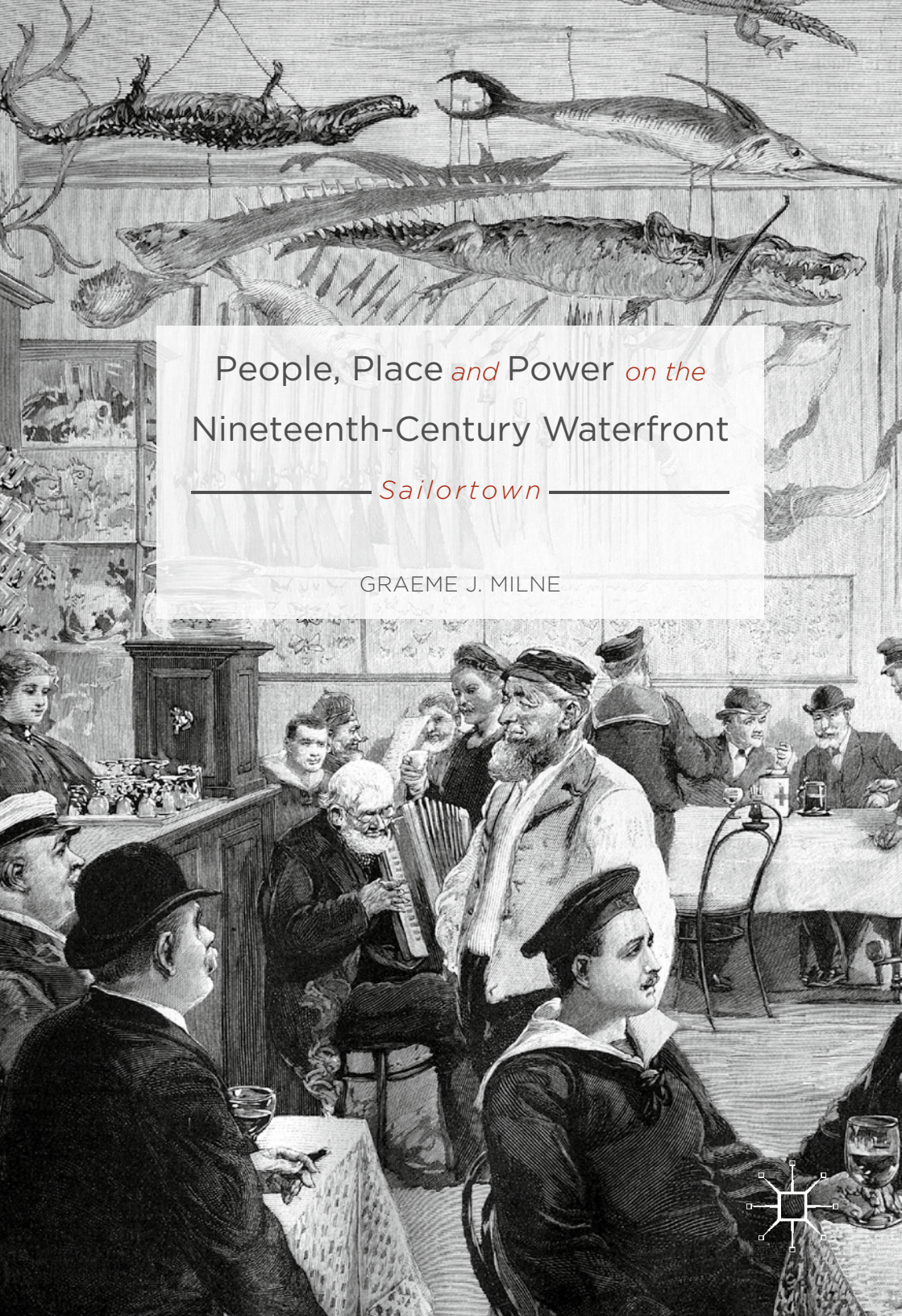

# People, Place *and* Power *on the* Nineteenth-Century Waterfront

## *Sailortown*

GRAEME J. MILNE

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*Respectfully dedicated to the world's seafarers.*
*Their lives are different now, but not different enough.*

# Preface

This book is about life in the waterfront districts of seaport cities in the nineteenth century. In writing it I have benefited from work done by many scholars, and my debts are evident in the footnotes. I also owe a lot to people who read my earlier drafts or listened to me talk, and who offered thoughts and advice. Others helped me do my job more generally during these years, which in turn made time for research and writing. Of course, none of them is responsible for the way I have used their research and ideas. Thank you: Di Ascott, Laura Balderstone, Brad Beaven, John Belchem, Ray Costello, Dave Cotterill, Liz Crolley, Tim Crumplin, Yvonne Foley, Val Fry, Sheryllynne Haggerty, Jon Hogg, Gail Howes, Aaron Jaffer, Alston Kennerley, Stephen Kenny, Lucy Kilfoyle, Isaac Land, Rachel Mulhearn, Jon Murden, Sarah O'Keeffe, Graham Oliver, Mark Peel and Michael Seltzer. Thanks also to the organisers of conferences and seminars where some of these ideas were first aired: Sam Davies and Mike Benbough-Jackson for the Centre for Liverpool & Merseyside Studies conference in Liverpool; the British Commission for Maritime History seminar in London; the Centre for Port and Maritime History conference in Liverpool; Richard Gorski for 'The Health and Welfare of Seafarers' in Hull; and my own department in Liverpool for giving me a place in their seminar series. I am always grateful for the ideas and encouragement offered by audiences at such events.

As the footnotes demonstrate, I could not have written this book without the help of archivists and librarians, most particularly those of the University of Liverpool; the London School of Economics; the National Archives at Kew; the British Library; the Liverpool Record Office and Central Library; the Maritime Archives and Library (National Museums

Liverpool); the London Metropolitan Archives; the Women's Library; and Glamorgan Archives. In addition, parts of the book would have taken much longer were it not for the efforts of libraries and publishers in the past decade in creating digitised copies of major sources.

This book also benefited from ideas generated by related projects, and from other parts of my work at the University of Liverpool. I am particularly grateful to the Arts & Humanities Research Council for funding 'Mapping Memory on the Liverpool Waterfront Since the 1950s', a collaborative project with National Museums Liverpool and the filmmakers Re-Dock; and also 'Atlantic Sounds', a research network led by Catherine Tackley of the Open University. Students on my urban history modules raised intriguing ideas about nineteenth-century city life in seminars and essays, and encouraged me to keep digging. I want to thank Brigitte Resl, then Head of the School of Histories, Languages & Cultures, for approving an extra semester of research leave after a period when I had several administrative roles, enabling me to complete the first draft of this book sooner than would otherwise have been possible. Those roles gave me many new colleagues to work with in our student experience, recruitment and admissions teams, and I will always appreciate their kindness to me and their hard work for our students.

Some brief notes on writing and style might be useful. People in the nineteenth century could rarely decide whether to use seamen's or seaman's mission, Sailor's or Sailors' Home, and the like. In quotations, I have used whatever form was in the source, otherwise I have just chosen one version and applied it, even to the titles of specific institutions, which were not themselves consistent. I have also capitalised Sailors' Home just to make it clear that I am referring to the formal institutions that were built in most ports, and not because I think those forbidding edifices are more important than the humble boarding houses that so many seafarers preferred. Money has been left in whatever £/s/d or $ amount appears in the original, with no attempt at conversion or updating. Most importantly, there are a large number of names and places in this book. I wondered whether to cut the names and locations that are not really necessary for the argument, and simply refer to 'a sailor', or 'a San Francisco crimp'. I had to do that anyway where no name is attached to a particular piece of testimony. In the end, though, I felt it was important to give the people of sailortown their names whenever I could. It seems an important counterweight to the way they were often treated at the time and since, as an anonymous underclass. I hope this decision makes the book more human without making it harder to read.

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CHAPTER 1

# Introduction

Sailortown was the place where the seafarer came on shore, where the maritime and urban worlds collided. It was shocking and thrilling, dangerous and liberating. To the seafarer, it offered freedom from the hardships of work at sea, but posed all manner of threats to his body, wages and soul. To shipowners and ships' captains, it was a corrupting influence that damaged their workforce, while also providing cheap and easy ways of recruiting seamen, no questions or obligation asked. Boarding-house keepers, bar-owners, outfitters, prostitutes and petty crooks all made money in sailortown, if they could avoid the criminality they helped create. Government officials knew that an effective seafaring labour force was crucial to globalising economies, and a strategic necessity in time of war; they struggled, however, to regulate such transient populations in sailortown. Missionaries and philanthropists saw a pit of depravity to be cleansed, but were unsure if the seafarer was a perpetrator or a victim.

Sailortown was a phenomenon rooted in a particular time. It rose and fell with the age of sail, and especially with the expansion of the world's trading systems to a global reach in the second half of the nineteenth century. For a few decades, from the 1840s to the 1910s, sailortown districts with similar (and already partly mythic) characteristics could be found in major ports worldwide. The impact of merchant seafarers on the economy, culture and society of seaport towns was profound, as was the mark made by that shore-based society on the seafarer as he came and went. Much commentary then and since stresses separation and exclusion, with seafarers seen as men apart from the rest of society, and waterfront communities



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as adrift from the urban mainstream. But sailortown is better understood as a frontier zone rather than a rigid border, defined by crossings, not by barriers.[1] In addition, because so many different interests had a stake in it, sailortown was a constructed and invented place, selectively pictured, mapped and represented to carry the weight of its critics' political and cultural arguments.

Just as it was debatable territory in its own time, sailortown now offers us a laboratory for studying important historical tensions and transformations. We are increasingly familiar with the nineteenth century as an era of trade, migration, information flows and networks, but also of persistent locality on many levels. The intense particularity of trans-national connections is a seeming contradiction, but actually essential to understanding how people built wider perspectives from everyday concerns. Sailortown's complex relationships offer human angles on social and cultural patterns that are often discussed at a more aggregate level in the economic histories of the period.

This chapter sets out the questions and themes of the book, explaining its structure and suggesting ways in which the history of sailortown can test some recent thinking about the globalising and urbanising world of the nineteenth century. It is also important to introduce the voices of sailortown, considering how difficult it can be to find the views of seafarers and their associates amid the polemical noise. The final section takes a brief tour of the world's sailortowns, establishing the key locations in which the events and processes discussed throughout the book took place, and which provide the empirical evidence for its arguments.

## Literatures, Entanglements and Spaces

Stan Hugill's *Sailortown*, published in 1967, is still the starting point for anyone approaching this topic. One of the last mariners to work on British deep-water sailing ships, Hugill was also an authority on sea songs and a gifted painter.[2] At first glance, his book is a collection of tall tales, romanticising the riotous waterfronts of the nineteenth century, but closer reading reveals a perceptive text with a solid evidence base. Hugill gathered seafarers' remembrances, mostly from older men he corresponded with, and mined published memoirs for references to time on shore. He set out a convincing periodisation of sailortown's development, from the booming waterfronts of the sailing-ship era, through marginalisation in the age of steam, to the obsolescence and sanitisation of the dockland zone

in the mid-twentieth century. Hugill also identified important tensions and paradoxes, stressing local diversity while recognising that sailortowns everywhere had similarities because of British dominance of the shipping industry. He understood the seaman's dilemma in confronting a threatening, dangerous and controlling place that nonetheless offered liberty from the privations of work at sea.

Sailortown historiography has gradually expanded since the 1980s. Judith Fingard's *Jack in Port* focused on the experiences of merchant mariners in Canada's eastern seaports, making particular use of local newspapers to explore the social history of the waterfront.[3] Conrad Dixon's article on crimping—the exploitation of mariners by boarding-house keepers and others—opened up that crucial aspect of the sailortown economy to proper scrutiny.[4] Valerie Burton's work discussed representations of masculinity in sailortown, an important part of seafarer identity when escaping from the (usually) all-male world of the ship, and a central element in public fears of sailors.[5] There are also valuable articles about certain groups of seafarers in sailortown, often focusing on a single nationality.[6] Historical geographers have published useful work on urban spaces near waterfronts, building on an earlier recognition that docks and wharves are only part of a seaport, and that the area slightly inland, 'where land use clash is most likely to occur', also offers key lessons.[7] More generally, sailortown appears across the diverse literatures of waterfront life, such as maritime labour, philanthropy, crime, drink, architecture and prostitution. All that work has great value and is heavily used throughout this volume, although its authors can only engage with the sailortown phenomenon in passing. Finally, it needs to be stressed that this book focuses on commercial seafaring and the seaports that handled it. Naval ports, fishing ports, whaling stations and river ports all had their own patterns of transient labour and dangerous reputations, and have since inspired historical fields of their own.[8] Nineteenth-century whaling may well have been the most multinational of all industries, for example, and navy ports continue to experience aspects of sailortown to this day. Waterfront streets also played host to the millions of migrants who made this period one of extraordinary mobility and mixing, but whose temporary presence is often hard to find in the sources. Explaining any of these properly requires specialist studies, and this book cannot cover that ground.

A new look at sailortown offers valuable evidence for broader questions about the building of the modern world. Sitting at the frontier between maritime and urban histories, it can bridge disciplines and create

new perspectives. Histories of oceans, travel and global connections have become common, partly because scholars are seeking the roots of current concerns about globalisation, migration and permeable borders.[9] Such work builds on earlier traditions of writing about trade, mobility, labour and empire, often by geographers and economic historians.[10] There is a desire to move beyond studying nation states, focusing instead on alternative frames of vision, not least maritime connections and the experiences of coastal societies. Powerful as such work has been, there is of course a danger that it simply replaces one artificial boundary with another, and that writing about 'the Atlantic', for example, creates another closed space and struggles to understand people who moved more widely still.[11]

The most recent scholarship often adds a conceptual layer derived from the various 'turns' that historical research has taken in the last quarter-century or so. In particular, we can study the interactions of seafarers and their associates with a stronger toolkit of ideas about gender and race, while seeing their daily lives better through knowledge of how human societies operate in space and place, as well as over time. Not least, trans-national, post-imperial and cultural perspectives on maritime histories demonstrate the need to study how coastal societies are connected by the oceans, as well as human activity on the oceans themselves.[12] Historians, geographers and literature scholars have charted the lives of individuals who moved among nations and empires, at a time when the boundaries and definitions of those constructions were becoming more debatable.[13] Culturally, some of the common features of sailortown districts worldwide point to a degree of convergence in waterfront society, which offers an alternative to the better-known integration of high culture at the *fin de siècle*.[14]

The presence of sailortowns in port cities worldwide tests ideas about Europe in Africa and Asia, and vice versa. It is no coincidence that sailortown's 'heyday' in the nineteenth century was an era of shifting perspectives on race, nationality and ethnicity, not least because increased mobility challenged individual identities and allegiances. Much of this great collision of forces had to be played out in the daily work of seaport cities. Historians are becoming more interested in those interactions of people and societies rather than states and institutions. Such non-state actors can offer a trans-national, as opposed to international, version of global history.[15] Strangely, though, the sizeable literature on port cities has made little use of seafarers and their associates. There is work on the planning and building of seaport cities, revealing the symbolic importance of the monumental waterfronts that face visitors coming from the sea,

but the impact of that built environment on the seaman is hard to find.[16] Historical demographers often neglect mariners, who for obvious reasons are even less visible than most people in the sources.[17] Port cities are often assumed to be multi-cultural and cosmopolitan, but exactly how those ideas manifested themselves in a time of rapid change raises another set of issues for sailortown to cast light on. Although most urban history research into trans-national connections and mobility has focused on the twentieth century, the diversifying maritime labour force of earlier decades offers evidence to push those frameworks back in time, especially when seafarers' experiences on shore are brought into sharper focus.

This book is structured around three threads in these wider literatures. First, it explains sailortown through a number of entanglements, all of which involved the seafarer, and the people and institutions he met on shore. 'Entanglement' is chosen deliberately here in place of 'encounter', which is perhaps the more familiar term for meetings at the boundaries of cultures and societies.[18] Entanglement seems to better convey the ongoing patterns of these relationships, and their shifting mix of interconnection, mobility, conflict and compromise over time. Although the word can have negative connotations, that is not the assumption here, and some seafarer entanglements were voluntary and positive, often depending on the degree of agency that the seafarer could exert in a given situation. Questions of ownership and autonomy were crucial, as seafarers struggled to manage their own labour, leisure, time and money. They did this in the face of interference and exploitation, and also the help and support that seemed just as problematic to them. Seamen were well aware of the dangers of sailortown and the threats that awaited them there, but valued its relative freedom with a mix of resignation, fatalism and optimism.

Second, these entanglements were played out in a set of spaces. On one level, this is a descriptive convenience: it is obvious that seafarers and their associates interacted in spaces, ranging from the global maritime labour market all the way down to the streets, alleys and boarding houses of seaport towns. However, these are not just patterns imposed by historians. It is clear from the source material that many of those who lived in, visited and studied sailortown were intimately aware of the spatial implications of their activities, although of course they did not express those ideas in our current specialist language. In addition, the players in sailortown's dramas were able to mould, use and control spaces to their advantage, despite the power of the state and the shipping industry to constrain these opportunities.

Historical geographers have long been familiar with these ideas applied to urban space more generally, and the recent 'spatial turn' taken by cultural historians can seem oddly separate from that existing body of work.[19] Nonetheless, sailortown's potential for testing concepts such as the social production of space is clear. Some of the most revealing work on this point traces its theoretical origins to the writings of Henri Lefebvre, who argued that space cannot be properly understood as a passive, pre-existing location in which social relationships are played out. Rather, it is itself produced by the interaction of several forces. Political power tends to produce spaces that have narrow, prescribed functions which are easier to control; planning and engineering are enlisted to implement and consolidate such forces; and then there is a lived level that threatens to subvert the overall conception. Any truly radical change in a society can only be achieved by producing a different space, and not merely altering an existing one produced by the ruling elite. Movements and ideas face a 'trial by space', and they will fail if they cannot produce a space of their own devising. Crucially—in a point sometimes missed by commentators—Lefebvre was insistent that these ideas had to be rooted in the physical environment. An understanding of buildings and spaces that are actually lived and worked in is vital, and should not be lost in the tendency to see the city as a text to be read in abstract or literary terms.[20]

The third thread running through all these entanglements and spaces is that the people of sailortown lived in a world of representation, performance and stereotype. Here, Laura Tabili's work is consistently thought-provoking. Focusing on Asian, African and Middle Eastern seafarers, and on migration, work and the state more generally, Tabili argues that there was nothing inevitable, latent or inherent about the discriminatory frameworks surrounding seafarers in the early twentieth century. Racism and its related prejudices are created and learned, so need to be explained, not assumed.[21] The same is true of the other constructed attitudes involved in making sailortown. Seafarers, boarding-house keepers, women working as prostitutes—all the stock characters of sailortown had stereotypes attached to them before sailortown's growth to global significance in the mid-nineteenth century. Whoever they were as individuals, they had to live with that inherited image even while they tried to overcome it, and we can struggle to find sources that let us get beyond layers of other people's perspectives. It seems clear, though, that some of the most extreme discrimination and exclusion experienced by waterfront residents in the twentieth century were the product of old ideas about sailortown feed-

ing into developing racial and gendered prejudices. Understanding the construction of the seafarer's image in the nineteenth century will help us trace the building of wider divisions subsequently. Ideas about sailortown did not create racism or the range of stereotypes about fecklessness and vice that we encounter in depictions of waterfront folk, but they helped produce particularly virulent forms of those prejudices.

Each chapter of this book therefore examines a key entanglement, and considers the extent to which it produced the space known as sailortown. The first entanglement is in many ways the one that created all the others, because there would have been no sailortown without the peculiar relationship between seafarers, the shipping industry and the global maritime labour market. As Chap. 2 reveals, the image and reputation of the seafarer was moulded by propaganda from shipowners, unions, charities and political commentators, with the seafarer always struggling to make himself heard. The seafarer's image was central to the development of the sailortown phenomenon, and vice versa. The maritime workforce grew and diversified in the nineteenth century. It absorbed a remarkable pace and scale of change, not least in making the transition from sail to steam. Yet the industry retained archaic practices that were at the heart of the sailortown phenomenon, and its culture was a complicated amalgam of liberty and coercion. Seafarers were employed by the voyage and paid off at the end with a lump sum in cash and no further obligation: despite such insecurity, many seamen thought this gave them greater freedom than shore workers. They could travel the world, yet be imprisoned for deserting their vessels, and were sometimes subject to tough physical discipline on board. As work on steamships became more common, fewer good seamen volunteered for the harsher life on sailing ships. Sailortown became a place of intense competition for the seaman's labour and, in a real sense, for his entire physical being, because once he was on a ship at sea, he could not leave his workplace, and his status as a free worker was compromised. So this fundamental entanglement of the seafarer and his industry sets the foundations for why sailortown was such a battleground over the seafarer, his image and his representation.

Chapter 3 examines the entanglement between the seafarer and those he met on the waterfront. The duality of sailortown, its freedoms and its dangers, was rooted in the seaman's wages. Seafarers spent flamboyantly on drink, entertainment, clothes and prostitution to celebrate their liberation from the ship. An entire economy of consumption and leisure grew up to help them do this, and, whenever sailors could not be tempted,

they might simply be robbed in sailortown's shadow economy of exploitation, theft and violence. The streets and bars of sailortown were spectacularly busy places, as crowds clustered round the key locations where the incoming seafarer had most cash. Sailortown was also a cosmopolitan place, although in strange ways that mixed the ideologies and institutions of race, nation and empire with a strong British aspect the world over, because of Britain's dominance of deep-water shipping. Asian and African seamen in western cities experienced a mixture of racism, Christian evangelism, and moral panics about opium, gambling and mixed marriages. European and American seafarers on shore in Africa and Asia had to negotiate another set of boundaries, facing bewildering racial and social hierarchies in cities such as Shanghai and Hong Kong.

Ultimately, the seafarer needed an ally in sailortown if he was to enjoy some time in port and then find his next job. Chapter 4 explores the entanglement of the seafarer with the boarding-house keepers, outfitters and others, collectively known as 'crimps'. Crimps came to personify the dangers and evils of sailortown, and they were convenient bogeymen for missionaries and shipowners. However, almost all we know of them comes from the writings of their enemies, and they are overdue reconsideration. Ranging from broadly honest providers of a safe home in port all the way to simple thieves, the smarter crimps gave the seafarer what he needed on shore for a price that was expensive without actually being extortionate. They constructed a mythology of themselves as defenders of the seaman against the real criminals of sailortown, and against the iniquities of shipowners.

The key location in the seafarer's struggles with the crimp was the seamen's boarding house, part of the broader idea of 'home' considered in Chap. 5. Much of the moral-reform effort in sailortown focused on providing respectable alternatives to the boarding house. Sailors' Homes and a plethora of religious and charitable institutes worked to change the seafarer by setting an example of respectable living space. They constructed impressive buildings that deliberately loomed over the bars and boarding houses, and by the early twentieth century had created an institutional cityscape in the larger seaports. Needless to say, many seamen were suspicious of people trying to save them. Seafarers had their own ideas of home, and their ability to build family lives in difficult circumstances is a forgotten aspect of their time on shore, lost in the rhetoric of 'Bachelor Jack' the footloose sailor. Seafarers' wives juggled fragile combinations of work and credit, as well as having to deal with the disruption of having a man

at home periodically. There is also evidence of pragmatic, long-lasting but unconventional relationships that are still hard to interpret through the filter of middle-class Victorian commentary.

Chapter 6 turns to the role of the state in sailortown, and the ways that the seafarer was embroiled in a developing culture of surveillance, policing and documentation as the century went on. Sailortown's dangers encouraged pioneering official thinking about the permissible uses of public and private space, and the appropriate role of state intervention in negotiations between individuals, particularly in relation to accommodation, drink and prostitution. Some of the early moves towards systematic identity documentation were tested on seafarers, as states became anxious about identifying transient seamen, fixing their locations, establishing their nationality and monitoring their employment records. This developed further with the rise of nationalistic and anti-immigrant ideologies, and black seafarers especially were subject to increasing levels of documentary scrutiny in the twentieth century.

Finally, Chap. 7 considers sailortown's legacies in the decades after the First World War. By then, large numbers of seafarers had regular work on predictable steamship routes, and were regarded as a part-time resident working class in their home ports, rather than a transient rabble. The old sailortowns were run-down areas full of pubs and nautical stores, often with a red-light street and a grubby reputation, but no longer with much capacity to shock. During the Second World War, the dislocation of seafarers from their usual routes, heavy casualties in the merchant marine, and the bombing of docklands provoked another round of state and charitable intervention, as officials feared a return to the worst excesses of the nineteenth century. Thereafter slum clearance and successive efforts at inner-city regeneration wiped out the old sailortowns, although near-waterfront areas still have some of the most excluded residents of seaport cities. By the very end of the story, this is no longer an entanglement between the seafarer and sailortown but between poor ethnic-minority communities and remarkably persistent prejudices rooted in sailortown myths.

While a book's structure should help to explain key patterns and answer questions, it inevitably imposes other divisions, perspectives and priorities in turn. This volume is organised around the seafarer and his experiences, because the sailortown phenomenon would not have existed without him. In making that clear, though, it risks marginalising those who only appear in the book as associates of the seafarer. These are people about whom we know relatively little anyway, so the fact that they are here at all raises

their historical visibility. Nonetheless, it can seem to add further injury to their neglect, particularly because it means that this is mostly a book about men. A small number of seafarers were women in the sailortown era, and their numbers grew later in the century among the catering and service personnel on passenger liners. This brought a new set of issues to the transition from sailortown to more respectable port city lives.[22] For most of the nineteenth century, however, and especially in the sail sector, the overwhelming pattern was one of a male world at sea meeting a more female one on shore. There is no intention here to demean or belittle those whose presence is secondary to that of the seafarer in the structure of this book, and hopefully what follows establishes a foundation from which other scholars can adopt a different focus, and put those actors centre stage in their own stories.

## Voices

Sailortown's great amalgam of peoples and cultures inspired all manner of writing. Much mid-nineteenth-century commentary came from those seeking to blame mariners for sailortown excesses, or to portray them as innocent dupes and victims, exploited by a parasitic underclass. It was a favoured case study for social reformers campaigning against drink, crime and prostitution in the Victorian city, and for xenophobes and eugenicists who feared immigrants, foreign workers and racial mixing. Early in the twentieth century, it was discovered by anti-modern nostalgics seeking quaint townscapes, and took on yet another range of meanings. Of course, most of this was written about the citizens of sailortown rather than by them. Our problem is not that sailortown folk are absent from the sources but that their voices are hard to hear. Seafarers were better known than many 'unskilled' working men of the period, and women working as prostitutes also attracted attention on a considerable scale. Indeed, the interactions of those two groups fascinated and appalled reformers and officials in port cities. Boarding-house keepers, bartenders and their associates had a lower profile, but even they were familiar characters to newspaper readers, especially during political controversies over shipping safety and the strength or weakness of the merchant marine.

Those issues of maritime political economy were often the starting point for debates about sailortown, and this has fundamental implications. Sailortown became controversial because it was a useful target for shipowners, state officials, charities and—eventually—maritime trades unions, all

debating the direction of the shipping industry. Because the British merchant marine was by far the world's largest in this period, its affairs were scrutinised by British Parliamentary Committees and Royal Commissions. This generated a huge volume of crucial evidence, albeit created in relatively narrow circumstances. Committees normally heard testimony from employers and officials, and were slow to listen directly to working people. The 1860 Select Committee on the Merchant Marine, for example, heard thirty-nine witnesses, twenty-five of whom were shipowners. Despite extensive discussion of desertion and the 'quality' of the labour force, no seafarers were called as witnesses.[23] Later in the century, seamen's leaders began lobbying for a presence in front of official enquiries. James Fitzpatrick, a fireman who led demonstrations in the Bristol Channel ports in the 1880s, claimed that well-attended public meetings had 'already had the effect of getting several practical seamen summoned to give evidence before the Royal Commission on Loss of Life at Sea'.[24] By the time of the 1896 inquiry into the manning of merchant ships, seamen and firemen (twenty-three of each) outnumbered shipowners (twenty-four) as witnesses. Shipowners still dominated proceedings, not least because their representatives and allies continued to sit on the committees as well as attending as witnesses, but we do begin to hear the voices of seafarers.[25]

Other sailortown folk, however, rarely gave testimony to such bodies. William Graffunder, a Cardiff boarding-house keeper, invited himself to the 1896 committee, but he was an unusual case. The women of sailortown were hardly heard at all. Those absences made it easier for shipowners and seafarers to scapegoat boarding-house keepers and prostitutes than to address their own differences in the committee rooms. Indeed, this fitted a broader pattern of diversionary debate in the industry. Crimps were a godsend to seaport business elites seeking to distract attention from low wages and poor conditions.[26] Shipowners denied responsibility for safety standards and the well-being of their workers, blaming boarding-house keepers who supplied drunk and incapable seamen. Reformers in turn pushed state institutions to take charge of systems for paying seamen, rather than face the harder battle of confronting a plethora of shipping firms and waterfront landlords. Seafarers' unions preferred to attack crimps and government officials than confront shipowners, not least because they struggled to organise their fiercely independent members.[27] While there is a huge body of official evidence touching on sailortown, therefore, most of it is limited in its underlying source base, and was generated through narrowly blinkered assumptions.

Such evidence underpinned the wider image of sailortown in the second half of the nineteenth century. British parliamentary inquiries were exhaustively reported in newspapers internationally. The press, particularly in seaport cities, supplemented this with editorials, and with reprints of maritime stories from their counterparts elsewhere. They also gave a lot of space in their letters columns to shipowners, maritime charities and, gradually, seafarers themselves. Newspaper court reports recorded the testimony of seafarers, usually when they were the victims of crime and crimping, and gave a rare voice to crimps and prostitutes. Inevitably, all of this information was filtered through the views of reporters, journalists and editors, so needs to be read in the context of contemporary perspectives on gender, class and race. By its very nature it reinforced sailortown stereotypes about drink, violence and depredations. Even when the seafarer emerged as a victim rather than a villain, he was often patronised and infantilised, and positive representations of other sailortown people were rarer still.

The final major source of sailortown evidence needs similar care. The decline of sail provoked much writing, as authors tried to capture the characteristics of a dying maritime culture. They found the working lives of mariners at best misunderstood and at worst ignored. Public perception was informed by sea fiction, and by a general confusion of chronology and sector that lumped late-nineteenth-century merchant seafarers with Nelson's navy and Long John Silver's pirates. Writers with experience of shipboard life complained that sea fiction was badly informed, but that the public seemed indifferent to efforts to explain the 'true' picture.[28] There followed a flurry of memoirs that claimed to inform and educate, mostly produced by the last generation to serve in large numbers as apprentices on sailing ships in the 1880s and 1890s. These found sufficient commercial market to remain a published genre for the first half of the twentieth century. The timing of this was no accident, just as an earlier upsurge in memoir-writing from the 1810s to the 1830s had provoked a wealth of recollection about the American Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars.[29]

These books, and works of directly informed sea fiction, certainly established more reliable representations of the practical working of merchant ships. What they tell us about the lives of seafarers, and particularly their time on shore, is less clear. Most were written by men who had retired from the sea as ship's officers, and few were able seamen (ABs), ordinary seamen (OSs), firemen (the merchant marine term for those who shovelled coal and tended the fireboxes of steamships) or catering staff. While

some officers worked their way up through the ranks, the majority had served as officer apprentices, and had been on that track from the beginning of their careers. As such, they were always socially separate from seamen. 'I was not the reckless, wife-in-every-port type heading eagerly for strong drink and weak women', recalled one captain of his early voyages, as if he ever could have been without losing his apprenticeship.[30] The young Joseph Conrad was made nightwatchman of his ship in Sydney, a task usually reserved for old men, and while he was fascinated by the colourful, noisy and violent night-time activity around Circular Quay, he left no real sense of what his crewmates had actually experienced.[31] Future officers were often bookish teetotallers, devoting time to studying marine law and navigation rather than sailortown's diversions.

Officers usually spent less time ashore than their crews, normally during business hours rather than at night. Their testimony is a useful reminder that not all the nautical locations in the waterfront zone were disreputable. Ports had bars catering for captains, such as the Bank Exchange on Montgomery Street, San Francisco, famed for its marble paving and oil paintings, while ships' stores dealers had a captains' room where masters could meet to discuss business with their peers.[32] Captains commonly felt a duty of care towards young apprentices, who were in any case careful to make a good impression; their first call in a new port would usually be the Mission to Seamen.[33] All in all, such men might never have experienced the classic sailortown, despite their years at sea, and, if they did, they usually said little about it in their memoirs. George Whitfield, for example, who visited San Francisco in the late 1880s, was persuaded to see two of the city's notorious 'dives' by older apprentices; according to his memoir, he left in disgust and decided not to 'defile these pages' with a description of 'licentious and beastly entertainments'.[34]

Partly to counteract these perspectives, the early twentieth century saw a wave of novels and plays by radical authors, who found the old sailortown depredations living on in the poor pay and conditions of maritime workers. Modernist maritime fiction was controversial for its portrayal of violence and sexuality, and its preoccupation with brutalised, broken or drowned bodies.[35] George Garrett, James Hanley, Jim Phelan and the few other voices to emerge from the stoke-hold and the top rigging offer a marked contrast to captain-writers such as Conrad.[36] Even here, though, sailortown is elusive. Writers such as Hanley and Garrett wrote about the new docklands with mixed populations of seafarers, dockers, industrial workers and their families, not the sailortowns of the previous century.

Eugene O'Neill's *Glencairn* plays offer commentary on sailortown vices, including the widely quoted lament of a dying mariner bemoaning hard work for mean pay, and time on shore that offered little respite because it was limited to sailortown, drink and fighting.[37] His *Anna Christie* (1921) is set in a rare representation of a sailortown tavern. Malcolm Lowry's *Ultramarine* (1933) is important for its detail and perception, but again was written by someone who was always an outsider to the mainstream maritime workforce. Evocative as all this is, it adds up to a rather thin body of evidence that can really be attributed to first-hand experience of sailortown by those engaged in its threats and attractions. Much of what follows is therefore built from fragments, and from looking sideways at sources created for different purposes.

## Sailortowns in Time and Space: A Brief Tour

This book focuses on sailortown in what might be called its heyday, or its peak, if such words do not seem too positive. The middle decades of the nineteenth century saw more men working on more long-distance deep-water sailing ships than ever before or since, and they visited more seaports in more parts of the globe. We need to position sailortown in time and in space, to understand why it developed a particular worldwide reputation when it did, and also to explain why its behaviours persisted longer in some parts of the world than in others. The sailortown phenomenon gained a new profile from the 1840s onward, but of course it was not a new thing. The idea that seafarers' lives were characterised by transience, drink, prostitution, crime and ethnic mixing has ancient origins and is a long-standing part of the popular heritage of the world's older seaports.[38] For centuries, however, seaports were small places, crowded around a harbour or wharf. Seafaring was mainly coastal or short-distance, with seamen returning frequently to their home ports and loved ones, or even travelling with their families at sea.

These patterns changed with European expansion into the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific oceans, when a growing number of seafarers were away from home for unpredictable periods and spent longer in distant ports. The maritime wars of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries accelerated these trends, adding layers of complication with the growth of fighting navies, chartered paramilitary trading companies, piracy and slave-trading. Competition for experienced seafarers was intense, and growing port towns were battlegrounds for naval pressgangs, shipowners

and crimps. This period has attracted much research, to the point where our knowledge of the maritime world from the 1750s to the 1820s is in many ways better than that of the subsequent century.[39]

After the Napoleonic Wars, the waterfront grew less military, but its reputation for vice, violence and coercion persisted as sailortown grew, along with the mercantile-industrial economy, into a genuinely global phenomenon. The maritime and urban worlds both changed rapidly, as port towns became port cities, struggling to accommodate growth and diversity in the numbers and origins of their people, realignments in trade routes, new technologies of ship- and cargo-handling, and increasing government intervention. Most fundamentally for the questions considered in this book, steamships gradually—but only gradually—replaced sailing ships in a transition that affected several generations of seafarers.

All this could no longer fit into one or two waterfront taverns. While sailortowns never spread over large areas, they became dense clusters of bars, brothels and boarding houses, nicknamed to mythical effect, such as San Francisco's Barbary Coast and Cardiff's Tiger Bay. Rarely defined legally, sailortown boundaries were nonetheless well known to visiting seafarers, as well as police officers, charity workers and journalists. It is worth conducting a brief tour of the world's principal sailortown districts to outline these broad patterns before considering their implications in the chapters that follow. Most of these areas have no maritime connection now but are still identifiable on the ground. Street names and patterns have proved remarkably persistent through the last century of urban change, and enough detail has been given to enable them to be located easily on current maps. The survey starts in London and works westwards around the globe.

London, the world's largest port, had a diverse sailortown that developed over a long period. Wapping was already noticeable as a sailortown in the seventeenth century, with its mean, narrow houses and bars pushed back from the waterfront by warehouses. In the early eighteenth century, Daniel Defoe criticised the sailor district around Wellclose Square, which had initially been set out with elegant residences for the middle classes between Ratcliffe Highway and Cable Street, in the parish of St George's in the East.[40] Parts of this area were sometimes referred to as 'Tiger Bay' in the nineteenth century, a name that was used in several seaports. Bluegate Fields, known as 'Skinners' Bay' for its treatment of seafarers, commonly appears as the worst street there mid-century.[41] Wellclose Square retained its maritime image far into the nineteenth century, with the Well Street

Sailors' Home nearby, and key sailor venues, including the still-surviving Wilton's Music Hall, in the adjoining alleys. Other clusters grew further down the Thames as the dock estate expanded eastwards, notably in Limehouse and the streets between the East India Dock Road and the West India Dock Road; this area, long associated with seafarers serving on the East India Company's ships, evolved into an early example of a sailortown defined by ethnicity as much as by maritime occupations.

Cardiff was a relatively late developer as a major port, its fortunes inextricably connected with the coal export boom of the second half of the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, it quickly gained a sailortown reputation, focused on Bute Street running north from the pierhead—'a mile of temptations' even in the 1850s.[42] Its sailortown was also referred to as Tiger Bay, a widely resented label that persisted well into the twentieth century and far beyond the time during which it was used in London. As in many ports, the wealthier merchant classes moved to the suburbs, leaving impressive residential streets to become a contested territory for subdivided housing, businesses and offices, public institutions and the seedier end of the leisure sector. In Cardiff's case, Loudon Square was still home to some master mariners, traders and their families into the 1880s, when the huge expansion of coal-export shipping in the nearby docks encouraged their departure, in a process labelled 'maritimization' by a later commentator.[43] Unusually, Cardiff's sailortown was clearly delineated by natural and man-made topologies, forming a peninsula bordered by the waterfront, a canal and two railways; most others had well-known but less physical boundaries.

Liverpool's sailortown districts were well established by the mid-nineteenth century. Stan Hugill identified two, clustering to the north and the south of the central business area.[44] The southern one focused on a triangle of streets behind the south-central docks, with its apex close to the original eighteenth-century dock, while the northern sailortown sat behind Prince's Dock, commonly full of Atlantic sailing packets in the early nineteenth century. The north end's heyday appears to have been in the 1840s and 1850s, giving way to the central business district and the industrial zone, which expanded northwards with the new steamship docks from mid-century. It was also absorbed into the larger Irish Liverpool, which grew in the wake of the Great Famine migration. The southern sailortown proved more persistent and was chosen as the location for the Sailors' Home, built on Paradise Street and Canning Place, as a direct challenge to the crimping complex in 1850. This became a magnet for sea-

men, prostitutes and hysterical journalists: 'there exists in the immediate vicinity of the Sailor's Home a boiling mass of iniquity almost inconceivable. It is such a veritable conglomeration of all kinds of moral foulness, rapaciousness, plunderings, brutal ruffianism, and stark staring licentiousness that we doubt if its equal can be found in any similar locality in the civilised world.'[45]

London, Cardiff and Liverpool had Britain's most prominent sailortowns, but many ports had a street or two with that kind of reputation. On Clydeside, seafarers were divided between Glasgow and Greenock, which prevented either of them reaching a really notorious scale. The Broomielaw in Glasgow did become a focal point late in the century, with the Sailors' Home, boarding houses for an increasing population of Asian and African seafarers, and religious missions crowded together on the riverfront and side streets. Bristol, although declining relatively as a port from its early-modern role as Britain's western gateway, still had sailortown problems in the mid-nineteenth century.[46] A lot depended on the profile of a port's shipping. Ports with a large proportion of short-distance trade had more stable maritime populations and fewer transient seamen. This was true of most ports on the east coast, although Hull, North and South Shields, and Leith had outbreaks of sailortown panics. By the end of the century, South Shields was a focal point for Arab seafarers working as firemen on steamships.[47]

Across the Atlantic, Quebec's place in the maritime economy gave it a rather extreme form of sailortown activity. An important part of Atlantic Canada's trade was in newly built wooden sailing ships, sent to Britain with cargoes of timber. This was seasonal, and the lumberjacks and sailors who worked in Canada in the summer months headed south to the Gulf of Mexico to take similar jobs in the winter. Just when captains were desperate to leave port at the end of the season, therefore, they could face severe shortages of sailors, and waterfronts saw a corresponding rise in coercion. Local topography separated sailortown from the rest of Quebec quite starkly, with the boarding houses clustering on Champlain Street down at the water's edge, well away from the (literally) higher society up on the cliff-top ridge. The eastern Canada sailortowns are among the few that have already attracted the attention of historians, so they appear less often in this book than their reputation, especially in mid-century, might warrant.[48]

Boston was still a major port in the mid-nineteenth century, although being overtaken by New York. As is often the case, however, many of

its sailortown characters are indistinctly rooted in time. Writers late in the century referred back to stories of the original 'Black Maria', a physically and socially powerful black woman, who took riotous seamen to the town jail and thereby gave her name to police vehicles.[49] Ann Street (now North Street), where Maria supposedly had her boarding house, was the focus of sailortown activity in Boston.[50] In the 1860s, the Unitarians abandoned their premises at Hanover and Clark Streets because they had 'a negro boarding-house adjoining the rear, a sailor boarding-house directly opposite, drinking houses and saloons in abundance in the vicinity'. If the Unitarians were squeamish, however, others actively sought to set up in direct competition with such moral dangers, and the press thought that the building would no doubt be taken over by Catholics.[51]

In New York, the area behind South Street was the main focus of the sailortown economy, just as South Street itself had been the original centre of maritime activity in the port. With its manageable tidal range, New York did not need a dock system to protect shipping, so vessels tied up at open quays. Visitors were struck by the closeness of the maritime and urban worlds, as the bows of ships loomed over the street and, in Dickens's phrase, 'almost thrust themselves into the windows'.[52] New York's sailortown gained notoriety in mid-century, with the shortage of seafarers caused by the California Gold Rush and, a little later, the conscription of young men into the armies of the American Civil War. Cherry Street and Water Street, running parallel to the waterfront one block back, were well known for sailors' boarding houses. Corlear's Hook, where the East River turns, was a sailortown in the 1850s, and by some accounts the reason for prostitutes being referred to as hookers, although there are numerous other explanations.[53] By the 1880s, sailortown was being defined as a bigger area bounded by Grand Street, the East River, Fulton Street, Pearl Street, New Bowery and East Broadway. The boarding houses and dance houses were still clustered on Water, Cherry and James Streets.[54] One piece defined 'Sailor Town' as the city's fourth ward and part of the seventh.[55] By 1890, nostalgic articles about the old New York waterfront were increasingly common, and it becomes harder to untangle representations and mythologies when we get into the twentieth century. Just across the river, Brooklyn became another branch of this shipping and crimping complex, as well as having a major cluster of Norwegian seafarers. Threats of war between Norway and Sweden in the 1890s had them fundraising for a cruiser, and the superintendent of their Sailors' Home became treasurer of a new Norwegian Patriotic Association of America.[56]

In Philadelphia, sailortown took the form of a few streets running inland from Front Street, notably Dock Street on the central waterfront. Again, the area had been prosperous initially, shifting to multi-occupancy as the wealthier classes moved inland. Swanson Street was described in 1882 as having 'once comfortable dwellings, but which for years have been given over to the uses of sailor boarding-houses, or rented to families of the lower classes'.[57] This is unrecognisable now with the construction of the Delaware Expressway along the waterfront. Baltimore was also known as an active crimping port, with a sailortown clustered on the waterfront at Fell's Point, south-east of downtown. A former shipbuilding area, this was Baltimore's leading immigrant district in the nineteenth century, and, despite losses, the sailortown-era built environment has survived better than in many places.[58]

Around the Gulf of Mexico, too, there were places with formidable reputations for sailortown vices in the later nineteenth century, although the phenomenon here was often akin to logging camps and gold-rush shanty towns rather than to port cities proper. New Orleans, however, was a long-established seaport with a multi-cultural reputation and an early image of vice and crime. Missionaries portrayed the town in the 1830s as having a 'battery of hell' ranged along the front of the city; 'along the levee, the grog shops fill a space three miles long'.[59] Its sailortown was in the streets that now make up the southern edge of the French Quarter, stretching inland on Bienville and Iberville Streets to Rampart Street.[60] Like other US cities, New Orleans had a complicated geography of prostitution, with a recognised brothel zone slightly inland—Storyville—that did not entirely eclipse the waterfront sector. Caribbean ports had sailor districts, but conceptually they belong to the old idea of seafarers escaping 'on the beach' than to the urban sailortowns of the north. This remained a real problem: sailors on shore in the tropics annoyed colonial administrators and failed to set the sort of example expected of Europeans.

