legal definition of someone who "used the sea." Indeed, they had been considered exempt from the attentions of the press gang in the past. When the Navy ignored this local consensus, the community united against it.[8] The crowd of 1811 believed it had sent enough warnings and was ready for action. At Douglas, the men of the herring fleet appeared not as peripheral *seamen* but as neighbors in trouble, whose injuries were also an insult to the community at large.[9]

The correspondence between the Home Office and the Admiralty contains many additional examples of communities that offered sympathy and outright aid to sailors on the run.[10] The Royal Navy's

dilemma, then, had much in common with the French army described in Alan Forrest's *Conscripts and Deserters.* Many sailors, once pressed, later jumped ship, setting off new rounds of impressment to fill their places. We know that most ships in the Navy were manned below their complement.[11] Britain's Old Regime was fighting for its survival; revolutions were toppling monarchies on every side. Increase the already evident reluctance to man the nation's "wooden walls," and George III could well have ended his life in exile.

Historians have sometimes taken note of British attitudes toward "the Navy" in general terms. This approach often has the effect of obscuring the kinds of conflicts and tensions that I have been describing. The title of Margarette Lincoln's book *Representing the Royal Navy* begs the question: Are we talking about the Navy of the admirals or of the press-ganged conscripts? Lincoln, in fact, is principally concerned with officers of the highest rank (the trial of Admiral Byng for cowardice is a recurring topic, for example); although she includes a chapter on naval chaplains and one on surgeons. When she discusses representations of the common seaman, it is generally from the officer's perspective. Here, Lincoln is discussing the problem of giving orders in an authoritative voice:

> The officer had to get the attention of the men by some such word as "prepare" and then wait for them to reply "ready" before giving the order. This may help to explain why seamen often preferred aristocratic officers since they were more assured in giving commands and instilled confidence.[12]

Perhaps such sailors did exist. We are not, however, going to learn much about sailors who thought differently if we proceed from the assumption that Britain was a hierarchical, deference-driven society where the best officer was one who knew his place instinctively, and knew how to "assure" others that they could expect to stay in theirs.

We might expect that some of the most thoughtful assessments of the sailor's potential *disloyalty* would come from the historians of British plebeian and working-class culture. Yet magisterial works such as E. P. Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class* and Jonathan Rose's *Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* make little effort to tell the story of the "working men who got wet."[13] The notable exception has been the work of Marcus Rediker, often in collaboration with Peter Linebaugh.[14] The difficulty here is that their body of work presents sailors as estranged from the land, belonging more to an Atlantic world than to any particular terrestrial locality.

I have discussed Rediker's ideas at length in Chapter One, but his approach does not lend itself to a deep analysis of how seafaring people might have related to the nation-state, either as its proponents or even as its antagonists.

We are left instead with the historians of the Royal Navy, who have been inclined to approach mass mobilization from the officer's perspective, as an administrative detail or a "manpower problem."[15] N. A. M. Rodger invokes victory itself as evidence that sailors were both loyal and enthusiastic. Some historians have pushed that logic even further, presenting the mere fact of the sailor's service to the nation-state as an unanswerable demonstration of nationalist fervor.[16] Reasoning backward from the outcome in this way is replete with hazards. Have there not been superb fighting forces that actually throve on the terror that they inspired in their own rank and file? To eighteenth-century writers, the Roman legions were a favorite example of this; tragically, the modern world has supplied us with many others.[17]

I agree with Rodger that there is an interesting story to be told about how the Royal Navy enlisted the cooperation and complicity of its sailors.[18] However, it is often hard to disentangle the choice to cooperate from the thread suspending the sword of coercion over one's head. Roughly half of the sailors who served during wartime volunteered, and took an enlistment bonus.[19] How many of these volunteers were anxious to serve the Crown, and how many had simply resigned themselves to service and decided to accept payment as a way to sweeten the inevitable? A similar point could be made about the sailors who, themselves conscripted, later press-ganged other sailors into the King's service. They could savor a moment of power over others rather than reflecting on their own weakness, or as one sailor put it, kicked themselves, they looked around for someone else to "kick in turn."[20]

It is a truism that war and nation-building go well together, but those who made an active choice to serve in the Royal Navy did not necessarily step forward out of enthusiasm for the current King, his ministers, or their laws. As Stephen Conway has wittily observed, the defense of "country" was often a thinly veiled defense of "county."[21] Despite their sometimes nomadic lifestyle, sailors did have hometowns, and Napoleon's threatened cross-channel invasion was only the latest in a series of French attempts to turn France's comparatively large population into a battlefield advantage. At such moments, a captain could inform his crew, without exaggeration, that they were the last best hope against imminent foreign conquest. Such thrilling episodes, like the distracting glitter of parades and illuminations, could elicit outbursts of enthusiasm. Contingent patriotism of this kind, however, could dissipate as quickly

as it arose.[22] It is also not clear that Britons stationed overseas, guarding imperial possessions whose names and histories eluded them, could draw on homeland defense as a convincing rationale for their wartime service. Moreover, the British Isles were not exactly under continuous siege in this period. Unveil a month and year picked at random, and we are likely to find *no* armada gathering in the English Channel.