Rio de Janeiro often had a shortage of seafarers because of yellow fever epidemics and a reputation for drink and violence; as elsewhere, this made fit men valuable and attracted crimps keen to exploit them. For similar reasons, Buenos Aires was, according to the superintendent of its Sailors' Home in the 1890s, 'the Elysium of the boarding-house-masters'.[61] Sailortown was originally part of the generally feared La Boca to the south of the city centre at the mouth of the Matanza River. With the building of Dock Sud, another sailor district developed along Avenida Leandro N. Alem, running parallel to the new dock four blocks

inland.[62] Missionaries were particularly concerned about drinking in South American ports, where the 'grog' on sale apparently unhinged seamen. Bahia Bianca, south of Buenos Aires, had a solitary waterfront grog store that attracted the crews of visiting ships on Saturday nights, allegedly leading to scenes of extreme violence and even murder: 'it does not take much of the drink sold to make a seaman for the time perfectly mad'.[63]

On the western coast of South America, Valparaiso was a thriving port with an international business community, occupying a strategic point on the long sailing-ship routes between the Atlantic and Pacific.[64] Built on steep slopes around the natural harbour, it was a crowded town of winding streets, with sailortown bars perched up in the hills. A strong sense of this cityscape persists, even if many nineteenth-century buildings were lost in a succession of earthquakes. Further north, Callao's sailortown was clustered beside the old waterfront, and separate from the fashionable and respectable streets. The crimping quarter was established by men from North America and Europe, and even the informal street names were imports coined for the benefit of seafarers: 'Jib Boom Street', home to a crimp called Murphy, is one example from the 1870s.[65]

San Francisco's sailortown was particularly complex because it was born in a confusion of several groups of incomers. The infamous Barbary Coast, for example, initially overlapped with 'Sydney Town', founded by Australians who crossed the Pacific in search of rich pickings either directly from the 1849 Gold Rush, or from managing the pubs, boarding houses and dance halls used by gold miners as well as the more general transient and maritime population.[66] For much of the nineteenth century, the Barbary Coast was not exclusively a sailor's quarter. Defined as the area around Dupont, Pacific and Kearny Streets, bounded by Washington, Stockton and Jackson Streets and the Bay, it was supposedly the venue for two-thirds of the crime, and nine-tenths of the serious violence and robbery in the city.[67] Sailors' boarding houses, however, were clustered along the city front on Jackson, Pacific, Vallejo and smaller streets.[68] Even in the 1860s, there were claims that the Barbary Coast itself was in decline, with an upsurge of bars, boarding houses and brothels in the area slightly closer to the waterfront. Locals had a finer sense of differentiation than outside commentators, who tended to use 'Barbary Coast' generically as a place of 'thieves, street walkers and sailors'.[69] By Stan Hugill's time early in the twentieth century, sailortown and the Barbary Coast had again become intertwined, as the sailor district coalesced on Pacific Street—'Terrific Street' in maritime mythology—but remained part of a broader red-light

quarter. San Francisco became prominent in seafarer folklore, and especially in sea songs.[70]

The ports of the Columbia River and the Puget Sound in the Pacific North West were the most persistent sailortowns by the end of the nineteenth century. Astoria, small yet strategically located, was essentially the first landfall for ships proceeding up the Columbia River to Portland, and the last for departing ships before they sailed out into the Pacific. Accordingly, it had an active crimping market in the removal of incoming seafarers and their 'sale' to departing captains desperate for a crew. Periodic crackdowns on crimping by the authorities in Portland simply moved the problem to Astoria temporarily, and crimps were believed to wield considerable political influence in these towns.[71] To the north, the Puget Sound was a famed crimping region, with numerous small logging wharves in addition to the growing towns of Vancouver, Seattle and Tacoma. Continuing wage differentials, shortages of seamen and active crimps ensured that the west coast ports of the Americas were cited worldwide as excuses or reasons for the actions of seamen and masters. In 1882 the police court in faraway Hull heard a claim for wages from a seaman shanghaied in Astoria, which, his lawyer helpfully explained, 'was a worse place for crimps than Callao'.[72]

Across the Pacific, Yokohama had two districts favoured by visiting seafarers, reflecting spatial clustering common to Japanese seaports in the nineteenth century. A sailortown drinking quarter grew up behind the waterfront in the foreign settlement, notably on Yamate-cho, which ran up the bluff on what was then the southern edge of the port. The brothel zone was separate, in the tradition of carefully segregated, licensed areas in Japanese cities. It was a little further inland in a narrow space between the town's canals. American and British crimps set up in Japanese ports, constituting a rather different expatriate community from the better-known western merchant families.[73] In Shanghai, sailors were just another transient multi-national group among several, and it is hard to discern a truly separate sailortown over time. There was, however, a well-defined geography of prostitution, with sailors' brothels occupying a lowly niche.[74] Hong Kong's sailortown was on Hong Kong Island, on the southern edge of the narrow strip of flat ground, just before the terrain rises steeply up to the Peak. Ship Street, Amoy Street and Spring Garden Lane were the focus. Hong Kong was also well known for its floating city, with traditional sailortown services, from drink and clothing to prostitution, available from the hundreds of boats in the harbour itself. Singapore's Malay

Street, between North Bridge Street and Victoria Road, was a red-light district frequented by merchant seamen, and Chinese, French and Japanese women.[75] It is now very different, glazed over as one branch of the Bugis Junction shopping mall.

Sydney's sailortown was around George Street and Kent Street, between Circular Quay and Darling Harbour. Like San Francisco, its hinterland promised jobs for deserting seamen—and not only during the Gold Rush—so there was an endemic shortage of mariners and plenty of work for crimps. A particular local concern was the animosity between seamen and the 'Larrikin' street gangs. Melbourne had a Sailors' Home on Spencer Street, and waterfront crimp houses. Elsewhere in Australia, sailortowns were more like the logging or gold camps of North America, although the busiest of them was the coal port of Newcastle, New South Wales. Delays in loading coal, strikes and port congestion often made Newcastle a dangerous place for seafarers, on shore in such numbers that the town struggled to cope.[76]

Kolkata (then Calcutta) had a sailortown focused on the north-east corner of what is now Benoy-Badal-Dinesh Bagh, formerly Dalhousie or Tank Square. The area now occupied by the bright-red Kolkata Police Headquarters was formerly known as Flag Street, and its side alleys were home to an array of seamen's drinking quarters.[77] By the 1890s, Kidderpore Dock had moved traffic south of the city, with the result that the sailors' brothel district developed new clusters in streets off Chowringhee Road, the main thoroughfare going south. Across India, Mumbai (then Bombay) had brothels frequented by seafarers on Grant Road and adjacent streets. This was just a short way inland from the northern point of Back Bay, running east–west across the peninsula; parts of this district remain a focus for Mumbai's prostitution business.[78] Round the Indian Ocean, Aden and the ports in East Africa were recruitment centres for the many African and Middle Eastern seafarers who worked on European steamers by the end of the century, but were rarely part of the sailortown phenomenon.[79] The same was true of West Africa, for centuries regarded as a graveyard for Western seafarers, but a major supplier of seamen for steamship lines from the 1890s onwards.[80]

Borsaʿīd (Port Said), northern gateway to the Suez Canal, had a huge amount of passing traffic in seafarers and ship's passengers by the late-nineteenth century, but little prospect of holding on to them for very long. Stopovers were measured in hours rather than days or weeks, and cafes, bars and souvenir shops close to the waterfront catered for transient visi-

tors.[81] Numerous ports in the Mediterranean had old sailor quarters, and Genoa and Naples were important to US sailing ships in mid-century, but the early adoption of steam meant that seafarers visiting these ports were on short stopovers before this became the pattern elsewhere.[82] Marseille's sailortown focused on the east end of the Vieux Port, around the junction of the Rue de la République and La Canebière. Again, this was one of the oldest parts of the town, with a maze of narrow streets linking the thoroughfares and reaching south to the Church of Notre Dame de la Garde, a landmark for seafarers and home to a collection of votive ship models. William Sewell, in his masterly study of Marseille in the mid-nineteenth century, established that the district on the north side of the old port had a large number of resident and itinerant seamen and other maritime workers, a substantial proportion of the city's prostitutes, many of the poorest foreigners and a high crime rate. In other words, he concluded, it was 'a more or less typical maritime quarter: poor, rough, cosmopolitan, and dangerous'.[83]

Dunkirk was the focus of a sailortown panic late in the century when large numbers of British steamships paid their crews off there, leaving them to make their own way across the English Channel to find another ship in a British port. This made them vulnerable to crimps and criminals, who crowded the docksides keen to intercept the men before they could reach either the railway station or the ferry terminal. Further east, Antwerp's topography was unusual in the nineteenth century because of its lack of delineation between the wharves and the town; it was commonly claimed that ships tied up at the nearest bar. This stood in some contrast to the arrangements elsewhere, with an increasing fashion for fortress docks, railways and wide roads separating the water's edge from the urban spaces beyond. Bars and boarding houses were found over a large area because the river quays extended along the whole west side of the town and around the north to the complex of docks. As usual, though, there were particular focal points, an important one being around Canal de l'Ancre, on the south west corner of the Grand Bassin.[84]

Amsterdam, with its striking fan of canals off the central waterfront, had two main sailortown streets, Warmoesstraat and Zeedijk, which are still lined with bars and hotels, but with tourists having mostly replaced sailors. Rotterdam's sailortown focused on Schiedamsedijk and Zandstraat, west and north of the triangle of quays at the heart of the town. The former still exists and plays host to the Maritime Museum, while the latter was cleared for the city hall and surrounding business streets: the 'notorious seamen's

district around the Zandstraat was torn down around 1910'.[85] Hamburg's sailortown focused on St Pauli, the built-up area just to the west of the old city walls, within easy reach of the Elbe waterfront and the growing network of docks. Key streets became famous internationally, such as the Reeperbahn and Grosse Freiheit. This was something of a debatable territory between Hamburg and its neighbour Altona, and had historically been home to a variety of people, trades and industries that were not regarded as appropriate, or simply could not be physically accommodated, in Hamburg itself (Reeperbahn, for all its scandalous connotations now, just means 'rope-walk'). Hamburg, too, became a focal point for nostalgia about seafaring, in a series of 1930s movies with storylines involving St Pauli, mariners in dance halls, and sea songs.[86]

Many other ports worldwide had sailortown districts, and a survey of local newspapers more or less anywhere will reveal a street or two well known to locals as the haunt of transient mariners and their associates. As will emerge from the chapters that follow, sailortowns had local differences, but also common threads. This book does not go as far as Stan Hugill, who—just before embarking on 300 pages of detailed port-by-port description—cheerfully admitted that there would be some repetition, 'one Sailortown being much the same as another'.[87] The similarities stemmed from all these ports being visited by the same broad population of seafarers over time, expecting the same set of goods, services and experiences. The differences came from the local and global mixing that made up any given seaport society. Our starting point therefore needs to be with the seafarer and his worlds in the age of sail.

## Notes

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CHAPTER 2

# The Seafarer in the Age of Sail

To understand sailortown, we need to know more about the nineteenth-century seafarer and his place in the globalising maritime labour market. Seafarers were unusual for their time. They left their home countries, visited others, and spent long periods away from land altogether. They worked alongside people of many nationalities, ethnicities and religions, while being separated for extended periods from women, children and non-seafaring men. Deep-water seafarers were waged, contracted employees, whose working lives were defined and directed by officers, shipping companies and state officials, but alongside such modern conditions they continued to experience older forms of harsh discipline in an unforgiving natural environment. All this had an impact on the seaman's interactions with the people he encountered in waterfront districts, and his behaviour on shore perpetuated his already complicated image. Seafarers often had a fierce occupational identity that they were keen to emphasise, even during the extended periods that many spent working on land, and however conflicted their attitude was towards their industry. In particular, while the number of men working in deep-water sailing ships declined late in the century, and steamships became the normal workplace of the seaman, the popular image of the seafarer was still someone who worked in sail, with the traditional attributes—good and bad—of a 'proper' sailor.[1]

This chapter considers the ways seafarers were portrayed in debates about their abilities, behaviour, loyalties and morals, putting those ideas in the context of an industry coping with radical change. Seafarers rarely had much power, but they had a degree of agency, and sometimes a



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determination to make the most of their limited options. Many of their problems on shore were rooted in difficult relationships with captains and shipowners, due to the industry's peculiar employment practices. We need to understand the pressures facing a ship's captain and his seafarers at the beginning and end of a voyage, and at intermediate ports in between—the key points, in other words, when the entanglement between the seafarer and his industry was further complicated by the proximity of sailortown. A large part of the core tension at the heart of sailortown—being at once a place of liberty and coercion—stems from a similar paradox in the lives of seafarers. In some ways men with great freedom to travel the world, they were also locked into powerful systems of control that curtailed their mobility for the benefit of the shipping industry.

## Representing the Seafarer

Many assumptions, prejudices and myths accompanied the seafarer when he came on shore, rooted in long-standing stereotypes, and in debates about his ability to cope with a rapidly changing industry. This complex mixture—what cultural historians call an 'imaginary'—was important in itself, but also symbolic of larger issues facing maritime nations. No end of commentators judged the seafarer on his capacity for work, his moral integrity, courage, and proper place in society. His alleged irresponsibility was at the heart of a list of social ills, including drunkenness, fighting, using prostitutes and generally lowering the tone of his surroundings. He became a symbol of an older, rough and dangerous masculinity, perhaps necessary at sea but no longer appropriate on shore.[2] Indeed, much of the debate about the seafarer had its roots in sailortown, rather than at sea. If it seems odd to have an occupational group judged for its time away from work, that is only one of many peculiarities about the entanglement between seafarers and their industry.

Most opinions about seafarers sat on a spectrum between child-like and gullible at one end, and depraved, primitive and corrupt at the other. In 1859 the shipowner Thomas Mackay called for training schools that would produce better seamen than the current 'unfortunate wretches … whose idea of home is a crimp's boarding-house, and whose religion is a combination of rum and prostitution'. Mackay conceded that sailors were 'not alone to blame', a common qualification in such criticism.[3] One boarding-house keeper claimed that 'the majority of them are often improvident and reckless', but acknowledged that they paid their debts.[4] William Wright,

the US Shipping Commissioner for New Orleans, argued in 1875 that seamen 'were not bad-hearted men; on the contrary they were with all their seeming roughness, full of generous impulses'.[5] Even in the 1890s, a New York lawyer called J. A. Johnson could still tell a conference that 'we have societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals and children. We need a similar one for sailors.'[6] One British diplomat writing from the Netherlands in 1902 believed that seamen thought 'more of the present than the future', so were easily manipulated by crimps.[7] Missionaries and charity workers infantilised Asian and African seafarers especially. A supporter of the London Strangers' Home for Asiatics thought it was like a training ship; boys working on those could not be expected to stand up for their own interests, and neither could the Asian seamen in that home.[8]

Other observers thought this was all too easy. Those opposed to reform at sea and on shore bemoaned the tendency to excuse seafarers' actions. Noah Rees, a Cardiff alderman who objected to the licensing of boarding houses, claimed that he 'hated this grandmotherly arrangement by which they sought to feed and nurse poor Jack, who could very well look after himself'.[9] Protective legislation supposedly threatened the seaman's self-reliance, independence and masculinity. Someone calling himself 'An Untinkered Sailor' accused the British state of making the seaman 'a baby, a puppet, and an easy slave to every evil influence'. This had come about through legislation designed to protect seamen from 'all the natural risks and conditions of existence', when it would be far better to teach him 'to face, to fight and to conquer them'.[10] William Lamport, a shipowner, dated the 'deterioration' of the British seafarer to 1854, when the first serious state measures were taken to improve the welfare of seamen. To him, this was 'taking the British seaman and protecting him into a creature not capable of looking after himself'.[11] One memoirist believed that seamen had declined considerably 'under the protection and dry-nursing of the Board of Trade'.[12] To the British Consul in Marseille it was a question of taking a firm hand: 'many sailors are like good-natured children, and will respond to reasonable persuasion. Confirmed drunkards and loafers will generally fall in to a firm hand. The blackguard, and dangerous sea-lawyer, will give trouble, but can be subdued.'[13]

The representation of seafarers was often rooted in past time or in particular events that reinforced rather than challenged stereotypes. Frank Bullen, a seafarer turned author, thought the public only took an interest during wartime, and that normally 'sailors are in theory admired, but in practice forgotten'.[14] Old ideas kept being recycled. The Earl of Rosebery,

opening the Leith Sailors' Home in 1884, seemed sympathetic to seafarers, speaking of the 'intense barrenness of life at sea', and the understandable temptation of 'anything that promised light, and warmth, and amusement'. But he cited as his evidence Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast*, published forty years before.[15] This idea of timeless struggle did seafarers no favours if it made their current problems seem natural and unsolvable. Even their courage, commonly invoked in tales of life at sea, was twisted into a broader critique of their activities on shore. Giving bravery awards to seamen in 1882, the Mayor of Liverpool urged them to engage with charitable and spiritual organisations on the waterfront; by so doing, 'they would become not only better sailors, but nobler men'.[16]

Why were seafarers so criticised and patronised, and, in particular, why were shipowners often so hostile to their men? It will already be clear that we are learning at least as much about the commentators as about the seafarers, and that there was a great deal of political and symbolic weight riding on the shifting fortunes of mariners, especially those working in sail. The continuing use of sailing ships, long after the widespread development of steam, created unusual industrial relations. Experienced sailing-ship men became scarce after mid-century, not least because wages fell behind those paid on steamships. Rather than improve pay and conditions to attract the necessary seamen, most sail owners joined a race to the bottom, accepting a high turnover of relatively low-skilled and low-paid workers, poor safety, and the slow decline of their sector. It became common to characterise sailing-ship men as a residual group who could find nothing better. Commentators turned this labour-market issue into a reflection on the moral failures and other alleged weaknesses of seafarers, and shipowners used this image to divert attention from their own practices. The seafarer's image was made worse still by some reformers, who reinforced the view that he was a man apart in need of special treatment.[17]

Sailing-ship owners believed that the rot had set in around mid-century, when demand for shipping boomed at precisely the time when good seamen were being enticed away from their sector. John Williamson, a shipowner addressing the 1876 Social Sciences Congress, blamed the two great gold rushes in California (1849) and New South Wales (1851): 'For years an enormous trade with these countries was done, and whole ships' crews invariably deserted for "The Diggings". The vacuum thus created had to be filled rapidly and repeatedly, and it was filled by the residuum of our populations.'[18] Thomas Mackay believed that desertion in the

Australian trades had soured relations between shipowners and seafarers.[19] Shortly after, the Crimean War and then the American Civil War diverted merchant seamen into naval and military service. Crimping increased as a result, and one shipbroker recalled this as a period when 'American ships were manned in English and foreign ports in a very strange manner'.[20] New York crimps allegedly charged an 'almost incredible' bounty of $400–600 during the 1860s, with black seamen especially vulnerable to being kidnapped at the wharves.[21] Less dramatically, industrialisation created better jobs on shore. Sailing-ship mariners had sought-after skills. They were strong men, used to working in harsh conditions. They knew how to work at height, handle ropes, tackle and knots, and manoeuvre themselves, machines and objects in confined spaces. Shipbuilding, construction, dock and warehouse work were obvious alternatives, others perhaps less so—James Simonds, Chief Officer of the London Metropolitan Fire Brigade, claimed in the 1890s that he got his men 'exclusively' from the ranks of the navy and the merchant marine.[22]

Even seamen who stayed in the shipping industry could avoid sailing ships, provided that they met the standards of the growing steam sector. Every seafarer working in the half-century after about 1840 had his life changed by the development of the steamship, even if he never set foot on one. Steam was the great disruptive technology of the age, but its impact at sea was multi-faceted. Only companies carrying better-off passengers and subsidised mail for short distances could justify the expense of running the first ocean steamships in the 1840s, but a series of technological and infrastructural leaps drove those costs down. Steam was already having an impact on the North Atlantic by the 1850s, with London and Liverpool, then Hamburg and New York, becoming home ports to major steam-liner companies as the century went on. The Suez Canal (opened 1869) created a shortcut from Europe to India and helped a rapid shift to steam in the East. Sailing ships continued to carry some bulk cargoes economically between the Pacific and Europe into the 1900s, but the Panama Canal (opened 1914) gave another boost to steam. The last few commercial sailing vessels remained in long-distance bulk trades, such as wool from Australia to Europe, into the 1930s.[23] Still, the length of the transition, and the great complexity of trading patterns, meant that much of the mid-nineteenth-century boom was achieved by sailing ships at a time when seafarers had growing alternatives, and this, ultimately, accounts for the character and persistence of sailortown's role in the maritime labour market.

Voyages in sail came to be seen as a young man's game as the century went on, to be followed as soon as possible with a regular berth on a steamer, especially if a man wanted to marry.[24] One seaman interviewed in Hull in 1888 claimed to have been 'round the Horn often enough to sicken me of such work', and he had tried to move into short-distance steam, which he reckoned sensible men were sticking with whenever they could. He might have done so himself: 'If I hadn't been an eejit I'd have been comfortable aboard a weekly boat sailing out of Cardiff, but a big spree lost me that job.' He contrasted the physical, dangerous work in all weathers of deep-water sail against the easier, better-paid work on steamships, and wondered why seamen, especially married men, would ever choose the former.[25] One captain recalled trying to recruit a crew for his sailing ship in Cardiff in 1905 and hearing a sailor remark that he would never 'sail round Cape Stiff in an old wind-bag'.[26]

The idea that steam would transform the working lives of seafarers was long established. 'The comparative shortness of all voyages in modern times', argued the *Morning Chronicle* as early as 1857, had 'lessened the broad line of separation' between seafarers and the general population. This trend could only increase, and seafarers 'will be less eccentric, and will require more and more to be treated like other people'.[27] A decade later, a Board of Trade official could scribble in the margin of a report on crimping that 'steam will I suspect do more to raise the seaman's morale than anything else'.[28] In 1879 another journalist concluded that 'steam has revolutionised seamen': 'The drunken seaman is dying off—at any rate in the home ports—and a skilled artisan, not too well paid for toilsome work—more dangerous than that of the miner—is taking his place.'[29] In London, missionaries reported that the streets around Victoria Dock were heavily settled by the families of steamship company crews, establishing households close to their work as would any other members of the settled working class.[30]

As steamships moved to dominance, work in sail became even less attractive. Robert Foulke's 'Life in the Dying World of Sail' was difficult and hazardous.[31] Sail owners ran ever-larger ships with ever-smaller crews, and while labour-saving machinery, navigational aids and better communications helped, sheer hard work by seafarers made possible the continued profitability of the sailing ship. These men remained cut off from society, enduring long, unpredictable separations from home and family while other seafarers gained regularity. Those who stayed in sail for more than a few voyages usually had some disadvantage—alcoholism, insubordination

or maybe just foreignness—that barred them from seeking better work in steam. A substantial number had to be persuaded, even coerced, into going to sea, by the various players in the boarding-house and crimping complex. Shipowners on the long routes from Europe to the Pacific in the 1870s reckoned only a quarter to a third of the crew would be 'downright good seamen', and while the owners were well practised at belittling their workers, there is no doubt that capable seafarers were leaving sail, especially as they got older and wanted to settle down.[32]

Seamen who made it into better jobs were still well aware of the broader reputation attached to their trade. They knew this image made it easy to cast them in a negative light and perpetuate poor wages and conditions. James Fell, a San Francisco missionary, noted in 1899 that 'of course, it serves the purpose of shipping masters, boarding masters, tailors and others also, to keep shipowners etc, under the impression that seamen are a set of drunken blackguards'.[33] The new trades unionists tried to put some distance between their members and the old mythology of drink, immorality and 'Bachelor Jack'. To the British union leader Havelock Wilson, the allegation that seamen were drunk when they began a voyage was 'slanderous', and only men supplied by crimps (he called them 'the refuse') were given to drunkenness: 'I do not quite admit they are sailors."[34] It was also the case, however, that the early seamen's unions found seafarers notoriously hard to organise, and prone to exerting their own rank-and-file individualism.[35] Promoting sober respectability was in part about improving union discipline, but it risked alienating men who felt that they got enough preaching on the waterfront without the unions joining in.

After all, a drink-fuelled 'good run ashore' was an important element in seafaring culture, and union leaders were unsure how far to go in condemning it. James Fitzpatrick, a fireman who led a demonstration in Bristol in 1886, referred to drink several times in his speech, struggling to pitch his argument. The crowd hissed when he complained that seamen 'were characterised by nothing else than by their drunkenness', then applauded when he reported witnessing a ship departing that morning with not a single drunk seaman on board. Drunkenness had declined in the past decade, he claimed, and there was no evidence that foreign seamen were more sober than their British counterparts. At that point, Fitzpatrick evidently felt that he had gone too far in the direction of temperance. He concluded with two claims that provoked laughter and cheers from his audience: first, that alleged drunkenness 'had never prevented Englishmen

from promoting and supporting the largest power in the world'; and second, that in any case 'a Dutchman could go and drink an Englishman blind'.[36] Fitzpatrick was struggling to square a number of circles, loath to admit that British seamen were heavy drinkers, yet even more reluctant to concede that they fell behind foreigners in that key aspect of contemporary masculinity.

It is also important to remember that while the lives of many steamship mariners improved, huge insecurities remained. Crews were still paid off at the end of each voyage, and, while they might be engaged for the next one immediately, the shipping company still had no obligation. Catering staff, growing in numbers as ocean liners became larger and more luxurious, were often dismissed through the fickleness of passengers.[37] The firemen and trimmers who worked in the stoke-holds were only employed while they had their health, which might not be long. Shovelling coal and maintaining furnaces in temperatures of at least 50° Celsius, stoke-hold men suffered high levels of illness and premature ageing.[38] Firemen working on Hamburg and Bremen steamships had, respectively, ten and twenty times the suicide rates of men of the same age on shore in the 1880s.[39] Frank Bullen, a seaman turned writer, feared that the 'black gangs' would perpetuate old sailortown behaviours. Firemen were, he wrote, understandably given to 'furious outbursts of intemperance after a spell of such misery on shipboard as few respectable folks ashore have any idea of. The lives of these men are so bitter, their outlook so hopeless, that no language can be considered too forcible in which to present their claims.'[40] The Rev. E. W. Matthews of the British & Foreign Sailors Society saw firemen in terms of the alleged degeneration of the urban poor. Seamen used to come from the countryside, he believed, but now they came from towns, and the firemen in particular 'come from the lowest slums very often': 'if they were sober steady artisans, or even labourers, they would not go to work in the stokeholds of our steamers'.[41]

This differentiation between segments of the workforce ran in parallel with wider social attitudes. The idea that a respectable working class was becoming embedded in an orderly society, and separating itself from the chaotic residuum of the casualised slum economy, gained traction at the end of the century.[42] Within the ranks of seafarers, such distinctions grew with the rise of steam. The continuing plight of some seafarers produced a note of despair, when the remaining sailing-ship mariners seemed stuck in the same rut their grandfathers had been in, and even some of the new seagoing workers lived harsh lives. This was especially evident in

the American North West, where sailing ships, crimping and the old stereotype of the irresponsible sailor persisted. James Laidlaw, British Vice-Consul in Oregon, concluded on the basis of twenty years' experience that 'it is next to impossible to prevent the sailor being fleeced—that he will place himself voluntarily in the hands of those who only thrive on his follies and vices'. Newspaper commentators went further, arguing that no one had yet found a way 'to protect from themselves men of weak moral fiber and rampant appetites'. A church elder in Astoria believed that laws were useless; 'the sailors have always been abused, and they always will be, until the end of time'.[43] He has yet to be proved wrong. Exactly how that abusive relationship was constructed certainly did change, however, and we need to focus on particular aspects of the sailor's entanglement with his industry before moving on to study sailortown itself.

## Mobility, Identity and Markets

There is another way of looking at the nineteenth-century seafarer, already evident in his mobility. The decades before the First World War saw unprecedented international connection and integration. Flows of trade, migration, finance and information encompassed large parts of the world, and were dependent on the ability of the shipping industry to increase its capacity and efficiency, driving down transport costs and journey times.[44] That in turn relied on the work of seafarers and the numerous other workers of the waterfront zone. The scale and scope of the international labour market, characterised by migration, mobility and transience, expanded in the second half of the nineteenth century, building on what was already a more fluid picture than was once believed.[45] Entire workforces moved between continents, as empire and capital tried to match the supply of workers with an endless demand for more production, especially in labour-intensive extractive industries such as plantation cash crops and mining.[46]

Deep-water sailing-ship men were only part of that, but a crucial and unusual part. Studying maritime labour lets us connect workers from many parts of the world in a way that they themselves would have recognised. Despite and because of the racial, national and class boundaries that divided them, seafarers offer evidence for connective, rather than just comparative, research.[47] Their mobility gave them access to different regional labour markets in the course of a voyage. Seafarers had regular opportunities to take their work elsewhere, either on shore or in a different kind of shipping, even if shipowners and states put many obstacles

in their way. We would consider many of these choices desperate, such as the choices made by the most exploited migrant workers of our own era, but then as now they could be a way out of circumstances that were even worse. The seafaring labour market produced a workforce of unprecedented ethnic and national diversity in the decades before the First World War, and many workers made a transition from the periphery to the global shipping industry. There is even evidence of international convergence of wage rates, at least for white deck crews working on steam liners. However, historians have been well aware that many forces pushed back against the seaman's ability to benefit from his mobility. African and Asian seafarers had to accept much lower pay than Europeans, and the wages of sailing-ship crews were held down by owners' willingness to employ unskilled men. Coercion, whether by sailortown crimping or state control, profoundly distorted the market.[48]

The nineteenth-century shipping industry has an extensive literature that need not be revisited here, but some key patterns are worth outlining.[49] While shipping became a global industry, British firms dominated its ownership and operation for much of the period.[50] In 1850, when most ships still used sails, Britain had just over half of the world's total shipping capacity, while its nearest competitor, the USA, had only a fifth. By 1910, total capacity was around ten times what it had been in the 1850s, mostly due to the huge expansion in steamships, and Britain still owned almost half, including many of the largest liner fleets. In addition, sail tonnage continued to grow alongside the steamship boom until the 1870s. Despite its rapid move to dominance in the new steam technology, Britain also had the world's single largest sail fleet, even in 1910, although by then it was well eclipsed by steam. British ships carried more than 90 per cent of trade between Britain and its colonies, and more than 60 per cent of trade between Britain and foreign countries.[51]

This boom in shipping demanded an increase in the numbers of seafarers, albeit not in proportion to the rise in carrying capacity. Shipowners were already driving down their crew/ton ratios (the number of seamen employed for a given size of vessel) in the 1840s and 1850s, and 'undermanning' was a totemic issue for shipowners and the new unions later in the century.[52] Still, seafaring was a growing occupation overall, and demand for new recruits was strong across the period. British-registered ships employed about 130,000 men in foreign-going trades in the 1870s, rising to around 185,000 by 1910. These men overwhelmingly served on steamers, although some 19,000 ABs or OSs were still working in

sail in the early 1890s.[53] Other national fleets, expanding rapidly in the later decades of the century, began to employ tens of thousands of seafarers—over 80,000 in the case of Germany, Britain's largest competitor, in 1910.[54]

As the workforce grew, so it diversified nationally. This built on a much older pattern, of course.[55] Italians, Flemings and Germans had served in large numbers on Spanish ships in the sixteenth century, and many Nordics and Germans crewed Dutch ships in the seventeenth.[56] Dana's famous 1840 account of life at sea revealed to an American readership the great diversity of the seamen working their vessels, and estimated that overall some three out of four men on US ships were foreigners.[57] One estimate from the 1850s claimed that only 2 per cent of men sailing out of New York had been born in the USA, and that British, Irish and Nordic sailors were the mainstay of the US merchant fleet.[58] By the end of the century, 16,000 British seamen apparently worked for the US merchant marine, almost the same number as the Nordics and Germans working for the British fleet.[59] The USA was doubtless a special case because so much of its workforce overall was foreign-born. It was also unusual in its large proportion of black seafarers working on a broadly equal footing with their white counterparts, at least in the early decades of the century when trade was expanding and seafarers were in short supply. African American seamen were in an environment that prioritised skill and experience over colour, in sharp contrast to their experiences on shore. By mid-century, though, US seafaring was increasingly defined as a white occupation, with black sailors relegated to being cooks and stewards.[60] As the century went on, some of the older maritime nations did not build large deep-water steam fleets and they became major exporters of seafarers instead. The number of Finnish seamen working on foreign ships in the early 1880s was about 6000, the same as the number working on Finland's own vessels.[61] Around one in five seamen working in Germany's rapidly expanding merchant marine was foreign at the beginning of the twentieth century. Many were Nordic, although German steamships, like their British counterparts, were beginning to employ African and Asian mariners in some numbers.[62]

These patterns produced an industry that was trans-national, diverse and mobile, albeit in rather peculiar ways. The busiest routes continued to be dominated by British ships, owners and officers, and indeed by British crews. However, shipping increasingly relied on workers from across Europe, Africa and Asia, especially in sail and in the stoke-holds of tramp steamers. It became possible for a British AB or OS to find himself in a

minority among the deck crew of a sailing ship, and this provoked disquiet among commentators worried about the future of British maritime capacity. The Shipmasters' Society, which represented captains, drew attention to the large iron sailing ship *Tasmania*, which left Europe with thirty-three crew in November 1894. By the time it returned to Britain in March 1896, having made three intermediate stops in the Pacific, a total of sixty-four different crew members had served in some capacity on the ship. Only thirteen of them were British. There had been seventeen Swedes, thirteen Germans, eight Norwegians, three each from the USA, Finland and France, and one each from Belgium, Denmark, Italy and Russia. Nor was it the case that the British sailors started the voyage and then dropped away; eight of them joined the ship abroad.[63]

At the other extreme, some large steamship lines working the North Atlantic routes saw themselves fulfilling a national flagship role and employed few foreign seamen. The Cunard and Inman lines, for example, had about 96 per cent and 84 per cent British crews, respectively, in the mid-1880s.[64] Those steamship companies that did move to employing foreign seamen used them in different departments of the ship, with a hierarchy that correlated race with the position of a crew member in relation to the waterline.[65] So stokers and firemen down in the heat of the boiler-rooms were likely to be African or Asian, or of such descent, while the deck crews and officers were mostly European. Segregation accompanied a sharp increase in the numbers of African, Asian and Pacific seafarers working on European ships, although such men had been employed at sea for centuries.[66] The opening of the Suez Canal encouraged major shipping firms such as the Peninsular & Oriental (P&O) and British India lines to use Indian crews all the way to and from Europe. In the second half of the century, P&O also had substantial numbers of East African workers, who joined the Indian Ocean's mobile labour market after escaping slavery.[67] By 1901, on average, white British seamen working steamers to India still outnumbered 'foreign' members of the crew by at least three to one. If they looked below, however, they would find that they were far outnumbered by the Indian 'Lascar' seafarers shovelling coal.[68] Other national fleets began employing Asian mariners in similar patterns, such as the Indian engine-room crews of the German Hansa shipping line, or the Chinese workers employed by the American Pacific Mail Steamship Co.[69] This process ran in parallel with the feminisation of catering roles on passenger liners, which were increasingly performed by women, or by men

perceived not to be proper sailors, raising another set of gendered and racialised issues in seafaring in the twentieth century.[70]

This diversifying, yet segmented, workforce raises important questions about trans-national labour, and the mixture of exploitation and opportunity that accompanies the movement of workers into global industries. Seafarers may have been in the world's most heterogeneous industry, but in large parts of it they worked in homogenous groups, defined by race, nationality and the desirability of the job. When continental European seamen joined the British or US merchant marine in search of better wages and prospects, their first step was usually a job on a sailing ship, which exposed them to danger and depredations in a declining sector of the industry. If they survived, they might make their own transition to steamships, although perhaps not in the largest, most prestigious firms. Seamen from Asia and Africa could work on steamships, but mostly in the harshest roles down in the stoke-holds, and for less pay. On the eve of the First World War, Indian seamen were paid between a fifth and a third of the rate paid to a white seafarer, and had poorer provisions. Manning levels were higher—three Indians were normally employed where one British seaman would have been—but even then, shipping companies were well ahead financially.[71] Initially, Asian and African seafarers performed tasks that white mariners considered beneath them, so were generally accepted, albeit in a manner that reinforced the discrimination against them. There were also rules against employing Indian seafarers on the North Atlantic routes, supposedly to protect them from cold weather, but removing them from competition for jobs in key shipping lanes.[72] In addition, the global reach of British-registered shipping meant that many Lascar seamen never sailed in British waters or landed in British ports, so they were to some extent a hidden workforce.[73] Attitudes towards them hardened appreciably in times of recession in the industry, and in the aftermath of the world wars, when Asian seamen were seen as posing a direct threat to the employment of white mariners.[74]

British seafarers mapped racial and national divisions onto perceived seafaring ability. Northern Europeans—known collectively as 'Dutchmen'—were represented as capable seamen. Definitions of 'Dutchmen' varied. They always included Germans, Swedes and Norwegians as well as men from the Netherlands, and sometimes Russians and Finns.[75] Other sources believed that sailors differentiated Russians from Finns, and Finns from other Nordic seamen. Opposite the 'Dutchmen' were the 'Dagoes'—all southern Europeans—who were usually represented as lacking those

positive attributes. Frenchmen, because of the long Anglo-French naval rivalry, were sometimes labelled separately, sometimes lumped in with the other southern Europeans.[76] African seafarers seem to have been universally called 'Niggers' by white seamen, as were many of those from India, although the latter were more commonly called 'Lascars'.[77]

That division between northern and southern Europeans became a well-established trope, common in newspapers, shipowners' testimony, memoirs and sea fiction. Robert Brown, for example, recounted how a young English seaman got in a fight with 'Dutchman' Olsen that led to a handshake and mutual respect, while a Greek seaman who attacked his crewmates (with a knife, of course, to emphasise another stereotype) was knocked overboard. Still, Brown put lengthy speeches into the mouths of shipmates about how they would sooner desert in the colonies than sail with foreigners at all.[78] British seamen complained in the late nineteenth century that shipowners and masters preferred foreign crews, and many owners were happy to admit this. Foreign seamen, especially northern Europeans, were considered less prone to drunkenness, and likely to be experienced sailors. In the words of one reporter in 1884, they were 'hardy, brave, skilful, cheery and obedient, thus forming a striking contrast to a too large proportion of our native seamen'.[79]

British seamen refuted the allegation that foreigners were better at their jobs, and union leaders often mocked foreign seamen. In a difficult situation, the foreigner would suddenly fail to understand orders, saying 'me no savais', according to one seamen's agitator.[80] It is particularly common to encounter the claim that foreigners were fair-weather sailors, and that a British seaman was unbeatable on a 'dirty night'.[81] The equation of courage with Britishness is important to their representation on shore. Commentators often cited the British seaman's proclivities toward sailortown vices before stressing 'pluck' as his one redeeming characteristic: 'If Jack sometimes takes a drop too much, and even deserts his ship, he does not lose his head, like so many of the foreign seamen, in a storm … with all their little failings they can find their way aloft in the worst of weather, while foreigners are often at their wit's end.'[82]

Historians are increasingly conscious of the need to locate seafarers in a wider landscape of racial ideologies. A better understanding of the trans-national maritime workforce offers insight into the complicated mix of ideas that coalesced in the later nineteenth century around social Darwinism, imperialism and eugenics. Although most obvious in interactions between black and white seafarers, some of the tensions between

different nationalities of white seamen also cast light on the ranks and hierarchies promulgated by 'race scientists'. As recent work suggests, active intervention in society and biology alike was increasingly seen as a counter to white racial decline, and it is no coincidence that the decades before the First World War also witnessed the rise of closer control of workforces through Taylorist management, and increasing state surveillance of foreign and transient populations.[83] Most of the implications for sailortown were felt in the twentieth century, and will be considered in Chap. 7, but they have their roots in the diversifying seaborne labour force of the 1880s and 1890s.

Those nationalities seen as better seamen had agricultural, fishing or seafaring heritages, just like the British supposedly had before they were contaminated by the industrial age. Nordic mariners were recognised for their Viking seafaring antecedents, a revival of interest in these themes being evident in the later nineteenth century: 'the sailors of Norway, Sweden and Denmark were famous in old times, as Britons found out to their cost'.[84] British commentators reassured themselves that Britain was unlikely to go to war with those countries, and such men 'after all, are very much of our own race'.[85] Another set of stereotypes promoted the idea that Asian and African seamen were suited to manual labour in very high temperatures. Some of those men had certainly grown up in hotter climates than their northern counterparts, but they were no more used to stoke-hold conditions than anyone else.[86] Revealingly, convenient myths about Asian seafarers had echoes of the broader maritime imaginary. The child-like naivety ascribed to all seamen overlapped with the image of the 'docile coolie', and these representations were endlessly manipulated to suit the rhetoric of shipowners and officials.[87] Always useful to shipowners, racial and national fears also gave seamen's unions a scapegoat that might help rally their own members. It was a diversionary debate, drawing attention away from the intractable day-to-day practices of the industry's entanglement with its workforce. We need to take a closer look at the routine relations of seafarers, captains and owners to understand how the choices open to seamen on the world stage presented themselves.

## Working in a Peculiar Industry

Seafarers were employed and paid in ways that poisoned relations among seamen, captains and owners. Again, there are many ironies. Working on a sailing ship was so dangerous that some kinds of trust were essen-

tial, especially among the crew, and very often between the crew and the officers. More generally, though, this was one of the lowest-trust working environments ever seen. Owners and captains expected seafarers to abscond with their wages at any opportunity, so delayed payment until all possible contracted work had been done. Seamen expected captains and owners to pay the bare minimum as late as possible, having made all manner of deductions for expenses during the voyage. There seems to have been little sense of loyalty on either side. While there are examples of individual seamen staying with a ship or a captain over a long period, systematic studies suggest that sailing-ship men rarely returned to the same ship or even the same shipping firm, preferring to move on to the next available vessel and assigning no value to continuity.[88]

British seamen resented what they saw as their industry's indifference to their needs, to the point that it affected their broader identity as seafarers in a supposedly maritime nation. In 1850, several seamen told Henry Mayhew that they would not fight in any future Anglo-American war because their treatment by shipowners was so poor compared with the way seamen were fed and housed on US vessels. Given this was a time when officers on US sailing ships had fierce reputations for brutality, seafarers clearly had a serious grievance. There was a certain contingency to the issue, however, and some sailors conceded that they would probably still join up for Britain if the French were the enemy.[89] Half a century later, commentators claimed that seamen were so furious about losing their jobs to foreigners that they were leaving the Royal Naval Reserve. 'Being despised and treated worse than a dog', these seamen saw no reason why they should serve when shipowners were allowed to display such a lack of patriotism.[90]

Part of this low-trust culture of expendability may have its roots in the industry's remarkably high death and injury rates.[91] To put this in some context, British sailing-ship crews in the 1890s were nearly ten times as likely to be killed in accidents as British coal miners, in terms of the proportion of the industry's employees lost every year. Even steamship crews had a fatality rate between three and four times that of miners.[92] Some commentators argued that the invisibility of deaths at sea added further insult. While the loss of men in mining disasters, for example, would be accompanied by press coverage and subscriptions, losses of sailors were hardly reported.[93] Of course, shipwrecks often were reported, but only a minority of seafaring casualties happened when a ship sank. In 1866 a census of 4866 deaths in the British merchant marine found only one in

four 'drowned by wreck'. A similar proportion 'drowned by accident', and another quarter died from major diseases, such as cholera, fevers and dysentery, or from falls from aloft.[94] Even when the ship was in port, seafarers were far from safe, and by the time a vessel was ready for departure, it might well have lost even more of its crew. Seafarers on ships in the docks accounted for ten of the 150 deaths before the Cardiff Coroner in six months in 1892, for example. They suffered much the same fate as when they were at sea, falling into the dock and drowning, or falling from heights when working in the rigging or handling cargo in the holds.[95] So this was an industry with a long-established assumption that seafarers would need to be replaced at most ports of call, and that it was a rare thing for a crew to remain intact even on one leg of a voyage, let alone for any extended period.