To nonetheless command the loyalty of large numbers of sailors over long periods of time, the nation-state had to persuade them of its own continuing relevance beyond the time and place of undeniable crisis. Defenders of Britain's Old Regime liked to contend that prosperity ("the roast beef of Old England") and cherished freedoms were safe only as long as the 1688 settlement was preserved. This old standby unexpectedly gained fresh relevance in the years following 1789, when the French alternative began to look positively unsettling. Seizing this opportunity, George III and his ministers grew more sophisticated and systematic in their efforts to court public opinion.[23] Deliberate attempts to foster conservative populism could, however, have unintended consequences. Claims that the war with France was necessary to avoid a foreign tyrant trampling on familiar laws and customs could not have been reassuring to many of the inhabitants of Douglas, for example. The violence and seeming arbitrariness of impressment—however justified by wartime expediency—forfeited one of the nation-state's best arguments, that it was the best guarantor of domestic tranquility. If, as the proverb put it, "the Englishman's home is his castle," then the press gang trampled on sacred liberties every time they crossed a threshold.

When the regime overreached itself, it sought to compensate sailors for their present troubles by promising them tranquility in the future. The press gang's apologists were quick to bring up the benefits of naval service, notably Greenwich Hospital, where disabled or "superannuated" veterans could find shelter and support. In the 1790s, William Pitt commissioned the popular songwriter Charles Dibdin to write sea songs assuming the voice of a patriotic and grateful sailor. These songs were performed to packed houses in London theaters and also circulated widely as cheap illustrated broadsides.[24] However, Dibdin's promises of a berth in Greenwich Hospital for the nation's wounded heroes must have rung false to sailors who had met one of the many naval veterans who had been unable to persuade the authorities that they were, indeed, eligible for entry there.

The nation-state, then, faced a difficult challenge; if it relied on naked force to man its fleet, it risked open conflict with entire communities, as well as alienating many of its own frontline defenders. If, however, it drew in enthusiastic volunteers by making sweeping

claims and ambitious promises, it was setting itself up for a backlash from disillusioned sailors. In 1797, resenting their low wages, the sailors at Spithead (Portsmouth) refused to sail, even though both the Dutch and the French had assembled invasion fleets. Demonstrating superb discipline and coordinated action, the sailors mutinied all at once, sent the officers on shore with a minimum of bloodshed, and proceeded to negotiate for redress of their grievances.[25]

If—as at Spithead—the spirit of wartime solidarity could actually be mobilized *against* the government, then perhaps the prudent course was to replace the dangerous rhetoric of the collective good with appeals to individualism and self-interest. A prime example of this tactic was awarding "prize money," granting sailors a share of the cash value of any enemy vessel that they helped to capture. Adam Smith called it "the lottery of the sea"; some sailors would make a calculated decision to serve their country, gambling that the chance for personal enrichment outweighed the discomforts of life on a King's ship in wartime, not to mention the risks of dismemberment or death.[26] Prize money, like Greenwich Hospital, was billed as another fine benefit of national service, but this practice was also a candid admission that some sort of immediate incentive to fight, and fight well, was necessary. Sailors, like other Britons, were not indifferent to what they could do for their country, but they were at least equally interested in what their patriotic service could do for them.

Linda Colley's famous analysis of British identity, of course, takes this insight as its point of departure. [27] In the spirit of Adam Smith's calculating volunteers, Colley proposed that war was the great unifying force behind Britishness, which she argued had emerged only in the eighteenth century, following the formal union with Scotland. She portrayed a nation composed of rival factions (the Scots prominent among them), each of which sought to further its own interests by advancing its own claim to be the greatest contributor to the patriotic struggle against Britain's rivals for global supremacy. Colley proposed that this model of Britishness showed why diverse groups (such as the Scots, or the nascent middle class) might prefer to collaborate with the government rather than dwelling on past grievances or fomenting rebellion. Colley acknowledged that Britishness remained beyond the reach of most Irish Catholics—the struggle against France was often expressed in terms of a Protestant holy war against the Continent's Papists—but argued that her thesis did help to explain why an oligarchic and sometimes repressive regime could command a broad enough base of support elsewhere in the British Isles that it was able to survive in an age of revolutions. Colley suggested that a wide variety of activities, even

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