Shipowners externalised many of their labour costs, and tried to limit their responsibility towards seafarers. Although they fed and accommodated their crews during the voyage, shipping companies did not pay men between voyages, nor did they supply clothing, tools or protective kit. They did not pay for accommodation on shore at intermediate ports, and they resisted responsibility for healthcare costs, repatriation of sick and injured seamen, training and pensions. Naturally, when shipowners pushed costs away from themselves, they were pushing them onto seafarers, and therefore into sailortown, where the seafarer's 'friends' stood ready to help him meet those expenses, in exchange for their share of his wages. Perhaps even more corrosive was the shipowners' tendency to blame their crews for losses at sea. When Samuel Plimsoll campaigned for improved shipping safety, shipowners countered with allegations about the physical and moral degradation of seamen. Sailing ships, so the story went, put to sea with most of the crew drunk and unable to keep watch or do the physical work necessary to save the ship from any sudden danger. Only after days of sobering up did they reach any kind of effectiveness.[96] Such propaganda was often effective: commentators on safety and workers' rights were reluctant to contribute to these debates, apparently believing that shipping issues were too specialised to be incorporated into general legislation.[97] None of this improved relations in the industry. When a British Board of Trade official investigated why seafarers were left abroad at ports of call in the 1860s, he found that shipwrecks barely made it onto the list of reasons—all the common causes were rooted in the industry's peculiar labour practices.[98]

Seafarers signed a contract, called 'articles of agreement', before the start of their voyage. In many cases a sailing-ship mariner was penniless when he signed articles, or even in debt. After some time in sailortown, he might owe money to his boarding-house keeper, and normally lacked appropriate clothing for a sea voyage. He therefore asked the captain for an advance note, typically for two weeks' wages.[99] This involved little risk to the owner or captain, because it would be honoured by the shipping company only after the vessel had sailed with the seaman working on board, and its value was deducted from the man's final wages. Most seamen traded their notes for whatever goods and services their boarding-house keepers, tailors or publicans considered necessary. Andrew Commins, a Liverpool barrister who represented mariners in court for desertion in the 1870s, argued that advance notes might as well have been invented for the benefit of crimps.[100] The advance note was indeed a very convenient way for shipowners and boarding-house keepers to transfer cost and risk onto the seafarer. Captains knew that keepers had a financial incentive to deliver the seaman to the ship in time to begin the voyage, while the keepers themselves could profit from their commission on the advance note. Despite several attempts to abolish the practice, advance notes persisted into the twentieth century, especially for men working on sailing ships and steam tramps. Of the 18,579 seafarers of all grades signed at the Poplar Mercantile Marine Office in 1901, just under 70 per cent were paid an advance on their wages, rising to more than 90 per cent for ABs, and for firemen and trimmers working in the stoke-holds of steamers.[101]

If the industry's payment systems were problematic at the start of the journey, they became more so at the end. When the ship reached its final destination, the captain made up the ship's accounts and calculated the wages owed to each seafarer, deducting the advance note and anything owed for tobacco, medicines and clothes the seaman might have bought from the ship during the voyage. It took two or three days for the owners' local agents to provide enough cash, especially if the ship had been at sea for months or years. Mariners arriving at their final destination were supposed to be given some of their money while these accounts were being compiled, and the British Merchant Shipping Act of 1854 specified that a quarter of the wages due to a seaman should be paid on arrival in the final port. Most captains and owners seem to have ignored this, however, and contemporary testimony overwhelmingly records seamen going ashore penniless.[102] This became a crucial point in the entanglement between the seafarer and the various sailortown residents who had an interest in him.

It was not so bad if the seafarer finished his journey in a familiar port with family nearby, but in many cases the vessel did not return to its starting point. British ships could pay off when they returned to any port in Britain or on the near-continent, the so-called 'Home Trade limits' ports from the Elbe to Brest. This practice represented a major saving for shipowners, who would otherwise have to return crews to their point of departure. It was also valued by seamen who, having spent months at sea, did not want to work at cargo-handling or ship maintenance in Antwerp or Amsterdam when they could easily get to London or Liverpool by ferry and railway. Even so, seamen terminating their voyages in strange ports were vulnerable to depredations, and faced an immediate drain on their wages just to return to their homes.

Lump-sum payment at the end of the voyage made it hard for a seafarer to support a family; in the best case, a seaman gave all his wages to his wife, went back to sea, and returned with another wage before the first ran out. This could happen in short-sea trades but was hardly feasible for deep-water seamen. Only gradually did the allotment system—by which wages were paid to families while the sailor was at sea—become widely adopted, in the teeth of resistance from shipowners and seafarers alike. For the majority of sailing-ship men, the continuing peculiarities of the industry's employment practices presented many dilemmas. These came to a head whenever a ship approached a port and the seaman faced the temptations and choices of sailortown.

## Choices

When a sailing ship arrived at an intermediate port of call, seafarers were contractually bound to stay on board, maintaining the vessel and often handling cargo: jobs such as unloading stone ballast were 'arduous and soul-killing', in the words of one memoir-writer.[103] If they jumped ship they were guilty of the criminal offence of desertion. Captains controlled shore leave and spending money, and while seafarers usually got Sundays off, it seems clear that they were not a great prize for the sailortown economy.[104] If that represented the routine for the majority, though, not all seamen wanted to continue the voyage through to its contracted end. Perhaps more surprisingly, some captains did not want them to either. Shipowners and captains officially condemned sailors who deserted from their ships at intermediate ports, claiming this as evidence of the moral laxity of seamen and the need to retain coercive labour management.

Desertion was also a polemical totem in debates about sailortown and government intervention. Still, both seamen and officers weighed up the costs and benefits of breaking crew agreements at intermediate ports, and there is good evidence that captains could profit from desertion. These calculations drove levels of trust even lower, and threatened a further entanglement with interested parties in sailortown.

At the heart of the debate on desertion were competing assumptions about whether the seafarer was, or even should be, a man capable of making his own decisions.[105] As ever, getting beyond headline cases is hard. James McLaughlan, for example, had been an apprentice on a British ship, from which he deserted in Buenos Aires in January 1856. He immediately joined a US ship and sailed to London. On arrival, he deserted again, signing onto another British ship as an AB in March 1857. At that point he was caught with false papers and imprisoned.[106] That sort of case, where a seafarer was openly contemptuous of the industry's contracts, shocked commentators, as did the systematic statistics that became available later in the century. About 14,000 seafarers deserted from British ships abroad in 1895, for example.[107] A similar number deserted from Hamburg ships in New York between 1890 and 1910. While not a large figure relative to German migration as a whole, it was sizeable enough to provoke warnings from seamen's missionaries against what they saw as attempts to bypass US immigration processes.[108]

As that suspicion suggests, one major form of desertion was rooted in global economics and labour markets, where a seafarer saw attractive opportunities available in other countries. It is easy to understand why European seafarers might desert in US or Australian ports during the nineteenth century. After all, millions of people paid to emigrate there. Gold prospecting, railway building, the urban construction industry and the prospect of owning land were attractive, especially at the end of a long voyage. Seamen deserted in such numbers during California's 1849 gold rush that hundreds of ships were stuck in San Francisco. Some never left, being converted into stores and cannibalised for building supplies; one became the town's first jail.[109] Other desertion hotspots arose from specific trading circumstances. On the west coast of South America, for example, it was common for British ships to call at Callao twice, on their way to and from the guano islands, a focal point for the world's trade in agricultural fertilisers. Seafarers who did not want to spend weeks shovelling bird droppings deserted in Callao, then signed on to another ship making the homeward voyage.[110] In other cases, long-term rather than short-term

benefits made desertion more strategic, and the only way to move from the fringe to the core of the world's industrialising economy. Continental Europeans seeking to join the British or US fleets had little choice but to start out on their own nation's ships before deserting abroad. For Asian seafarers on restrictive 'Asiatic Articles', desertion in ports like Cardiff and South Shields, where seafarers had community support, was an essential prerequisite to joining another shipping company.[111]

The second major category of desertion abroad was more particular to a given ship. Some seafarers fell out with officers during the voyage, or suffered violence, poor food or unhealthy living conditions. A seaman in the West Indies trades told Henry Mayhew that desertion rates would fall if seamen were treated better; his straightforward prescription was 'better usage and better pay, and more to eat'.[112] Half a century later, unions still argued that poor provisions on British ships were driving desertion.[113] Some captains and owners had reputations for brutal discipline, which made recruitment harder in the first place, and left seamen feeling little loyalty. In San Francisco, the missionary James Fell believed that deserting seamen were making a statement about the industry's failure to modernise: 'it is simply that the men are exasperated on too many ships by a wretched network of rules and customs which should belong to a past age, and be torn up root and branch, and relegated again to the darkness from which they took their origin'.[114] Another American commentator wrote that owners' hand-wringing about the declining standard of seamen was a good sign. It meant that sailors were abandoning an unpleasant and dangerous occupation, and was actually a complaint about 'the decline of any disposition to be kicked and beaten'.[115]

Ultimately, desertion only existed because seamen were not free agents at intermediate ports, and needed the captain's permission to be paid off with their accumulated wages. Captains had to balance conflicting incentives. They did not want the trouble and expense of paying a man off in a foreign port and having to find a replacement. However, seafarers who deserted at an intermediate port forfeited their wages altogether, regardless of how long they had worked for the ship. This introduced a moral hazard, making it preferable for a captain to lose men by desertion than by agreement—he still had to find replacements, but he kept the original men's wages. Masters facing a lengthy stay in port had a considerable temptation to get rid of their crews. Commentators in the 1860s claimed that some masters regularly lost their crews while others kept them, and that crimping and sailors' whims were not the only factors in

the equation.[116] In Calcutta, Maj. G. B. Malleson, in a far-reaching report on seamen's welfare, mentioned captains who engineered desertions by putting men to work painting, cleaning or repairing the ship, or loading coal, in the heat of the sun. By these means 'the Captain was relieved from the expense of supporting his crew during his stay in port, that expense falling upon the government'. Malleson thought it suspicious that captains rarely pursued deserters, even though they would have been easy to find on Flag Street.[117] Similar thinking was evident three decades later in Oregon, when a captain admitted that he had let his crew go, 'for he considered them a poor lot and was rather glad to get rid of them, knowing he could get good men here'.[118] Ernest Satow, Britain's Consul in Uruguay, reported a large number of desertions at Monte Video, none of which were prosecuted through the courts: the absence of a legal resolution meant that wages remained with the master and the shipowner.[119]

Worse, seamen and officials thought that captains conspired with crimps. Glasgow crimps in the early 1890s allegedly had 'the patronage of shipowners, captains and foreign consuls', promising easy engagement of seamen.[120] Much the same was reported in Marseille, the 'shipmasters having placed themselves unreservedly in the hands of crimps and boarding-house keepers'.[121] John Isaacs, who wrote to the newspapers in 1888 claiming to be a long-serving ship's steward, alleged that Capt. Codeler of the *Vancouver* had encouraged a crimp to take away the whole crew upon arrival in San Francisco because they were 'lazy'. The officers were ordered not to interfere. Some men had to be given a few dollars to make them go ashore, and all forfeited their wages as deserters. Isaacs believed that captains charged inflated prices for kit sold to sailors during a voyage, advanced as little money as possible during intermediate stops, and took payments from crimps in ports where labour was short.[122] P. J. Walker, who ran the Sailors' Home in Buenos Aires in the 1890s, reported that captains would not let him aboard their ships, being in collusion with the port's boarding-house keepers, or at least afraid of them. He claimed that a sailors' magazine, published in the port, had asked how many shipping shares captains bought with the proceeds of their deals with crimps.[123] Walker had previously drawn an analogy with receivers of stolen goods, believing that captains were as culpable as boarding masters in 'this sailor robbing'.[124] The new British Consul wrote from San Francisco in 1902 that it was difficult to find proof of captains negotiating with crimps, but that there was a place on the waterfront so well known

as an open exchange for crimps and British captains that it was called Limejuice Corner.[125]

Solid evidence for the costs and benefits of desertion is indeed hard to come by, although British officials began recording more detail as their suspicions grew. In the case of the *Annesley* in San Francisco in 1907, four ABs deserted, and the captain had to hire replacements at higher wages, as well as paying a fee (the melodramatically named 'blood money') to crimps. All this cost him £49 extra, calculated over the four months that it took the *Annesley* to get back to Britain. However, the Board of Trade discovered that the captain's accounts did not include wages left behind by the deserting seafarers, and those turned out to be revealing. One of the seamen, J. Bjorkbaum, had been on the ship for just over thirteen months, earning £40 6s. In that time he had been given £22 9s. in advance wages to pay for tobacco, tailors' bills and purchases at intermediate ports. Had he been paid off rather than deserting in San Francisco, he would have therefore taken almost another £18 with him, and his three fellow-deserters each left between £17 and £18 behind. The desertions in San Francisco had cost the captain £49, to be sure, but had saved him £71.[126]

If the choices facing seafarers and captains on arrival in a port seem complicated, getting safely away on a voyage was by no means straightforward either. Captains faced last-minute crew shortages when men failed to join their ships after signing contracts. Failure to join was, in its own way, as complex a phenomenon as desertion, and intimately connected with sailortown. According to Thomas Hanmer, manager of the Liverpool Sailors' Home, two-thirds of those failing to join in the 1870s did so by accident or falling into temptation—they were 'living riotously, and neglecting the consequences'. Hanmer seemed to have some sympathy for these men, at least compared with the other third, who absconded 'designedly'. He argued that sailortown's attractions were too much for many seamen; on the short journey from the home to the pierhead, men would jump down from the cart and be lost in a bar on the way.[127] Others thought that even good seamen would break their contracts if a vessel seemed unseaworthy, or if their first impressions of the food or the officers were particularly bad. Very few were truly dissolute, living from one credit note to the next with no interest in anything but funding their debauchery.[128] As ever, motives can be obscure, and not just those of seafarers. That last account was cut from the newspaper and sent to the Board of Trade by Cardiff crimps, who were trying to reinvent themselves as respectable boarding-house keepers. They evidently believed that the article helped make the

case for the sort of service they could provide seafarers and shipowners alike if only the Board of Trade would permit them.[129] So while it fits well with other representations of seafarers from the time, its author's motives are questionable.

By the end of the century, the beneficial impact of the steamship on the maritime labour market was becoming clearer. The US Treasury Department calculated that there were 83,135 crew arrivals in New York on British steamships in 1900, and a 'desertion' rate of between 4 and 5 per cent, which it ascribed to the ordinary drunkenness and failure to turn up for work that could be found in any large industry. On the remaining sailing ships, however, desertions reached 15 per cent, pointing to a sector that had significant problems recruiting its workforce amid persistent crimping and coercion.[130] In San Francisco in 1901, only 122 out of a total of 1424 desertions were from steamships. Even in the sail sector, the overall figures concealed huge disparities. Well-equipped sailing vessels with good food and accommodation could keep their crews as well as steamers did.[131] In Buenos Aires, the British Consul believed that sailing-ship captains from Nova Scotia were the worst in the port for driving their men to desertion, and that closer surveillance of their activities in all the ports they visited would lead to an overall improvement in the desertion statistics worldwide.[132]

Desertion and failure to join therefore offered seafarers some degree of personal autonomy in an industry that otherwise exercised very high levels of workplace discipline. Penalties for desertion were severe, but in many ports seamen could reasonably gamble on not being caught. The industry's dirty secret was that desertion sometimes suited captains and seamen alike, however much shipowners condemned the dishonesty and immorality of the seafarer. In other circumstances, though, captains struggled to recruit workers, especially in the sail sector. A large part of the economic underpinning of sailortown was the need to match not just supply and demand overall, but complex local pressures.

## Conclusion

Sailortown, as the place where the international shipping industry came ashore, was the location for an important part of global modernisation. Skilled workers were able to move out of sailing ships and the stokeholds of steamers, and into better jobs in steam, or in growing shore-based industries. Their places were taken by workers from lower-waged

economies, or by unskilled men persuaded to work on sailing ships by crimps. This entanglement between the seafarer and his industry was played out on shore as much as it was at sea, and in particular it became a wider set of relationships involving the people of sailortown. Harsh attitudes towards seafarers persisted even while some of them benefited from material improvements in working conditions, and carried over into relations between employers and unions. Shipowners certainly responded to the development of seamen's unions late in the century with extreme hostility, even by the standards of the time.[133] The rise of steam finally forced the industry to address the direct relationships between employers and workers, instead of conducting a series of proxy-conflicts through crimps and government officials, but this did not happen overnight, nor did it create a conciliatory approach to labour relations.

The next chapter looks more closely at the seafarer's experiences on shore, as he entered the territory of crimps and their associates. Commentators recognised that the presence of seafarers on shore, and the particular mechanisms that were created for their entertainment and exploitation, made sailortown districts unusual, even in the context of the hardships and exclusions characteristic of the Victorian urban crisis. Now that we have a grasp of the peculiarities of the industry, we can better understand how these waterfront entanglements developed as they did.

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CHAPTER 3

# The Maritime-Urban Frontier

Seafarers approached port with a mix of expectations, some rooted in their own experience, others in the yarning and singing of crewmates during the voyage. Sailortown offered choices, threats and opportunities, and the seafarer always had allies and enemies, although he sometimes struggled to tell the difference. In turn, seaport society already had its ideas about the seafarer, and how he might fit into an urban world that was changing just as rapidly as the maritime economy discussed in the last chapter. By no accident, seaports were among the fastest-growing cities of the age because they channelled the mobility of people and goods in the first era of globalisation. Sailortown therefore needs to be seen in two larger urban contexts, the Victorian slum and the cosmopolitan seaport city. Both have been the subject of much writing in recent decades, but often without making use of the lessons available from sailortown. Much of what was shocking about sailortown stemmed from the way seafarers and sailortown women thronged the waterfront streets, parading in such numbers as to challenge respectable visions of urban space on many levels. Perhaps even more disconcerting was the realisation that this behaviour could not be legislated or policed away. Sailortown people asserted ownership over their streets, bars and houses as part of a wider battle for ownership of the seafarer, with his valuable wage packet and his sought-after skills. We need to understand how those key places were used and abused, and how the boundaries of sailortown itself were defined. The lived experiences of the seafarer and his associates need to be followed as he negotiated his way through his time on shore. Sailortown was a place of leisure for seafarers,



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and because of that also a place of exploitation, danger and resistance. It offers possibilities for testing Henri Lefebvre's ideas about the production of space, given his argument that leisure was often a subversive force in the nineteenth-century city.[1]

Any study of sailortown's depredations risks focusing on extreme cases, because those dominate the surviving sources. It seems obvious that most seamen, even in the age of sail, were not constantly deserting from their ships to be beaten, robbed, drugged and shanghaied: the industry could hardly have survived, let alone grown so rapidly, in such circumstances. Nonetheless, scandalous testimony from sailortown moulded the seafarer's image and drove policy-making against a backdrop of regular moral panics. One of the most common rhetorical flourishes employed by missionaries and officials in this period was that seafarers faced worse dangers on shore than at sea, an extraordinary statement in light of the industry's shipboard death rates.[2] Because some seamen suffered excesses on shore, all experienced an increase in government regulation, surveillance, documentation and intervention by charitable and official bodies, and therefore a more contested experience in sailortown. The seafarer's entanglement with sailortown was often voluntary, which made him more disposed to resisting those trying to 'rescue' him. We need a sense of proportion regarding sailortown and its people, and a recognition that it existed on many levels from the intensely physical through to political and cultural abstractions.

## Sailortown and the Victorian Urban Crisis

Although obvious, it is worth stressing that sailortown was an urban place, and an important step up in scale and substance from its old 'beachcombing' precursors of the eighteenth century. Its urbanism gave it greater significance to contemporaries, who were concerned with the threats and dangers of growing cities. Sailortown is therefore—as a whole and in its key parts—an important case study in thinking about the 'moral geographies' and 'moral locations' of the nineteenth-century city.[3] Assigning moral value or danger to particular streets, buildings and spaces was fundamental to the way people lived in the city, steering their paths through and around places according to their perceptions, and of course defining the same places differently depending on their own priorities and proclivities.

Journalists and early social scientists saw sailortown as part of the mid-Victorian urban crisis, and key themes were already evident to Henry

Mayhew in his *Morning Chronicle* articles of 1850.[4] Mayhew identified the characteristic problems associated with mobile, sojourning mariners who spent months at sea, only to be released periodically in a seaport with large lump-sum wage packets. Reckless drinking, sexual excess and rapid impoverishment drove them from their boarding houses back to sea to start another cycle. Others writing in the same era also located sailortown in a wider landscape of work, poverty and slums. Thomas Beames' 1852 book on London's 'rookeries', for example, had a chapter on the Ratcliffe Highway, long famous for its sailortown dives, and then a section describing the activities of crimps. To Beames, the highway was just one among many problem districts, while the crimps were a nautical variant of the exploitative middlemen to be found in any slum.[5] Two decades later, much the same was true for James Greenwood, whose 'visit to Tiger Bay' contained what were by then familiar depictions of seafarers and sailortown people. Greenwood did use this as his opening chapter, presumably seeking a well-known case with which to start his tour.[6] In contrast, while James McCabe had a chapter entitled 'Sailors in New York' in his 1872 exposé of that city, it was Chapter 75, and he evidently did not consider it very prominent amid the broader chaos of the new US metropolis.[7]

Sailortown districts were not the worst slums of the mid-nineteenth century because they at least had prospects of work and a steady inflow of money when shipping was flourishing. Social reformers in the 1840s and 1850s wrote of slums that were much more abject, and the 'invention' of the slum as an urban form draws on the worst cases of transience and insecurity, shocking levels of infant mortality, and overwhelmed public infrastructure.[8] There is a sense, however, in which sailortown became distinctive as time passed because its characteristics persisted while worse slum districts were reformed around it. Regular factory or service employment became a reasonable prospect, even if not a reality, for a growing proportion of urban workers. Seafarers still came and went after industrial labourers had settled down, and the fact that many waterfront workers—dockers, warehouse hands, ship's cleaners and launderers—also had insecure and casual employment gave those districts an increasingly anomalous pattern.[9] Part of sailortown's fascination was that it maintained an atmosphere that was being eradicated elsewhere. Peter Ackroyd has a telling image of Charles Dickens in the late 1860s, devoting his night-time perambulations to the east of the city, beyond the Tower of London and into docklands, perhaps because that was where the streets and the people still had some similarity with the London of his youth.[10] There was a

developing sense of separation, of a maritime-urban world that was being left behind by modern improvements.

Just as the seafarer was perceived as a man apart, so sailortown came to be seen as a specialised place, requiring explanation from commentators who understood the nature of maritime life and work. They set the seafarer centre stage, and claimed to be revealing a world that was even more impenetrable than the 'darkest' districts familiar from existing representations. As such, it is no surprise to find many of these accounts written by missionaries or evangelists who had experience of working with seafarers, or who had been at sea themselves. Frank Bullen and George Mitchell, for example, wrote of London's sailortown, and James Fell about San Francisco.[11] Some journalists also began to identify sailortown as a phenomenon, such as M. J. Brusse, who detailed the step-by-step experience of a seaman from arrival on shore in Rotterdam, to departure on his next voyage, showing the detail of a hidden world to his readers.[12] Being regarded as a specialist subject, of course, could lead to marginalisation. In the 1880s a Liverpool newspaper commentator who wrote critical pieces about sailortown vices thought that they had a strangely low profile in the work of social reformers. He would have liked the waterfront boarding houses and dance halls to get 'as much attention from the lovers of decency and order as the pubs do'.[13] This points to the success of the temperance movement in focusing concern on the large eye-catching pubs that seemed to sit on every street corner, while sailortown's complications receded into the narrow side streets, hidden from light and scrutiny.

What set sailortown a little aside from the rest of the urban crisis? Most reasons, inevitably, revolve round the seafarer. His wages injected large sums suddenly into the sailortown economy, on a scale that had no real parallels elsewhere in the poorer districts of nineteenth-century cities. His transience had a faster turnover than other patterns of seasonal work, adding to the urgency of his spending and consumption, and of his exploitation. His work had a long-standing mystique that encouraged many commentators to believe that seafaring was a separate world beyond the ken of landsmen. The seafarer's display of extreme masculinity on shore, allied with the flamboyance of many of his female associates, probably gave a more extravagant tone to gender relations than in industrial districts, or at least appeared that way to observers. Finally, the conflicted vision of the seafarer as both perpetrator and victim of sailortown's depravities ensured that his urban world was a source of confusion and contradiction.[14]

Importantly, though, the entanglement between the sailor and sailortown was cyclical, mutually reinforcing, and not always negative. His actions were informed by the part he felt he should play, and in turn fed into a reinforcement of the mythology surrounding the seafarer on shore. City folk define acceptable and unacceptable behaviours in relation to particular locations, tolerating things in pubs, say, that they would not approve of in restaurants.[15] It is easy to see the seafarer as a transgressor, disrupting Victorian norms of respectability and the appropriate use of urban space, but that is precisely what everyone expected him to be. Commentators who repeated stories of drunken sailors were not shocking their audience but confirming their existing prejudices. In that sense the true sailortown subversives were the seamen who came on shore and went home to their wives. This mix of real actions, expectations and stereotypes naturally changed over time, as sailortown went through its phases of public panic and comfortable nostalgia. Sailortown therefore not only casts light on the most obvious dichotomies between respectable and unrespectable activities in the Victorian city but also shows a sense of how those representations became socialised and normalised, influencing further behaviours in turn.

## Sailortown and the Cosmopolitan Port City

The idea that seaport cities are distinctive and important has become commonplace since the 1950s, when geographers and historical demographers began focusing on the location and development of ports, waterfront land use, regeneration, and the fluidity and mobility of populations.[16] Key clusters of research focus on port cities around particular seas and oceans—the Atlantic and the Mediterranean especially—while there is also a long-standing thread of work on 'the colonial port city', which takes most of its evidence from Asia.[17] Port cities brokered global interactions of trade, empire, labour, migration and ideas, playing host to a variety of travellers and visitors who crossed lines of periphery and centre, province and metropolis. Historians have focused on the complicated ways in which empire 'came home' to the metropolis, and also the opportunities and dangers presented by living and working across far-reaching trade and imperial labour networks.[18] Seafarers are surprisingly absent from most of this research, however. Although crucial to the character of a seaport city, the seafarer is hard to see in many historical sources, and especially the classic materials used by imperial historians, architectural scholars or

historical demographers. A renewed awareness of sailortown should help these discussions because it was simultaneously local and international, taking some of its characteristics from its immediate circumstance, but many others from the influence of seafarers and fellow-sojourners. That interaction created a set of recognisable common characteristics that were interpreted through the myths and stereotypes of the classic sailortown. They therefore offer evidence, earlier than some, of the kind of globalised urban places more recently explored by scholars such as Doreen Massey.[19]

In particular, sailortown lets us revisit the assumed cosmopolitan character of seaport cities. The presence of people from many cultures in waterfront districts implies contact and exchange, and some commentators could get quite mystical, as in George Mitchell's view that 'Sailortown is not so much a restricted geographical area as a centre of nautical vitality, emanating from Cairo to Cardiff, and from Pekin to Poplar.'[20] In waterfront districts, wrote one 1890s evangelical, 'you may hear many languages, and see men in all colours of skin and dress. A new sense of cosmopolitanism and world-wide friendship is brought home to us.'[21] Sailortown was a laboratory: 'There is no place in London for ethnological study like the West India Dock Road.'[22] A visit to the Stranger's Home, established for the accommodation of 'Orientals, Africans and Polynesians', was 'ethnology made easy'.[23] The subjects of these orientalist visions were mostly seamen, and by the end of the century there were noticeable clusters of sojourning and partly resident seafarers in ports on all the main trade routes. Indian seafarers, for example, could be found in most ports around the Asian seas, whether in Singapore, a key port of call for British steam fleets, or in the Gulf, where many would make a pilgrimage to Mecca between working on ships and on shore; as time went on they settled in European ports in larger numbers.[24] Kru mariners from West Africa formed communities around the Atlantic rim, and seamen from the Middle East clustered in Europe's tramp-shipping ports.[25] A significant cluster of West Indian seamen developed in Cape Town at the beginning of the twentieth century following great demand for mariners during the Second Anglo-Boer War, and many established themselves with jobs and families ashore.[26]

On the other hand, there is ample testimony that sailortown districts encased seafarers in a bubble that perpetuated their maritime culture, with surprisingly little interaction between them and the city. The seafarer might have encyclopaedic knowledge of the bars on one or two streets, but ignorance—and unspoken fear—of anything beyond. A New York writer in 1881 believed that some sailors had 'wandered as far as the Bowery,

the fame of the many attractions of that thoroughfare having reached their ears', but that very few had ever seen Central Park.[27] While a seaman would yarn all day about London, 'to take him west of Aldgate pump is to lose him'.[28] The negative side of being a citizen of the world was that seafarers could feel like strangers wherever they went, unacknowledged and unwanted by ordinary people in the ports they visited.[29] Ethnic-minority seamen were particularly likely to feel isolated in strange ports, and often faced official regulations curtailing their movements, as well as broader hostility from waterfront residents.

In any case, there were seafarers with no wish for an exotic cosmopolitan experience, even if it had been on offer. A society can be very diverse without being very mixed, especially if one group has a numerical or cultural dominance combined with a sense of superiority. British mariners had a reputation for being insular in outlook, so the large proportion of British shipping on most deep-water trading routes tended to create a British atmosphere in seaports worldwide. Oliver North, who visited Valparaiso in the 1870s, thought it was 'in reality a sort of English colony': 'You find there the same oaths, the same beer, the same ship-chandlers, the same tick-going tailors and tobacconists, old-clothes men, sailors, gin palaces, billiard rooms, narrow dirty streets, and smells that you do in any seaport in the three kingdoms.'[30]

Accounts of indifference or hostility to foreign ports had become very common by the time captains and journalists were writing extended memoirs and travelogues in the 1920s and 1930s. Seafarers stuck to 'cosmopolitan Sailortown, where English is the common language', noted Alexander Bone, who believed that a London clerk holidaying in Marseille would know more about the city than a sailor trading in the place for years.[31] That definition of cosmopolitan, to mean a British-dominated maritime sphere separate from any local culture, is itself revealing. Cicely Fox Smith told the story of an engineer on the Liverpool–Lisbon run who hardly ever went ashore in the latter port because he thought the steep hills made the trams unsafe, and did not trust 'Dagoes'.[32]

In ports where Europeans were recent arrivals, sailortown remained a European or inter-colonial enclave. Bars, lodging houses and shops were run by expatriates from all parts of the maritime world. In the early twentieth century, the China Dog tearoom in Kobe was run by a Malayan man, while across the Pacific in Valparaiso, Irish and West Indian men were successive operators of a notorious bar.[33] Some sailortown characters gained international reputations. Mohammad Dessoukeh, otherwise known as

Jock Ferguson, sold an array of goods to passing seamen in Port Said, conducting his sales pitch in a carefully cultivated Scottish accent.[34] There was a boarding house in Marseille in the 1850s run by a Frenchwoman called 'English Mary', to the mystification of one Quebec sailor.[35] Of trades that had disproportionate ethnic representations in San Francisco, German and Irish saloon and boarding-house keepers were prominent, as were Nordic sailors (employed on the coastal lumber trade) and Chinese laundry workers; half the population in the waterfront zone was foreign born.[36]

The names of establishments were chosen to cloister visiting mariners from anything alien or unfamiliar. Antwerp, Amsterdam and Hamburg all had a bar called Channel for Orders, while Marseille and Liverpool both had one called Flags of all Nations.[37] Ports worldwide had bars with 'Liverpool' in their names, such as San Francisco's Liverpool Saloon on the corner of Pacific and Sansome Streets.[38] Callao had Liverpool Joe's bar, which, it seems, actually was run by a man called Joe from Liverpool, with its sign that read 'LIVERPOOL JOES WELCUM'.[39] Astoria, Oregon, had a waterfront boarding house called the Liverpool House, and a 'notoriously disreputable' bar called the Coach and Horses.[40] As that suggests, even when the names were not maritime, they had a generic British aspect to them. Cape Town had the Sailor's Friend and the Jolly Tar Inn.[41] Sydney had the Sailor's Return and the Hero of Waterloo.[42] The bar nearest the seamen's mission on Steuart Street, San Francisco, was called The Last Chance.[43] Many of these were run by expatriate Britons. Part of the complaint surrounding crimping in Dunkirk in the 1880s was that some crimps were 'renegade Englishmen', attracted by the large sums paid to British seafarers arriving at the port from long voyages.[44]

English had already overtaken Dutch as the working language of international seafaring in the eighteenth century.[45] The dominance of British and US shipping on major trade routes by the middle of the nineteenth century ensured that English became, in simplified, technical form, the new global language of the sea and of sailortown. Mariners whose first language was not English quickly adopted a version of it in the course of their seafaring, picking up parts of other languages depending on the make-up of the crews they sailed with. This was presumably a factor in their subsequent preponderance as bartenders and dance-hall keepers in sailortowns worldwide. Bars staffed by former mariners speaking German, Hungarian, French and English contributed to the multi-cultural melting point that James Joyce found in Trieste in the first decades of the twentieth century.[46] In the largest ports there might be enough seafarers of a given nationality

to create their own bars and cafes, and this pattern is certainly well documented in relation to boarding houses. London reportedly had this kind of landscape in the 1870s, with venues along the Ratcliffe Highway catering for a particular national clientele.[47]

We need to be careful about the seductiveness of cosmopolitan cities, and the idea that sailortown might have been ahead of its time in heralding a tolerant space in the midst of increasingly fractious national and imperial identities. Sailortown's multi-culturalism looks rather like that of the old cities of the Hapsburg and Ottoman Empires, and work on those in recent years is much concerned about the degree of nostalgia and wishful thinking that they have attracted, understandably given the horrors that swept them away in the First World War.[48] In the case of sailortown, transience added another consideration to whether a place might be tolerant and cosmopolitan in the longer term. The majority might admire a spectacle, but that does not mean there will be any welcome for the 'exotic' peoples taking part in it, should they step outside the frame and expect to settle down in close proximity to the observer. Nonetheless, those initial mid-century representations of sailortown as a laboratory for the amateur ethnographer set the tone for much that followed, regardless of subsequent changes in populations and attitudes. They also point to a working-class cosmopolitanism that was different from that of the cultural elites normally studied by historians of pre-1914 Europe, and which would reward detailed research in its own right as part of a widening sense of the need to study multiple cosmopolitanisms emerging from particular historical circumstances.[49] The idea that sailortown was a spectacle is also important because it applied to seafarers and their associates, women especially, even when there was no simple element of racial difference involved. The following sections consider in more detail the key spaces that were the stages for sailortown's theatre.

## Sailortown's Streets

This book benefits from a generation of scholarship on the nineteenth-century city and new understandings of urban space and its uses.[50] Streets, spaces and buildings need to be carefully read—or perhaps translated—if we are to understand how urban elites sought to control the people of sailortown, as well as the ways that they were challenged in turn.[51] Useful as these ideas are, though, we need to avoid falling into the trap of seeing sailortown's streets and buildings as just a literary or metaphorical device.

They were hard physical places that bruised and contained those who lived and worked in them, while sometimes affording protection, shelter and a stage on which to assert individuality and freedom of expression, even within tight social constraints.[52]

The seafarer's wages sat at the heart of his entanglements with sailortown, and waterfront streets were the front line in the battle to separate a seaman from his lump sum in cash. Some needed little persuasion. Seafarers developed a reputation for being generous, even profligate, with money, and conspicuous spending was part of their pleasure at being on shore. Single seafarers especially seem to have had little culture of saving. An official of the London Sailors' Home thought his residents normally spent all their wages before they went back to sea—and those were men considered the 'better sort' of seafarer.[53] Although much commentary focuses on theft and coercion, sailortown could make large sums of money from seafarers without that. Even Herbert Asbury, an American journalist who rarely played down urban depredations, noted that seafarers in San Francisco could avoid crimps and simply spend their money voluntarily in the huge number of bars where they were welcome customers.[54] Authors often invoked a variation on the expression 'he has worked like a horse to spend his wages like an ass'.[55]

Sailortown accordingly put on a spectacle to attract the mariner's attention. Colourful newspaper descriptions are common. Commentators believed that the seaman's senses were dazzled by the attractions of sailortown streets; his eyes by the women, but also by paintings, photographs, jewellery and trinkets; his ears by music from the dance halls and in the form of instruments to be bought and played. His appearance, long neglected at sea, was spruced up by bootblacks, barbers and tailors, while the quack doctors looked after his ailments, all in exchange for 'silver not copper'.[56] Street traders known as 'basket girls' or 'orange girls' apparently stuffed sailors' pockets with fruit while pulling their whiskers.[57] Shooting galleries, knick-knack shops and photographers' studios were common, and shops had a broad miscellany of goods, random to the outsider but logical to the seafarer, ranging from oilskins, boots and bedding to knuckle-dusters, melodeons and pipes.[58] A typical outfitter's 'slop-shop' would have a straw mattress ('donkey's breakfast' in sailor-speak) hanging on one side of the door and an oilskin suit on the other; the window would be full of uniforms, knives and gifts.[59] Sailors contributed to the spectacle by bringing exotic animals to sell, to the point where 'parrots and monkeys' became a catch-phrase associated with sailors' baggage; sailortown had several

dealers ready to buy these creatures, such as Jamrach's on the Ratcliffe Highway.[60] Street entertainers frequented waterfront districts, believing that seafarers would pay them well. Henry Mayhew talked to the owner of a 'happy family' menagerie in London who testified that 'the sailors was the most generous people to me, and those I had most to depend upon whilst I was on Tower-hill'.[61]

Of course, sailortown is harder to identify in the more routine, systematic urban history sources. Street directories, for example, used neutral descriptions—refreshment house, hotel, outfitter, boarding house—for establishments covering a range of respectability and had none of the hyperbole of newspapers. Still, the sheer concentration of such trades in some waterfront streets comes across clearly. In Cardiff's 1891 directory, for example, the buildings on Bute Street between Hannah Street and Maria Street filled just over one printed column, equating in this case to a five-minute walk on the ground. The listing had fourteen outfitter/clothiers, twelve boarding houses, ten hotels/pubs, five photographers, five refreshment houses, and four each of bootmakers, hairdressers and tobacconists.[62]

Against that backdrop, sailortown was a place of performance where people created their own identities, conscious of their own choices but also of how they were represented by others. Seafarers on shore behaved in ways that were, according to commentators, immediately recognisable. They were given to walking back and forth as if on a ship, often outside a key location, such as a Sailors' Home or a government shipping office. One description from a northern English port (probably North Shields) is typical: 'morning, noon and night they lounge, and tramp, and grumble, and smoke, and spit throughout the livelong year'.[63] In Cardiff, seafarers congregated outside the Seamen's Union office, 'Windy Corner', or across the road at 'Penniless Point', but only, local storytelling had it, until the pubs opened.[64] Their clothing was also a crucial indicator, and the idea that dress is a cultural and social place-marker is becoming an important area of historical research.[65] Seafarers complicate this question considerably because they sometimes had little choice what to wear. Many men came ashore in rags or in a strange mixture of styles, combining whatever survived of their original kit with clothing bought abroad, or from the captain's 'slop chest'. The sale of clothes was an important aspect of the sailortown economy, but also an opportunity for seamen to reassert their own sense of how a seafarer should look.

There are endless references in the newspapers, and especially in court reports, to men dressed 'as a sailor', but journalists rarely explained what that meant, evidently assuming that their readers already had a mental picture. Immediately recognisable seafarers were embedded in the popular image of sailortown in the first half of the nineteenth century, with cartoons depicting their distinctive clothing, dancing, drinking and brawling.[66] Sailing-ship men supposedly wore loose, functional clothing that let them move freely while climbing masts. It was often assumed that clothes would be at least partly blue, a cross-over from the fighting navy, but bright red also featured. Thomas Beames, describing the street scenes on the Ratcliffe Highway in 1850, claimed that every fourth man passing was a sailor 'whose dress at once connects them with our mercantile marine'. British or foreign, black or white, they would be wearing some combination of a Jersey frock, sou'wester hat, pilot coat, pea jacket, large trousers gathered at the hips, and low quartered shoes with large bows. They would also—a common view—be walking with a rolling gait.[67] There is more scattered testimony of clothing that formed part of the seafarer's conspicuous consumption on shore, and of seamen who refused to walk sailortown's streets in rags or even in standard seaman's clothing. Harry Hine, who first went to sea in 1859, recalled that sailors on East India ships would wait until the very last minute in a pub at the corner of the dock entrance before running on board as the vessel was leaving. One man had no time to change and was seen working up in the rigging in a frock coat, bright waistcoat, 'gold' watch and top hat.[68]

Recognisable seafarers were also conveying a particular kind of masculinity, and contemporaries were disturbed by sailortown's implications for gender definition and relations. Seafaring has long been represented as demanding stereotype masculine attributes such as courage, self-reliance, comradeship, physical strength and skill with complicated machinery. Other supposedly masculine traits—drink, violence and the use of prostitutes—were also tied closely to the image of seafarers, not least as expressed in sea songs. These were under fire in this period from those trying to construct a 'new' manliness that focused on responsibility, bread-winning and sobriety.[69] Waterfronts were also the location of major occupations regarded as masculine, most obviously dock labouring, shipbuilding, railways and road transport.[70]

It would be easy to see sailortown as more masculine in character than factory districts, for example, or at least as a place of sharper tensions between different aspects of masculinity. However, what truly worried

many observers was the way that the seafarer's masculinity became entangled with certain kinds of womanhood in sailortown. Representations of waterfront women focused disproportionally on the 'low' prostitute, especially when depicting women in public spaces. Morality agitators dehumanised them by caricaturing the physical appearance of those 'preying' on seafarers. Almost identical language runs through these descriptions on both sides of the Atlantic and beyond: in London their 'generally loathsome faces are painted, their bold eyes are often "painted" too, or indisguisedly blackened; their utterances call to mind the eruption of a mud volcano', while in New York, 'women hideously painted and bedizened are here, their faces bearing an imprint of vice unspeakable'.[71] Long-standing assumptions about the extreme masculinity of seafarers, and the equally negative forms of womanhood exhibited by prostitutes, meant that the actual encounters of men and women on the waterfront took place in an unusually heightened atmosphere. Work by cultural geographers suggests that an 'aggressive heterosexuality' has become the normal, even hegemonic condition of urban space in modern times, threatening those of minority sexual orientation.[72] It seems likely that the exaggerated sexuality attributed to the men and women of sailortown was equally disturbing to many of its middle-class observers.

The experiences of men and women in sailortown therefore offer evidence for a gender history that moves beyond single definitions of manhood and womanhood, and which provides alternative and complementary angles to previous interpretations based on class and formal politics.[73] Sailortown's versions of manhood and womanhood were full of conflicting judgements, especially in an era when the acceptability of certain behaviours was changing. Drunken nights spent with prostitutes in dance halls, for example, were a defining aspect of the masculinity of both transient seafarers and rich, 'sporting' young men. The image of the seafarer strolling with his girl in sailortown was ubiquitous in sea songs and on-board yarns, to the point where every seafarer knew this was expected of him. At the same time, it was a parallel, perhaps even a parody, of the promenading that urban elites performed on a city's formal 'walks'. Representations of women working as prostitutes were as contradictory as the images of seafarers themselves, and in some similar ways: in the words of one recent scholar, they were portrayed as either 'exploited and forgivable victims, or as the totemic representation of a dangerous and mutant sexuality that polluted respectable society'.[74] Many sailortown women defied the developing Victorian definitions of gendered spheres, and not only those

working as prostitutes or thieves. Women who were married to seafarers often had to work outside the home and participate in a money-lending economy that was unlikely to foster respectability, although of course this was also common in poorer communities away from the waterfront.[75] Some of those women whose voices have come through the sources were combative about their rights; others, well aware of the gendered expectations of the authorities, took a pragmatic line, playing the part expected of them in an effort to avoid still worse punishments.[76]

The seafarer's entanglement with these women, a key aspect of his liberation from life at sea, therefore reinforced a raft of stereotypes. Commentators were scandalised by what they saw as the brazen character of sailortown streets, and the public mixing of crowds of sailors and women who were universally assumed to be prostitutes. Sometimes the seafarer's first contact with women was on the dockside or even on the ship, although port authorities and the police got better at securing dock estates as the century went on. More often it was on the street, and seamen could apparently never walk far on shore without being solicited. Street solicitation, as well as occupying the lower rungs of the prostitution hierarchy, was dangerous for all involved because of its association with drink, pick-pocketing, robbery and violence, but it was often the only feasible practice for women who did not work in brothels, or who were barred from pubs.

Descriptions of street encounters between sailors and women are usually very generic and lacking in convincing detail. One notable exception is by James Moore, a worker for the Missions to Seamen, who observed London's East End in the guise of a sailor during the 1890s. According to Moore, while standing opposite a pub for two hours, he was 'molested' no fewer than forty-three times by women; on another occasion, while helping a drunk seaman to the Sailors' Home, he was solicited seven times in the course of a short walk.[77] Such testimony reinforced received ideas about public nuisances, but those who had to police those streets often took a different view. Competing evidence from the London Sailors' Home and the Metropolitan Police in the 1850s offers a good illustration. Admiral Hope, Chairman of the home's board, took it for granted that the large numbers of intoxicated sailors and women who paraded the streets constituted 'disorders': 'there is the irregularity of drunken men and drunken women surrounding our institution, and they have possession of the thoroughfare, so that I have found it exceedingly difficult to get into the institution'. This, he assumed, was a criminal state of affairs,

and under questioning he blustered rather than admit that there was no actual 'riot, noise and fighting'. The admiral was astonished to find that the police could not just arrest the men and women who thronged the streets around his institution. Indeed, James Steed, Superintendent of H Division, was categorical that his men did detain disorderly characters wherever they found them, but that the sailors and women who congregated in numbers around the Sailors' Home were usually 'perfectly orderly'. For Steed, places such as Well Street and the Ratcliffe Highway were 'a thoroughfare for sailors of all nations, and girls too', and this was not in itself a policing problem.[78]

As Hope's testimony indicates, sailortown's streets were crowded in strategic locations, and this became self-reinforcing. These were places with large numbers of seafarers, and in particular where they had the most money. Those seeking to separate a seaman from his wages believed they had a short window of time in which to do that, between a seaman being paid off and committing his pay to someone else, whether his family, a boarding-house keeper or an institution like a Sailors' Home. It follows that this also happened in a close compass of space. The spatial implications of these patterns underpin several later sections of this book, but for the moment we need to explore what happened when sailortown's street performance moved indoors.

## Spaces of Enticement

Commentators were always struck by the sheer number of waterfront bars awaiting the seaman as he stepped on shore, and there is something of an irony here. Early temperance campaigners had targeted drinking on board ship, once commonplace, and could legitimately claim success in pushing the industry towards 'dry' ships by the 1850s. This might, of course, have made sailortown worse by encouraging a culture of binge drinking between voyages.[79] As some seamen's advocates argued, it was not unreasonable for seamen to be drinkers on shore, and the total that they drank in a year was possibly less than that consumed by workers with permanent access to bars. Drink was a social glue for seafarers. A man would stand drinks for his shipmates, and even 'treat' everyone in the bar if he had been paid off from a long voyage. This bought the seafarer membership of an extended group of men who might help him out in difficult times.[80] It created an expectation that persisted well into the steamship era, to the despair of wives and families.[81] Temperance campaigners targeting

seafarers were therefore fighting an even more embedded set of social ties than was the case in other working-class districts. Aware that taking a man away from drink was to take him away from society, agitators struggled to recreate the positive aspects of pub culture in 'dry' surroundings.[82] For seafarers, such ideas threatened one of their few social connections.

Sailortown bars need to be seen as part of a much larger tavern culture in the nineteenth-century city that went beyond drink. These were communal, welcoming places that could quickly turn into sites of violence, sometimes motivated by ethnic, national or racial conflict. They were fundamental to class formation, most clearly in the development of working-class identities but also for the numerous gradations of the middle classes. Tavern-keepers' profits were rooted in selling drink, of course, but they knew that to be successful they needed to provide a much wider range of services, especially because any given bar had no shortage of close competitors.[83] Some of those proved potentially more threatening to elite sensibilities than the drink problem, not least the rise of radical political movements, trades unions and organised crime based in working-class bars.

Anti-drink campaigners often broadened their attack to the wider functions of the waterfront bar. They linked bars to crimping because these were an important hunting ground for crimps looking to snare seafarers and also because it was generally believed that mariners made themselves easy victims by their extreme drinking habits. Inevitably, bars in the waterfront zone were tainted by association regardless of what actually went on there. Edward Gourley, a Sunderland shipowner and temperance campaigner, thought that 'nearly all the public houses on the quay side, Liverpool, are crimp houses'. Liverpool's own stipendiary magistrate would only agree that they were 'to some extent', which is probably about right.[84] As will be discussed in the next chapter, much of the evidence about key spaces of crimping does not in fact relate to bars but to ships, docks and streets—that is, as early as possible in the seafarer's time in port.

After drink itself, the main angle of attack on the sailortown bar was that it encouraged sexual immorality. Many critics focused on the bar as a place where sailors met women working in prostitution. There was even a form of words—'frequented by unfortunate women and sailors'—that licensing officials used to summarise objections to waterfront pubs and dance halls.[85] This connection between certain kinds of masculinity and womanhood was the major concern of commentators—inextricably connected with drink, to be sure, but actually a set of judgements about sailortown's

gender relationships. The missionary James Moore, when asked whether seamen followed prostitutes into public houses, or vice versa, thought that 'it is six of one and half-a-dozen of the other'.[86] James Nugent, a priest and morality campaigner in Liverpool, had no doubt that sailors were at the heart of the threat to female virtue in the town: 'On their coming ashore, with the character of the men, you can understand that the money flows very freely indeed and therefore in Liverpool there is a great amount of female immorality from that particular source.'[87] Liverpool's police chief in the 1880s, J. W. Nott-Bower, argued that the city had 'an unusually large population of seamen, foreigners, and that floating class of young men free from the restraints of home life, who cannot be "made moral by Act of Parliament" and who create a demand for vice which, as all history teaches us, is sure to be responded to'.[88] Across the Atlantic in Milwaukie, physicians were specific about the behaviour of men working on the Great Lakes: 'as a general rule, the first thing a sailor does on landing from his vessel is to get drunk, and the next is to go to a house of prostitution'.[89] Henry Toynbee, a master mariner and social investigator, believed that the separation of seafaring from society made men vulnerable to 'the low, sensual excitements which meet them open-armed in every port after the privations of a voyage'; seafarers were 'living in an almost compulsory state of fornication, keeping a very large number of the other sex in the same sad chains'.[90]

Some mid-century commentary claimed that sailortown, for all its depravity, was much improved from the experiences of earlier generations. London's dance rooms—known as 'Green Rooms'—had once been even more scandalous. Thomas Warlters, a veteran auctioneer of public houses in the 1850s, recalled the time during the Napoleonic Wars when the Duke of York on Shadwell High Street would have '200 or 300 sailors, and women of all descriptions, some dancing, some singing' in a huge back room; the seamen had mostly been 'Swedes and Lascars' because British sailors were afraid of press gangs.[91] Such scenes, he believed, were long past, because publicans now worried about their licences. That seems to have been a minority view. The idea that the sailor's bar, dangerous enough in itself, was a gateway to greater depravity remained persistent. This was literally and spatially the case because the front of house bar was often very small compared with the 'large, lofty, well-lit dancing rooms' behind. One, described by Thomas Beames in 1850, had nautical scenes painted on the walls: a shipwreck, a vessel in full sail, men working aloft, and Greenwich Hospital. There would be professional musicians and

singers who acted out scenes in their songs; sometimes there were performing gymnasts. Everywhere, the clientele consisted of men and women preying on seamen.[92]

Some of those people testified in an 1891 court case about the Rose and Crown bar in London's East End, and this gives us unusual access to their voices. William Casey, a former sailor who claimed to have known the Ratcliffe Highway for thirty years, described how he had been assaulted in the Rose and Crown in 1890 while speaking up for two 'Dutchmen' who were being fleeced. The place, he said, was 'generally full of bullies, crimps and boarding house runners'. Casey had not gone to the police because he believed officers were corrupt and 'got too many half-pints there'. Another sailor, Charles Silva, had been robbed by a woman sitting on his knee, while William Shirley, a veteran seaman, had been 'hustled, knocked about and robbed'. Shirley testified that he had 'sometimes' complained, suggesting that he kept returning to the bar despite his experiences. Mary Kerr said she had gone to the Rose and Crown to find sailors, and that many of the women working from there were German and Dutch; 'the audience was all sailors and unfortunates'. Sarah Turner had also, she said, used the venue 'to pick up seafaring gentlemen'.[93] Not everyone agreed that sailors went to bars to pick up prostitutes, or vice versa. An unnamed Metropolitan Police inspector testified to his local licensing committee in 1891 that most of the sailors and women frequenting two East End bars arrived together, had known each other previously, and were primarily there for dancing. When asked if these were 'unfortunate women', he avoided the question but nonetheless made an important distinction: 'no doubt they are women that live on the sailors, not women who walk the streets'. Pressed, he refused to call them prostitutes, although the committee clearly wanted to hear this and went on to reject the licences anyway.[94]

Nevertheless, the idea that pubs and dance halls were the gateway to brothels recurs worldwide in sailortown. Eugene O'Neill frequented a bar in Buenos Aires called the Sailor's Opera that featured risqué dancing, and where business cards advertising nearby brothels were handed out to the clientele.[95] Some favoured more music and dancing rather than less as the solution to sailortown's depravities, albeit in a controlled environment. John Hollingshead, a pioneering theatre manager, thought that the advent of the music hall was turning dangerous old taverns into places of entertainment, and praised the transformation of the Prussian Eagle on Ratcliffe Highway. Such places, he argued, now 'give the sailors and their friends something better to do than getting mad drunk upon rum and

brandy and stuff, and running amuck and murdering each other in the streets'.[96]

If the connections between sailors, women, streets and pubs seemed hard for the authorities to crack, the broader geography of prostitution also exercised regulators and agitators on the waterfront. Seamen were often cited as one of few groups frequenting the lowest classes of prostitutes, reinforcing the exclusion of both by association. In Philadelphia in 1830, the poorest streetwalkers would only have 'some drunken buck, or sailor, or mayhap an ignorant country-man' as clients.[97] Timothy Gilfoyle argues that elements of the 'sporting male' subculture that developed in the 1830s in New York City can be found in earlier attitudes of sailors and longshoremen, and that sailortown prostitution retained a large element of street and saloon solicitation, while better-off districts developed formal brothels.[98] Perhaps as both a cause and effect of this contempt, seamen could be drunk, abusive and destructive customers for brothels, especially in Asian ports when they felt they could act with colonialist licence. Keepers of brothels for soldiers and seamen in Hong Kong faced regular large bills for damage to their premises, not a problem commonly experienced by their counterparts with local clientele.[99]

In London the brothels were poorer in the east and richer in the west, but even within the East End there were important distinctions. Mayhew thought the supposedly criminal Frederick Street brothels were 'larger and more roomy than I expected to find them', and even had four-poster beds. He found worse in Bluegate Fields, where brothels catering for Lascar and Chinese seamen had barely any furniture.[100] At the end of the century, police officers guiding Charles Booth's researchers thought that sailortown prostitution was poorly paid, but preferable to that elsewhere in the city. Pennington Street, for example, had 'a sturdy kind' of prostitution that lacked the 'bullies' living off the proceeds that were common in the West End, according to Inspector Reid.[101] Further down the Thames, ordinary seafarers frequented prostitutes in Jamaica Place, but junior officers went to Flint Street, having met the women at the Duke of Suffolk pub. The Jamaica Place brothels had been dispersed by a Vigilance Committee in 1895, noted a sceptical Inspector Carter. Whereas twenty of the twenty-four houses in the street had been brothels, and therefore easy to monitor, he now had to watch activity dispersed across the district, but in no way reduced.[102] Liverpool, claimed one campaigner in 1876, had a large number of 'very low brothels' near the Sailors' Home in Canning Place, and three streets of what he called 'black men's brothels' in the northern part

of town, where the men were stewards, cooks and sailors, and the women mostly Irish. He thought that the 'general appearance of the brothels and their inmates' improved towards the suburbs in the east of the town.[103] By the 1920s, sailortown brothels the world over were assumed to be the most sordid survivors of a past age. Albert Londres, in his crude polemic holding Polish Jews responsible for a white slave trade to Argentina, chose a brothel in La Boca as his archetype of low-end prostitution; it had a yard instead of a reception room, where men stood waiting in line just as they would for a job on the docks.[104]

Women working as prostitutes in seaport cities were often as diverse a population as their clients, and usually migrants living away from their home districts. The normal assumption in British ports was that prostitutes were disproportionately Irish, but Hull had a small cluster of German prostitutes living and working in King's Court, Dock Street, in the 1880s; in the wording of the police report, they were a 'gang,' led by Aloine Bitthen, 'the worst woman in Dock Street'.[105] Liverpool reportedly recruited women from its industrial hinterland to work as prostitutes in the 1880s. A mission established on Lime Street, near the railway station, reported that traffickers targeted women according to very specific requirements for age, height and build.[106] Marseille had a higher proportion of foreign prostitutes than other French cities, with almost a quarter of the women coming from abroad, most particularly from Italy and Spain.[107] Nineteenth-century Shanghai had a famously mixed community of women working in a hierarchy of prostitution, with nationalities rising and falling in numbers until the final influx of White Russian women following the Russian Revolution in 1917. Historians have uncovered various patterns by which women came to be working as prostitutes in Asian and US ports, of which local recruitment was only a part. Women from the American West Coast went to Shanghai in some numbers, either on spec or having been actively recruited by brothel-keepers.[108] In late nineteenth-century Buenos Aires, three in four women working as prostitutes were foreign born. While that was in an era of high-volume immigration, when a large proportion of the population as a whole had been born abroad, the disparity persisted even as general immigration declined in the twentieth century.[109]

Historians have long recognised the tendency to link prostitution with race and to assume that poorer brothel districts were also areas with disproportionately high ethnic-minority populations. As well as the racist equation of black and Asian women with prostitution, there was a strong

spatial-political element, in that minority districts had little political say and were likely to have the undesirable functions of the city located in their streets. By the end of the nineteenth century this pattern was thoroughly consolidated in US cities.[110] In some British colonies, too, there was careful segregation at various levels. Hong Kong separated brothels with Chinese and non-Chinese clients, regulating them according to different ordinances, with much more rigid medical examination and surveillance for those catering to westerners. Spatially, though, matters were confused. While the two categories apparently clustered in different parts of the city, the lowest brothels for foreigners—those for seamen and soldiers—were not found with the other foreign brothels in the central district but rather to the west among the Chinese brothels and the poorer part of the colony.[111] Unusually, the Hong Kong authorities believed that merchant seamen did not frequent the very poorest brothels. For once there was an even lower group of clients, in this case the garrison's soldiers.[112] Old prejudices surrounding sailortown districts continued to influence landscapes of race, class and gender well into the twentieth century.

Perhaps the most mythologised of all sailortown spaces was the opium den. Although it became a key location in wider debates about Chinese settlement in European and US cities, the opium den was initially as much about sailortown as about Chinatown.[113] Dickens' version, described at the beginning of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* in 1870, set the tone for such representations for decades to come. Although Dickens had the keeper of the den as a 'haggard' English woman, and his protagonist as an English choirmaster, he took several opportunities in the first chapter to stress that the den was dependent for its livelihood on Chinese and Lascar seamen arriving at the London docks. Newspaper descriptions co-located London's opium district with streets well known for seamen's boarding houses, such as Pennyfields and Limehouse Causeway, and emphasised their seafaring clientele. One report in 1881 had several Chinese seamen being returned to their ship by the police, having gone to a crimp's boarding house that doubled as an opium den.[114] In San Francisco the link with seafarers was less explicit, although there was still an early assumption that opium use was limited to Chinese people, and the discovery that young white people visited opium dens caused a media panic in 1875.[115] That sense of an old sailortown vice leading to wider contamination resurfaced periodically in the following decades, especially at times when Chinese seafarers were perceived to be taking jobs from white seamen.

Although the drink, drugs, race and prostitution nexus went far beyond sailortown, its persistence in waterfront districts became a convenient myth that stigmatised those areas and their inhabitants long after the decline of sailortown itself. This also eased the respectable consciences of the middle classes, who could use that 'common knowledge' to ignore discreet brothels and private vices in their own areas. Indeed, radical voices claimed that it was 'the poorest and most slatternly' of the trade who were prosecuted, leaving brothels in polite areas to function unmolested.[116] A similar process differentiated waterfront bars from the respectable pubs in the inner-suburban residential districts. At the same time, many people wanted to be associated with the edgy image of sailortown, even if only in retrospect. The long-accepted story that Johannes Brahms had a misspent youth playing piano in the sailors' brothels of St Pauli is still causing arguments among music historians. Whether he did or not, the more interesting point is that he claimed that he did. By the 1880s, when Brahms made those remarks, there was something attractive about having a connection with the vice and thrills of sailortown; it had an air of daring and romance, and offered an excuse for his failure to learn social niceties.[117]

## Threats and Dangers

Alongside its attractions and its moral dangers, it is hardly surprising that sailortown should be a place of physical danger too. After all, it played host to the sort of young, male and unmarried transient populations that were notorious in US gold-mining camps for killing and dying in ridiculous numbers.[118] As far as we can tell, however, no sailortown ever came close to the homicide rates experienced in those places, suggesting that there was a much higher degree of social control and cohesion. Tiger Bay was not Dodge City, despite what commentators wanted to believe. Florence Bell, for example, a member of a Middlesbrough iron-making family, thought that 'there is something in the intercourse of sailors from other ports who come and go, nomadic, unvouched for, who appear and disappear, with no responsibility for their words or their deeds, that seems to bring to the whole world a kinship of lawlessness and disorder'. Bell contrasted mariners with manufacturing sector workers, towards whom local elites had paternal attitudes.[119] In fact, the most detailed work on waterfront crime shows that seafarers were much more likely to come in front of the courts for breaches of merchant marine legislation than for truly criminal activities. Desertions, shipboard disciplinary violations, and

disputes over wages and contracts were the most common reasons for seafarers to be taken to court. The likelihood of a sailortown resident being the victim of a seaman's criminal activity was small.[120]

When they were involved in violence and robbery, seafarers tended to be victims rather than perpetrators. The idea that life was cheap in sailortown was a recurring theme in reformist writing, and the seafarer found stabbed in an alley or drowned in a dock is a commonplace in the polemical literature of the time. Memoirs paint a bleak picture of violence at sea and on shore, describing beatings by mates on board ship, fights on the docks between seafarers, and a culture of armed hostility throughout.[121] Actual examples are always rare, though. When seamen were found dead, local authorities often seemed ready to assume that they had died in drunken brawls, perpetuating the stereotype instead of investigating the individual case. The British Consul in Odessa noted the suspicious deaths of five British seafarers in less than a year in 1864/65, but the Russian police were sceptical about claims that the men had been murdered, and they demanded to have their expenses covered before they apprehended any suspects.[122] Although British officials were scandalised by the Russian attitude, it is true that sailortown crimes of all kinds were hard to convict because so many of those involved were drunk and so made poor witnesses. Indeed, the high profile of sailortown murders later in the century suggests that they had a political and polemical value precisely because of their relative rarity. They stood out from routine theft and robbery, and were highlighted by missionaries and reformers who found it difficult otherwise to draw attention to the plight of seafarers. For example, the murder of George Copeland 'in a house of ill-fame in Dunkirk' became a totem in the campaign for a wages transmission scheme in continental ports in the 1880s.[123]

Theft was more common than extreme violence, and newspapers regularly reported testimony, usually from missionaries and officials, about seafarers being robbed of remarkable sums. There is good evidence of organised gangs who preyed on mariners. When James Edwards was convicted of snatching a £5 note from a sailor in a London pub in 1866, Constable Damerell testified that he was a 'swellmobsman, and belonged to a lawless gang, who got about sailors and robbed them'.[124] A court in Cardiff heard of the 'Ashbox gang' in 1892, so-called because 'they waited about the street corners on the look-out for sailors just come ashore, emptied the contents of ashboxes over their heads, and, while they were blinded and choked by the ashes, robbed and ill-treated them'. At least

one member of the gang, Arthur Gwilliam, was himself a seaman.[125] Some criminals had a particular technique that they used to rob seafarers, often rooted in knowledge of seamen's habits. In New York, thieves preyed on 'snoozers'—sailors who fell asleep drunk on the steps of their boarding houses. One Water Street keeper pretended to be asleep on his own doorstep to capture such a thief in 1827.[126] John Cole, a former seafarer turned thief, got to know sailors in bars before engineering an argument and challenging them to a fight. Many seamen would happily oblige, going into the street and taking their coats off. Cole would then run away with the coat and any valuables in its pockets.[127] That willingness to have a fight played into the hands of at least one San Francisco boarding-house keeper. Hugh Sherlock of Vallejo Street employed a boxer called Patsey Cannon to challenge sailors to a bout; the losing seamen would be 'looked after' in the boarding house.[128] A pair of boxing gloves was commonly noted among the standard boarding-house paraphernalia associated with drinking, smoking and billiards.[129] Given the levels of drink involved, situations were likely to develop in ways the seafarer would not have wanted but had no means to control. In 1888, for example, a seafarer called Larsen was paid off at London's Tower Hill shipping office with £17 in cash. According to Agnes Hedenström, keeper of the Scandinavian Temperance Home, he 'was dragged into a public house by half a dozen crimps. Two or three hours later he came home with his face bleeding and with only 12/6 left.'[130]

It was noted previously that clothes formed an important part of the seafarer's visibility in sailortown, and they were central to its criminal economy also. A necessity, and a key item of consumer display, clothing was also important in sailortown's gift-giving culture. The ready availability of pawnshops and receivers of stolen goods ensured that clothes were quickly converted back into cash, so they were a common target for thieves. Griffith Williams, a seaman on shore in Cardiff in 1895, fell in with a woman called Mary Fitzpatrick and spent the evening buying clothes for them both. She then disappeared with both parcels and was later found to have pawned his clothes for 10s.[131]

Some seafarers were well aware of the threats that awaited them. They could be seen performing strange physical contortions to reach coins sewn into unlikely parts of their clothing for safekeeping.[132] Joseph Richards, described by a journalist as a 'shrewd African seaman', noted the serial numbers of three Bank of England notes that he was issued as pay in 1855 and so was able to prosecute two men who later stole them.[133] Others took

direct measures, carrying their working knives on shore and making sure they went around in groups. There are differences depending on whether a ship was at an intermediate port or at its final destination. In the latter, crew members scattered after being paid off, travelling to the next port or signing on different ships, and often losing all track of their shipmates. At ports of call, however, the crew remained a unit, whatever internal tensions there might be between them, and they would often maintain that sense of crew solidarity while on shore in a strange port. Indeed, historians and former seafarers alike have suggested that on-board culture required a large degree of levelling, developing a collective sense of what it meant to be a proper shipmate, reinforced with folklore and tradition.[134] One sea-shanty collector reported an interviewee telling him that 'after the first few weeks a man was sick of the very sight of his mates: yet he had to be friendly. And as time wore on he became used to them and was ready, upon reaching port, to fight for his worst enemy in the crew.'[135]

Some seafarers just lived up to their naïve stereotype. In particular, that tendency to trust other seamen, often a source of strength, was exploited by criminals. As a very young sailor, Alan Villiers was tricked out of money in Sydney by a man with a good line in nautical banter: 'the mean, thieving rascal had pretended to be a sailor'.[136] In Liverpool, Pat O'Mara's father had a stolen book that taught him enough maritime jargon to persuade sailors to accept his hospitality, after which he would rob them. O'Mara himself narrowly escaped a beating later when he found himself working on a ship with one of his father's victims.[137] This was in the early twentieth century, when the visiting Nordic crews of long-distance sailing ships were the last maritime victims of Liverpool's sailortown.

Sailors also robbed other sailors, and in many cases drink was an obvious complication. Courts had to untangle cases where all those involved, including witnesses, were drunk seafarers. In 1841 a New York boarding-house keeper called James Cochran was acquitted of robbing a sailor because the man admitted 'that he was too drunk to know precisely what took place'.[138] Seafarers on shore were usually willing to buy drink, food and accommodation for fellows who were short, and did not always find themselves recompensed in the way they expected. John Leslie, paid off in North Shields in 1863, fell in with a young sailor called Francis Keefe on the Tyne ferry, and introduced him to his boarding-house keeper; Keefe was later arrested on his way to Liverpool having stolen Leslie's coat and wages during the night.[139] A similar case in San Francisco in 1891 saw Gus

Johnson, a ship's steward, steal a watch, chain and cash from a seaman called M. J. Lopez after a night out drinking.[140]

Courts sometimes lost patience with seamen for recklessness. When Charles Sinson tried to reclaim £14 from his London boarding-house keeper in 1866, he got a lecture from the magistrate about the availability of Sailors' Homes, and the stupidity of giving money for 'safe-keeping' to crimps.[141] In San Francisco, a judge sent Martha Jackson—'a Barbary Coast brunette'—to San Quentin for two and a half years for stealing $300 from a sailor called Daniel Curtis. He reduced her sentence a little because he wanted to make the point that Curtis was partly to blame, referring to 'the foolhardiness of persons who persist in wandering about in the disreputable localities of the city at night with large sums of money upon them'.[142]

If seamen were more often victims than perpetrators, two categories of sailortown violence are important exceptions. Seamen sometimes fought one another in mass brawls in the streets, dividing on national or racial lines. Cardiff feared slipping into anarchy in the late 1840s and 1850s as the rapid growth of the port outpaced shore facilities. US Independence Day in 1856 saw a riot between British and American sailors.[143] In 1859, 1000 people were allegedly involved in a stand-off between French and Austrian seafarers, armed with sticks and knives.[144] The port's elites worried about knives, associated with all sailors, but with southern European seamen in particular, and published posters warning of heavy sentences for those caught using weapons.[145] Seafarers from ethnic minorities were at risk from the wider population and also from other seafarers, especially in times of pressure on the labour market. The Strangers' Home for Asiatics in London claimed an important role in protecting Asian seafarers from this kind of violence. Mercantile Marine Offices, which will be discussed later as a key focal point for conflict involving seafarers, crimps and officials, could also be dangerous places for minority seamen. The Strangers' Home claimed in 1890 that its Indian residents had been 'set upon and subjected to vile abuse and maltreated' in the London offices, while the police had to be called to break up a fight between European and Chinese seamen.[146]

Ships' officers could be a target for seafarer grievances, especially the mates who were responsible for everyday discipline on board. Violence on ships was common enough, but mates had a level of legal and physical authority that meant that sailors stored their resentments until the next port. American mates on the Atlantic routes—often referred to in the

contemporary literature as 'Bucko mates'—had a reputation for abusing seamen, which meant that their time on shore in Liverpool and New York could be dangerous. One armed confrontation in 1840s Liverpool led to the arrest of thirty seamen and twenty mates. It had begun when the crew of the *Powhattan* promised to pay back their mate for his treatment of them; the mate in turn gathered his fellow mates from several vessels in the port and confronted the seamen on the street outside their boarding house.[147] A mate called 'Big Lou Holmes' allegedly led his fellows in a fight against thirty Greek and Italian seamen in Joe the Greek's Coffee House in Williamson Square, Liverpool.[148] Grudges could be tenuous yet deadly serious. William Robinson, a seaman charged with the murder of a mate called Stephen Goodwin, had not even served on Goodwin's ship but had apparently applied for a berth and been refused. Robinson told Goodwin, before stabbing him outside a bar, that 'you are a mate, and you think sailors are dogs'. Goodwin seemed mystified, asking 'what have I done, that these men should use me so?'[149]

However much these images dominate perceptions of sailortown, in reality the contribution of sailors to waterfront crime and vice is long on anecdote and short on useable statistics. Few studies have been able to differentiate criminal activity in waterfront districts by occupation or nationality, the key indicators of the impact of transient mariners on the urban geography of crime. In mid-nineteenth-century Marseille, crimes associated with poverty and itinerancy (e.g. begging and vagrancy) were disproportionately common in slum districts away from the immediate waterfront zone. Among mariners, locally born seamen committed few crimes but rates were higher among visiting mariners, especially those working deep-sea ships. Mariners were only one criminally inclined group among many, but they constituted a visible section of the 'temporary dangerous class' created by transients.[150] Part of that visibility stemmed from sailortown's own prominence in most seaport cities. Being close to the waterfront, sailortown areas were rarely exclusive, and competition for the use of narrow, confined waterfront areas was such that all these streets had multiple purposes, and fell under the gaze of a wider range of observers.

## Imagined Places

The experiences of seafarers on shore can be seen in new light when the symbolism of key locations is added to the discussion, and when sailortown is understood as a place of intersection between maritime and urban

cultures. It is also important to consider the daily cycle of sailortown life, which, as with everything else, revolved around the habits of the seafarer. Visitors got very different impressions of sailortown depending on the time of day, as seafarers and their associates worked their ways through sailortown's 'choreography of existence'.[151] In addition, amid the negative press, there were always some boosters willing to promote waterfront districts. New York's South Street, for example, could be seen as a great mixture of humanity and purpose, from 'rich merchants' via 'jolly tars' to 'dull loafers'.[152] Water Street, a block inland, had witnessed the steady victory of commerce over sailortown, as huge warehouses proved a more profitable use of the ground. A columnist wrote in 1868 that 'merchandise can pay better rents than dance houses', and warehousing and distribution were pushing out marine stores, boarding houses and slop-shops.[153] By late in the century, sailortown was becoming a picturesque destination for urban tourists. Anyone with 'a nautical twist of mind' would find New York's South Street a joy, wrote one journalist in 1893. The tone was becoming nostalgic; the author drew attention to sailing ships, junk shops with nautical memorabilia, the rare presence of US-built and registered ships, and the multi-national crews of sailors. There was a visit to Pier 14, where Atlantic packets used to tie up: 'it is a locality of traditions and reminiscences'. Old seamen could be found there telling stories.[154]

If an increasingly picturesque representation was not enough to counter continuing visions of depravity, journalists could appeal to economic value and progressive land use. One common theme was to highlight 'useful' activities on the waterfront, such as manufacturing industry. Although San Francisco's near-waterfront zone was often pilloried in the press, the same papers sometimes identified aspects that 'should be a source of pride'. A writer wrote approvingly in 1885 of saw-milling on Spear Street, and iron-working on Main Street, while also noting that the Sailors' Home was there, along with seamen's clothing stores. He invoked the common trope that the area was little known to most people in the city.[155] At around the same time in Liverpool, a journalist noted that 'many thousands of town-dwellers' rarely if ever visited the waterfront districts, but far from condemning the area's character he recommended a walk there in order to better understand 'the extent and nature of Liverpool's trade'. He offered a list of the many buildings, spaces and uses in the zone, from small shops to huge warehouses, busy roads and railways. It was a dynamic and colourful scene for all its rough edges, representing 'one side, and that not by any means the worst, of the Liverpool of today'.[156]

The pressure on space in confined, multi-functional waterfront districts inevitably created odd juxtapositions. Boundaries between respectable business streets and sailortown could be hard to detect, and were sometimes defined less by space than by time of day. The south end of Cardiff's Butetown, for example, was an active working quarter during office hours, with clerks and businessmen visiting the exchanges and offices around Mount Stuart Square. By 6.00 p.m, though, the office classes had left for the day 'and the area is now as complete a "Sailor town" as one could hope to find'.[157] Elsewhere a visitor might struggle to find the stereotype sailortown activities unless he knew when, as well as where, to look. In San Francisco, the notorious Barbary Coast was sleepy and down-at-heel during the day but woke up in the evening to prepare for what a reporter called the 'midnight harvest'.[158] Some once-infamous waterfront streets worked the other way. By the 1890s, New York's South Street was a bustle of activity during the working day but remarkably quiet at night: 'the saloons close at an early hour, and long before midnight South Street is at rest'.[159]

That continuing multi-functionalism meant that sailortown remained in the consciousness of port city elites, or at least the male businessmen who had their offices near the waterfront. While early nineteenth-century merchants had lived with their families above their counting houses, in most ports they drove a process of spatial and functional specialisation as the century went on. They moved their families to new houses in the inner suburbs, their goods to large, specialist warehouses, and their offices to purpose-built office blocks. The need to keep at least some of their activities close to the port, however, ensured that the merchant classes saw sailortown more often than any other slum district. They had been able to separate their families from it, but at least during their working day they remained as locked into the spatial determinism of the seaport economy as the seafarers were.

It is also clear—but frustratingly underdocumented—that waterfront districts were defined in part by the imaginary sailortown that developed in the minds of seafarers at sea. This had its roots in internationally famous streets, bars and dance halls, but was then embellished endlessly through the words of sea songs and sailors' yarns. Harry Dean, remembering his time as a young sailor approaching San Francisco in the 1870s, had heard 'so much about the Barbary Coast from the sailors that I wanted to see it for myself', and eventually persuaded his uncle the captain to show him.[160] As scholars of shanties (working songs) and forebitters (songs sung in

leisure hours) have demonstrated, much sea music offered hyperbolic accounts of life on shore, deliberately giving men as much contrast as possible with the privations of life at sea. Valerie Burton has discussed songs such as 'Ratcliffe Highway', with its depiction of a flamboyantly dressed 'flash packet' being pursued down the street by a sailor.[161] Amid much bravado and misogyny, there could be some touching wishful thinking, with sailors hoping that women might be kind to them and not steal their clothes. Stan Hugill's research revealed shanties that constantly reinforced the notoriety of prominent streets and quarters, such as Liverpool's Paradise Street and San Francisco's Barbary Coast, and populated sailortown with partly mythological characters such as Maggie May the prostitute and Paddy Doyle the crimp.[162]

Sailors inevitably struggled to match all these anticipations with any kind of reality on the ground, but that was a problem for other commentators too. Even in the 1870s, writers would set out to discover the iniquities of sailortown, only to report that things were strangely quiet. Richard Rowe noted that Ratcliffe Highway had improved its manners 'to a marvellous extent, say those whose recollection runs back some thirty years'.[163] In 1877, *The Times* reported the latest London slum clearance as the 'extinction of a rookery … one of the most important social and sanitary improvements which has been carried out since the demolition of "Tiger Bay", Ratcliffe Highway'.[164] For at least two decades more, though, the highway and its alleys and squares were represented as the centre of sailortown's excesses by polemicists. Here, as elsewhere, it is often hard to separate the physical sailortown from the increasingly imaginary one.

## Conclusion

Sailortown helps us understand the nineteenth-century city better, even though it seems to be an extreme subset of that wider urban world. It could be very narrowly focused, both physically in its few small streets and functionally in its relationship to the seafarer and his wages. It was not even all of the waterfront, although its characteristics tended to be extrapolated more widely. Lurid accounts of sailortown vices perpetuated extreme versions of gender stereotypes, with the real men and women of sailortown having to find their way amid depictions of rapacious seafarers and brazen prostitutes. Minority seafarers sought, and sometimes managed to create, their own safer spaces in foreign ports, facing hostility not only from the locals but from the dominant white British segment of

the global maritime labour force and its peculiar definition of waterfront cosmopolitanism.

At least some seafarers got what they wanted from sailortown, in the form of flamboyant binge-consumption, abetted by a large cast of characters who did well from the seaman's wages. Those seeking a quieter time on shore faced a harder challenge of avoiding enticements and, ultimately, the threat of predatory violence. In the absence of state protection and industry reform—or, more fairly, in their very slow development—it is no surprise that many seafarers struck up alliances with people who promised them a degree of safety on shore, albeit often at a high price. This was not the first or last society to choose the predictability of organised crime over the chaos of the disorganised variety, and this is where we need to turn to the phenomenon of crimping.

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CHAPTER 4

# Crimps and Crimping

Largely forgotten now, the crimp was a stock character in polemical writing about sailortown. Crimping flourished because good sailing-ship mariners were scarce, merchant captains did not have access to the pressgangs or reserve systems favoured by fighting navies, and owners refused to pay high enough wages. In many ports, crimps came to control crew recruitment, extracting fees from captains and sailors alike. This was a core sailortown nexus, bringing together the semi-legal, unregulated edges of both the maritime and the urban economies. Crimping was a complex of activities, led by boarding-house keepers, but also involving the owners and keepers of bars and dance halls, tailors and outfitters, corrupt officials and a miscellany of touts, runners and other hangers-on. It became a sophisticated process of control, with the crimp and his associates monitoring the seafarer's movements from before his ship had even reached port to beyond the point of departure. Crimps used a mix of persuasion and menace, building alliances with magistrates and local authorities that smack of organised crime and corruption. As such, they cast an unusual light on broader attitudes towards the seafarer and sailortown by highlighting the true priorities of seaport elites. In the late-flourishing examples of the sailortown phenomenon, in the American North West in the 1890s, crimps wielded political influence and commanded wealth and votes. They and their opponents were capable propagandists, and just as the seafarer was surrounded by a complicated imaginary, so the image of the crimp included a substantial element of mythology.



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This chapter explains what crimping myths tell us about the place of the crimp in sailortown, and particularly how he was able to maintain a surprising level of influence over local maritime labour markets. The ways in which real crimps operated were exposed a generation ago in Judith Fingard's studies of the Atlantic Canada ports, and in Conrad Dixon's careful breakdown of the crimping process. This chapter builds on that work with new evidence, in particular by considering the crimp's ability to control seafarers in particular spaces and at key times.[1] Effective crimps brought performance and spectacle to their operations as well as violence and extortion, and it is time for a new look at these crucial sailortown players. It is also clear that crimping had an impact on the shipping industry at many levels, from the experiences of individual seafarers to distortions in the global labour market. It provoked international diplomatic discussions by the later decades of the century, although how much of that arose from any concern for seafarers' welfare and how much from the interests of shipowners was always a matter for debate.

## The Mythic Crimp

There is a lot of mythology about the crimp, and by the end of the nineteenth century he was an established maritime legend. Even judges felt they could joke about the reputation of the crimp complex. When a lawyer tried to read the relevant legislation at a London boarding-house keeper's appeal in 1899, Mr Justice Darling commented that 'there are much more entertaining books on the subject of crimping'.[2] Long before then, crimping tales could not be taken at face value, but for that very reason they reveal a rich vein of myth and theatre surrounding sailors on shore. Probably the best-known example from sailortown folk culture is the story of the crimp who signed a dead man on board ship, persuading the ship's officers that the man was simply drunk. The captain gave the crimp the advance wages or commission due for supplying the sailor to the ship, only to discover that he had been conned after the ship had sailed. This tale was repeated regularly throughout the nineteenth century. Herman Melville included a version of it in *Redburn*, his 1848 autobiographical novel of a boy's first sea voyage, and claimed that a crewmate had seen such events before. The crimp, he noted, carefully arranged the limbs of a 'drunk' seaman called Miguel Saveda on his bunk, and it had been thought normal enough that the man was unconscious for the better part of a day after sailing.[3] This extract was reprinted in seaport newspapers, in an intriguing

blurring of journalism and fiction. The *Belfast News-Letter*, for example, carried it under the title 'Shipping a Dead Seaman' and credited it as 'From Melville's Redburn' in exactly the same format as provincial newspapers used when reprinting articles from the metropolitan presses.[4] The tale was revived frequently in the following decades. John Mason, for example, a captain-memoirist of the 1920s, accused a San Francisco crimp called Shanghai Franklin of having 'often' crimped dead men.[5]

How the man died is usually not included in the story, which is revealing, because a legend intended to show the crimp in the worst possible light would presumably accuse the crimp of murdering the seaman to profit from his body. Instead, the crimp is seen as a pragmatist, taking advantage of a seaman's death from drink or another 'natural' cause. Such stories of ingenuity and guile pervade crimping tales, and the joke was usually on the ship's captain. A common thread consists of the deceptions used to persuade captains that men who had never been to sea were in fact experienced seafarers. There are several variations. Men walked round a rhinoceros or cow horn, and climbed over a clothes rope, enabling the crimp to truthfully state that they had been several times across the Line (Equator) and round the (Cape) Horn. A Liverpool crimp variously called Paddy West or Paddy Doyle, who had a boarding house on Great Howard Street, is usually mentioned as the originator of these practices, but in truth they were already legendary in the mid-nineteenth century.[6] Even a Board of Trade Superintendent, who in 1895 retired from his post in Cardiff after thirty years, claimed to have known a boarding-house master who did the horn trick.[7] Paddy West's legend was adapted for the age of steam, allegedly training men how to shovel coal in his backyard so that he could pass them off as ships' firemen.[8]

Like all myths, these classic crimping activities reveal a set of truths. They demonstrate that the entanglement between the sailor and the crimp had many layers, from brutalisation through resigned acceptance to workplace resistance and even comedy. Melville's dead seaman was a 'shanghaiing' tale taken to the extreme. Shanghaiing was the process whereby a sailor would go on shore, accept a drink from a friendly crimp, then wake up bound for a far-distant port. Shanghai may just have been the most exotic destination that came into the mind of whoever coined the phrase, although one author thought that 'Shanghai voyage' was already a generic term for a long and arduous passage, while more recent thinking connects the expression to older Chinese practices of kidnapping workers.[9] Sometimes the drink was drugged; sometimes it just led to so many other

drinks that it had the same effect. There are numerous well-evidenced cases (unlike the dead seaman story), but shanghaiing also acquired a legendary patina. By the 1860s, fact and fiction had already intertwined to the point where seafarers' advocates needed to stress that it was real; readers evidently assumed such things were tall tales from a lost maritime world.

Being shanghaied was a clear assault on a seaman's rights, although for most victims it just meant that they were back to sea sooner than they would have liked.[10] Alcoholic seamen who went on benders as soon as they reached port were especially vulnerable. Frederick Harlow, a memoirist, recalled a 'hopeless drunk' American seaman who claimed to have spent ten years trying to get back to Brooklyn, always being shanghaied in the wrong direction.[11] The British Consul in San Francisco intervened in 1902 to prevent a befuddled sailor called Simonsen from being delivered on board a new ship. This was just a day after he had been crimped away from his incoming vessel, doubtless with promises of a good run on shore.[12] But Simonsen would have been back at sea shortly in any case. Shanghaiing became really dangerous when non-sailors were kidnapped, and the press often used these instances to raise public opposition to the activities of crimps. The *Daily Evening Bulletin* in San Francisco, a long-standing critic of the crimping complex, regularly carried stories of shanghaied men. Joseph Lewis, for example, was a carpenter who found himself on a voyage to Belgium, and had to work his way back home to his family via New York, Chicago and Wyoming.[13]

The 'round the Horn' and 'across the Line' legends also have their roots in the ways that crimps worked with seafarers to deceive captains. James Beer, a Liverpool boarding-house keeper, briefed the would-be seaman William Noott to tell the captain that he had served as an AB either on a coaster or on a US ship to explain his lack of British discharge papers. He changed Noott's clothes, giving him a blue shirt, a belt and a cap to make him look like a seaman. While Noott's lack of seafaring experience was apparent when the ship sailed, he worked hard anyway, earned the wages of an OS and decided to remain at sea thereafter. Had Beer represented Noott as an inexperienced OS from the beginning, no offence would have been committed but of course he might not have been hired either.[14]

As Noott's case suggests, no competent captain would have been taken in by crude attempts to pass landsmen as experienced seafarers, and there was something more complicated going on. A ship's master needed a

certain number of ABs to work his ship properly, and in the event of accidents he wanted to be able to testify that he had an appropriate number. Until seafarers' documentation was formalised late in the century, however, it was easy to claim AB status, and some masters were willing to turn a blind eye when they were in a hurry to sail. The crimp benefited from shipping unqualified men at the higher grade because he got a larger sum of advance wages, and the seafarer benefited if he had a long enough voyage to work through his advance and actually receive pay of his own when it was over.

What, then, was the point of these myths, and of their mundane counterparts in the experiences of real seafarers? Crimp stories were a knowing performance and an inside joke rather than a serious attempt to deceive. Everyone involved recognised the theatricality, and such tales therefore entered the mythology of sailortown through yarns, sea songs and the nostalgic writing that accompanied the demise of sail. They signal the core nature of the crimp's trade, which was to extract every possible monetary value from the seafarer, initially by taking his wages and then by exchanging his body (whether alive, sober, drunk or dead) for an advance on the wages from his next ship. At the same time, they credited the crimp with cunning, guile and cheek; to mix up elements of folklore, he was perhaps a combination of bogeyman, trickster and Robin Hood. Seafarers bore the brunt of the crimp's activities, but the crimp could also profit from masters and shipowners. He might work, if not for the sailor's direct benefit, at least against the interest of the owners—the sailor's enemy's enemy could be some kind of friend. Commentators noted that seamen rarely blamed the crimp for their hardships, even admiring what they called his 'slimness'[15] While at sea, a seaman might talk himself into viewing the crimp with 'an intense, sincere, and whole soul hatred', yet apparently fall willingly into his clutches again as soon as he reached port.[16] Old seamen gave the impression that it had been an honour to be shanghaied by famous crimps, albeit after many years in which the memories had been softened through yarning.[17]

## Representing the Crimp

Understanding the entanglement between the seafarer and the crimp needs an awareness of the crimp's developing media representation. The word 'crimp' refers to an intermediary or brokering role, sometimes in relation to cargoes but more usually in the recruitment of sailors or soldiers. As

with most middleman roles, crimping had a negative image. Societies that claim to value craft, production and honest toil tend to be suspicious of those who make money from buying and selling, and the fact that crimps ultimately dealt in human beings lowered their status further. 'Crimp' was frequently prefaced with 'notorious' or 'low' in the reporting of court cases. 'Land shark' was particularly common, and a San Francisco writer called them 'horrid vermin', 'crawling nightmare snakes' and 'sharkies' in the course of a single article.[18] A British Consul thought that the crimp was 'the most mischievous, wicked, unconscionable being on earth'.[19] Sometimes their failure to take on suitable manly employment was highlighted. James Vernon of Barry Dock, convicted of crimping in 1900, was described as 'one of those loafers who got their living by making a prey of seamen on the quay walls, instead of going to sea themselves'.[20]

Listing more than a few variations would be impractical, but Table 4.1 demonstrates the range of abuse levelled at crimps across space and time. The vampiric aspects of crimping were a common part of the rhetoric. One sea captain referred to crimps as 'those accursed creatures, who live on the fat of the land and suck the blood of poor Jack, and then poison him both in body and mind'.[21] A seamen's leader called crimps 'blood-sucking vampires' in 1879.[22] In 1888 a journalist described the area around the Liverpool Sailors' Home as 'a locale of human vampires'.[23] This language was used widely in sailortown for anyone perceived as exploiting the seaman, and even some Sailors' Homes, complained a letter-writer, had 'vampire officials'.[24] A close variation was 'human mos-

**Table 4.1** Newspaper names for crimps and their runners

| *Epithet* | *Examples of appearance in newspapers* |
|---|---|
| Hammock snatcher | *Liverpool Mercury*, 7 September 1860; *Western Mail*, 8 June 1869 |
| Man-catcher | *Liverpool Mercury*, 16 February 1864 |
| Blood-sucker | *Louisiana Advertiser*, 28 November 1826; *Dundee Courier & Argus*, 13 July 1872; *Morning Oregonian*, 19 August 1889 |
| Fiend | *Liverpool Mercury*, 18 December 1891 |
| Scallywag | *Western Mail*, 28 April 1892 |
| Parasite | *Glasgow Herald*, 17 February 1894 |
| Harpie | *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, 29 November 1896 |
| Marauder | *New York Herald*, 25 February 1844 |
| Land pirate | *Morning Chronicle*, 10 March 1862 |
| Shore pirate | *Morning Oregonian*, 23 February 1890 |

quito'. In that case the author also drew parallels with rinderpest in cattle, which needed 'stamping out'.[25] The crimps of Antwerp were 'the vilest creatures that ever drew sustenance from the sweat of other men's faces'.[26]

Critics also sought historical analogies to condemn crimping. American commentators recalled that pressgangs had once forced Americans into the British navy, and that this seemed to have parallels with shanghaiing seamen: 'we appear to be retrograding towards those dark and gloomy periods in the history of Great Britain and our own country'.[27] Crimping undermined free labour because men were bought and sold for their advance notes rather than hired directly for wages. One 1860 newspaper commentary, reprinted on both sides of the Atlantic, claimed that 'the shipowners cannot, in fact, be said to hire sailors; they buy them of the landlords with these advance wages'.[28] Three decades later the British Consul in Dunkirk reported seamen being discharged from their ships with no wages due, and even in debt to the ship, because their voyage across the Atlantic had not been long enough to pay off the advance note given to the crimp at the start of the crossing.[29] The British Consul in Buenos Aires reported that 'a seaman is literally a saleable article'.[30] It seemed little had changed since Mayhew's time—he thought crimps were like street dog-stealers, enticing away the dogs (sailors) and then offering, all innocence, to sell them back to their owners (captains).[31]

This was just a short step from using the language of slavery and the slave trade.[32] American commentators invoked this when broader arguments about slavery were common. In 1860, for example, the Boston press called boarding-house keepers 'owners of human flesh' for their control over seamen.[33] The Norwegian Consul in Bristol took particular exception to men being moved to other ports and signed onto ships; he thought that was 'no better than the slave trade'.[34] A generation on, commentators could still refer to the sailor's situation as 'an absolute slavery'.[35] Others thought it was self-enslavement, brought on by the seaman's alleged immorality and weak-mindedness. Thomas Gray, Assistant Secretary of the Board of Trade in the 1880s, argued that drunk seamen who fell into the hands of crimps had put themselves in a state of slavery. He asked an audience of seamen at the opening of the Gravesend Sailors' Home in 1886, 'am I not right when I say that man is a slave?', and went on to state 'that no human agency can help such a man while he chooses to remain in such bondage'.[36] By then the situation of seafarers was sometimes equated with another panic that invoked ideas of slavery, that of the 'white slave trade' that allegedly kidnapped women into prostitution

in South America or the Far East. Frederick Bernal, the British Consul at Havre, thought that seamen in perpetual debt to boarding-house keepers were virtually 'white slaves'.[37]

Anti-Semitism was part of the rhetoric about 'white slavery', with Jewish men from Eastern Europe commonly accused of trafficking, and this was also a major element in attacks on crimps. Although boarding-house keepers were rarely represented as Jewish, tailors and outfitters who made overpriced clothing known as 'slops' usually were. In London, the Registrar of Seamen's officials believed that crimping was dominated by 'certain families, principally slop-sellers of the Jewish persuasion', who had been established for generations.[38] 'Jew slopsellers', sometimes just 'Jews', were regularly accused of boarding incoming vessels in London Dock in the 1850s.[39] Testimony from Hull referred to waterfront runners working for 'Jew tailors'.[40] In one 1855 police court case, brought by two seamen seeking the return of clothing taken as security by a tailor, the latter was not even named, just referred to throughout the newspaper report as 'the Jew'.[41] While the multi-national diversity of sailors was celebrated, or at least accorded anthropological interest, Jewish outfitters and ships' store dealers were depicted negatively. George Sala singled them out in his 1851 account of waterfront London: 'for Jack, does Meshech manufacture the delusive jewellery; while Shadrach vaunts the watch that has no works; and Abednego confidentially proposes advances of cash on wage notes'. Sala later elaborated, arguing that Jewish and Gentile outfitters were as bad as each other, and that virtually everyone in sailortown robbed mariners. Nonetheless, his choices are telling.[42] Half a century later, the British Consul in Marseille still believed that seamen's tailors were 'mostly Russian or German Jews'.[43]

Against this background of mythology, name-calling, stereotype and evocative metaphor, it is as well to be reminded that real crimps actually did exist. The best-documented individual crimps are those active in the American North West at the end of the nineteenth century, in part precisely because their image fed into the genre conventions of frontier journalism. While condemning the crimps' activities, journalists appreciated their extravagant dress, dramatic court appearances and gift for cultivating their own images. James Turk—'a notorious sailor boarding-house keeper'—sued the *Oregonian* for libel in 1883, but the paper did not ease up, ridiculing him for being well fed and showing no signs of the illnesses he used as reasons for delaying court cases: 'Jim was as rosy-cheeked and burly and cumbersome as ever.'[44] Turk had political clout, despite allegedly

costing the city of Portland $50,000 over two decades in the prosecution of his crimes.[45] When he died in 1895 at the age of sixty-three, the press reported that he had been born in England and was 'a veteran of the Mexican War', which seems unlikely if his age was accurate.[46] Turk established a crimping dynasty, with his youngest son Frank being convicted of illegal boarding at the age of nineteen in 1891; James accompanied his son to court and paid a $300 fine to save him from jail.[47] Frank then developed a broader criminal portfolio, including assault and battery, dog-stealing and prize-fighting.[48]

Larry Sullivan, also active in Portland, Oregon, used his prosperous image to convince sailors that he could fix jobs for them on shore. In one case he credited his clothing—what the journalist described as 'a genteel-looking suit'—with his success in persuading several Japanese seamen to desert.[49] Sullivan's influence grew throughout the 1890s. He bought out rival firms and threatened to raise his 'blood money' fees unless shipowners gave him monopoly contracts over crew recruitment.[50] Sullivan was an associate of Joseph 'Bunco' Kelly, who put up $700 bail for Sullivan in 1892 when the latter was charged with assaulting the harbour officer, John Byrne.[51] Kelly was a legendary figure in his own lifetime, with at least one premature account of his death, when he supposedly drowned chasing two seamen deserting from their vessel. In fact he lived on to trade in bogus opium and be convicted of murder in 1894.[52]

These depictions were solidified in maritime memoirs early in the twentieth century. John Mason's recollection of 'Shanghai Franklin' in San Francisco, for example, focused on his weight ('very fat') and his clothes: he was 'most elaborately dressed. He had jewellery on him which must have cost many thousands of dollars.'[53] Other depictions cast crimps as business-like rather than flamboyant, although perhaps no less theatrical. Charles Dixon, a former captain, recalled his youthful encounter with a Rio de Janeiro crimp called Steve Breen in the 1890s. The subject of fearsome seafarers' yarns about drugs and violence, Breen turned out to be just as frightening in reality. Dressed 'with more than ordinary care', he was 'a cold, quick, dangerous man, but he kept the ships moving out of Rio'. What particularly struck Dixon was that his then captain, 'the kindest and most honourable of men', was a good friend of Breen and trusted him completely in matters of business. Breen duly supplied a deserter from another ship and a political radical on the run from the authorities.[54]

Understanding the role of these crimps is important, but such men could have achieved little on their own. Major crimps built extended

networks of touts and runners, employed for their physical strength and intimidating presence. One New York reporter gave a specification for a suitable person in 1874: 'To possess the ability and courage to go on board vessels just arrived in port and carry off the sailors' chests, so as to compel the mariners to leave the vessel and go to the sailors' boarding-house to which their clothes have been taken.' This was in connection with John McCarthy, a 'powerfully-built man', who combined driving a wagon with acting as a runner for several boarding houses; he had just been arrested for badly wounding a ship's mate who tried to stop him removing effects from a vessel.[55] Pat Murphy, a 'hanger-on of the sailor boarding-house gang' in Portland, Oregon, was 'an exceptionally tough citizen'.[56] In London, Thomas Canty was 'a tall and powerful fellow', described in court as a 'loafer … a touter, and one who sponges off sailors, or knocks them about for the crimps if necessary'.[57]

Runners, making the initial contact with seafarers, faced a greater risk of arrest during periodic police actions against crimping. San Francisco's John Devine, known as 'The Chicken'—a common label for prize-fighters—was executed for murder in 1873 at the age of thirty-three, after a six-year career as a boarding-house runner that saw him arrested seventy-nine times.[58] In the same year, Joseph Fagan, 'sailor boarding-house runner and noted city front bruiser', had paid $150 in fines in a month when arrested for his latest highway robbery.[59] Exactly what runners got in return is hard to determine. On the Thames in the late 1860s, crimps allegedly paid 8s.–10s. for each sailor successfully delivered to their boarding house.[60] A commission rate of 25 per cent is widely corroborated and was, for example, the rate allowed by London slop-sellers in the 1860s to anyone who brought sailors to their shops.[61] Seamen's advocates in Hull alleged that the tailors' runners who got men drunk before the vessel had tied up were paid 16s. a week, plus anything up to 25 per cent of the money taken from the seamen in their charge.[62] Liverpool runners in the early 1880s were apparently on a commission of 'not less than 20 per cent'.[63]

As would be expected, we only have hard evidence about a tiny proportion of those involved in the crimp complex, and the overall numbers would have been substantial when more distant hangers-on are included. In January 1875 the Thames police identified thirty-two individuals waiting for incoming vessels at the various London docks, as well as a number whose names were unknown. Most were only seen once, but William Burns and Hugh Campbell were spotted four times each, and some two or three times.[64] In addition, these men were just the most obvious elements

in the waterfront networks that underpinned the crimping economy, and all sorts of people worked for crimps at some or other remove. William Kretschmere, a German waiter in a coffee shop at 8 Ratcliffe Highway, persuaded two navy sailors to desert in 1859, and delivered them to a nearby shipping agent called Moss Phillips.[65] A Liverpool journalist wrote of a culture of watchfulness on the part of crimps and everyone else engaged in exploiting mariners: 'Every shoe-black around the Sailors' Home can tell you when ships are due in.'[66] A seafarer approaching a port was entering a well-developed information environment, coordinated by crimps who were practised in a range of methods from persuasion to violence. Ultimately the point of that was to control the seafarer during his time in sailortown and to limit his scope for autonomous action.

## Controlling Spaces

What, then, could a seafarer expect as he approached a port, having spent the voyage exchanging tales of vampires, land sharks and 'tough citizens?' In the first place, he was likely to encounter the crimping economy far sooner than might be predicted, and probably before his ship reached port. Crimps pushed the boundaries of sailortown outwards, aware of the value of early contact. In ports that were some way up a river, this point of 'arrival' could be many miles away. Crimps working on the Thames in the 1860s boarded vessels from small boats that they kept out at Gravesend, more than twenty miles from Tower Bridge. Offering sailors a drink to welcome them home, runners handed out business cards for whatever boarding house, bar or outfitters shop they represented. Some then stayed on the ship to watch the crew, while the rest rowed ashore and got the train up to London, preparing carts to get the men securely to the boarding house. This was slick and sophisticated: a police superintendent actually used the word 'surveillance' to describe the crimps' procedures.[67] Across the North Sea, Antwerp crimps could board in Dutch waters at the mouth of the Scheldt after taking the train out to Flushing 'so as to be early on the scene of the plunder'.[68] Witnesses reported the decks of ships being 'literally covered' with crimps.[69] The British Consul complained that the police posed 'no impediment to crimps', and that liquor and tobacco were freely distributed to the 'great detriment of discipline and order on board'.[70] Capt. Nicol of the *Zuleika* claimed in 1888 that the police had ignored his signals for help while sailing up the river with forty runners on board and his crew 'rolling about drunk'. The ship arrived safely, he said,

thanks only to a 'few steady men and apprentices'.[71] Even in such dramatic cases, therefore, some seafarers resisted crimping inducements, but it is always hard to assess proportions amid the polemical noise.

Runners had stories for sailors, tailored to the port they were arriving at and the point they had reached in their overall voyage. Seamen coming to the end of a contracted voyage would be told of the comforts of the boarding house and how they could stay for a good run on shore before easily finding their next ship. Seamen approaching intermediate ports were offered undemanding, well-paid jobs if only they would desert and come on shore. Bartending was a favourite, but there were less obvious occupations that made use of seafarers' skills and might be unusual enough to make them think it was a genuine offer. A runner working for the San Francisco crimp Pete Gallagher offered incoming sailors jobs shifting scenery in theatres.[72] In Astoria, a 'stylishly-attired young lady' visited a ship, taking an interest in the welfare of the seamen; this was a common enough activity by middle-class philanthropists, often women. In this case, however, she tried to entice the sailors to desert and work for 'an uncle who ran a large cannery just up the river'. Seven of them went, doubtless into the hands of the boarding-house keepers.[73]

It was common for crimps and runners to misrepresent themselves as working for respectable institutions such as Sailors' Homes in order to get on board ships before they docked. Edward Isaacs, described as 'a Jew crimp and touter', was fined in 1863 for misleading a ship's master at Gravesend; he got all the way up the Thames, persuading the crew to come to his crimp's clothing establishment, before he was ejected by one of the dock officers.[74] It was often alleged that boarding-house runners acquired copies of cards used by Sailors' Homes and distributed them in an effort to lower the seamen's defences.[75] Some crimps and runners learned to talk with seafarers in their own languages, and were as much part of the trans-national mobility of the global waterfront as their victims. During the guano boom in the 1850s, Callao became notorious for crimp houses established by North American and English crimps. Frederick Sullivan, an Irish seafarer, testified in 1858 that he was enticed ashore with promises of high wages by John 'Black Jack' Carter, who ran a boarding house called the Merrimac with another crimp named Barney Bishop. The subsequent consular report on the case revealed that some of the port's crimps were moving to even better pickings on the Frazer River in New Caledonia.[76]

Crimps also exploited the peculiar sailortown cosmopolitanism that used nautical English as its language of convenience. Waterfront runners

of all nationalities took advantage of the tendency of British seafarers to speak only English and to assume that everyone they met would accommodate them. Officials sympathised with the British seafarer 'entrapped by the first English-speaking person he meets … are not we all when travelling in a foreign land much more ready to make acquaintance with English-speaking persons than we should be at home?'[77] Crimps who wanted to make a closer target of a particular national group simply hired men who could speak the relevant language. A prosecution of tailors and their runners in London in 1901 revealed that Jewish tailors were hiring Norwegian runners to approach their own nationals' ships in the docks. Tailors named as Abraham and Levinson employed runners called Kundsen and Nielsen, respectively; the runners were found on board the Norwegian barque *Stratford* and needed interpreters during their subsequent trial.[78]

The most common runner's tactic, however, was simply to ply men with drink. Having been at sea for weeks or months, they would be keen to have a drink, and also unused to its effects. Whisky, reckoned a consular official in the American North West, was the crimp's 'chief agent'.[79] Sometimes runners could not get on board as soon as they would have liked, if vessels were moving quickly or had particularly diligent (and usually armed) officers on watch. Even then, crimps were ingenious. They made up small packages of liquor, cigars and boarding-house cards, throwing them onto the decks for seamen to collect. They would also keep up a constant patter as they rowed or sailed alongside, telling seamen of the luxuries that awaited them on shore. Even without actually meeting a crimp, then, it was possible for seamen to arrive in port both drunk and vulnerable.[80]

A few runners here and a bottle of whisky there might not have represented much of a challenge to seafarers or their officers, but the evidence suggests that organised crimping could be a mass event. Some ships were boarded by large mobs, to the point where observers saw a threat to public order as well as to seafarers. In 1850s Cardiff, gangs of twenty or thirty men allegedly boarded ships and removed the crew complete with their possessions.[81] A London court heard in 1863 of a ship being boarded by a hundred 'crimps, touts, outfitters, boarding-house keepers and others', harassing seamen for their business: 'the confusion was dreadful'.[82] Although such scenes became less common in European ports later in the century, they remained a feature of the west coast of the USA. In San Francisco, a mass of small boats—the 'runner's fleet'—went out to intercept arriving vessels.[83] 'Thirty or forty' crimps invaded the *Poona* in San Francisco in 1874, crowding the decks to such an extent that it was

impossible for the crew to do their work.[84] In 1891 'an organised band of 75 men' stormed the *Buccleuch*, a British ship in Astoria, Oregon. The captain had taken precautions the night before, moving his vessel ten feet off the wharf and pulling in his gangways. Nonetheless, a mob of 'sailors, beach-combers, and boarding-house runners' came equipped with a large plank, and used it to get on board before trying to drag the crew onshore. According to the captain, the terrified seamen barricaded themselves in the rear cabin, and the crimps had to content themselves with stealing all their kit.[85] Occasionally there is evidence of seafarers saving themselves from such depredations by 'giving up' unpopular members of the crew. One memoirist recalled a crew at Astoria persuading a gang of runners to take away a malingering seaman who had refused to pull his weight on the outward voyage.[86]

Control over a ship and its crew as it reached port was therefore far from a technical issue of maritime law. It was at the heart of the crimp complex, and the broader landscape of waterfront criminality. A considerable degree of violence was expected and tolerated at the boundary between the ship and the land, and captains and crews could legally remove crimps by force. Officers commonly carried handguns, and sailors used whatever weapons could be found or improvised. The first and second mates of a ship lying off Savannah had a gun-fight with three crimps in 1847 that left both of them injured, while the crimps were run off by the ship's carpenter wielding a cutlass. The reporter covering the story believed that crimping in the port was 'worse than piracy on the high seas'.[87] The British courts in the 1850s mostly sympathised with crews defending their vessels. In 1856, Solomon Davis, identified in court as a Jewish outfitter, was among twenty 'crimps, touters, slopsellers, and others' refusing to leave a ship in St Katherine's Dock, London. A seaman called John Jones, left in charge of the vessel and evidently at the end of his tether, beat Davis on the head with a belaying pin. The magistrate reprimanded Jones for the degree of violence he had used but let him off with paying compensation rather than a criminal penalty.[88] In the same era, Birkenhead Police Court acquitted the second mate of a US ship who beat a boatman and kept him in irons overnight, suspecting that he had come on board for nefarious purposes.[89] One London dock policeman was judged to have gone too far, however, when he tried to force a tout called Timothy Purcell off the railing of a ship in 1867. There was a real danger that Purcell might have fallen into the dock and drowned, and the constable earned a public reprimand from the magistrate for exceeding his duty.[90] Perhaps predictably, the American

press tended to support robust action by ships' officers: 'if a brace or two of these pirates and thieves were shot and killed once a fortnight for a while the effect would be very wholesome'.[91]

Of course, we have to be sceptical about some of this evidence. Everyone involved had an incentive to inflate the numbers of crimps and the scale of their operations. Captains and sailors might not want to admit that they had lost control of their vessels to a few men in a rowing boat. Crimps wanted to boost their reputations, and journalists enjoyed the spectacle. It seems likely that many accounts were exaggerated, and that some at least were drafted with the old crimping myths in mind. But that makes this material more valuable, not less, illuminating the core sailortown battle for control of the seafarer even as it tried to raise a smokescreen around it. Whether there were five crimps or fifty on any given morning in the Puget Sound, they were part of the performance that built the crimping complex, in both its day-to-day reality and its surrounding reputation and legend.

These struggles for access to seafarers on board arriving vessels point to the crimp's need to acquire control of the seaman at the earliest opportunity. Close monitoring then continued while the runner escorted the seaman to the boarding house, and throughout his stay. One journalist wrote in the 1880s that a seaman ensconced in a boarding house was as secure as if he was in a jail, and would only leave when the full value of his wages had been extracted.[92] Boarding-house keepers not only sought to prevent their residents from going to Sailors' Homes but also kept them away from competitors. A Liverpool journalist described how 'Boss' and his associate Mickey made sure seamen were not tempted to spend their money anywhere else. When a seaman returned to Boss's boarding house and commented that one of his fellows had stayed in a bar to play poker, Mickey was sent to 'rescue' him from the depredations of 'Bob the barman'.[93] Some boarding-house keepers kept their residents in line with violence and intimidation, continuing the culture of shipboard life on shore. William Anderson, who ran a boarding house on San Francisco's Pacific Street, was in court twice in a few weeks in 1872, first for beating a drunken sailor with a belaying pin (favoured weapon of ship's mates) and then for slashing a whaling crewman with a razor.[94] In 1874, William Webb assaulted a seaman to ensure prompt payment of a bill; his defence was that the seaman was likely to get drunk and squander his money, so enforced payment was 'a business necessity'.[95]

Occasionally the boarding house was not secure enough. In small ports the police knew the boarding houses well enough and would launch periodic crackdowns, especially when seamen were really scarce. Crimps responded by extending sailortown's boundaries outwards, hiding sailors in the surrounding countryside or neighbouring towns. Hull crimps did this during a shortage of seamen in the 1850s, bringing unlikely places such as Beverley, a dozen miles away, into the sailortown economy.[96] Nicholas Olsen, a Grimsby crimp, told deserting seamen that he would take them to Hull to get a new ship but instead hid them more than twenty miles away in Cleethorpes.[97] In Cardiff a boarding-house keeper called Richard Thale had a house on Tredegar Street, and another outside the town to which he sent seamen; this was described in court as 'a plan of a somewhat novel kind with regard to crimping'.[98]

The point at which a vessel left the crimp's reach was just as important as the point of arrival. The most dubious crimping activities depended on crews being shipped at the very last minute, when their unfitness as seamen could be disguised, and any legal or financial difficulties were likely to disappear with the departure of the ship. Although a ship might be in port for weeks or months, when the decision was taken to sail, matters became urgent. Masters facing seasonal pressures, such as ice, hurricanes or monsoons, did not want to lose face with owners by missing a departure date. Commonly, crimps feigned ignorance of the whereabouts of seafarers, only to suddenly find them when departure was imminent. The captain then had little choice but to take whoever the crimps offered.[99] As one captain testified in 1893, 'It is the same old story. These boarding-house men always wait until a ship is ready for sea, and when time is most valuable, and then seek to harass the captain in the hope that he will buy them off so he can proceed on his voyage.'[100]

This need to magic men out of thin air at the most profitable moment tested the crimp's monitoring and control over seafarers in port. Just as crimps reached out to sea to pull in sailors, so they watched the exits, and controlled departures. When men tried to go from the London Sailors' Home to the city's railway stations for onward travel to a new job, runners would pelt them with what the newspapers euphemistically referred to as 'mud and all the filth they could collect'. This would be done by 'prostitutes, crimps, touters and thieves' who were keen to prevent men from leaving London for other ports while they still had money.[101] Covering a seaman with horse manure might delay his journey and offer another opportunity to rob him or move him to a boarding house. It also, of course,

intimidated the carters and staff working for the home. Even when a crew had been placed safely on board and the ship was ready to leave, officers had to make sure no one was spirited away again. One former apprentice recalled leaving New York on a California clipper in the 1870s and finding the officers on constant watch until the ship was well beyond the crimps' reach.[102]

Crimps exercised a keen sense of the spatial boundaries of the seafarer's world on shore, therefore, and indeed worked hard to define those limits for the benefit of the sailortown economy. They were essentially building a virtual wall around sailortown, through which seamen could only pass on the crimp's terms when their money was exhausted. Such spatial thinking was deeply embedded and gradually became apparent to state agencies also. Schemes for the safe transmission of sailors and their money through sailortown—or even bypassing the waterfront altogether—posed a far greater threat to crimps than any number of individual arrests and fines. Undermining the close spatial entanglements of sailortown became the weapon of choice for reforming authorities, and we will come back to this in Chap. 6. For now, having got their man, the crimps needed to separate him from his wages.

## Depredations

A crimp's control over seafarers was as much mental as physical, and commentators often invoked the seaman's alleged child-like and innocent character. Observers could not understand why seamen would ever believe the inducements offered by crimps, especially 'after being skinned or half-flayed alive in every port they entered'.[103] Other voices took a more sophisticated view, arguing that power relations in sailortown were such that many seamen knew perfectly well the character of the crimp but had no way of avoiding him. Years of experience had taught the seafarer that he was powerless in the face of organised extortion by crimps, and had no means of 'navigating or working himself clear of them'. The seaman felt that he had nowhere else to go.[104] Even when crimps were not violent, they brought a high level of persuasion to bear. One writer referred to the 'pocket-bleeding and brain-paralysing influences' that beset a seaman from the time he stepped on shore.[105] Someone claiming to be a crimped seaman described the process in Glasgow in 1894, and, even if the author was actually a missionary or charity worker in disguise, it is consistent with a range of evidence:

> I am very soon buttonholed by the tout for a crimping boarding-house. If I go with him to his place—and it is seldom you can resist the experienced 'tout'—what is the invariable experience? I am all right for a little while: but when I am reshipped what takes place? I sign on, get my advance note, endorse it, and may only have a few shillings to pay out of it. Yet every possible pressure is brought to bear on me to buy this and that the other things at most extortionate prices; and the ingenuity displayed in suggesting the things 'I need' is really wonderful. Finally I am left with only a mere shilling or two out of a 55s. note.[106]

As that testimony suggests, the smartest crimps did not rob seafarers in a simplistic manner but rather persuaded them to buy goods and services at inflated prices. Over many decades, similar cases point to seafarers simply putting up with high charges, or else feeling that they lacked the power to fight back. It was hardly surprising that crimps became blasé about their business. One captain asked a crimp whether he was not afraid of the many seamen he had robbed over the years: his response was, 'Good God, no: I get them all again.'[107] It seemed that nothing much had changed since a seaman, resigned and philosophical about his lot, told Mayhew that 'I shan't be any poorer a twelvemonth's hence.'[108]

Fortunately for historians, a small number did buck this trend, exposing in the public courts the sort of bills that they and their fellows were presented with. Henry Williams, a sailor on shore in New York in 1835, was charged $9 for cartage that had cost 50 cents; he refused to pay Samuel Cole, a boarding master, was arrested, and defended himself in court so convincingly that the magistrate called the charges 'grossly fraudulent'. However, the journalist reporting the case argued that 'ninety-nine sailors in a hundred, with their usual improvidence and simplicity' would not have challenged the charge.[109] Half a century later, journalists were still writing that seamen were 'but feeble folk in a knowledge of worldly wiles' who easily went along with the demands of crimps.[110]

In an exchange of newspaper letters in 1873, a former seaman claimed that sailors were given perhaps 60 per cent of the value of an advance note in clothes, lodgings and some cash; a boarding-house keeper countered that respectable tradesmen would cash notes for a 10 per cent commission (sometimes even 5 per cent), although that of course was not quite the same point.[111] Other estimates put the crimp's share of a cashed advance note as high as 50 per cent.[112] There were always extreme cases. One former apprentice recalled crimps taking $120 out of $125 advances paid

during a particular labour shortage in Oregon around 1880.[113] A letter-writer called John Isaacs, who claimed to have spent seventeen years working as a steward, gave a breakdown of his experiences in San Francisco in the 1880s.[114] The distribution of his $60 advance note is shown in Table 4.2.

Extortionate bar bills were a frequent element in press criticism of boarding-house keepers. James Kelly, a boarding master in Savannah, Georgia, tried to charge a group of five seamen around $40 each for services incurred over three days in 1855. Most of the bill was for drink, tobacco and cash advances, which were harder to prove either way than tangible elements such as clothes and accommodation.[115] Consider Table 4.3, the account kept by a Tynemouth boarding-house keeper and pub landlord called Glover with respect to one of his tenants, James Hall, in 1857. Hall was due to be paid just over £33 for voyages to and from the Black Sea, and according to Glover he spent his way through that amount in sixteen days. Whether Hall actually ran up this bill is unknowable, but the point is that Glover clearly thought it was feasible, and that the magistrates might believe that a sailor was capable of this. Hall, claimed Glover, had been 'treating'—buying drinks for people in the bar—as well as various extras that did not appear on his bill, such as 'keeping a couple of bagpipers to play to him all the time'. In the event the magistrates were

**Table 4.2** Spending John Isaacs's advance note, San Francisco, 1888

| *Item* | *Amount ($)* |
|---|---|
| Boat to take him on shore | 3 |
| Boat to take him on board his new ship | 5 |
| Crimp's fee for obtaining the new position | 20 |
| Runner's fee for accompanying him on board | 10 |
| Shipping fee | 15 |
| Three days board | 4 |
| Sum actually paid to Isaacs | 3 |
| **Total** | **60** |

*Source*: *Morning Oregonian*, 20 March 1888

**Table 4.3** James Hall's boarding-house bill, Tynemouth, 1857

| *Date* | *Items* | £ | *s.* | *d.* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 9 Dec. 1856 | 20 pints (pt) rum | 2 | 6 | 6 |
| | 20 quarts (qrt) beer, 15 ounces (oz) tobacco | | 15 | 0 |
| 10 Dec. 1856 | 8 glasses rum | | 2 | 0 |
| | borrowed money | | 2 | 6 |
| 11 Dec. 1856 | borrowed money | | 2 | 6 |
| | 5 pt rum; 5 gills rum; 15 qrt ale | 1 | 12 | 6 |
| | 6 oz tobacco; 2 glasses gin; 2 gills brandy | | 6 | 6 |
| 12 Dec. 1856 | cash | | 2 | 0 |
| | 15 pt and 28 gills rum | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| | 4 qrt, half gallon and 22 gills beer | | 9 | 3 |
| | 1 pt brandy; 16 glasses gin | | 8 | 0 |
| | 36 oz tobacco; 3½ glasses gin | | 12 | 4½ |
| 13 Dec. 1856 | 18 pt rum; 15 gills rum; 26 qrt beer | 3 | 4 | 0 |
| | 26 bottles lemonade; 26 gills beer | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| | 15 oz tobacco; 6 glasses gin | | 6 | 2 |
| | 12 glasses gingerade; cash | | 5 | 8 |
| | 1 week board | | 14 | 0 |
| | clothes | 1 | 2 | 6 |
| | 2 pt and 10 gills rum; 4 glasses beer | | 16 | 0 |
| | 24 glasses spirits; 9 qrt beer; 7 oz tobacco | | 14 | 7 |
| 15 Dec. 1856 | 16 half glasses spirits; 10 glasses and 2 gills rum; 1½ oz tobacco; beer | | 12 | 10 |
| | 2 weeks board | 1 | 8 | 0 |
| | cash | 2 | 8 | 0 |
| | spirits; tobacco; rum | | 4 | 1½ |
| | cash | | 5 | 0 |
| 17 Dec. 1856 | cash | | 7 | 0 |
| | 20 glasses spirits; 8 qrt ale | | 9 | 4 |
| 18 Dec. 1856 | ale; spirits; tobacco | | 16 | 4 |
| 19 Dec. 1856 | 35 glasses spirits; 20 glasses ale; 2 glasses brandy | 1 | 4 | 10 |
| 20 Dec. 1856 | ale; tobacco; cash | | 7 | 0 |
| 24–26 Dec. 1856 | ale; spirits | | 7 | 11 |
| | **Total** | **26** | **12** | **5** |

*Source*: *Newcastle Courant*, 2 January 1857

unconvinced, and were perhaps suspicious of the way the bill became less specific towards the end of Hall's stay. They ordered all the spirits struck off the bill and £20 returned to the seaman.[116] Importantly, though, Glover's real mistake was to seize Hall's clothing and effects, making him liable

for prosecution under the crimping provisions of the British Merchant Shipping Act of 1854. The sailor would have struggled to get redress for the bar bill alone.

As a result of such cases, crimps took their paperwork seriously, refuting allegations of theft and extortion with elaborate accounts for provisions, and shifting the burden of proof onto the seaman. One journalist wrote that crimps constructed their bills depending on what they thought they could get away with—charges were 'on a sliding scale that is in direct ratio to the drunkenness, stupidity, or innocence of the dupes'.[117] Some crimps could not resist temptation when faced with the seaman who was worth even more than usual. Henry Fayle tried to charge a sailor called Salthouse the extraordinary sum of £93 6s. 4d. for boarding, lodging and loans of money because he discovered that Salthouse was due a share in a salvage operation. Fayle was eventually jailed for perjury but only because Salthouse was lucky enough to have a respectable family who could testify to his whereabouts over an extended period.[118] In some cases, crimps took advantage of seamen's illiteracy to draw up agreements that had no direct connection with their boarding houses. Richard Critchley of London's Ratcliffe Highway had form on this point. In 1866 he drew up a contract, witnessed by accomplices, by which a seaman called Tobias Sampson 'invested' £30 in Critchley's oyster restaurant. Two years previously he had been in court over a partnership invented for the purchase of a horse and cart.[119]

Estimates of the profitability of the crimp economy are rare and their reliability unclear. Crimping did require substantial upfront payments that had to be clawed back from the sailor's wages. With fees, bribes, accommodation, food and drink to pay for before he could persuade a seafarer to come to his boarding house, the crimp's trade carried substantial risks. He also had to support his runners and touts, even if they seem to have been on commission. In Liverpool in 1863, a shipowner estimated that crimps spent £3000–£4000 a year, and would therefore have to bring in much more than that to remain in business.[120] All the evidence, however, comes from their opponents. Supporters of the San Francisco Sailors' Home calculated that the town's boarding-house keepers made $216,000 a year from keeping seamen's advance notes in the 1880s. Never satisfied, they also wanted to take over the home and take the additional $72,000 earned by seamen who stayed there.[121] In New York, a journalist estimated that 2000 men were looking for seafaring employment on any given day in 1897, and were fleeced for $300,000 overall by crimps.[122]

In Dunkirk in 1891, 1447 seamen paid off from British ships received a total of £31,665—about £22 each on the average. Commentators feared that practically the whole of that sum went to crimps. On the bright side, another 1460 men sent money orders home to the value of £27,262.[123]

Those are not very large sums when divided over dozens, even hundreds, of boarding-house keepers. It seems likely that a few did well while most were no better off than the men they exploited. The few rags-to-riches stories that we have about crimps are certainly very vague. A London magazine alleged in the 1860s that some crimps had country houses and were able to 'bring up their families in comparative affluence', but did not offer any specifics.[124] Henry Toynbee, a ship's captain and social reformer, claimed to have been told by a detective that the proprietor of one of the lowest houses in the East End of London was 'an independent gentleman' with a country house, who came every day to his business in a private carriage.[125] Again, though, there were no details, and these tales may simply be an elaboration on the common point about crimps being well-dressed.

Newspapers sometimes reported 'man bites dog' stories, where seamen swindled boarding-house keepers. Like any credit-based business, keepers had to trust their customers so far, and some seamen evidently exploited this. In 1830s New York, John Tanner paid Peter Duffy, a Water Street clothier and boarding master, with a forged cheque supposedly from a leading shipowner; Tanner was caught leaving for Jersey City with a number of such cheques in his possession.[126] Two Englishmen, deserters from Hong Kong, lived on credit with a San Francisco boarding-house keeper for a week in 1873 before collecting their wages and absconding without paying their bill. The papers reported weak surveillance on the part of the runner who accompanied them to get their pay—'this is one of the few instances where Jack proved sharper than his master'.[127] There are also occasional stories of crimps who found themselves working as seamen, and suffering at the hands of the crew for their past oppressions, but, as ever, these tales lack specificity. A New York writer in 1881 reported that 'a few years since' a Dublin boarding master called Gharrety was so anxious to get a last payment from a seaman that he stayed too long on the ship and had to make the voyage to New York. The sailors tormented him with hard and unpleasant work.[128]

A few seamen fought back more physically. Alexander Dund fired a revolver (accidentally, he claimed) in a crowded London pub to stop a crimp's runner called Michael Murphy from harassing him.[129] In Astoria, Oregon, a seaman called Harry Fredericksen, who had been shanghaied

onto a vessel, drowned while trying to escape. A group of Nordic fishermen tried to save him but were held back at rifle-point by the ship's mate. News of this spread quickly, and a 'large body of Scandinavian sailors' congregated in front of the boarding house from which Fredericksen was crimped. A heavily armed police presence only narrowly averted a lynching. The press report was headlined 'The Norseland Spirit' and highlighted the unusual excitement of the seamen, otherwise better known for their ethnic-stereotype solidity.[130] In Port Townshend, Washington, a mob of seventy seamen attacked a boarding house and saloon run by Max Levy, who was supplying non-union seamen, doing considerable damage and almost managing to lynch one of Levy's runners.[131]

Much as those stories appealed to journalists and newspaper readers, it seems likely that most crimps made a living—but not a fortune—from seafarers as long as they struck a key balance. They had to provide enough of a service to be considered expensive rather than extortionate, so avoiding the attention of the law or direct action by their clients. It was certainly very hard for seamen or the authorities to prove that bills for drink, accommodation and clothes were actually criminal. In a few cases, magistrates would try to develop a benchmark for assessing disputes between seamen and boarding-house keepers. In 1890, Wilhelm Ronan, a German seaman, went willingly to Lewis Honogardy's boarding house in Bute Street, Cardiff, but then fell out over alleged debts and prosecuted the keeper for confiscating his kitbag. The court calculated what the Sailors' Home would have charged Ronan, ordered the return of the bag and the 'excess' rent, and also fined the keeper.[132] Generally, though, magistrates were reluctant to interfere in the market by price-setting. Most prosecutions for crimping focused on access to vessels or harbouring deserters, which could be clearly defined. In addition, crimps increasingly recognised that there were other ways to make money than robbing seafarers, and that the recruitment needs of the shipping industry offered more systematic opportunities.

## Crimps and Market Power

Crimps who worked solely by coercion or theft from seafarers were missing out on a range of potential profits. Here it is important to follow the work of scholars such as Judith Fingard and Conrad Dixon in assessing the broader economic, social and labour aspects of the crimping complex.[133] If reformers, and even shipowners, had a genuine objection to the crimps'

exploitation of mariners, they also disliked the idea of captains paying fees to crimps for recruiting seamen. At the same time, captains and owners had to balance the costs of crimping (most of which could be passed on to the seafarer or their merchant customers) against the costs of being delayed in port through lack of a crew. The seafarer himself, even with his money spent, knew that he had value to the crimp as a worker to be found a new ship, and could sometimes exploit that limited power for his own benefit. There is evidence that relations between captains and crimps shifted in the 1880s. John Mason, for example, wrote of his captain's dealings with a San Francisco crimp called Brennan. The two had done business previously, but when Brennan told him that times had changed and that it was only possible to get sailors by paying a 'blood money' fee, the captain was furious, refusing to believe that men could no longer be shanghaied and otherwise coerced on board. Why could Brennan not round up some 'hobos, roughnecks, highbinders, rancheros, soldiers, priests, anything at all?'[134] While the detail of this tale sounds exaggerated, it does fit with a broader move by crimps away from kidnapping and extortion, towards finance and market manipulation.

Crimps wanted a stake in managing the labour market because it reduced the risks posed by the shipping industry's business cycles. In principle, the sooner a seaman had spent his money and gone back to sea, the better for the crimp, but it was not always possible to secure outward jobs on demand. During slack periods, captains could find crews without paying middlemen, and crimps had boarding houses full of unemployed sailors.[135] Crimps could have simply evicted men onto the streets, and some did just that. However, this reinforced propaganda from Sailors' Homes, and undermined the crimp's authority over the seaman. Crimps claimed to spend a great deal of time and money looking after seafarers, and the balance of the evidence suggests that this could be true. The keeper did have a financial interest in making sure that men boarded their ships, whereas the salaried officials of the shipping offices and Sailors' Homes had no such incentive. William Graffunder, leader of the Cardiff boarding-house keepers, claimed in 1883 that his colleagues 'frequently sacrifice their night's rest in order to trace the whereabouts of the seaman and induce him to join his ship at an early tide'.[136]

Crimps with political and market power could solve this problem by monopolising the supply of seafarers even at times of excess labour. This was part of a long-term effort to cultivate administrative and judicial allies. In 1850s Quebec, magistrates supported seamen seeking an early discharge

from their contracts despite their very clear ongoing obligations to their vessels. Sailors were of course steered towards this procedure by crimps, who could then legally find them new jobs in exchange for their advance notes.[137] Politics was the next step. San Francisco is the most obvious case where boarding-house keepers existed in sufficient numbers to be able to influence decision-making: one journalist complained that 'the Barbary Coast has votes'. Sailors' landlords, it was claimed, had sufficient power over the running of the port to make it hard for other commercial interests to move against them.[138] They did this by registering large numbers of 'residents' in time for elections; as a journalist put it, sceptically, the waterfront boarding-houses were 'filled up on paper'.[139] One commentator believed that the nature of urban growth was itself to blame, with the movement of respectable citizens away from the waterfront leaving behind a district of boarding houses for sailors and other transients likely to form a rotten borough. He wanted council wards laid out as narrow strips so that 'the loose politics of the water front wards would be controlled by the more reliable population inland'.[140]

British crimps grasped the importance of reputation management by the 1860s and began a publicity offensive in the newspapers. They claimed to offer an alternative service to sailors who, as free men, could make up their own minds where to spend their money. By this account, it was the missionaries, the police, the dock officials and the Sailors' Home staff who were guilty of trying to entice seamen into the waterfront institutions.[141] This was a sophisticated argument, designed to reinforce sailors' suspicions about the motives of the institutions. There was a steady use of the rhetoric of 'respectable' keepers, self-defined. In New York a Sailors Landlord Association claimed 190 members in 1857; it resisted plans to abolish advance notes but also sought the suppression of the lowest 'boarding cribs' on Water Street and South Street, whose runners 'interfere with legitimate business'.[142] By the 1870s a body calling itself the Seamen's Boarding-House Keepers' Benevolent Association tried to dictate the terms of advance payments, restricting the business of the official shipping office in the process; that association had 127 members.[143] In San Francisco, J. F. Harrison claimed to be representing 500 sailor boarding-house keepers when he argued against the Sailors' Home in 1879.[144] That was a suspiciously large figure, given that the leading operators in the town were numbered at twenty-eight or twenty-six in the 1880s.[145]

Those associations gave crimps an air of credibility, and by their very names tried to move the terms of the debate away from crimping.

Boarding-house keepers' resistance to the new government shipping office in San Francisco was fronted by a so-called 'Sailors' Association', which unsuccessfully held out for high wages, most of which, of course, went to the crimps.[146] Liverpool boarding-house keepers created a succession of bogus societies over decades. There was a Seamen's Protection Society in the 1860s and an Amalgamated Seamen's Protection Society in the early 1880s, established by boarding-house keepers trying to overcome their reputation as crimps.[147] In Cardiff, the Boarding Master Friendly Society petitioned for the right to provide substitute seafarers in the event of men falling ill at the last minute or failing to join their ships, which seemed eminently reasonable. Police Superintendent Evans knew the members well, however, and believed them to be 'a band of ruffians' who would use any concession to regain their strength in the market.[148]

William Graffunder was probably Britain's most ambitious boarding-house master when it came to establishing political fronts, lobbying officials and putting his case in the press. He first emerged in Cardiff associations in the 1880s, and became adept at identifying cases where Board of Trade officials appeared to be discriminating against boarding-house keepers.[149] He also worked in alliance with the shipowners' trade body, the Shipping Federation, claiming to be a defender of 'free' labour.[150] By 1893, Graffunder was styling himself General Secretary of the National Union of Boarding Masters & Tradespeople, with his headquarters, inevitably, in the Bute Street area of Cardiff's docklands. Claiming to be working on the instructions of his various branches across the nation—the only evidence that these existed is Graffunder's own writing—he argued that Sailors' Homes were given privileged access to shipping offices to the detriment of his 'honest tradespeople'. The Board of Trade found that this was true, but not something the Sailors' Homes much cared about; tellingly, the Board of Trade therefore rescinded the homes' access rather than extend it to the boarding-house keepers.[151]

To have men like Graffunder posing problems for the Board of Trade in that era—half a century after the first serious efforts to outlaw crimping—is testimony to their adaptability. It also points to the continuing willingness of ships' captains to use their services, and the failure of institutions to provide enough attractive alternatives to drive them out of business. Indeed, it seemed clear by the end of the century that crimps were as busy as ever in the declining sailing-ship sector. In particular, they were developing wider systems of control to manage the increasingly multi-national workforce. Just as the shipping industry benefited from faster voyage times

and better communications, so crimps adopted the new technologies to extend the boundaries of sailortown still further. In the 1880s, crimps allegedly achieved an organised web that encompassed the western US ports. In 1889, Capt. Bolduc of the British vessel *Edinburgh* refused to pay Astoria crimps $372 for five men, and instead sent to San Francisco for a crew. He found that his telegram was intercepted, and rumours started in San Francisco that the vessel was unseaworthy. When he finally persuaded seamen to travel north, he had to transfer them directly from the coastal steamer so that they would not fall into the hands of the crimps.[152]

In Britain, seamen's leaders thought they faced an international crimping conspiracy to replace British seamen with foreigners. James Fitzpatrick told a Bristol meeting in 1886 that 'crimping as an institution had vast machinery, and its power was world-wide'. Crimps, he alleged, recruited seamen across Europe, shipped them to British ports with false papers, and used them to undercut British seafarers' wages: adverts were even posted in continental newspapers claiming that there was strong demand for seamen and good wages on offer.[153] British mariners trying to get work on sailing ships or tramp steamers believed that they faced a significant disadvantage because of this. A seaman living with his family had to seek employment as an individual, approaching ships' officers at the docks or shipping offices and asking for work. Seamen living in boarding houses were likely to be found a ship by their boarding master, who could offer the captain all the men he needed in one negotiation, saving considerable time. As the century went on and experienced British seamen turned increasingly to regular liner shipping, the boarding-house population in major ports became disproportionately foreign. Those British seamen who wanted to work on sailing ships, or who had no other options, found jobs harder to get.[154] In addition, a meeting of 'distressed British seamen' in Shadwell in 1886 heard complaints that boarding-house keepers charged seamen a commission of between 5s. and 7s. 6d. to find them a berth, and then shared this sum with the ship's officers. The crews recruited like this were invariably foreign.[155]

Unusually, this particular allegation was investigated by the Metropolitan Police and found to be broadly accurate: in London and Cardiff, Nordic seamen paid their fees to boarding masters, were signed on as a group, and the captain received 'a present from the crimp either in money or goods'. However, there was no evidence that men were systematically brought in from abroad, and indeed there was never any shortage of Nordic seamen in the ports anyway. The police reported that it would be easy to

break up the racket because they had already identified the boarding masters involved. Tellingly, though, they listed the old stereotypes that made Nordic seafarers more attractive to ships' captains—sobriety, physical strength, discipline—that would not change even if the crimping process was disrupted.[156]

Part of this evolution in crimping activity was about attitudes towards the ethnic composition of crews, especially those of African or Asian origin. Masters and chief engineers were reluctant to ship mixed crews in their respective departments, and rarely gave black mariners deck jobs at all. This made it difficult for black seafarers to get a berth unless there were sufficient numbers of them to make up a whole gang of firemen, for example, that could be employed at the same time. The assistant superintendent of the London Strangers' Home for Asiatics claimed that in most British ports it was 'rarely possible to obtain a complete coloured crew'. The exception, he argued, was in the 'British Channel' ports (sometimes used in this period as a synonym for Bristol Channel), where 'the coloured seamen, Arabs, Somalis, West Coast Africans and West Indians foregather'. A black seaman discharged in London, by contrast, would find it hard to get another ship and would be more likely to become destitute.[157]

In some ways, this takes us full circle. For all their public objections to middlemen, British captains and shipping companies had long since ceded control of the seafarer-supply business in some circumstances, and most notably in Asian ports. There, Lascar seamen were supplied to ships by ghat serangs, then managed on board by foremen called serangs.[158] This practice was long established, and commentators often drew parallels with crimping. European observers reported the activities of ghat serangs in Java and similar operators in Calcutta. George Earl, in his book *Eastern Seas* (1837), painted a picture of seamen being exploited by serangs that had much in common with the developing image of the crimp. One San Francisco author pointed to the universal troubles of seafarers, but also noted that it had proved possible to suppress crimp-like activity in Calcutta.[159]

Those enquiring into this issue always seemed reluctant to confront it, aware that it underpinned a growing imperial shipping industry. A British parliamentary enquiry back in 1815 felt the system was full of abuses but argued that any reforms should be a matter for the authorities in India.[160] Even after 1850s legislation outlawing crimping, serangs were redefined as brokers and continued in the same role. They worked closely with boarding-house keepers and became the target for decades of complaints

about corruption and abuse; clearly, though, the shipping companies could not contemplate directly managing their Indian crews.[161] A similar regime of seamen's agents brought Arab seafarers into the British merchant marine in large numbers in the twentieth century.[162] This colonialist assumption of an undifferentiated mass workforce that could not be handled without intermediaries is revealing, seeming very similar to the attitude of many sailing-ship captains toward the motley crews of Europeans recruited for them by crimps.

## Conclusion

It was obvious to any seafarer arriving in a major seaport that he was about to encounter great pressures. His labour, especially if he was an experienced sailing-ship mariner, was valuable, but not in the sense that a shipowner would pay him a large wage for it. Instead, crimps were keen to manoeuvre him onto his next ship as quickly as possible, and if necessary persuade him to desert from his current vessel to make that feasible. If he was arriving at a paying-off port, his wages were attractive to many people. His own interests were complex, and usually in some conflict. One commentator noted that the mercantile community would never have tolerated a port that levied a tax on shipping equivalent to the average costs of paying off crimps; such a tax would 'be considered an outrageous imposition upon the subjects of a friendly power'. The author had answered his own question, however, by observing that most of a seaman's wages never reached him. In effect, the sailor paid the 'tax', explaining the lack of outrage from the shipowners.[163] The Liverpool Shipowners Association asked the Board of Trade in 1902 whether there was any prospect of the US government taking definitive action against crimping; if not, the association would recommend that its members reach an agreement with the Portland crimps. Unconcerned with any abstract question of law or morality, its priority was to have some predictability in the fees its captains would face when visiting the port.[164]

The rise of the steamship, and especially the tramp steamer, paradoxically created new opportunities for crimps, who proved readily adaptable. Deskilling the maritime workforce in the age of steam prioritised the labourer's strength over the sailor's nautical knowledge. Crimps could offer captains a crew-recruitment service without the old theatrics of passing men off as experienced seamen who had been several times round the Horn. When waterfront employment was scarce, shovelling coal on

a steamship was evidently as desirable a job as anything else. Some cases in Cardiff from the early 1890s, for example, have a strange unreality to them, with all concerned happy to acknowledge that men were going to sea with no experience, and that it did not matter. Daniel Coughlin, a crane driver, was accosted by a runner called Gregory near the shipping office in Cardiff and given a job as a ship's fireman; Joseph Scott, a labourer, was even signed as an AB following a similar encounter with Gregory, and found that all the captain wanted from him was to keep the crew in order, which he did.[165]

The crimp, then, was a complicated character, and one who became profoundly entangled with the seafarer and the shipping industry. It is also clear even from this chapter that he became a target of state and charitable interventions in sailortown, not least because he claimed to be providing a home for the seafarer, challenging those seeking to reform the sailor by placing him in a suitable domesticated environment. Those conflicts, and the spaces in which they were conducted, are the subject of the next chapter.

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CHAPTER 5

# Visions of Home

What did 'home' mean to transient seafarers? State and philanthropic agencies focused on this question from an early point, and the creation of a respectable home environment for the otherwise homeless seafarer was central to their rhetoric.[1] Living space was crucial to the competition between crimps, officials and missionaries over how to contact, influence and ultimately control the seaman. At the same time, the seafarer's attitudes towards home were often ambivalent, and his aspirations did not necessarily match the prescriptions of his self-appointed benefactors. Even in sailortown, some seamen and some women set up households that suited their circumstances regardless of wider opinions, creating a sense of belonging amid transience and insecurity. However, most unmarried seamen in the age of sail lived in boarding houses, which were the reference point—indeed, the target—for a set of new living spaces created by charities, societies and missions. The seamen's boarding house, or at least the myths surrounding it in the popular press, became in turn part of a nostalgic imaginary of sailortown in the early twentieth century.

A number of large institutional providers created a new landscape in waterfront districts. The Sailors' Home movement expanded from its London origins in the 1830s until most major ports had similar establishments, although there was no central organisation driving it. Various religious missions created institutes, churches and hostels for seamen, building international networks spanning hundreds of local centres. All these bodies co-existed awkwardly, struggling to provide facilities and entertainments that struck the right balance of attractiveness and respectability. And while



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quantitative evidence is hard to come by, it seems clear that they struggled to attract more than a minority of seafarers. Institutes, homes and missions were deliberately located in the worst sailortown streets as a challenge to the bars, brothels and boarding houses, which in turn clustered round them to entice away their visiting seafarers. Their internal spaces, facilities and decorations were also controversial, with long debates about the seafarer's wants and needs, and whether these should be indulged or discouraged. All this contributed over the decades to the moulding of a contested cityscape, with institutions and individuals offering conflicting visions of an appropriate home on shore for the seafarer.

## Family Lives

The idea of the seafarer as a man apart from society was often expressed more specifically—he was seen to be separated from the benign influences of women and family. One journalist wrote in 1888 that seamen suffered from 'the almost entire absence from their lives of home ties and associations, which go so far towards civilising and humanising us all'.[2] This needs to be seen in the context of the 'new masculinity' of the late nineteenth century. Rooted in an ideal domestic life, a male bread-winner's thrift and sobriety enabled him to support a wife and children who did not work outside the home.[3] Whatever relevance this vision had in factory districts or coal fields, it was scarcely realistic for the transient sailing-ship mariner. Studying the seafarer on shore therefore offers an important alternative perspective to established views of gender roles that were intertwined in household, work and wages.[4] Research suggests that seafarers and sailortown women could overcome long separations and financial insecurity, although their methods might take them beyond Victorian norms of respectability. At the same time, surviving diaries and correspondence suggest that many aspired to what they saw as ideal marriages in spite of their circumstances.[5]

Analysis is not helped by the innuendo that surrounded seafarers and women in the nineteenth century. Although there was hard-hitting commentary about the links between sailors and women working in prostitution, most public discussion of domestic entanglements was conducted in a coy, guarded manner. While everyone knew, in Dickens' phrase, that 'Jack has his Jill', exactly how to discuss this posed dilemmas.[6] Fund-raising and reform events often heard commentary about this, and it is striking how speakers preferred to raise an easy laugh rather than risk offending the

polite sensibilities of their middle-class, often female, audiences. At the opening of the Dundee Sailors' Home in 1881, for example, one speaker made a laboured point about the home's female benefactors, noting that just as 'Jack has a soft heart for the ladies … the ladies have a soft heart for him'. Another made an oblique remark noting the sailors' habit of falling victim to 'Philistines of both sexes'. Tame as they were, both comments were greeted with laughter, not the applause and 'hear-hears' that accompanied the rest of the speeches.[7] Anyone from the Earl of Rosebery to Cardiff city councillors could get a laugh with a reference to seamen having 'a family in every port'.[8] Even the traditional seafarer's toast on a Saturday night in a foreign port was 'Sweethearts and Wives'—not, it seems, the other way round.[9] Debates about sailortown's men and women were conducted against a backdrop of nudges and winks.

The family lives of seafarers were closely connected to the demography of the seafaring population. Even in the sailing-ship era, commentators reported shifting behaviour over the life-cycle. George Pierce, Secretary of the London Sailors' Home in the 1840s, thought that young seamen went for long voyages to India and Australia, then moved into the West Indies trades or coastal shipping when they wanted to settle down. His institution catered for the younger sailors, he said, perhaps one in ten of whom was married. Those who continued to be seafarers into middle age would settle in nearby residential districts, such as Poplar and Stepney.[10] Over time, the proportion of married seafarers increased. A Dundee union official reckoned that a crew of twenty-five to thirty might have had five or six married men in the 1850s, a ratio that was reversed by the 1880s.[11] He had some incentive to exaggerate these numbers because he was arguing that married men living in their own homes were disadvantaged by the official arrangements for signing on crews. Still, by 1893 the British Board of Trade calculated that 46 per cent of seamen were married, or had once been.[12]

Settling down into a recognisable working-class family was one end of a spectrum of morality ascribed to the seafarer, with waterfront prostitution at the other. There is scattered but intriguing evidence of a debatable middle ground in between. Short-term marriages had been part of the old beachcombing traditions in the Pacific, where sailors married and then divorced women, apparently with general consent. In other cases, sailors could buy their right to be remembered by an individual woman from one voyage to the next, and seem to have placed considerable store on this.[13] From the mid-nineteenth century, commentators regularly discussed

women called 'sailors' wives'. Mayhew found in 1850 that some women worked in collaboration with boarding-house keepers, usually in adjacent buildings. The seamen lived with the women during their stay and paid for all their expenses until their wages ran out and the boarding master got them their next ship. Mayhew concluded that such houses were well kept, that the men were not being robbed, and that it was common to refer to the woman as the seaman's 'wife' for the duration.[14] In London, most of these women were German or Irish, according to Mayhew, who interviewed a German woman in detail. She had a British sailor living with her at the time, probably for another month, and had been given all his wages. She claimed that she always made a sailor's money last, and would in any case be given any remainder when he left. This arrangement would be repeated with several seafarers when they were in port, but the woman had no intention of marrying any of them; she had her own German waiter for the longer term.[15] We know little about how this worked, to what extent the men were aware of each other's existence, and how a woman coped when more than one of her men was in port at the same time.[16] Some commentators regarded such women as prostitutes. James Moore, a mission worker, claimed that women in 1880s London would marry Nordic seamen, living as their wives while they were in port and working as prostitutes while they were at sea, with the full knowledge of the men.[17] That seems to be a particularly negative interpretation, not shared by the police or officials, and sailors' wives were unlikely to appear in the statistics of street prostitution or as residents in brothels.[18] Their men were presumably not customers of such women either, so sailors' wives would have improved some indicators of respectability in seaport cities even if they scandalised some missionaries.

The extent to which the men and women of sailortown felt mutual commitments is unclear, not least because we usually only hear of the relationships that failed. Annie Scorthorn, a Liverpool domestic servant, brought a breach of promise case against a marine cook called Edwards after the couple had lived together during successive periods on shore. Edwards's lawyer tried to impugn her character by claiming that they had originally met 'in a neighbourhood which was the resort of immoral women, near the Sailors' Home, and from the outset he took her for a prostitute'.[19] Occasionally there is evidence that women exploited uncertainty, trying their luck that their husbands would never come back. John Clarke put his wife Margaret in charge of their seamen's boarding house in Liverpool for fourteen months in 1854/55 but returned to find that she

had married another sailor in his absence. Margaret, who was prosecuted for bigamy, tried several defences: first, that the original marriage was not binding; then that Clarke had abused and abandoned her; and finally that she had a letter stating he was dead.[20] Sailortown relationships, like those everywhere, sometimes spilled over into violence and tragedy. The press loved the melodrama and the multi-cultural exoticism. In San Francisco, Harry Krieger, a Bavarian seaman, shot Mary Smith, known as 'Scotch Mollie', having become jealous of the time she spent with 'a big sailor known on the Barbary Coast as "Liverpool" or "Captain" '.[21]

Most lives, of course, were less dramatic, and full of ordinary hardship. One writer referred to the 'semi-widowhood of the sailor's wife'.[22] The Rev. Daniel Greatorix, vicar of St Paul's Dock Street, next door to the London Sailors' Home, thought that many apparently 'fallen' women 'proved true wives to sailors, bearing great privations while maintaining an unimpeachable character'.[23] Indeed, as institutions providing facilities for single seamen in port become more commonplace, some wondered if efforts might be better redirected toward wives and families. The Rev. Sinden of St Mary's in the East End of London reported in 1869 that he rarely had a seaman appear as a beggar, but that seafarers' wives frequently came to him for assistance, and he wished something could be done for them.[24] By the end of the century, Havelock Wilson, the British union leader, thought that women married to or associated with seafarers led marginal existences, having to 'do all sorts of rough work', and often having to 'go on the streets'.[25]

In the 1880s, the broad improvement of seafaring lives in the steamship age was showing through in social survey work. Charles Booth's investigators counted 2298 seamen who were heads of households in London's East End, and a total of 6989 people who were seafarers' dependents.[26] Just over half of these households were in Poplar, an important maritime district following the dock system's eastward expansion, while one in ten lived in the old sailortown parish of St George's in the East. Booth was only counting heads of household, so his work does not give us reliable evidence for itinerant seafarers. Nonetheless, his figures are evidence of seafaring households as they moved up and out of sailortown. Importantly for a workforce known for its poverty, the families whom Booth identified in Poplar were better off than many of their neighbours. Some 92 per cent were in his 'ordinary standard earnings' class, defined as 'comfortable', while just over a third of all Poplar households were poorer than that. Even in St George's, 51 per cent of seafarer's households were in 'ordinary stan-

dard earnings', and 35 per cent in 'regular minimum' earnings; they had mostly escaped the casual wages which characterised the poorest groups. If they were better off than average, though, these seafaring households had fewer children. Of course, many factors, not least age and religion, affected family size, but these patterns fit the anecdotal profile of steamship seamen, a group of workers who were able to establish households with regular incomes, just later in life than their contemporaries.

It should have been possible for even a sailing-ship mariner to be a regular bread-winner. In Britain, the Merchant Marine Act of 1854 formalised the payment of 'allotments' to wives or family members, who could collect a regular wage while their man was at sea. Indeed, some shipping companies already had an allotment system before that, at least on longer routes.[27] Revealingly, though, there was substantial resistance from all sides of the industry. Shipping companies complained of the administrative expense, argued that wives spent the money on drink, and claimed that seamen were opposed to it.[28] Seamen's unions accused shipowners of blocking tactics, but their members were by no means united in supporting the idea.[29] Ironically, the allotment system muddied the arguments around bread-winning. While it allowed a seafarer to ensure that his wages went to support his household, it deprived him of direct involvement in that process. A factory worker could choose every week how much of his pay to hand to his wife, but allotments meant that the seafarer did not even have that symbolic moment at the end of a voyage—his wages had already been paid to his wife by the company. This threatened to undermine the delicate balance that allowed a bread-winner to retain the decision-making autonomy that was crucial to contemporary masculinity.

The statistics certainly point to patchy adoption of allotments. British government shipping offices certified 370,000 foreign-going contracts each year in 1906–1908, and fewer than one in ten left an allotment behind for a family member.[30] Some offices had much higher ratios, however, with almost one in five of the men using London's Victoria Docks shipping office leaving an allotment, indicating that men working on P&O and British India liners to Asia were broadly accepting of the system.[31] Southampton, Shields and Hull were also higher than average, while Liverpool and Glasgow were lower. Seafarers on regular short voyages—those on a three-week round voyage on a Liverpool Atlantic liner, for example—might feel they were home often enough to pay their families directly, so the lower level of allotments there is not necessarily an indication that men were neglecting their families. Indeed, Liverpool's

business district had one of the best-known set-pieces of the waterfront, when wives came to collect their allotments from the shipping company offices in Water Street on 'white stocking day'. Just as crimps and hangers-on escorted sailors to receive their wages, so money lenders—often themselves women—would accompany the wives of seafarers to get their husbands' notes cashed and ensure that their debts were paid.[32] The allotment system would later become embroiled in sailortown's racial faultlines, with some observers claiming that it encouraged mixed marriages. African and Chinese seamen were allegedly willing to give their wives regular access to their wages, and so women favoured them as husbands.[33]

The seafarer's wage was not his only contribution to family income, and it was a long-standing aspect of waterfront culture that a seaman would return home bearing exotic presents from distant places. Most of the evidence comes from recent periods, such as the availability of US consumer goods in Atlantic seaports after the Second World War, but there are occasional insights into what seafarers brought home for their wives in earlier times.[34] In 1890, four seamen reported the theft in Marseille of clothes they had bought for their 'wives and friends'. Silks in primary colours predominated. The men had red, white and canary silk shawls; silk handkerchiefs in the same colours; red, yellow and white shirts; and a variety of underwear to a total of twenty-one items. Whether these really were gifts for wives or goods to be traded, they point to a steady influx of colourful, high-status textiles in waterfront districts, the likes of which might not have been equally available or affordable to working-class communities elsewhere. Small recompense for poverty and uncertainty, the arrival of such goods would have become part of the cycle of debt, credit, boom and bust experienced by seafarers' wives and families. The seafarers in this case were indignant that they had been deprived of the chance to return home bringing gifts, and presumably also saw this as part of their bread-winning role.[35]

Victorian ideals of conventional family life were becoming increasingly possible for working seafarers as the century went on, particularly as the steamship made voyage patterns and paydays predictable. Even in the sailing-ship era, though, some seafarers formed arrangements with the women of sailortown that mapped quite closely to bread-winning monogamy, albeit on a short-term serial basis. Home clearly mattered to them. It was also fundamental to the assumptions of missionaries, officials and philanthropists, who regarded the lack of a safe home as the main cause of social evils surrounding transient seafarers. They worked to create their

visions of proper homes for the seafarer, not least as a challenge to the seamen's boarding house. These competing visions of 'home' point not only to the seaman's priorities but to the way he was perceived by a wider society, whether as a source of profit, a lost soul to be rescued or a threat to be reformed.

## The Seamen's Boarding House

The boarding house was a battleground between crimps and their opponents, with the seafarer caught in the middle. It was an important physical place, where some seafarers enjoyed comforts and safety, and others were essentially imprisoned. It was also a symbol of the dangers faced by seamen on shore, and it was already a stereotype in mid-century. Michael Seltzer is one of few scholars to study this topic, offering a historical and anthropological assessment of the changing place of boarding houses in seafarers' lives, against the wider context of bars, taverns and charitable institutions near the waterfront.[36] Earlier histories of crimping gathered valuable material on the crimps' key space for controlling seafarers.[37] These places were a subset of a much larger phenomenon. The idea that young working people could live on their own is a recent assumption, and nineteenth-century cities had thousands of boarding houses, categorised by class, occupation, gender and respectability.[38] In 1851, for example, Liverpool had 214 sailors' boarding houses, but it had more emigrant houses (239) and brothels (353). All were dwarfed by the 2170 boarding houses for general labourers, and just under 20,000 lodgers lived in these houses at any one time.[39] By the late 1870s, the manager of the Liverpool Sailors' Home thought that there were 80–100 boarding houses in the town solely interested in serving mariners, with perhaps another 300, including beer-houses, where seamen were among a general clientele.[40] St John, New Brunswick, had 102 sailors' boarding-house keepers in 1864, although the great majority also had other businesses (grocers, clothiers, tavern-keepers, etc.).[41] New York allegedly had 170 seamen's boarding houses in the early 1870s.[42] Cardiff had about 150 in the 1860s.[43] In 1895, William Graffunder, leader of the Cardiff boarding-house keepers, testified that there were 60 or 70 seamen's boarding houses as such, and 'lots of people all over the town who took in seamen as lodgers whenever they could get them'.[44]

Seamen's boarding houses clustered on side streets a little back from the waterfront, pushed inland by warehouses and railway lines. They

typically occupied older domestic property, built for the merchant classes of a previous generation. Generally represented as small buildings, at least in comparison with the barrack-like Sailors' Homes created to compete with them, some could accommodate many seamen at a pinch. Matthew Hoey, licensed to board sixteen lodgers at his house in Denison Street, Liverpool, was caught with an extraordinary ninety-eight guests on the night of 11 June 1889. He claimed that he had been forced to take them in briefly so that a mail-steamer could catch its tide for departure, and presumably earned more from this than his 5s. fine.[45] In Cardiff, a reformer called P. P. Wright claimed to have found seven men sleeping in four beds in a room 12 ft by 14 ft, which had beer stored in it. His complaint was partly about overcrowding but also about the mix of alcohol and accommodation.[46] Both premises were commonplace terrace or cottage houses with two or three storeys and a basement.

Thoughtful investigators recognised that the boarding-house keeper was not synonymous with the crimp, and that there was a respectable aspect to this market. In 1850, Robert Day, a seamen's missionary, could only list ten boarding houses in his district of south-central Liverpool 'that I can with some degree of confidence recommend as suitable for any seaman who wishes to be comfortably and honestly dealt with'.[47] Still, they did exist, and missions continued to keep such lists throughout the century.[48] Mayhew interviewed someone he believed was the 'better class' of keeper, who in turn had the 'better sort' of sailor in his house. This man charged the same as the London Well Street Sailors' Home (14s. a week) and claimed to keep a careful watch on the wants of his boarders, particularly as regards food.[49] Government officials thought their regulations should aim to turn crimps into good boarding masters, not push the whole sector out of business.[50] Indeed, there was a broad assumption that boarding-house keepers should act in a paternal manner towards their tenants, part of the perception that seamen could not look after themselves. A London justice put it explicitly in 1857: 'Boardinghouse-keepers were in the situation of *loco parentis* to sailors, who were mere babies on land, and were legislated for as if they were so.'[51] Half a century later, Charlie Müller, one of Stan Hugill's informants, was well looked after by 'Rasmussen the Dane', who kept a boarding house in Hamburg with his wife. Rasmussen behaved like a ship's captain would in a foreign port, doling out small sums of spending money from the seaman's wages.[52] Some seamen appear to have accepted this kind of paternalism from a boarding

master, where they might not have welcomed similar arrangements in an institution such as a Sailors' Home.

Being the better kind of boarding-house keeper was never easy, though, because so many officials and campaigners had an incentive to paint the whole sector negatively. A Bristol keeper called Sturt lost his temper with a Sailors' Home agent in 1861: it was all very well for the home to send a man on board ships, he conceded, but the agent should 'solicit the men in the proper manner, and not run down boarding-house keepers, calling them robbers, thieves and crimps'.[53] In addition, even the better houses were still located close to the waterfront because that was where their clients needed to be, and they were damned by association whatever their individual character. In New York, critics claimed that the seamen's boarding house district around Cherry Street was a magnet for prostitutes, who crowded the area waiting for seafarers to come and go to their lodgings.[54] Respectability was hard to maintain in such surroundings.

We have a few scattered descriptions of seamen's boarding houses. Thomas Beames, writing of London's 'rookeries' in 1850, described what he thought was a 'decent specimen': kept by a foreigner, its residents were French, Italian, German, Spanish, Portuguese and Greek. The downstairs common room had nautical prints and a macaw ('sailors love parrots like children'); the kitchen seemed a welcoming place for the men, who sat around talking with the keeper and his wife in several languages; and the rooms upstairs had bunk beds enabling twice the number of men to be accommodated.[55] In the same era, Mayhew reported a London boarding house decorated with huge numbers of shells and corals, tokens brought back by seamen, as if the keeper 'were studying the conchology of the East'.[56]

In 1881 the *Liverpool Review* described the sort of boarding-house facilities that were necessary to win the loyalty of seafarers, arguing that mariners put up with high charges in exchange for comfort, food, drink and companionship. The sitting room of the house was small but clean, with bright lights and a large fire: in effect, it was a positive version of the sailor's shipboard home in the forecastle, which was small, dirty, cold and dark. It would have been cheaper, the writer argued, for a seaman to stay at the Adelphi Hotel, but there he would have been badly out of place—'living with old Boss in a boarding house, situated in a narrow street off Park Lane, he is in his element'. On the walls were the 'usual' cheap German prints, and photos of the mariners themselves. The writer claimed it was a 'point of honour, or etiquette' for each seaman to have

his photograph taken, and leave it with the boarding-house master when he left. Naturally, only the images of recent boarders were on the walls, as those of earlier visitors were put in a drawer to make room for the next cohort. Such gestures towards domesticity, and a wish to be remembered, crop up sporadically in seamen's reminiscences.[57]

Other descriptions stressed the maritime theme of decor and fittings. A writer visiting a boarding house in 'a Northern port' (i.e. in the North of England) reported 'a smell of strong tobacco and the hum of a number of gruff voices'. The front parlour had nautical paraphernalia including a telescope and quadrant above the mantelpiece, engravings of ships 'in various stages of distress', a sofa 'like a cabin locker', a 'crowd of other marine suggestions', and a smell of 'oakum, new canvas, and old run puncheons'.[58] The dining room of a Hull boarding house in 1888 had a cross-legged Burmese idol and a stuffed dog on the mantelpiece. The keeper was 'a lady of dark complexion and problematical age'. Four men were already in the room when the writer arrived in the company of a seaman called the 'Bosun', amusing themselves with the speech and antics of a parrot belonging to a Welshman. One of the men had run out of money and was living on the keeper's charity until he got a ship; he was not allowed to forget this, being fed burnt cuts of meat, roundly condemned by the keeper for accepting a drink of the Bosun's whisky, and made to do the washing up.[59] As this suggests, food was a key issue in providing for seamen ashore. A New York commentator believed that the food in a boarding house was about the same quality as might be had by 'the ordinary labourer's family', but that such was the contrast with that available at sea that mariners thought they were living well. Similarly, while the sleeping arrangements might be cramped, they were luxurious compared with life in the forecastle.[60]

Seafarers apparently expected drink and music, even in respectable houses. In 1870s Dundee, the noise from a seamen's boarding house led to a fight in the street between the keeper's wife and a neighbour. A seaman staying at the house testified that he had been drinking whisky with nine or ten seamen, some of whom were visiting from another boarding house. One man had played the fiddle and others had danced, and this seems to have gone on all night: the witness testified that he had not been to bed. When the neighbour complained, the keeper's wife claimed that 'they were not making much noise'.[61] The court seemed to find this funny rather than scandalous, perhaps because it was emphasised that there were no women present.

Some boarding-house keepers genuinely tried to make their houses comfortable for the benefit of their clients, others for less honourable reasons. Seafarers interpreted home comforts as an indicator of moral tone, neglecting to wonder where the keeper of a well-equipped boarding house was getting his money from. John Hatch, just arrived from the Cape of Good Hope in 1851, was impressed by the appearance of Thomas Murley's house in London's Upper East Smithfield: 'I thought it was a respectable house. There was a good deal of very nice furniture in it, and it was very clean.' Hatch subsequently fell out with Murley and decided the house was a brothel. The magistrate who heard the resulting case was curious why Hatch would 'go into such as disgraceful place', but such judgements were clearly not straightforward.[62] While we do not have many descriptions of crimps' boarding houses, they seem to have hidden behind more up-market fronts. Ernest Mitchell, who deserted from his apprenticeship in Melbourne, was helped to abscond by Old Mother Doyle, proprietor of the 'House of Blazes'. From the outside, this was a neat hotel with a cosy bar and bedrooms for captains and ships' passengers. The seamen, however, stayed in the huge basement, which was accessed from a back alley. This had two tiers of bunks, a piano, a long table in the middle and a kitchen at the rear. It had a substantial layer of soundproofing in the ceiling so that people upstairs in what the seamen called 'heaven' would be none the wiser. When sailors were needed for a departing ship, Mother Doyle would hold a party in the basement and send the chosen men drunk to the vessel.[63]

Mother Doyle may not have had many returning residents, but some boarding-house keepers did build long-standing relationships with seafarers. That was the case in Mayhew's 'better class' of house in 1850, where the keeper claimed that 'I mostly see my old customers, voyage after voyage'.[64] In the 1870s, Liverpool's police chief used the same phase, testifying that sailors 'go to boarding-houses that they have been in before, and return to, voyage after voyage'.[65] Some boarding-house keepers certainly thought that they had a kind of ownership over certain seafarers. Henry Wiggins told a London magistrate in 1854 that he 'had a man, a sailor named John Lundy, belonging to me on board the *Pyrenees*'. Asked to clarify this by a surprised magistrate, he simply said that the sailor had lodged with him before his last voyage, but it seems likely that there were debts involved.[66] A boarding master called John Demont accepted a reduced fee for getting Thomas Guy a job in 1858, and pursued him for the balance next time he arrived in port.[67] A Manx seaman called William

Brown had lodged with Mrs Turner in London for five years before he was convicted of assaulting a prostitute in 1861. Mrs Turner, a stevedore's wife, saved Brown from jail by testifying that 'she had always found him a very civil, well-conducted and inoffensive young man'.[68] There are even cases of boarding-house keepers putting themselves in harm's way to defend their seamen. Charles Brown of Princes Square, Ratcliffe Highway, was badly injured by Jane Thomas, 'a female desperado' who was trying to pursue a black seafarer into his house in 1857.[69] Of course it is never clear whether keepers were being altruistic or protecting their own investments, but obligations could evidently be complicated and persistent. In such circumstances, seamen who stayed with boarding-house keepers were not acting irrationally. As Conrad Dixon concluded in his pioneering reassessment of crimping, seamen could accept a high price-tag for the relative safety of the boarding house, and some protection from sailortown's truly criminal elements. For a young man with no family and no inclination to save, this may not have been such a bad deal.[70]

For similar reasons, ethnic and national minority seafarers sought out boarding houses run by compatriots, and keepers built positive reputations for honest dealing with fellow countrymen, even in notorious places such as San Francisco.[71] It became common to 'market' houses with national insignia. German boarding houses in London had flags and eagles.[72] New York's boarding houses flew a flag 'of the nation to which the keeper and patrons belong'.[73] In some cases, though, the owners seemed to be hedging their bets: one visitor to a Hull boarding house reported a 'nondescript' flag flying from a long pole from the first floor.[74] Window signs signalled the languages spoken, encouraging seafarers of certain nationalities, such as the 'Hollandsche lodgement' spotted by Mayhew in Ship Alley off Wellclose Square.[75] Sometimes attempts to create a sign in English could be unwittingly accurate: a Swedish crimp's notice stating 'Sailors taken in and done for' caused the Thames Police Court some amusement in 1857.[76] In 1874, San Francisco had a boarding house for Chinese seamen working on the Pacific Mail ships at the bottom of Brannan Street.[77] Some clustered together, to the point where Steuart Street in San Francisco had so many Nordic boarding houses that sailors called it Finn Alley.[78]

Boarding houses sometimes became focal points for wider tensions, especially between black and white seafarers in US seaports. A riot in Ann Street, Boston, left many injured in 1843, after a white sailor called Smith—'a notorious pugilist'—attacked black sailors on the sidewalk in

front of a sailors' boarding house. By the time the keeper, a man named Forman, returned from church, the fight had escalated into a riot and his windows had been smashed.[79] Black seamen's boarding houses served as meeting places for anti-slavery campaigners, and as safe refuges for black seafarers. William Powell kept 'The Colored Sailors' Home' at a series of locations over two decades on Cherry Street, Pearl Street and Dover Street in New York. A reporter described it as an 'oasis in the desert', with a library and reading room. Operated on temperance principles, mealtimes were characterised by conversations 'on the various questions incidental to the elevation of man', and the home was advertised as being open to 'friends of the slave'.[80] During the draft riots of July 1863, the home, then on Dover Street, was gutted by the mob while the residents and staff escaped over the roofs.[81]

As white seamen working on liner steamships became settled in major ports later in the century, the men using boarding houses were an increasingly international population. By 1911, Cardiff had 181 seamen's boarding houses, most of them specialising in one or two national or ethnic groups. Ten catered for Arab seamen, no fewer than twenty-six were Greek, and other Europeans tended to cluster either in northern or southern groups. It was not uncommon, however, for the British and the Northern Europeans to share boarding houses.[82] In South Shields there was a rapid increase in the number of boarding houses run by and for Arab seafarers in the decade before the First World War, clustering in the Mill Dam district of the town.[83]

Specialised labour markets in the coal-export ports maintained demand for a large number of boarding houses into the twentieth century, and they also survived on the fringes of trade routes where sailing ships were still common. Elsewhere, though, there were signs of decline. Even in the mid-1890s, Frederick Barclay, manager of the Well Street Sailors' Home, believed that seamen's boarding houses were becoming a 'thing of the past'. What gives his remarks some weight is that he did not base this argument on any achievement of his own institution but rather on the relative decline in the number of men requiring extended boarding-house accommodation in the steamship era. Steamer crews stayed on board or were only on shore briefly, and men who were married in towns away from London went home if there was any gap at all between sailings. All in all, 'the keeping of seamen's boarding houses is a distinctly small and decaying industry, which quite recently men have abandoned for other occupations'.[84] Still, the advocates of Sailors' Homes had been seeking the

demise of the boarding house for half a century by that point, and we need to understand why those institutions had yet to prevail.

That Liverpool journalist who thought the seafarer would be out of place in the Adelphi Hotel, even if it cost him less to stay there, had the right idea. Class and occupational boundaries reinforced sailortown's definitions of home. Everyone in the Victorian city knew that certain districts, streets and types of accommodation were more respectable than others, and were associated with particular kinds of people. This pigeon-holing of transient, and later of ethnic-minority, seafarers into sailortown boarding houses was hard to break and posed a significant challenge to reformers. Rehearsing the foolishness of the seafarer or the venality of his associates might have been an effective way to raise charitable funds, but it also perpetuated the old myths about the seafarer as a man apart, and meant that he remained unwelcome outside his 'home' in sailortown. Those seeking the seaman's moral uplift sought to provide new homes that would gradually change assumptions about the seafarer's place in social hierarchies.

## Sailors' Homes

There is a small but valuable body of writing about Sailors' Homes, and they have long been recognised as a fundamental element in the institutional landscape built to challenge sailortown.[85] London's initiative in establishing a home in 1835 started the trend, and eleven Sailors' Homes opened in British ports between 1849 and 1857.[86] The same decade saw similar institutions in continental ports, including Rotterdam and Amsterdam, and the movement spread around the Atlantic rim, with much of the organising initiative coming from former naval officers, shipowners and evangelicals. Fund-raising, often through lecture tours, tapped into existing religious networks and sometimes encouraged expatriate residents of foreign ports to create institutions for their own nationals.[87] Occasionally, shipping companies created accommodation, but usually only for apprentices and officers. Green's Home in Blackwall, London, opened in 1841, was a large establishment and the most famous exception to this rule.[88] Sailors' Homes were intended to offer the seafarer a respectable home on shore, safe from sailortown depredations. The founders' arguments were rooted in the linked imaginaries of the child-like seafarer and the criminal crimp, and were intended as places of social improvement. However, spaces of protection are simultaneously spaces of control, and in the

low-trust environments of the shipping industry and sailortown, seafarers inevitably feared the latter aspect more than they welcomed the former.

Several factors made it hard to bridge the gap between seafarers and Sailors' Homes. There was a widespread view that seamen resented the idea of charity, so Sailors' Homes were careful to insist that they charged seamen a market rent sufficient to pay running costs. Turning the seafarer into a self-sufficient adult was at the heart of their rhetoric: a supporter of the Southampton Sailors' Home argued that seamen should feel they could 'pay their way and walk in and out as independent as other men'.[89] Taking this tone too far, however, suggested that Sailors' Homes favoured seafarers who were already socialised into paying high rents and behaving in an orderly manner. Homes further exacerbated this exclusivity by creating other distances, internally and externally. Apprentices were often separated from seamen, for example, to encourage them to think of themselves as future officers. In the 1880s, the Liverpool Sailors' Home created a new, separate room for apprentices and rearranged some spaces so that officers 'would be more completely separate from the men'. As a shipowner on the Board put it, the apprentices could stay at the home 'without associating with people they might object to'.[90]

How seamen interpreted such signals is frustratingly hard to discover, but the most common criticisms of Sailors' Homes suggest that they were seen to be institutional rather than 'homely'. J. J. Mayo, who argued for the regulation of respectable boarding houses in the early 1870s, thought that Sailors' Homes lacked 'anything approaching domestic comfort which sailors have a craving for more than any other class'; they were just a 'Sailors' Barracks'.[91] One missionary believed that sailors 'preferred little places, where they could be comfortable'.[92] A Liverpool boarding-house keeper, who obviously had his own agenda, claimed that men preferred 'the privacy and freedom from restraint of private lodgings'.[93] Rules, whether real or imagined, were clearly an issue. Some homes were run on temperance principles, and many seafarers avoided the Sailors' Home in Buenos Aires, for example, on those grounds.[94] A supporter of the London Sailors' Home in 1886 felt he had to stress the independence of those staying there: 'men are at liberty to live as they please without being forced into teetotalism, or anti-tobaccoism, or any phase of religion', and what he called the 'Hallelujah department' was, along with other moral agencies, 'judiciously subordinated' to the home's objective of providing safe room and board.[95] While those specifics may have been true, having to state them suggested that crimp propaganda about the

institutional atmosphere of Sailors' Homes was widely believed. Another writer thought that Sailors' Homes were 'far too "goody-good" to suit Jack's tastes. He acknowledges them admirable things in their way, and then at once betakes himself to the congenial crimp.'[96] Some homes were less strict, though. A seaman staying at Green's Home in 1850 told Henry Mayhew that 'it's really a home—not like the other place', by which he presumably meant Well Street. He defined home as a place where he could read by a good fire, be allowed in without judgement by the watchman if he was ever out late, and feel no pressure to get another ship.[97]

The scale and design of many Sailors' Homes certainly made them reminiscent of prisons, asylums and hospitals: the politician and maritime commentator Thomas Brassey thought a typical Sailors' Home had 'a close resemblance to an embellished prison'.[98] Founders usually wanted to make an architectural statement in the heart of sailortown, and most chose a similar imposing design. This was partly about sending a message to the sailortown bars that were literally being overshadowed. It also reflects a general thread in mid-Victorian philanthropy, which favoured prestige projects, unambiguous statements and lasting physical testimony to the generosity of the founders.[99] As with any institution, difficult balances had to be struck between reassuring potential clients of its stability and seriousness, and alienating them with its scale.[100] Inside, Sailors' Homes shared the old boarding house commitment to nautical decor, albeit in a more institutional way. Sailors' Homes had small, often wood-lined bedrooms that were actually called cabins. In the Well Street Home, cabins were just big enough for a bed, washstand and chair. Seamen kept their clothes in their own sea chests.[101] The corridors had models of ships along with pictures, prints and a plaque commemorating one of the founders, Admiral Bowles.[102] Other choices were explicitly paternalistic, such as the 'gold-framed, life-size portraits of the directors' that hung around the walls of the dining room.[103] Sometimes a nautical theme was the inevitable by-product of a home's educational and training activities with apprentices. The smoke room in the Dover Sailors' Home, for example, had an extensive collection of maps, charts and sailing instructions, and there were two large marine barometers in different parts of the building.[104] Such multiple uses made it impossible to play down the nautical atmosphere of Sailors' Homes even if managers had wanted to.

Sailors' Homes certainly suited some seamen. Occasionally, seafarers offered (or were persuaded to give) testimony praising Sailors' Homes and the treatment they received there, although it is hard to tell how typical

such men were. A letter signed by four East India Company seamen in 1861, for example, has a literary prose style that only a minority of seafarers would have possessed.[105] More convincingly, homes pointed to the number of return visitors, which they thought was relatively high. One in three of those staying in London's Well Street in 1862, for example, had been there previously, as had between one in three and one in four of those using the Canning Place Home in Liverpool from the 1860s to the 1880s.[106] Generally, though, the number of men using Sailors' Homes could be disappointing, and they were often well below capacity. In 1863, Liverpool, with 345 beds, had an average occupancy of only 212; in the 1870s, numbers averaged around 250.[107] The Sailors' Homes in Amsterdam and Rotterdam were regularly less than half-full.[108] In Melbourne, the Spencer Street Home was extended to cope with demand in the 1860s, but by the 1890s was rarely more than a quarter full.[109] In Glasgow the eighty-bed institution often only had twenty residents in the late 1850s, and the superintendent believed that most of the seamen using the Clyde were staying downriver in Greenock.[110] As that suggests, shifting patterns of trade and the transition from sail to steam undermined the standard financial model for Sailors' Homes in many ports. Homes in eastern Canadian ports closed down in the 1890s, unable to pay their way.[111] By the end of the century, homes were chasing a shrinking middle ground in the market. They lost the better-off men who were able to set up their own households, but could not accept the poorest seamen without fundamentally altering their funding arrangements, and also threatening their own reputations.[112]

Like everyone else, officials of Sailors' Homes worked in the strange cosmopolitanism of sailortown, and had various rules focused on race and nationality. Sailors' Homes in Asian ports were established by expatriate-dominated charities and public authorities, and accommodated western seamen only, partly to protect them and partly to control their activities amid wider concerns about the disorderly behaviour of poorer Europeans on shore in the East. Until the 1930s, no Indian port had a Sailors' Home that would accept non-white mariners.[113] The colonialist assumption was that Indian seamen had no need for protection in their 'own' ports, and that they would be managed by serangs. At the other end of the imperial sea routes, Indian seafarers brought the empire home and raised difficult questions about the commercial, missionary and evangelical elements of Britain's entanglement with Asia. Even in the early nineteenth century, Asian seafarers were found starving on the streets of London, as shipowners

and the East India Company tried to avoid responsibility for them.[114] The company eventually provided barracks—with separate provision for Indian and Chinese seafarers—for men to stay in while waiting for their return voyage east. These could hold upwards of 1000 seamen in 1815, when a parliamentary committee concluded that they were overcrowded and cold, with inadequate cooking and medical facilities.[115] Forty years later, press attention once again focused on the number of inquests being held into the deaths of Asian seamen, the large number of sick Lascars being admitted to the Dreadnought Hospital, and the visible presence of Asian beggars on the streets of the capital.[116] Fear of 'Calcutta on the Thames' provoked much soul-searching.

The response was to build the Strangers' Home for Asiatics, Africans and South Sea Islanders, established in 1857 on London's West India Dock Road. This had an explicit mix of charitable and missionary provision that would have been unacceptable in the mainstream Sailors' Home movement.[117] In its first twelve years the Strangers' Home accommodated around 5000 men, more than a fifth of whom were destitute, and another fifth were casual, short-term boarders. With the opening of the Suez Canal and the multiplication of regular steamship lines to the East, demand for Lascar firemen increased, and the home gained a regular function in housing crews between voyages. The Strangers' Home in the 1870s had an 'Asiatic' mess for Lascar seamen and a 'European' mess for South Sea Islanders, 'half-castes', Indians known as 'Doctors' (who had worked as interpreters and apothecaries on migrant ships from India to the Caribbean) and Chinese men. The European mess offered better privacy in partitioned-off single bunks, and it cost 14s. rather than 10s. a week.[118] The home was always a peculiar hybrid, mixing amateur missionary paternalism with the new state registration systems increasingly applied to seafarers. Within those controlling frames, however, it provided a place of safe association where a diverse community of sojourners could build their own support networks.

Sailors' Homes in British ports claimed to be open to seafarers 'of all nations', but there were many caveats. Foreigners were admitted to the Cardiff Home 'on application being made by their respective consuls', which must have limited the institution's accessibility. The Liverpool Home did not admit 'Lascars, and such like men, whose habits differ so widely from European, etc, seamen'.[119] In practice, some homes seem to have had more diverse populations, for reasons that are hard to uncover. While just under a fifth of the residents at the Well Street Home

in London were foreign in 1865/66, at the Poplar Home a short distance away half the residents were foreign.[120] Segregation was widely assumed. A Sailors' Home advocate in 1870s San Francisco believed that a typical home was 'so managed as to permit the separation of different nationalities, but all are accorded the same benefits and privileges'.[121] One journalist claimed that by the 1890s in London, notices in any institution catering for seafarers were 'always in two languages, English and Scandinavian; occasionally also in Russian, French, Dutch and German' (what he meant by 'Scandinavian' is unclear).[122] This suggests that homes were willing to cater for at least the northern Europeans who had long been considered the acceptable element in the foreign seafaring labour force.

Nordic seamen could in any case draw on an extensive institutional network in foreign ports by the end of the nineteenth century. Some of this was church-related, with Lutheran pastors and missionaries common in seaports around the northern seas. In other cases, individuals established boarding houses, sometimes on such a scale that they were on a par with Sailors' Homes. As has been noted, Agnes Hedenström (later Agnes Welin), a Swedish Lutheran missionary, established a small institution for seamen in Limehouse in the 1870s, before launching a major fund-raising campaign across northern Europe to build a larger establishment with accommodation for more than 200 seamen. Known as the Temperance Home for Scandinavian Sailors, it retained this function until Welin's death in 1928, but by then it had relatively few residents.[123]

For all their flaws and difficulties in attracting seafarers, Sailors' Homes did set a new agenda in sailortown. Crimps adopted their nomenclature, trying to appropriate some of their respectability. There was a so-called 'Sailor's Home' in San Francisco in 1902 that the British Consul thought was 'in reality, although masking its evil deeds under the name of religion, nothing better than a low boarding-house'.[124] Crimps included 'Home' in the names of their establishments to add to the confusion. Glaswegians seem to have been adept at this over some decades. A man called McGillivray applied for a drink licence for a new establishment to be called the American Sailors' Home in 1857. This was rejected on the grounds that it was likely to confuse mariners.[125] John Glaser and John Hall, two seafarers arriving on the Clyde in 1888, testified that a man called John Anderson offered to take them to the Sailors' Home, eventually admitting that he was from the 'Scandinavian Home'.[126] Despite the risks—Anderson was fined £10 for crimping—it made sense to try to deceive those men who had the money and inclination to stay in Sailors'

Homes. Crimps were also keen to send the same messages about solidity and trustworthiness that the Victorians associated with substantial architecture, even if they knew that many seamen were put off by impersonal buildings. In 1893, when Astoria crimps started working together to entice seamen to their new premises on Second Street, they issued a business card with an image of 'a handsome five or six storey structure' that bore little resemblance to the much smaller house itself.[127]

By the end of the nineteenth century, the Sailors' Home movement had established institutions worldwide, and most major ports had an imposing structure near the waterfront. They provided a safe home for seamen able and willing to pay their rents, and undoubtedly protected many individual seafarers from crimps. They were a real benefit to apprentices and junior officers, which was no small thing, but a tiny proportion of the ordinary seafarers on shore at any one time were accommodated by them. Through their architecture, decor and rules, Sailors' Homes made an imposing statement about the kind of responsible seafarer they sought to attract and the sailortown excesses they aimed to counter. In so doing, they offered many propaganda gifts to crimps and alienated many seafarers. They also helped perpetuate the old imaginary surrounding the seaman. By trying to accommodate him in an institution, they reinforced both the child-like and the threatening elements in seafarer stereotypes.

## Missions to Seamen

Next to Sailors' Homes, religious missions commonly appear in maritime memoirs as the institutional landmarks of waterfront districts. Some had international scope. The American Seamen's Friend Society claimed to have branches 'in almost every port throughout the world' in the mid-1870s.[128] The Missions to Seamen, a British-based organisation, had sixty-two stations in Britain and twenty-four overseas in 1906; three years later, the British and Foreign Sailors' Society had twenty-eight posts in Britain and thirty-one abroad. These bodies expanded considerably during the First World War, extending social provision for seamen dislocated from their usual routes and ports. By 1919 the Missions to Seamen had doubled its presence, operating in 125 stations at home and 43 abroad.[129] The leading German Protestant mission, the Deutsche Seemannsmission, was only founded in 1884, but by 1911 it had a presence in more than 200 ports.[130] This section does not offer a history of missions as such because there is substantial work already on their institutional development.[131]

Rather, it is concerned with the entanglement between the seafarer and those seeking to save his soul. Seamen's Missions were part of broader trends in nineteenth-century religiosity, not least the establishment of 'civilising' missions. Christianity, temperance, self-discipline, respectable behaviour and responsible child-rearing were preached to colonial peoples and domestic slum-dwellers alike.[132] Seamen, variously regarded as the perpetrators and victims of sailortown vices, were key targets for missionary activity.[133] Missions to Seamen also had a strong imperial and racial thread, trying to keep European seamen in reach of churches when abroad, and to convert Asian and African seafarers in European ports.[134]

Missionaries, like crimps, knew that early intervention was important. Robert Day, a worker for the Mersey Mission to Seamen in the 1840s, visited ships berthed in the central docks and was often on duty at the door of the sailors' bethel, trying to divert mariners away from other sailortown attractions. He toured boarding houses in nearby streets, inviting mariners to evening and Sunday prayer services.[135] By the 1860s the mission divided the Liverpool waterfront into three districts, each with a scripture reader who visited boarding houses.[136] Its chaplain made 3397 visits to ships in 1861.[137] Another mission, the Liverpool Seamen's Friend Society, held several services a day, adding up to 364 Sunday and 312 weekday services in 1881, addressing total congregations of 18,200 and 6500, respectively. There were 500 open-air services.[138] This suggests that many seafarers had some contact with missionaries, although it is never clear whether those figures were inflated by a small number of individuals attending multiple services. More importantly, there is little independent evidence of what such experiences amounted to. Occasional seafarer testimony suggests that missions were a last resort that men were happy to attend for shelter in the absence of alternatives: one man spent evenings at the mission in Callao only because he had no money for drink and nothing to sell.[139] As Stan Hugill would later put it, 'singing a couple of hymns for a cup of tea and a bun' was preferable to another evening on board ship.[140] Commentators were generally sceptical of the seaman's reception of religious and 'improving' initiatives. Journalistic descriptions of missions, reading rooms and chapels routinely noted that the average or common sailor was rarely interested.[141] Even if such comments were rooted in broader seafarer stereotypes, they are indicative of the task facing missions.

Like Sailors' Homes, missions often catered for seafarers who were relatively well off and not in most need of their facilities. Apprentices seem to have been the mainstay of missions abroad. This was clearly an expected,

socially responsible activity for future officers, regardless of their personal religious beliefs. Victor Making, an apprentice at the beginning of the twentieth century, spent nearly every night of his ship's stay in Tacoma at the Seaman's Institute, playing board games, attending concerts and being introduced to the town's respectable residents. He believed that he could well have gone astray were it not for missions.[142] When they tried to reach beyond the apprentices and officers, though, missions faced major problems of social distance. It was common to suggest that missionaries needed to be down to earth, with no airs or graces, matching the stereotype of the seaman himself, but of course preachers were normally educated men from a much higher social position. The occasional exceptions were often talked up in newspapers and later in captains' memoirs, but there is little evidence of the ordinary sailor's viewpoint.[143] 'Father Taylor', preacher at the North Square church in Boston, Massachusetts, was described as 'the good old man, uneducated, blunt and always ready to take things as they came along', and the seamen's boarding houses in the neighbourhood apparently had a picture of him on their walls.[144] Canon Kearney in San Francisco gained a reputation for getting into fist-fights with crimps, and was known as 'the Fighting Parson' in the 1890s. Flowery use of sea jargon was discouraged because seafarers took it as confirmation that the missionary was interested in the literary image of work at sea rather than its reality; only preachers who had actually been at sea themselves had the authority to use such terminology. Clergy were advised to use nautical terminology only if they were absolutely certain what the words meant; erroneous use would lead to ridicule.[145] Dickens, however, reported that Boston's Rev. Taylor, who had been a seafarer once, made effective use of maritime imagery and drew his examples from the experiences of seamen.[146]

Missions thought that seamen were hard to reach due to their sheer variety. The transience of the seafaring population brought a far more varied group of men to a church or mission than to any inland church. In addition, their experiences could set them apart. The Secretary of the Seamen and Boatmen's Friend Society thought that seafarers had 'strange prejudices, fancies and beliefs', and that they were 'men of all temperaments and shades of thought and feeling'. Accordingly, missionaries needed tact and judgement, 'great patience, forbearance and prayerful perseverance'.[147] Doubtless missionaries believed these characterisations of themselves and their congregations, but there is an element of explaining away their failure to engage with a large proportion of seafarers on shore.

Ultimately, missions reached seafarers through the social welfare aspects of their activities. A former apprentice recalled that seamen were usually unimpressed by preachers, although the Missions to Seamen, one of the largest British-based organisations, had done many a 'good turn' for seamen in ports worldwide.[148] Frank Bullen, himself a seaman turned mission worker, thought that seafarers' cynicism came from dealing with 'Christian' shipowners who provided poor food and conditions.[149] Looking back from the 1930s, one missionary believed that 'were it not for the social and material side', religious societies working with seafarers would have closed their doors long before.[150] The Seamen's Institute at South Shields on the Tyne, for example, focused on practical issues. It provided a table with free stationery, and seafarers used this to write more than 3600 letters to 'parents, wives and friends' in 1888. The institute in turn received in excess of 2000 letters for seamen. Sailors could store their kit while they sought lodgings in the town.[151] In New York the German mission had 40,000 visitors to its reading room in 1913, and received or posted 13,000 letters. Perhaps revealingly, 1400 men attended Christmas celebrations, which was not far short of the 1900 who actually stayed in the mission's accommodation in the whole year.[152] A sense of home on special occasions seems to have been valued over the residential provision.

Some missions established coffee shops in an effort to keep men out of bars, showing a good spatial sense of the key threats. American missionaries ran a coffee room in Calcutta in the 1880s, 'in Flag Street in the heart of Sailor Town', according to one former apprentice. He was sceptical about the religious value of the 'confessions' that the seamen were encouraged to make. These were 'received with much applause, as they went into minute details and their sins were chiefly connected with wine and women'.[153] This extension of the seafarer's yarning culture to a mission context must have created dilemmas for the missionaries, and is good evidence of the seaman's ability to accept the help of outsiders on his own terms. For the same reasons, missions had to be careful about entertainment. Well aware that seafarers sought music and spectacle on shore, they feared that anything likely to attract seafarers would alienate the sensibilities of middle-class sponsors. Missions, and also Sailors' Homes, tried to design activities that fell into the contemporary definition of 'rational recreation', a much wider effort to reform working people by influencing the ways they spent their leisure time.[154]

Music was a common way to establish a cultural connection with seafarers, although it was hard to keep to the morally improving kinds, especially

because dance halls were such a notorious element of sailortown, and ribald singing an established part of sailor culture. A missionary called Wesson, sent to work with British seamen on shore in Rio de Janeiro—'where liquor is cheap, and where crimps and landsharks abound'—was described as being 'no novice' at working with sailors, and he took a portable harmonium with him to form a connection with seamen through music.[155] Missionaries lacking experience with cosmopolitan populations sometimes struggled to move beyond their own frames of reference. In Boston, for example, mission workers noted that Nordic seamen had been brought up religiously but lacked any understanding of 'moral duties'; in this case the seamen saw no contradiction in attending a religious meeting and then going to a dance hall where they 'engaged enthusiastically in the waltz'.[156] In Montreal, seafarers were themselves part of the performance, acting out aspects of their work on stage at public concerts in the Seamen's Institute.[157] However, missions had to be careful about having old seamen around because their favourite pastime of spinning yarns did not always accord with the management's efforts to 'supply a pure moral atmosphere'. In Portland, old seamen in the bethel had even persuaded men to desert their ships.[158]

Occasionally, missionaries argued that the point of all this effort was not so much to redeem the seafarer but rather to show a wider society the better side of his nature. James Fell, waterfront missionary in San Francisco, believed that seafarers had such a negative reputation that they would pleasantly surprise people who met them in polite circumstances. He enlisted seafarers to sing at public concerts, to the general delight of the audience, especially, he inevitably had to comment, the ladies.[159] Fell's unusual vision of the role of missions may have made him popular with seafarers, and he is certainly one of the few missionaries named regularly in memoirs. The fact that such a conscious effort to bridge social divisions seems to have been unusual, however, confirms the broader sense that the ordinary sailing-ship mariner was unlikely to feel at home amid any of the institutional spaces intended to protect him from sailortown.

Perhaps the most direct challenge mounted by missionaries to the seafarer's idea of a good run on shore was found in the temperance movement. Seamen were an early target for temperance agitators, who apparently had some success, at least in getting them to sign pledges. At its initial meeting in 1833, the Marine Temperance Society of New York secured pledges from 575 seamen and 183 officers.[160] The Seaman's Friend Society claimed in 1844 that that eight out of ten of those staying at the

New York Sailors' Home attended weekly temperance meetings, and that half of the residents actually signed pledges.[161] A yearly average of just over 5000 enrolled themselves in the abstaining branch of the London-based Missions to Seamen in the early 1880s.[162] In 1887 the missions reported that 61,259 seafarers, fishermen and bargemen had pledged themselves to total abstinence in the past eight years. This had allegedly driven twenty-two pubs to close in Bristol, and reduced the number of crimps from fifty to two.[163] Of course, all the evidence of seafarers signing temperance pledges comes from missionaries and a few selected converts, so the lasting effect of any of this is unclear.

The internationalisation of the seafaring labour force also provoked a series of responses from missions.[164] Realising that many of their countrymen served on foreign ships, mission groups across northern Europe began establishing overseas stations in the 1880s. The Norwegian Mission to Seamen found the greatest demand for its services was in Leith, Newcastle, Antwerp and Cardiff.[165] Finland's mission set up churches in Hull and London, while the German mission rapidly created an international network. An important priority for German and Nordic missions was to promote the seafarer's sense of national identity. This helped establish initial contact, and memories of home and family were thought to encourage moral reform.[166] Revealingly, nationalism seems to have been less explicit in the British missions. Being the dominant national group in world shipping, British seafarers did not have to confront their foreignness—even when abroad—to the same extent that minority nationalities did. British seamen's missions doubtless had a British tone, but then by all accounts so did sailortowns the world over. For Norwegians, Finns or Germans, though, a mission's strong national identity made it stand out in a strange town. Language emerges as an important issue, with the need to preach to mariners in their own language if any real connection was to be established. This was an important attribute of a Swedish preacher named Eoll, who set up a mission in Prince Street, Bristol, in 1879.[167] Missionary societies printed tracts and bibles in many languages so that their workers had a point of contact with the men they approached on board ships, even if they could not speak to them. The Sailor's Rest mission in Cardiff ran separate religious services for English, Nordic, French and Italian seamen.[168]

Charles Faithfull, who established a Mission Home in Marseille in the 1870s, saw the smaller ports around the northern coast of the Mediterranean as dangerous territory for British seafarers, where crimps

allegedly controlled waterfronts with no interference from local authorities. Aware that he could not establish formal institutions in all these ports, Faithfull wanted to operate a small vessel 'as a coasting "Bethel," to take good news to those neglected ports where Jack is simply the food of the land sharks'.[169] However, at the same time as Faithfull was bemoaning the absence of help for seafarers in the Mediterranean ports, others were hailing the work of missionaries there. Sir James Corry, a Belfast merchant and Member of Parliament, praised the work of the British and Foreign Seamen's Society in 1886, having found a branch in every port that he visited on a yachting cruise.[170]

That cluttered landscape must have appeared confusing to the seaman, and missions themselves struggled to find common ground on which to coordinate their efforts. The New York press reported as late as 1897 that 'for the first time in the history of organised work for seamen' a united effort was being made by six mission, church and bethel organisations to bring together their services.[171] Missions had to confront the decline in the numbers of seafarers in the old sailortown districts, and also an increase in the ethnic and national mix of those who remained. Consolidation doubtless offered a way to anticipate an uncertain future, but by then the leading missions had accumulated decades of financial and bureaucratic baggage, to say nothing of extensive properties in the waterfront zone. Persuading them to work with one other, let alone with the Sailors' Homes and secular bodies, was inevitably difficult. It was also a distraction from the bigger problem of persuading seafarers to engage with any of them.

## Institutional Landscapes

Understanding sailortown is in large part a question of understanding competition for the use of urban space, in what was always a congested waterfront zone. When trying to create a homely environment for seafarers, institutions like Sailors' Homes inevitably ran into a contradiction. The locations of homes and missions were intended to pose a direct challenge to sailortown bars and brothels, while supposedly separating their residents from those vices. They therefore found themselves in active conflict for space in the near-waterfront zone with the venues they sought to overcome, and with the crowded complex of business and official functions that relied on proximity to the waterfront economy. The process ran both ways, of course. Homes and missions might set themselves up in sailortown districts, then find that sailortown consolidated around

them, fighting even harder for the attention of the seafarer. The mission on the Rue de la République in Marseille, for example, was sandwiched between two brothels in the early twentieth century, the Black Horse and the Holyrood Palace.[172] In the 1870s, officials counted forty-six public houses within 200 yards of the Liverpool Sailors' Home.[173] This figure, or an update on it, was cited in most charity and institutional reports for a decade, and it became common for visitors to make similar points about specific localities. Near the end of the century, a journalist spotted fifteen public houses within a five-minute walk of the Scandinavian Home in London.[174] This was a clear case in which the spatial contest over sailors' safety and morality could have been influenced by local authorities, but licensing committees were under great pressure from the politically influential drinks trade.[175]

By the end of the century the result was a striking institutional landscape. A journalist visiting London's East End in 1899 described sailortown streets as characterised by two things. One was the sailor himself, visible in every state from prosperity to poverty. The other was the effort devoted to helping him: 'Seamen's Institutes, Bethels, Reading Rooms and Homes abound.'[176] Liverpool's Sailors' Home, opened in 1852, was built in Canning Place, virtually on the site of the town's original dock, and across the street from the imposing domed building that housed the Board of Trade offices and Custom House. If it had one face pointing to the organs of mercantile state power, though, the rear and side faces of the home were prominent on Paradise Street, a key sailortown thoroughfare. The Liverpool Seamen's Friend Society used the same spaces, sending its missionaries to preach in the open air, 'mostly in Canning Place, the Mariners' Parade, and around the Sailors' Home'.[177] In New York, Cherry Street was a key focal point, with the United States Shipping Office, incorporating a savings bank, across the street from the Sailors' Home, 'almost in the midst of the worst of the sailors' boarding-houses'.[178] In London, the church of St Paul, Dock Street (established 1847), replaced a floating chapel, and it was deliberately located behind the Well Street Sailors' Home and in the centre of the East Smithfield/Wellclose Square sailortown district.[179]

The Missions to Seamen had no doubt that location was crucial to their achievements: 'In the successful contest against crimps and other enemies of sailors on shore, the great centres of operations were the Missions to Seamen churches and institutes under one roof, planted in the sailors' quarter of the seaports.'[180] The British and Foreign Sailors' Society moved

to new premises in Amsterdam in 1894, on the Schiedamsedijk, 'a notorious highway and district, where sailors of all nations are wrecked body and soul'.[181] German missionaries sought out strategic locations as the best place to divert arriving seafarers away from the bars and brothels, whether in La Boca, Buenos Aires, or in Hoboken, New Jersey, where the leading German liner fleets had their piers.[182] Missions also adopted imposing architecture, as preaching on ships and pavements gave way to prominent buildings. In London, the Missions to Seamen built their first large Seamen's Institute at Poplar in 1894.[183] The Seamen's Christian Friend Society nearby in St George's Street had a hall that could accommodate 500, a 'small' room for 200, reading rooms and a library.[184] In Glasgow, the Seamen's Friend Society built a new institute on the Broomielaw in the 1880s to replace its overcrowded existing premises, determined to maintain its profile in a key location, despite the financial difficulties of bidding against commercial and official interests for space on the waterfront.[185]

Competition for space in sailortown was made worse in British ports by the long-standing separation of religious and secular institutions. US ports, by contrast, often had missions that combined accommodation with places of worship. In Chicago, a multipurpose building on the corner of Michigan and Market Streets contained a church capable of seating 500 people as well as a Sailors' Home, a marine school, a library and reading rooms. Known as the Mariners' Temple, it gave free meals to the city's poor on Sunday.[186] The extent to which seafarers accepted that charitable arrangement is unclear. Boston's Seamen's Friend Society opened a new building in 1874 that was part-church, part-Sailors' Home.[187] The New York Sailors' Home was run by the Seamen's Friend Society, a missionary organisation.[188] This pattern continued with new buildings late in the century. When Charleston lost its Mariners' Church and Sailors' Home in the 1886 earthquake, it constructed a new building with a chapel on the ground floor and home above.[189]

Such was the limit on available space in key sailortown districts that individual buildings sometimes became a battleground, as different interests promoted successive uses for them over time. The very first Sailors' Home pioneered this, taking over the site and even the salvaged materials of London's Brunswick Theatre when it collapsed in 1827—the symbolism was obvious to reformers.[190] Pubs and dance halls were a popular target for missionaries, who took advantage of the closure of prominent sailortown landmarks to set up their own operations. 'Paddy's Goose' (The White Swan), a long-established bar on London's Shadwell High Street with a

statue of a white swan on the roof, closed in 1886 and was taken over by a Wesleyan Mission; by the 1920s it was a boys' club, still known by its old nickname.[191] Wilton's Music Hall, squeezed in behind the Prince of Denmark pub in an alley beside the Well Street Sailors' Home, was taken over as a mission hall from the 1880s.[192] Not that charities and missions always got their way; the crimp complex sometimes fought back, especially in places where it had political influence. The long struggle of the Ladies' Seamen's Friend Society to establish and maintain a Sailors' Home in San Francisco is probably the most extreme example. That society had to fight over a succession of former hotels and boarding houses, never able to establish a purpose-built home, while front organisations for crimps made counter-bids for leases and alleged abuses by officials.[193] That case, however, proves the rule to a great extent because it represented the last era of real crimp power in the city. Even in San Francisco, the steady regularisation of shipping schedules and steamship timetables in the early twentieth century reduced the influence of the crimps, and increased the ability of institutions, whether state, charity or religious, to mould the sailortown cityscape.

Occasionally, someone suggested a radically different approach. Glasgow's Provost McLean told the annual meeting of his city's Sailors' Home in 1890 that such institutions should be away from the harbour 'in localities where the boarders would be free from the temptations to which they are subjected in the neighbourhood of the shipping'.[194] No one at that meeting commented on his proposal, which was extremely unusual, and half a century ahead of its time; only in the face of bombing during the Second World War did seamen's institutions sometimes decamp to the suburbs. By then, union leaders had started to argue that moving seamen's facilities away from the waterfront would be an act of liberation and normalisation, such was the historical stigma associated with sailortown. Seamen should be able to 'come uptown, like other human beings', argued Joseph Curran of the National Maritime Union of America.[195] It is telling how rare that spatial perspective was in all the debate about seamen's facilities in the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth. However much they wanted to reform the home life available to the seafarer, it would always have to be done within a narrow compass of the old sailortown.

## Conclusion

By the 1890s, optimistic commentators thought that reforming organisations had pushed back sailortown, and established many respectable homes for the seafarer on shore. It had been a spatial, economic and spiritual con-

flict. For one evangelical writer, the 'sinister-looking streets' around the Liverpool Sailors' Home were 'survivors of older Liverpool', where the 'trail of the crimp and the allurements of the House of Death are painfully evident in the narrow and miserable-looking streets'. Faith, to that observer, had been the key, along with the safety, space, light and amenities provided by the Sailors' Home and the nearby mission-run Seamen's Institute. The environmental and cultural contrast, literally from light to dark, was a conscious endorsement of the original settlement of the home 'in the centre of the seamen's dangers'.[196] By this time, some were seeing a future without boarding houses. Alexander Provand, a Glasgow Member of Parliament, wrote in 1894 that he foresaw seaports with only two kinds of living space for seafarers. Married men would go home to their families between voyages, while unmarried seamen would be accommodated in municipally operated Sailors' Homes. No boarding houses would be allowed to cater for seamen.[197] A combination of the great change in the seaman's working life brought by the steamship and an institutional solution in keeping with broader trends in municipal provision would finally create fitting homes in port for the seafarer.

It is striking, though, that this was half a century after the initial wave of enthusiasm for Sailors' Homes. Boarding houses persisted as long as there were transient seamen, mostly in sail, but also in the new tramp steamers. Indeed, the failure—often refusal—of institutions to welcome ethnic-minority seafarers gave boarding houses a new impetus in the early twentieth century, when an increasing proportion of tramp crews were men of African or Asian origin. Whatever else Sailors' Homes and missions achieved, it was not the demise of the seamen's boarding house. They undoubtedly did hasten the uplift of some seamen from living in dangerous spaces, and from being perceived as dangerous themselves. Apprentices, officers and some ABs in regular employment valued them, and while never more than a small fraction of the seafaring workforce, the numbers attending mission services and staying in homes were not trivial. Importantly, though, these institutions offered a home on shore that never let seafarers forget what they were. Only much later did it become common to ask why seamen had to be segregated even on shore, rather than staying in hotels like everyone else. The assumption that a seaman's place was on the waterfront among other seamen underpinned institutional provision throughout the sailortown era and beyond, and it is rare to find any objection from seafarers or anyone else.

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CHAPTER 6

# The State in Sailortown

Sailortown's reputation for transience and international connections made it a test-bed for state surveillance, regulation and intervention. Taxation and medical quarantine had long required monitoring of shipping, but those systems were severely tested by increasing mobility in the nineteenth century, when states had to devise new methods of seeing, documenting and policing fast-changing populations. Some of these capabilities were intended to help the seafarer by attacking the depredations of sailortown, but in so doing they increased the extent to which he was watched. Faced with overseeing the world's largest merchant fleet, the British state had to build a huge dataset of seafarers' identity and occupational records. Once again, the seafarer only rarely had a straightforward, bilateral relationship with his employer, and the growth of state interest further underlines a key paradox. So often represented as marginal and neglected figures, the seafarer and the people of sailortown were economically, politically and strategically very important.

The common representation of the ship as a total institution can be more revealing still when seen in the context of sailortown. Contemporaries and historians alike have drawn parallels between ships and classic land-based total institutions such as prisons and asylums, and there is much to be learned from the rigid discipline, timetabled watches, routines and hierarchies in the closed world of the ship at sea. That said, the ship was only total for periods of time, because the 'inmates' were at least partly released every time it arrived in a port. As Erving Goffman stressed in formulating these categories, work environments are not the same as



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those actually designed for imprisonment, however many parallels there may be.[1] Equally, sailortown was not entirely open either. Shore life for many seafarers involved semi-closed institutions such as Sailors' Homes and crimps' boarding houses. As the century went on, state institutions added their own layer of surveillance, documentation and regulation in sailortown, attempting to monitor and control a recalcitrant population suspected of transmitting diseases, crime and immorality.

This chapter considers five aspects of the entanglement between the state and the seafarer, demonstrating as ever that these relationships were multi-faceted, and had a tense mixture of positive and negative impacts on the lives of seamen and their associates. It begins with the long attack on desertion, which was played out in legislation, regulation and international treaties across the second half of the century, and which often targeted the seafarer while claiming to help him. States also attacked crimping more directly, regulating the dangerous spaces where seafarers, crimps and the authorities had to interact. Later in the century, states intervened in systems for signing men on to their ships and paying their wages, issues that were fundamental to sailortown depredations. Documentary identity, a key issue for developing state capacities in the period, was a particular challenge among the transient, often uncooperative people of sailortown, and was crucial to monitoring the growing global subaltern class of trans-national seafarers. Finally, states moved into the contested fields of health and morality, most obviously in efforts to regulate the interactions between seafarers and women working in prostitution. The apparently riotous streets of sailortown became a testing ground for ideas of control and order, offering us important evidence for the development of state capacity. The wider culture, processes and mindset of the surveillance state—'governmentality', as the phenomenon has come to be known—was often familiar to the people of sailortown before it became common in the city more generally. The sailortown phenomenon also had its heyday in an important era of transition, when liberal states were implementing panoptical ideologies. These hoped that society, given the right state technologies, would move away from pre-modern violence and coercion to achieve order through doctrines of discipline and self-discipline. However, sailortown's complex mix of tensions over class, empire, race and gender offered many challenges to states, and, while it could be a testing ground for innovation, it also saw old and new structures co-existing for decades.

## The War on Desertion

As we saw in the early chapters of this book, desertion was one of the most corrosive aspects of the shipping industry's fraught labour relations and an important driver of sailortown depredations. Although it is debatable whether shipowners actually lost money as a result of desertion, they lobbied maritime states for punitive laws that would imprison men who broke their contracts. This was part of the master–servant model of employment relations that had become more severe in response to industrialisation. Laws such as Britain's Master and Servant Act of 1823 were rooted in state fear of industrial and political upheaval, in an era of rapid economic and social dislocation for the working classes.[2] There were also more specific maritime motivations. Various German states began to 'industrialise' seafaring by giving more contractual power to masters and shipowners in a new deep-water sector characterised by longer voyages. As a result, criminal law was increasingly brought to bear on seamen in the German states, and also in the Netherlands.[3] Although master–servant laws were subject to growing opposition even in mid-century, they continued to be enforced against seafarers. Indeed, the penalty for deserting from British ships was increased to twelve weeks imprisonment in 1850, catching up with a panic started in Australia in the 1830s. There, and soon afterwards in the USA, the financial incentive to jump ship outweighed a month's earnings, hence the quest for a more threatening deterrent to desertion.[4] Germany's newly united central state brought the various state laws together in 1872, reinforcing the criminalisation of desertion.[5]

The imprisonment of deserting merchant seafarers raised practical and moral issues. Shipowners insisted, with some justification, that captains faced serious pressures of time and so needed crews to be on board as contracted. By this argument, however, imprisoning deserters only made sense if the men were apprehended immediately, then delivered on board as the ship was leaving. Often the captain did not know that men were missing until the last minute, and most sailors were only caught and prosecuted after their ship had sailed. This might have a deterrent effect for the future but hardly helped the captain at the time. More broadly, opponents objected to state resources and the criminal law being deployed for the benefit of shipowners. Joseph Chamberlain, President of the Board of Trade in the 1880s, along with Thomas Gray in the Marine Department, wondered whether there might be something wrong with a sector that required the threat of imprisonment to persuade its workers to do their

jobs. Britain abolished imprisonment for deserting seamen in 1880, leading to a media panic over an apparent increase in desertion.[6] Chamberlain held his nerve, reminding shipowners that employment contracts in other industries were a matter for civil rather than criminal law.[7] Importantly, though, this was a measure of decriminalisation, not a true liberalisation, and it only helped white seafarers. The increasing numbers of Asian seamen employed on 'Asiatic Articles' remained locked into state-enforced contracts that gave them no legal way of leaving their ships in a European port. Their representatives, mindful of the history of Indian migrant labour, regarded this as a form of servitude, and it persisted long after master–servant laws were overcome elsewhere.[8]

Sensing potential dangers posed by mobile workers, states gradually built an international treaty regime around desertion. Britain's Foreign Deserters Act of 1852 established some of the basis for subsequent extradition processes more generally. Although this became widely observed in Europe, however, it was not in force between the USA and Britain, the two states that had to deal with the largest number of each other's nationals. Correspondents during a spate of crimping in the 1870s bemoaned the lack of consular agreements and mutual cooperation across the Atlantic.[9] Other bilateral treaties were attempted but proved difficult to enforce, such as one between Germany and the USA in 1871, while some states, such as Argentina, resisted treaties because their desire for immigrants meant they had no objection to seafarers jumping ship.[10] Implementation was always problematic, especially when an individual of one nation might be working on a ship belonging to another, in a port belonging to another still. Lacking resources, courts passed complaints to foreign consuls, who sometimes saw themselves as pursuers of deserters, sometimes as protectors of seamen from crimps and other local dangers. A few consuls became practised at reaching informal agreements. Andrew Carnegie Ross, the British Consul in Buenos Aires early in the twentieth century, secured the agreement of the local police, Sailors' Home and shipping company agents to arrest deserting seafarers and freeze out crimps. The Foreign Office and the Board of Trade agreed that such arrangements were preferable to negotiating a formal treaty.[11]

Seafarers found it hard to believe that consuls, police officers and courts were really interested in protecting them. According to missionaries, British seafarers in New York in the 1890s thought their consul was in league with crimps and that he took a share of their earnings.[12] That was at the time when Havelock Wilson, a British union leader, was agitating

about the presence of crimps in the consulate shipping office. But captains and officials squabbled too, characterising each other as greedy, lazy men who colluded with crimps at the expense of the industry and its workforce. One captain in 1860s Callao believed that the British Consul had shares in a local crimping house and was too liberal in allowing seafarers to claim a discharge from their vessels.[13] At the same time the British Consul in Marseille thought that half the arriving British captains colluded with crimps; captains were, he argued, poorly paid men susceptible to flattery and presents.[14] Liverpool's Mercantile Marine Office, accused of allowing incompetent seamen to be shipped in 1863, rounded on the captains concerned and actually named John Herron in a published letter as 'without exception, the most difficult to please among the shipmasters frequenting this office', who spread 'opinions wholly at variance with facts, and which are the result of unreasonable prejudice'.[15]

Thoughtful captains acknowledged that consuls varied greatly. Masters interviewed by *Shipping World*, a trade magazine, in 1898, thought that the British Consul in Galveston was a great asset to the industry, while his counterpart in Hamburg had presided over scandalous treatment of seafarers. The New York Consul, on the other hand, was perceived as an old man who delegated shipping issues down through several layers of his staff to the point where the crimps ran the process by default.[16] The complexities of these relationships and the pressures of time involved in turning a ship round in port did not help cultivate mutual understanding. Consuls saw the worst side of captains and seafarers alike, while every honest captain was doubtless surprised to find the consul treating him with suspicion because of the behaviour of his peers. The seafarer saw the consul as working for the state or the shipping industry, and either way hardly likely to be sympathetic to him.

Ultimately, desertion, crimping and exploitation were rooted in the economics of the sailing-ship labour market, and they did not respond to poorly resourced policing and regulatory efforts. The level of intervention necessary to monitor, arrest and deliver deserters to their ships in a large port was extreme, and probably beyond the means of any seaport police force. It was certainly well beyond the willingness of the shipping industry to pay for it through increased taxes. There was also a growing sense that punishing the seafarer was an anachronistic diversion of state resources towards an already privileged industry. By the 1880s, that last point was being made more forcibly by trades unions, and even by some shipowners from (relatively) less confrontational maritime districts such as

the north-east of England.[17] Finally, state agencies, such as the Board of Trade in Britain, knew that they would never have the trust of seafarers if they were also perceived to be tools of the industry. Efforts to manage desertion in the shipping industry did set important precedents, however. They established some of the ground work for tightening borders, for hardening attitudes toward trans-national labour forces, and for more formal deportation systems, as states began to develop a whole new raft of laws to manage mobility and migration early in the twentieth century that went far beyond seafarers.

## Regulating the Spaces of Crimping

In the second half of the nineteenth century, state authorities in many countries targeted key aspects of crimping. Some of the most effective measures disrupted the crimp's control of space and his ability to reach the seafarer. As with many of the developing dilemmas of the liberal state, anti-crimp activity raised key concerns about interference in private contracts and spaces, even when the aim was to protect one of the parties. That said, officials were usually less squeamish as they looked further down the social hierarchy. For all the rhetoric of the middle classes in their private sphere, poor urban dwellers could expect little privacy as an increasing army of inspectors claimed access to their homes. That they were accompanied by journalists and social investigators added to the respectable gaze brought to bear on the poor and their living spaces.[18] The crimp's long-standing reputation as a semi-criminal bogeyman also made it easier for officials to justify interference in his business.

In Britain, state agencies belatedly recognised the importance of making early contact with the seafarer, a tactic long familiar to crimps and missionaries. River police forces helped here because these applied resources directly to the riparian spaces used by the crimps, whereas previously inland-facing police had struggled to exert jurisdiction. In 1867 the Board of Trade agreed to pay for a police inspector and three constables to prevent crimps from boarding ships on the Thames, a belated enforcement of the Merchant Shipping Act of 1854. The officers boarded vessels at Gravesend and escorted them up the river until safely docked. Obviously, four men could not secure all the shipping arriving on the Thames, so they used the crimps' methods, reading *Lloyd's List* to identify ships returning from long voyages, which were most likely to have crews with large wages due. The officers paid particular attention to safeguarding vessels as they

passed through dock entrances, where crimps and others could get aboard under pretence of helping to manoeuvre the ship.[19] In some ways, though, these engineered waterfronts and dock systems were already relatively orderly spaces, and thoughtful policing could identify key priorities in the spatial conflict with crimps. Elsewhere, matters were much harder. Part of Callao's attraction for crimps was its 3-mile beach, which was essentially impossible for authorities to monitor. Although official business was done at a single point ('the Mole'), captains and crimps knew that they could transfer men by small boats anywhere along the beach, day or night.[20]

Even in physically solid dock systems, the human element remained unpredictable. Police often faced allegations of favouritism and corruption. In 1861 a constable working for the East & West India Dock Company on the Thames forcibly ejected Dennis Driscoll from a ship amid much verbal and physical violence. In court, Driscoll alleged that the police only picked on him 'because he would not bribe dock constables and officers with half-crowns, while touters, crimps, Jew clothiers, railway runners and others were allowed to go on board ships and pull the sailors' legs off'.[21] Crimps and runners could also play one jurisdiction off against another. In 1901, for example, the Board of Trade discovered by accident that London dock companies were issuing permits for access to their premises. The Surrey Commercial Docks had permits allowing tailors to solicit for orders, while the London & India Dock Co. had printed tickets for laundry-women: 'Admit Mrs. _____ during business hours for washing from ships in dock.'[22] Board officials were astounded, aware that these activities were established cover stories for crimps and prostitutes, but the dock companies were only concerned with preventing pilfering, and felt that captains should be responsible for ships and crews.

As those varied circumstances suggest, defining, let alone policing, spaces of crimping was no easy task. In 1887, fully three decades after initial legislation on both sides of the Atlantic, the Board of Trade was still conducting international surveys of port authorities to pin down patterns of illegal boarding and possible solutions.[23] Crimps fought a sustained battle, pushing their right to access space on ships and shore alike. In the doorways and corridors of Mercantile Marine Offices and consul's chambers, for example, the difference between a safe space and a dangerous one for the seafarer could be very small. Crimps crowded around the entrances of offices where sailors were paid off. One seafarer's advocate criticised policing at the Mercantile Marine Office at Tower Hill, London, claiming that 'there is always great difficulty for the sailors to get through

the chain of crimps watching outside'.[24] Glasgow's Mercantile Marine Office on Virginia Street was accessed by a narrow passage, which police struggled to keep clear. One crimp was convicted of assaulting an officer who had told him to 'clear out' and called him a thief; revealingly, though, the court was reluctant to allow officials to remove men from such spaces unless there was clear proof of wrong-doing.[25] In Liverpool the Sailors' Home shared a passage with the office where seamen were paid off: 'disturbances' caused by mobs of crimps reflected badly on the home, quite apart from the threat they posed to seamen themselves.[26] When the boarding-house keeper Thomas Wallis prosecuted Constable Townley Mason for an assault on the steps of the Liverpool Sailors' Home in 1866, he called several of his fellow-keepers to testify for him, while Mason was supported by the home's officials, and the court struggled to find independent witnesses.[27]

Although such spaces were better policed in British ports by the end of the century, the union leader Havelock Wilson alleged that the old ways persisted in New York. Crimps accompanied seamen all the way to the British Consul's pay desk, he claimed, amid scenes of mob intimidation.[28] The Consul denied this, but in ways that are nonetheless revealing. It was difficult to persuade landlords to rent their buildings for the purpose of signing and discharging sailors, and the Consul's contract on the office at 2 State Street contained a clause that would evict him if there was any disorder. The Consul believed that trying to remove the crimps would cause more of a disturbance than allowing them to stay, thus endangering his lease. In any case, there was no easy way to separate those who had legitimate business from those who did not.[29] The situation in US ports was complicated by the weakness of official bodies charged with protecting seamen. In the 1890s, US shipping commissioners were allegedly the only officers of the federal government required to rent their own office accommodation. This made it practically impossible for them to find a space capable of handling large numbers of men away from the temptations of boarding houses and saloons. Eugene Chamberlain, US Commissioner of Navigation, recognised this spatial imperative when he put the reform of building provision high on his list of recommendations for reform in 1895.[30]

British consuls were sometimes able to build their own facilities, and the architectural messages they sent to seafarers were part of a broader attempt to underline state power. Between the late 1840s and early 1860s, a cluster of British consular buildings was erected in the Galata district of

Istanbul, containing a consular court, a seaman's hospital, a prison and shipping offices.[31] Some seafarers might have seen this favourably, if they were healed in the hospital, got a job via the shipping office, and saw masters who exploited them convicted by the court. On another level, though, it was a perfect gathering of institutions created for surveillance and control over the seafarer—the entire complex was even adjacent to the Sailors' Home. Similarly, plans for new Mercantile Marine Offices in the London docks in the early 1880s reveal careful attention to segregating spaces within the building. Seafarers had to wait in yards at the rear of the building until they were called into the engagement and discharge rooms. These rooms were divided by high counters to keep the men corralled while they were being signed on or paid off.[32] However, those plans maintained the old flaw of having seafarers enter the compound through narrow alleyways. It must have been obvious that a single entrance on the main street would have been easier to clear of crimps, but that would have clashed with the unspoken norms for the design of such buildings. The architectural message in this case was about the reinforcement of hierarchy, with captains and officials using a front door and seafarers one at the side. However much the state may have been aware of the spatial problems of key sailortown locations, its ultimate priority was the maintenance of separations between officials, ships' captains and seafarers. An abstract definition of order exacerbated the everyday conflicts in the alleys of sailortown.

If competition over sailortown's public spaces was complicated, the idea that the state should intervene in private space was still more controversial. This was made urgent by the realisation, even in the 1870s, that Sailors' Homes were not putting seamen's boarding houses out of business. Missionaries, philanthropists and union leaders therefore began lobbying for increased scrutiny and regulation of boarding houses. One commentator explicitly referred to the need for 'by-laws for the surveillance of the temporary home of the seamen'. He felt that keepers should be subject to 'discipline' under 'absolute' by-laws.[33] As was a common pattern in Victorian law-making, what began as enabling legislation became more interventionist over time, albeit slowly. In Britain, a variety of local standards were given national weight by the Merchant Shipping Act of 1894, which empowered local authorities to license, inspect and regulate seamen's boarding houses, while also forbidding any unlicensed person from offering lodgings to mariners. In the same decade, New York established a Board of Commissioners for Licencing Sailors' Hotels and

Boarding Houses, with O. Egerton Schmidt, a Chamber of Commerce representative, as its president.[34] Key elements included rules that would separate the various parts of the crimp complex, and the physical spaces in which those activities were undertaken. As a delegation of clergymen in Cardiff put it, the new regulated boarding houses must be 'clean, pure and free from immoral influences'.[35]

Indeed, breaking links between accommodation, drink and clothing had been a favoured state tactic for decades, however patchy the enforcement of such rules might have been. Shipping masters licensed to supply seamen in the 1840s, for example, were not allowed to deal in excisable goods or any items used by seamen.[36] Obviously, crimps opposed such regulation, but other critics also argued that it was a blunt instrument. Banning publicans, victuallers and tailors from providing lodgings for seamen would penalise men who had been doing this without reproach, sometimes for many years. It sent the message, in the words of one commentator, that such people were 'so utterly untrustworthy and degraded' as to be unsuitable, by definition, rather than by action, as boarding-house keepers. It also penalised seamen, some of whom testified that they had been lodging with such men for years without complaint.[37] Was the protection of some seamen worth the removal of choice from others? This remained a dilemma for the rest of the century.

Some boarding-house keepers accepted licensing, hoping it would increase their market power by giving them preference in shipping seamen. William Graffunder, a leader of the Cardiff boarding-house masters in the 1880s, argued that licensed 'respectable' houses should have parity with Sailors' Homes, and an equal profile on the signs, adverts and recommendations to seamen at the Merchant Marine Offices.[38] Other keepers complained that the worst crimps were able to operate outside the legislation simply by not registering their houses. This was true, but, as newspaper commentators noted, the point of the by-laws was to protect seamen, not to ease competition for boarding masters.[39] It is also hard to assess the effectiveness of regulation and enforcement. In London, prosecutions under a new set of by-laws passed in 1903 normally numbered from four to six a year by the time of the First World War, and mostly focused on people operating unlicensed houses rather than violations committed by licensed premises. There were many prosecutions of Chinese people, although they were by this time running a large proportion of the remaining boarding houses, so it is hard to say whether the law was disproportionately aimed at them.[40]

In any case, efforts to regulate boarding houses struggled with the realities of sailortown—a boarding-house keeper might well be prevented from running a bar or a brothel, but what was to stop bars and brothels being run by other people next door? One London boarding house had a brothel on either side of it, allegedly with connecting doors on the top floor.[41] Boarding-house keepers had rarely exploited seafarers single-handed, and it was more common for a keeper to work in alliance with a tailor or a bar-owner than to actually be in those trades himself. The old connection between boarding houses and the clothing trade was well documented. Crimps would insist that seamen could only be shipped if they cashed their advance notes with certain tailors; this was part of an allegation against a man called Hawkes in Cardiff in 1849.[42] In New York, late in the century, some crimps had become specialised crew recruiters, leaving accommodation to be managed by boarding-house keepers. However, because it was illegal to charge a fee for shipping a crew, these men got their money indirectly from the boarding-house keepers, who obviously charged the seamen extra in turn.[43] The crimp complex was well able to use informal networks to overcome regulations banning any individual from performing more than one function.

Efforts to regulate the spaces of crimping undoubtedly had individual successes. Seafarers were saved from the most exploitative crimps and from especially dangerous, overcrowded buildings. As officials discovered, though, defining and controlling space could be much harder than it seemed because every physical boundary on the ground opened up dilemmas about intervention in free markets and the proper use of state power. Pioneering as it was, regulation of seamen's boarding houses became subsumed in wider assumptions about housing standards, slum clearance and licensing. Ultimately, as long as sailors' money flowed into sailortown and the shipping industry needed recruitment services, crimps and their associates would pursue loopholes. Many state officials recognised this and sought to intervene more directly in the processes of crew recruitment and payment that were at the heart of the crimp complex.

## 'Government Crimping'

The peculiar entanglement between the seafarer and his employers is a running theme in this book, and in particular the assumption that it could only be conducted through numerous third parties. As the nineteenth century went on, the state became a more active player, to the point where

key employment issues were managed by officials in government offices. Such interventions inevitably caused tensions across the industry. One side's neutrality was the other's bias, and long-standing issues of the rights of capital and labour, seafaring identity, independence and occupational pride surfaced in these debates. If shipowners thought the British Board of Trade was an interfering, blundering bureaucracy that added nothing but cost to the industry, the new seamen's unions in the 1880s had little positive to say about it either. James Fitzpatrick, a union leader, argued that the sailor had 'two great enemies'—the Board of Trade and 'the crimping community'—and that 'to some extent these two went hand in glove'. In Fitzpatrick's view, the board's officials painted a negative image of British sailors, who had 'upheld the nation's flag in times gone by, and they deserved better than to be libelled by a quill driver'.[44]

As has been discussed, the Mercantile Marine Offices in British ports were a key focal point for conflicts between and among crimps, seafarers and officials. That was because they were important—their very existence represented a serious attack on sailortown. Captains had to engage their crews there, enabling officials to check that the men were willing employees. Men were paid off, also in the presence of officials, in an effort to remedy the worst abuses by captains seeking to deduct expenses and charges, and the depredations of crimps. Making mariners sign on and off in the presence of a state official became an international standard: the USA introduced such a law effective from July 1872, amid newspaper criticism of shanghaiing.[45] Shipping offices were also part of the information and propaganda effort against crimps, although what effect this had on seamen is impossible to assess. Their noticeboards carried posters with the penalties for breaches of regulations, as well as lists of offenders: in the words of one memoirist, 'the toll of boarding masters, tailors, runners, and other "queer fellows" being rounded up for over-zeal in quest of custom'.[46] Those men in turn spent decades collaborating with captains to infiltrate or bypass the walls of the shipping offices. In so doing, crimps exploited the continuing ambivalence of the state, which was sometimes caught between competing instincts towards regulation and laissez-faire. Shipowners demanded exemptions from having to use government shipping offices in emergencies, such as when signing late replacements when a vessel was about to sail. Reasonable in itself, such provision enabled crimps to move back into crew recruitment whenever captains claimed they had an emergency. This reached such blatant levels in Cardiff in the

early 1890s that hundreds of seafarers sent a petition to the Board of Trade.[47]

Important as the process of signing crews was, the truly fundamental issue was always the seafarer's wages, and we have to return once again to that persistent oddity at the heart of most sailortown tensions. Safeguarding the seaman's pay was the holy grail of state intervention; if those wages could be removed from the sailortown economy, it would quickly collapse. Interference in maritime wages systems was slow, however, because of large logistical problems, the many interests stacked up against any reform, and the real question of whether it was appropriate state behaviour. Most schemes for compulsory safeguarding of wages smacked of infantilising the seafarer. They required the building of a network of savings banks and a money-transfer scheme. They also demanded that all-important early intervention, at a point when the seafarer was subject to many competing pressures. Seamen were paid off at shipping offices in the same streets as the worst sailortown dives, creating an immediate hazard. The Secretary to the Missions to Seamen Society summed up a common view in 1878: mariners were issued with their lump-sum wages 'in the very vilest purlieus of vile mercantile seaports, when surrounded by ruffians'.[48]

Some pioneering local initiatives showed what might be possible, but also the threats to be overcome. The British consul in Bremerhaven, for example, persuaded seamen to lodge money with him for safe keeping while they had a run onshore in the 1860s. He then used those funds to send men back to England where they had a better prospect of finding another ship. The crimps, though, got local magistrates to seize the funds in payment of debts, real or invented, and thereby fatally undermined the system.[49] There is also testimony that many seafarers wanted their wages safeguarded but were suspicious of institutions. One former apprentice recalled seamen giving him money to look after in the 1890s, so there was presumably a good deal of informal banking on ships and in port, most of it undocumented.[50] Seamen's missions sometimes forwarded wages.[51] The Protestant Episcopal Mission to Seamen in New York handled several thousand dollars a month early in the twentieth century, and sent some of it back to Britain.[52] James Fell, a San Francisco missionary, claimed that 100 British sailors deposited their wages with him during a serious trough in trade in 1897, when many seamen were left unemployed in the port.[53] Building a system that was as trusted as a shipmate, yet with the official clout to overcome well-connected crimps, was a substantial challenge.

Sailors' Homes were important in the development of wage-protection schemes for seafarers. They often hosted savings banks, and arranged with shipping offices to transfer seamen's wages directly to the bank. For example, thirty-nine men staying at the Well Street Home went to the Poplar shipping office on 15 June 1875 in the company of the home's agent. They collected their wages and instructed the agent to send a variety of sums for safe keeping in the home's savings bank. The largest sum was £50, and five other men saved at least £30; the total banked by that group was £460. The conventional narrative accompanying such examples was always that this money would otherwise have gone to thieves, prostitutes and crimps. Of course, money deposited in the savings bank might well subsequently find its way into sailortown, although presumably in smaller amounts. Even in this sample, two men were listed as having 'refused' to bank their wages when the time came, so the long-standing preference of some seafarers to look after their own affairs remained.[54] Nonetheless, the principle was widely supported. Agnes Hedenström, long-time proprietor of the Scandinavian Temperance Home in London, persuaded shipping offices to forward her lodgers' wages to her accounts with their written consent. Officials duly devised an appropriate form. Typically, Hedenström argued that this would prevent theft, but also save men from their own imprudence.[55]

The involvement of Sailors' Homes and missions in safeguarding seamen's wages opened the process to further complaint from boarding-house keepers and other sailortown businesses. Sailors' Homes were not state institutions, and most were not even charities. William Graffunder, leader of the Cardiff boarding-house keepers, argued that they were 'in reality nothing more or less than well-conducted boarding-houses on a large scale'.[56] Why, then, should they have quasi-official status, being allowed early access to arriving seamen when boarding-house keepers were kept off ships by the police?[57] These complaints were part of a broader allegation that the state was driving the crimp out of business not for reasons of social reform but because it wanted to channel the lucrative proceeds of the sailortown economy towards a few selected partners. Boarding-house keepers had long accused Sailors' Homes of cherry-picking those seamen who could afford to pay their own way, while assuming that boarding masters would extend credit to destitute men until they found their next ship. This had indeed been part of the traditional role of the boarding master and remained central to his self-image and propaganda. If boarding masters were deprived of better-off seamen, however, this arrangement was

unsustainable.[58] A tradesman called A. A. Lyons led a campaign against the Liverpool Sailors' Home in the 1880s, claiming that it was moving into the provision of such things as tailoring services, seeking profitable activities beyond simple room and board. The role of government officials looked to Lyons suspiciously like the old stereotypes of the crimping process—seamen were met on their ships by officials, carefully escorted to the Sailors' Home where clothes and food were provided for a price, then sent to sea again by the government shipping office as soon as their wages were used up.[59] To Lyons, crimp control of the seafarer was simply replaced by state control.

The greatest threat to crimps came from state processes for transmitting wages away from sailortown altogether. Under such schemes, non-resident seamen were still paid off at their port of arrival but given the option of having their wages sent directly to a savings bank in their home town, or wherever they planned to get their next ship. The key state effort in this context was the 'Midge' system, named after the small boat used by Board of Trade officials on the Thames to get on board incoming vessels. Part of the effort to manage the seafarer from his earliest point of arrival, this gave state officials time to offer seamen the scheme's services. In 1883, for example, 15,194 seamen made onward journeys under the British wages transmission scheme. Some 4720 men travelled from London to no fewer than 117 other towns, where they could collect their wages. A third of those men went to Liverpool, while other major destinations were South Wales, the north-east of England and the Clyde.[60] Of course, this was a small proportion of the men arriving in British ports, but men arriving in their home port did not need the service, so it is a more substantial number than it appears.

The scheme proved popular, and reformers pushed for it to be extended to British seamen terminating their voyages at foreign ports. The practice of British seafarers being paid off anywhere in the Home Trade Limits of northern Europe was a major benefit to shipowners, and was also favoured by many seamen seeking the quickest passage to wherever their homes might be. However, it was no coincidence that these ports remained notorious for crimping into the steamship era. Around 2000 seamen were paid off British ships in Dunkirk each year in the late 1880s, offering enough business to keep crimps interested.[61] Missionaries used high-profile 'outrages', including the murders of British seamen, to argue that shipowners should be required to return men to their actual home ports or, at the very least, enable wages to be forwarded safely.[62] In one case the British

Consul in Dunkirk took it on his own responsibility to send men home to Britain and arrange for their wages to follow them.[63] Such actions did not help relations between the Foreign Office and the Board of Trade, and ultimately encouraged the latter to act. Transmission was introduced to Dunkirk on an experimental basis in 1894, and was claimed to be an immediate success, with desperate crimps reportedly fighting each other with razors to get custody of the diminishing number of seamen on the streets.[64] Nonetheless, more years passed before the system was extended to other continental ports. By 1899, Rotterdam and Hamburg were reported as safer territory for British seamen, but Antwerp was a still a problem. Board of Trade officials were intimidated and assaulted, and the British made repeated representations for more policing.[65]

Transmission schemes attracted a strong response on various fronts. Local tradesmen in the East End of London complained in 1880 that their businesses were being ruined by the lack of seamen's custom. One Liverpool paper, normally a vocal critic of crimps, referred to the scheme as 'government crimping', refusing to recognise any distinction.[66] The Antwerp Communal Council protested about the loss of 'several millions of francs' by the shopkeepers and others in the shipping districts of the town when the British scheme was extended to the Continent. Parts of the British press thought that was exactly the desired outcome: 'we heartily congratulate the Board of Trade upon this result'.[67] Some suspected that transmission moved the problem rather than solving it. Arthur Leitch, a Greenock shipowner, claimed in the 1880s that the system was depriving his port of seamen because it made it easy for arriving sailors to move on immediately to Liverpool or London, 'where they think they will get a bigger spree'.[68] One letter-writer doubted whether money reached seamen's families: 'it is simply transferred from the pockets of Continental crimps, drink sellers and loose women to those of their Tower Hill confreres'.[69] In addition, as some groups of seafarers benefited, there was always the danger that crimps intensified their efforts against others. The British wages transmission scheme was only available to British nationals, for example, leaving foreign seamen arriving on British ships exposed to the old dangers.[70] Some of the bureaucratic clumsiness of the early transmission schemes offered easy propaganda for crimps. The Board of Trade charged seamen three pence in the pound to send wages home from continental ports, simply confirming seamen's doubts about official motives. Crimps duly appealed to the seafarer's sense of independence, offering

to help him take charge of his own affairs and telling him 'you are not a baby'.[71]

Ultimately, wages transmission helped seamen, but it solved a problem that should not have existed in the first place. By the 1890s, missionaries and reformers were finally asking whether the real answers to sailortown's ills lay not in the relationship between seamen and crimps but between seamen and their employers. William Dawson, who worked for the Missions to Seamen, noted that some firms had effective allotment systems, paying regular wages to the wives or other relations of seamen while they were at sea, and believed they recruited better seamen as a result. Rather than build a complicated international bureaucracy for wage transmission, the state should require employers to pay wages in allotments during the voyage: 'why cannot our great shipowners, who have built up such splendid commerce and such fine ships, organise a system of payment under which it may be possible for respectable, God-fearing seamen and firemen to man their vessels?'[72] As Dawson noted, no other working men had their wages retained for weeks or even months, only to be legally dismissed from employment penniless in a strange place and have to wait some days more to be given a large sum in cash.[73] An important part of Dawson's argument was the parallel history of pay and conditions in the Royal Navy. Sailors there had once been as disreputable and demoralised as merchant seamen, until the Admiralty started paying them seven-eighths of their wages monthly while at sea, either in person or to their families or savings banks.[74] By all accounts, this transformed individual and family life for navy men. It was a much easier piece of reform in the navy, of course, with relatively long-term employment and a centralised bureaucracy compared with the fragmented anarchy of the commercial shipping industry. Nonetheless, as the century went on, the contrast between the two services became hard to ignore.

The British state did introduce a series of measures to encourage allotments, but there was huge resistance. Shipowners claimed men would set up allotments and then desert in distant ports, with the shipowner paying out to the family for weeks before the news came back and the wages could be stopped.[75] The Merchant Seamen (Payment of Wages and Rating) Act of 1880 enabled long-voyage crews to have half their monthly pay lodged with a savings bank or collected by relatives, but seamen found this legislation 'inoperative' and had no means of enforcing it individually.[76] It also apparently had no force in relation to seamen signing articles in foreign ports, which excluded substantial numbers.[77] Shipowners benefited from

the assumption that sailortown's battles were between the seaman and the crimp (and perhaps the government official). Attacks on the seaman's fecklessness and the crimp's venality remained clever diversions, distracting attention away from the liabilities and responsibilities of shipping employers. It is revealing to consider the 1880 findings of a Liverpool-based group of shipowners that constituted itself as a 'Committee of enquiry into the condition of our merchant seamen'. The great majority of recommendations related to events on shore rather than at sea. Advance notes should be illegal and boarding houses regulated; there should be international treaties to suppress crimping; government should provide training ships to bring boys into the industry; and there should be a mandatory contributory benefit fund for seamen. The only recommendation involving actual seafaring activity was a call for ABs to have to gain a certificate of competence.[78] Characteristically, therefore, the committee concluded that the condition of merchant seamen was a matter for local councils, the Foreign Office, the Board of Trade and seamen themselves, but not shipowners. Only rarely did anyone with a political voice challenge that basic premise.

## Documents, Identities and the Global Subaltern

Sailors became one of the most documented groups of workers by the end of the nineteenth century, carrying papers that combined identity cards with certificates of eligibility for work in the industry. This was part of the war on crimping and desertion, but also of international moves to tighten borders and increase scrutiny of mobile populations. African and Asian seafarers in European ports, and Europeans on shore in the tropics, were a transient class that threatened elite ideas about race and order. Keeping track of their eligibility to work and—often more importantly—their presence on shore became an important driver of seafarer documentation. Historians have recently demonstrated that state-certified identity played a crucial part in the rise of government capacity for surveillance and control in the nineteenth century, but it is also clear that some of the pioneering processes were worked out in relation to merchant seafarers, who offered an important test of the state's capability to oversee its subjects.[79]

Even in the 1820s, local officials saw better documentary surveillance as a solution to crimping and desertion. The scale of the problem in New Orleans led the Louisiana legislature to introduce discharge certificates and require captains to register deserters. Seamen properly discharged in

the port were given a certificate, which was a simple statement of the man's name, the vessel and captain, and the date of the voyage. Any seaman trying to secure another job without such a certificate could be returned to his original ship if it was still in the port, while the keeper of any 'tavern, lodging or boarding-house' trying to conceal a seaman was liable for a $100 fine. In what would be a persistent pattern, ships' captains were reluctant to invoke the law, despite complaining about crimping.[80] The process was unwieldy, and it required captains to operate their own surveillance. Nonetheless, similar discharge certificates were widely adopted by the maritime powers, and they remained in place for much of the century. The key improvement was to replace these individual certificates with a continuous discharge book. This was a combined identity document and disciplinary record that accompanied a man throughout his career. It carried a detailed description, so that substituting one seafarer for another, or passing inexperienced men off as long-serving mariners, became much harder.[81] Even seamen's unions sometimes supported this extension of the documentary surveillance regime. In 1885 the Aberdeen branch of the United Seamen and Firemen's Society petitioned for continuous discharge certificates, already used in the Royal Naval Reserve, to help ensure that only seamen with documented experience and competence—their members, in other words—would be signed on to ships.[82]

If that was the broad trend, much of the detail was messier. Sailortown's intermediary classes quickly learned to manipulate documentation, especially during industrial disputes when shipowners needed large numbers of strike-breakers with passable paperwork. In 1891, Catherine Buckner, a London boarding-house keeper, was convicted of forging seamen's discharge papers. She altered papers for her out-of-work residents in line with demand from the employers' organisation, the Shipping Federation. If there was a shortage of firemen, for example, she converted AB's certificates accordingly, and signed her boarders onto ships regardless of their previous experience. Business was brisk, and Bruckner handled 500 certificates in two months.[83] Some went further, finding men who matched the descriptions in stolen papers and passing them off as experienced mariners. A Liverpool boarding-house keeper called Beer was jailed more than once in the 1870s for issuing papers to men he found wandering unemployed in the streets, hoping to get their advance notes.[84] State documents could, perversely, make this easier because masters in a rush to make up their crews might place undue faith in the paperwork.

Seamen also resisted documentary regimes by using multiple names, and claiming to have been shipwrecked, robbed or otherwise lost their papers. Officials believed that some men did this so often that they hardly knew what their real names were.[85] European seamen adopted English names to make them harder to trace, especially if they were evading military service.[86] Seamen used nicknames as an easier alternative to keeping track of a man's official name on a particular ship. One seaman signed on to a ship in New York as John Miller, having deserted from another ship in that port and wishing to cover his tracks. He then told the mate his name was William Labourine for the purposes of the log, and eventually confessed to being William Seaborne during a subsequent court case about his wages in London. The crew called him Paddy.[87]

Port health officers, keen to monitor sailors on shore during seaborne epidemics, were dismayed by the ability of mariners to disappear in seaports, as were Board of Trade officials and shipowners. Local authorities prosecuted sailors who gave the address of a Sailors' Home, or of well-known boarding houses, but then stayed elsewhere. They also fined boarding-house keepers for keeping poor records, seeking to thwart the seaman's invisibility indirectly.[88] In Liverpool, the Chair of the Shipowners' Association alleged that three in every four mariners who failed to join their ships had given the government shipping office a false address, and that seamen were impossible to find if they wanted to lie low in port. He drew an explicit contrast with men working in jobs on shore, who he believed could be readily found because they had 'some local habitation'.[89] Mariners found ways to circumvent boarding-house legislation by negotiating subtenancies from landlords, with rent books and spurious receipts for furniture. Although an entire building might still be occupied by mariners, this arrangement freed landlord and sailor alike from being inspected.[90]

The seafarer's mobility and capacity for evading surveillance had long been seen as a threat, especially in relation to black seamen. States in the American South passed a series of Negro Seamen Acts in the 1820s to restrict contact between free black seafarers visiting ports on ships and the local enslaved black people. Black seamen were imprisoned, at their captains' expense, while their ships stayed in ports such as Charleston.[91] In Galveston, Texas, departing ships were searched in the 1850s to detect anyone trying to escape slavery disguised as a free black seafarer, and African American seamen arriving in the port were issued with identity passes.[92] At the same time, the British Merchant Marine Act of 1823

pushed responsibility for Lascars in London onto the East India Company and its contracted shipowners, imposing penalties for any seafarer left on shore in London without appropriate support.[93] Whatever the particular reason, states developed an early concern for restricting the presence of black and Asian seafarers on shore, however much they had to acknowledge the importance of those men to the working of their merchant fleets.

As time went on, defining race and nationality posed a profound challenge to new generations of seaport bureaucrats, just as seafarers and other sojourners demanded rights that metropolitan societies were unwilling to recognise.[94] European sailortowns became a laboratory for classification schemes aimed at defining, and thereby controlling, mariners and their mobility. The language used in seamen's meetings began to reflect this struggle to draw lines between different groups, especially in times of hardship. A meeting of unemployed seamen in London in 1886 was reported to be 'on behalf of distressed British seamen out of employment, including all subjects born in any of Her Majesty's Possessions. A large sprinkling of the "black" element was observed.' The main target of the meeting was the employment of foreign seamen, and specifically the large number of Chinese men working in the stoke-holds of major London shipping lines.[95] As will be discussed in the next chapter, this was not the last occasion when black seafarers were defined either as British or foreign depending on the political needs of state agencies and unions.

Assumptions about maritime labour were therefore at the heart of institutional reactions to Asian and African sojourners in sailortown, and the first resort of authorities was to investigate whether destitute men could be found a job on outgoing vessels. Such thinking was formalised in the procedures of the London Strangers' Home for Asiatics, established in 1857 as a combined home, mission and shipping office for Asian and African seamen. The Strangers' Home classified those who arrived at its doors in distress in three groups according to their relationship with seafaring. Class A men were qualified seafarers out of a job; class B were 'adventurers' who were willing to work at sea as a means of returning home; and class C were 'loafers' who were hard to deal with as they normally refused to work as coal trimmers on ships. The Strangers' Home argued that British ports were a dumping ground for colonial mariners because captains had to accept any available crew at small ports in Asia; if these men turned out to be inadequate seamen they could always be quietly paid off in Britain and replaced with better mariners. The problem was particularly acute for unqualified cooks recruited elsewhere in the world, who were barred from

employment as cooks on vessels leaving Britain. Still, for all the widespread concern, numbers rarely seemed very significant. The Strangers' Home dealt with about 200 destitute men every year around 1909, of whom only 20 per cent were in the loafer class and therefore hard to deport by finding a vessel for them to work on.[96] Like much else about 'foreign' or 'alien' seafarers, this was more of a symbol than a real crisis.

European seafarers 'on the beach' in Asia also raised awkward questions about race, class and mobility. They offer another element in the framework of multiple imperial frontiers, by which officials, missionaries, settlers and traders envisaged their work in competing and contradictory ways: the seafarer's positioning of those lines was different again.[97] In mid-century there had sometimes been substantial numbers of white seamen on shore in ports such as Calcutta, and states tightened rules to stop Europeans being discharged there.[98] Colonial officials had the power to repatriate seafarers categorised as 'Distressed British Seamen' to Britain or to another colony, having satisfied themselves that the men had no prospect of work. Officials saw these men conforming to the worst stereotypes of the drunk, lazy and feckless British seafarer, and squabbled over who should take responsibility for them. Mauritius was a favourite spot for those wanting to 'shirk the winter months in England', while British seamen stuck in Bombay would never get work because of their 'personal appearance and antecedents'. The Bombay Sailors' Home complained it was accommodating fifty-one distressed seamen in 1887, thirty-two of whom had been sent there by officials in other Indian Ocean ports. Old crimping habits were allegedly at the root of this. Indian and English seamen alike were enticed on shore in Mauritius by touts who sent them to work on sugar plantations. By the time they came to the notice of local officials, they had sold their clothes and were destitute.[99] Again, numbers were small, and the administrative effort and inter-departmental tension caused by such men seems disproportionate. But beachcombing—part of maritime legend since at least the era of the buccaneers—continued to touch nerves, especially for the governors of tropical islands close to major shipping routes. Lord Basil Blackwood, Colonial Secretary of Barbados, complained about loafing British mariners in 1910, and thought it was 'rather demoralising that a white man should be going about in this condition'. His counterparts in Ceylon and Singapore raised similar concerns about loafers bringing 'the white race into discredit'. Not all such men were mariners, but seamen ashore contributed to a floating population of

westerners in the East who were not under as close imperial control as the authorities would have liked.[100]

Bureaucratic innovations in the generation before the First World War established the foundations for documentary regimes that became the norm for seafarers throughout the twentieth century. Those in turn form a revealing subset of the broader tightening of passport regimes that supported more rigid national boundaries in the period. Asian and African seafarers working on British fleets were subject to a still more intrusive level of documentary surveillance in the 1920s, and we will come back to their experience in more detail in the next chapter. Now we need to consider the key medical strand in the state's desire to control seafarers and their sailortown associates.

## Public Health and Sailortown's Sexual Entanglements

Public health was one of the most persistent threads in state intervention on the waterfront. It needs to be understood against a long tradition of providing separate care for seafarers and ex-seafarers. This combined a genuine belief that the sailor's problems were specific, with a wish to segregate him from a broader society that might somehow be contaminated by his presence. In particular, the idea that seafarers should have their own hospitals was long established by the time the shipping industry started its rapid mid-century expansion. In some cases, like London's Dreadnought Hospital, this provision was separated from shore society in the most explicit way possible, based in a succession of former warships moored on the Thames off Deptford. In the USA a network of marine hospitals in major seaports formed the first federal health system in the country's history. Seafarers also drew the attention of the medical authorities because of the (reasonable) belief that transient seafarers would carry diseases from one country to another unless carefully controlled. As crude quarantine systems gave way to more targeted surveillance regimes, new port health and sanitary authorities monitored arriving vessels with increasing rigour, and focused particularly on the bodies and possessions of seamen and lower-class passengers, especially when they were from ethnic or racial minorities.[101]

Important as these aspects were, they were overshadowed by venereal disease on the list of issues associated with seafarers. Here, medicine

overlapped with moral panic to further distort the reputations of merchant seamen and the women they associated with in sailortown. In Britain and several of its colonies, the Contagious Diseases Acts (CDAs) and similar legislation in the 1860s and 1870s enabled the medical inspection of women suspected of working as prostitutes in the vicinity of army and navy bases, and their subsequent detention if found to be carrying venereal diseases. The political response to the CDAs is widely regarded as having created a new consciousness of gender politics and the relative rights of men and women in public space.[102] There was also a strong racial dimension in British colonies that saw themselves with particular challenges in monitoring and regulating sexual contact.[103] Crucially for this book, supporters of the CDAs wanted to extend their provisions to civilian, commercial waterfronts, and thereby deal with what one campaigner called the 'crowds of drunken seamen and low prostitutes which one sees in most seaports'. The Association for the Extension of the Contagious Diseases Acts proposed bringing particular seaports into the provisions of the CDAs, especially the 'hotbeds of disease introduced by sailors of the merchant marine of our own and of foreign countries'.[104] Given the number of women in the sailortown districts of major commercial seaports, extension would have been an unprecedented intervention. In addition, the uncertainty felt by contemporaries about where to place 'sailors' wives' on the spectrum of social respectability would surely have generated more controversy than even in the naval ports.

As if the impact on sailortown's women was not far-reaching enough, an extension of the CDAs would also have subjected new categories of men to medical examination and forced treatment. While army and navy personnel were not actually inspected under the CDAs, there was an underpinning assumption that those men would be seen by service doctors on a regular basis. Would a new medical regime be required to control merchant seafarers? Hippolyte Homo, a French regulationist, argued in 1872 for the inspection of army and navy personnel, and also 'vagabonds', prisoners and merchant mariners, but he did not recommend extension to workers elsewhere in the economy, such as factories, mines or railways.[105] Where that line would be drawn in seaports was a major issue because even those fond of attacking mariners' morals had to admit that carters, dockers and general labourers accounted for a large proportion of venereal disease on the waterfront, with seamen just one group among several.[106]

Extensionists saw an inevitable chain of events from the arrival of the seafarer in port through to an increase in prostitution and disease, but the

evidential base was always thin. The Liverpool priest and morality agitator James Nugent, for example, claimed that just over 100,000 sailors had been paid off in the town in 1877, that they received anything from £4 to £50 in wages, and that between fifty and 75 per cent of that money had been spent on drink or prostitution.[107] The city's police chief agreed that sailors spent money 'most thoughtlessly, and most wickedly', fuelling drunkenness and prostitution.[108] But moving beyond that kind of statement into anything that would stand up to cross-examination was much harder. The sudden arrival of a large number of merchant vessels in Plymouth harbour coincided with a jump in disease cases in 1870, and, while one of the district's medical officers believed there was a correlation, he admitted that he had no proof, nor any evidence that merchant mariners were particularly diseased.[109]

Revealingly, plans to extend the CDAs created broad opposition from both seafarers and shipowners. For seafarers, the issue was one of dignity, even if in expressing this they added to the stigmatisation of waterfront women. James Fitzpatrick told a meeting that despite widespread condemnation of medical examination for 'street unfortunates' (a contemporary euphemism for prostitutes), a bill before Parliament was once again seeking to have 'this degradation' applied to British seamen.[110] Shipowners also lobbied strongly against extension, just as they opposed quarantine regimes, fearing that medical surveillance of crews would reduce the number of mariners available to them, and also disrupt and delay their sailing timetables.[111] Historians have noted that parliamentary committees considering the legislation were generally in favour of extension, and heard some remarkably one-sided evidence. In particular, they wanted to believe that the CDA regime in naval ports could easily be scaled up to the mercantile waterfront. Even so, some sense of the enormity of what was being considered, and the scale of opposition from a remarkable social spectrum, began to dawn on the authorities. The CDAs were not extended to commercial ports, and indeed were abolished around naval and army bases in the 1880s.[112]

Contagious diseases legislation was also adopted in some British colonies, where a more complicated landscape of race, class and empire had to be negotiated. The desire to reduce levels of venereal disease in the British and imperial armies was arguably even more urgent for colonial administrators than it was at home.[113] Merchant seafarers were caught up in the implementation of these laws, but only to the extent that any visitors to the colonies were, and there were no serious proposals to include

seafarers in the army and navy regulations. This may be an indicator of the relative weakness of colonial authorities. Although they appeared to have considerable powers of surveillance and control, the scale of mobility associated with the shipping industry stretched the resources of colonies. The Hong Kong government decided in the 1860s that it could essentially only legislate for foreigners, because it believed Chinese prostitution was so embedded in that society, and so impenetrable to analysis, that it would be impossible to frame and implement workable laws. Less philosophically, it also believed that it lacked the staff to police prostitution in the harbour itself, even before the great expansion of shipping traffic in the final decades of the century.[114]

Failure to extend the CDAs to major British commercial seaports can be read as a grudging recognition that sailortown was a civilian space. While it might be subject to all manner of unusual laws and regulations, it could not reasonably be bracketed with the navy and army garrison towns that had seemed such obvious targets for regulationism in the middle of the century. The timing of the long transition to steam and the regularisation of seafaring work may also be a factor here, with an awareness by the 1870s that sailortown was past its peak and that the steamship was changing waterfront society. Reaching a less judgmental stance on the medical treatment of seafarers and their associates took time, but again the arguments rehearsed in the later nineteenth century served as the basis for a more enlightened raft of measures for seamen's welfare in the decades after the First World War.

## Conclusion

The role of the state in sailortown offers important evidence for the broader rise of bureaucratic capability, and officials naturally believed that their activities were crucial in reforming key problems. Board of Trade officers in British ports took credit for eradicating the most extreme depredations, with journalists portraying their efforts in heroic terms. Superintendent Turner of Cardiff, retiring in 1895 after more than thirty years, recalled that beating the crimps had been 'night and day work for years' that broke down his health for a time. He brought a continuous series of prosecutions, driving crimps out of business and sending them to jail, until a 20 per cent desertion rate was down to 2 per cent. The actions of Turner and his 'very zealous' staff became, the writer believed, a model for ports elsewhere. Turner's recollection focused on policing and administrative

actions, including wage transmission and formal systems for signing men on at the mercantile marine offices.[115] At no point did he mention the great shift from sail to steam. One of Turner's colleagues, Charles Hughes, who retired in 1898, was described as 'a famous crimp catcher' by the *Western Mail*, and he testified that 'the crimps never recovered from the treatment they received in 1866–70'. The tone is one of nostalgia and congratulation. The writer explicitly refers to 'the old days', with Hughes being 'the last of the little band' who cleared the port of crimps.[116]

American officials too believed that they had abolished the worst excesses of crimping in the 1870s. John Young, US Shipping Commissioner in Philadelphia, reported in 1875 that men were no longer allowed to join their ships drunk, which rendered the old crimp dodges pointless. In addition, formal paying off in the shipping office meant that their wages were made up properly, and they were given a certificate of discharge; previously, men were open to abuse by captains and officers on both counts.[117] Several newspaper accounts in the 1870s and 1880s explained the new government-supervised processes for signing on mariners, depicting a detailed scrutiny of articles of agreement and the personal role of local US Shipping Commissioners in ensuring that the crews of ships were who they claimed to be and were on board voluntarily.[118]

The increasing willingness and ability of states to intervene in shipping produced a substantial range of regulation. It is telling that the official log book issued by the Board of Trade had twenty-seven categories of legal notices and advice for captains by 1902; the first thirteen related to safety, navigation and regulation of ships at sea, while the remaining fourteen focused on the seafarers, dealing with accommodation and health at sea, but also several separate provisions for payment, and securing of wages and advances.[119] Regardless of how well such rules were enforced, there was no doubt in the official mind by the end of the century that the seafarer's world needed at least as much state scrutiny on shore as it did at sea.

As ever, though, we have to question the efficacy of state intervention in the shipping industry and in sailortown. It is hard to judge the relative impact of regulatory measures against the sheer economic might of the transition to steam and the role of capital and labour shifts in the industry itself. Steamships, with their timetabled schedules, higher wages and better prospects of job security, represent the move towards discipline in shipping, leaving behind the violence and coercion of the sailing ship. As such, they encouraged similar order on shore by marginalising desertion, crimping and beachcombing, and reducing the proportion of

seafarers left outside the norms of the new industrialised maritime workplace. The steamship's work in regularisation was not the same as the state's efforts in regulation, but it was ultimately more important to the decline of sailortown.

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CHAPTER 7

# Legacies: Sailortown in the Twentieth Century

Sailortown rose and fell with the age of sail. By the early twentieth century the steamship had made systemic crimping obsolete, and sailortown began to appear less as a scandalous pit of vice and exploitation and more as an object of nostalgic, sentimental anti-modernism. Cicely Fox Smith, for example, used sailortown to argue that local character was being standardised out of modern life in the 1920s. She described 'Ship Alley' as 'the same yesterday, today and forever', a place where the fortunate traveller might encounter an 'imaginary sailor's inn', while the demolished Brunswick Hotel in Blackwall had 'already belonged to yesterday for many years before its final passing'.[1] This sailortown was very much an imagined place, rooted in a century of scattered representations that had their origins in the 'hearts of oak' maritime world of the Napoleonic Wars. H. M. Tomlinson took a more sophisticated view, identifying sailortown as a place of fading memory where, with every passing year, fewer people would understand the wide-ranging maritime significance of seemingly local urban spaces.[2] In the 1930s and 1940s, writing about sailortown merged with the gangster underworld of the Depression and a new gritty urbanism in the hyperbolic characterisations of Richard McKay.[3] Publishers thought that novels of crime, vice and intrigue were well located in sailortown; one cover blurb noted that Cardiff's dockland was 'an excellent setting for just such a story'.[4]

Despite all this, and the optimism of journalists, reformers and officials, sailortown retained a harsher side along with its mythology. Many seafarers still faced the old dichotomy of liberty and danger on shore, albeit



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in new ways. This chapter cannot deal fully with the twentieth-century waterfront, which needs to be studied in its own right rather than as an epilogue to the history of sailortown. Still, for the purposes of this book we have to explain the persistence of some sailortown legacies through another series of changes on land and at sea. Issues of race and ethnicity in European and US seaports, brought to prominence by the increasing presence of seafarers of Asian and African origin, became yet more contested during and immediately after the two world wars. Welfare services for seafarers belatedly delivered part of the promise of pioneering initiatives started back in the mid-nineteenth century. And the old imaginary of the seafarer and his sailortown associates kept recurring in the rhetoric of the industry, and the fragmented state and charitable agencies that worked on the waterfront, still seeing the seaman through ancient prejudices.

## Race and Segregation on the Waterfront

We have seen that sailortown was intimately connected with ideas of race, ethnicity, nationality and foreignness in the nineteenth century, as the maritime workforce became a trans-national phenomenon on an unprecedented scale, and seafarers fitted into a strange kind of hybrid Britishness. Those patterns became sharper, and boundaries more rigid, in the new century, when the old sailortown districts in western cities were explicitly defined by racial and ethnic distances. Although seamen of African, Middle Eastern and Asian origin settled down to build families and households like their white counterparts did, they could rarely follow them out of sailortown into the working-class suburbs. Near-waterfront neighbourhoods inherited sailortown stereotypes of crime, vice and otherness, suffering disproportionate levels of exclusion. This persisted far into the twentieth century, long after the number of working seafarers declined and waterfront communities lost their immediate connections with the maritime economy. Sailortown's separation from its broader urban surroundings continued, but increasingly based on racial rather than seafaring factors. We know a good deal about these communities now. In the British case, the people of Cardiff's Butetown, Liverpool's south docklands, and the old Tyne riverfront at South Shields have been the subject of detailed study.[5] In addition, there is excellent work on the evolving racial profile of the seafaring workforce itself, and the muddled, hostile response of imperial states to the realisation that black seafarers were essential to their maritime economies, yet hard to define and control.[6] Spatial segregation,

conflict over work, and relationships between seafarers and waterfront women remained central concerns in ever-evolving circumstances.

A succession of racialised labour-market disputes were played out on waterfront streets early in the twentieth century. Many of these targeted Chinese seafarers, who were seen as a growing threat to white seafarers' jobs, against a backdrop of media hysteria about opium, gambling and the 'yellow peril'. A mob of white seamen stopped Chinese crews signing on to their ships in London in 1908, leading to street disturbances and questions in Parliament.[7] Seamen's unions saw anti-Chinese agitation as a way of building their own authority among white seamen. Edward Tupper led anti-Chinese riots in Cardiff in 1911, claiming that Butetown was separate from 'our civilisation' and encouraging his men to attack not only Chinese seafarers but also Chinese-run laundries.[8] During the First World War, union campaigns against the employment of Chinese seamen on British ships duly recycled the old sailortown stereotypes. Letters to the National Union of Seamen newspaper in 1917 referred to the risk of 'allowing the Orientals to spread disease', and how 'opium and gambling habits resulted in general depravity'.[9]

Many European port cities saw disturbances in the years following the First World War, when the return of white seafarers from military service caused a temporary excess of workers. White seamen protested against mariners of African and south Asian origin employed by shipping firms in Marseille.[10] There were riots across Britain in 1919, in London, Liverpool, Glasgow, Hull, South Shields, Cardiff and even the inland port of Salford on the Manchester Ship Canal. These were almost invariably played out in old sailortown spaces, where it was easy for mobs to focus on African, Arab or Asian boarding houses. In the Glasgow riot, for example, an inflammatory union meeting sparked off a fight in the yard of the Mercantile Marine Office, before a running battle moved first to the Sailors' Home, then along the Broomielaw to the African seafarers' boarding house.[11] In Cardiff, white mobs knew exactly which streets to go to in search of black seafarers, although that spatial concentration also enabled black seamen and their families to defend themselves. In the aftermath of the riots there was an influx into Butetown of some black residents who had previously left but who now wanted the security of their old neighbourhoods.[12]

While foreignness and race had always been sailortown issues, there was a clear hardening of attitudes as seafarers became less transient in the twentieth century. Pat O'Mara's testimony is revealing of the intricate spatial and gendered aspects of these ethnic cityscapes. He grew up behind

Liverpool's south docks in a street full of Irish families, with each of the surrounding streets dominated by a particular group. He reported that his parents' first Liverpool home had been in the 'upper part of Stanhope Street, just above the Negro white-wife element'. Nearby streets had 'Negroes, Chinese, Mulattoes, Filipinos, almost every nationality under the sun, most of them boasting white wives and large half-caste families'. O'Mara's testimony is far from nostalgic, suggesting that communities muddled through in a grudging, fragile tolerance.[13] If mixed marriages and less formal relationships attracted a great deal of prejudice, waterfront women emerge from the sources determined to defend their choices. Cardiff's Chief Constable complained in 1929 that women 'champion the cause of the coloured men under whose "protection" they live and whose "half-pay" they sometimes receive. They appear to show no shame and when challenged retort that their conduct is no worse than that which is tolerated when both parties are of the same race and colour.'[14]

Mixed marriage in particular became a totemic issue, with a raft of eugenic writing and commentary focused on 'half-caste' children.[15] This work, most notoriously the Fletcher Report in Liverpool, poisoned relations between local communities, academics and journalists for decades.[16] Those who grew up in such areas had more positive memories, amid the wider awareness of prejudice. One Cardiff author described a range of multi-ethnic families, with a particular focus on the 'Welsh women who were the heads of the households of Third World men' forming an 'Afro-Celtic culture'.[17] That latter description would also apply to sailortown districts elsewhere, albeit with the 'Celtic' component more often composed of Irish women. Indeed, a sociologist studying these communities concluded that women became important figures far beyond their own households. Black men, facing hostility from white men, relied on women for help dealing with all manner of problems.[18] Given the demography of waterfront districts, it is hardly surprising that such cultures should develop. One study found that 81 per cent of the women in Cardiff's Butetown were white in the 1940s, but only 25 per cent of the men.[19]

By the 1930s and 1940s, it had become commonplace for journalists to define areas such as Butetown in terms of race and civilisation. One wrote in 1936 that 'as you walk down Bute Street a colour bar swings across the road behind you'.[20] A nostalgic piece on Butetown referred to two civilisations separating at nightfall, as the businessmen left the offices at the waterfront and the area south of Hayes Bridge took on its night-time character as Tiger Bay.[21] The old many-cultured attractions of sailortown

reappear in slightly different form decade after decade. In Cardiff, three districts had emerged by the 1930s. Running from north to south down the peninsula, these were a mainly Greek and Cypriot cluster; a larger district around Loudon Square where the population was more than 80 per cent non-white, with large numbers of Arab, West Indian and West African residents; and a cluster at the south comprising mostly southern Europeans. Running up the east side of these residential districts was Bute Street itself, which was the last of the old sailortown.[22] Cardiff's Chief Constable believed there were forty cafes on Bute Street serving as fronts for brothels in 1929.[23]

Why were these seamen not allowed to make the same spatial transition out of sailortown that their white peers did? After all, they were rooted in their home ports, had wives and families, and were no more consumers of sailortown 'services' than their white shipmates were. Many interconnected prejudices worked against normalisation of the black seafarer's life on shore.[24] Most fundamentally, shipping companies continued to argue that their industry, so prone to boom and bust cycles, needed a reserve army of labour that could be hired or fired at will. Black seafarers became that labour force, clustered in the old sailortown districts so that they could be put to work quickly in times of need, yet easily deported when supply exceeded demand and white seamen's unions agitated for the removal of black competition.[25] Careful manipulation of imperial citizenship rules enabled the state to define black mariners as British or as alien according to the requirements of the shipping industry, and they once again became targets for new documentation systems. Even some British-born black mariners felt obliged to carry documents in an attempt to avoid harassment by the authorities, reinforcing their segregation at sea and in port alike.[26] The notorious Special Restriction (Coloured Alien Seamen) Order of 1925 enabled local officials to define seafarers as aliens, and there is ample evidence of this being widely misapplied to seamen who were actually British subjects. Implementing the order also revealed tensions between different departments of the British state, the industry and the unions, with the Board of Trade and the seamen's leaders talking up fears of racial disturbances in seaports if the presence of black seafarers was not restricted.[27]

Assigning these national and imperial labels to seafarers allowed state officials to subcontract responsibility for the 'reserve army', giving a new turn to old sailortown problems. Destitute seamen, for example, could usually be defined as someone else's problem. In the South Wales port of

Barry, sixty Somali seamen appealed to the local council in 1930, claiming that the shipping downturn during the Depression had left them living off their boarding-house keepers for months. A council official noted that the keepers had met 'their moral obligations to their countrymen' but were now penniless themselves. The situation, he argued, would damage 'the prestige of this country' among seamen. The Colonial Office was unimpressed, arguing that the Somalis could be from British, French or Italian Somaliland, or from Abyssinia, and even if they were British, it was a matter for the government of the protectorate to arrange repatriation.[28] In South Shields it was common for Yemeni seafarers to be redefined as 'Turks' when it suited the authorities.[29]

Worse, seafarers were often disappointed to find that their wartime service did not counter the prejudices they experienced on shore. In 1941, one observer noted that West African mariners in Liverpool, 'patriotic and proud to be British, are astonished and grieved at their isolation here'.[30] The experiences of black seafarers stood in marked contrast with the principled, liberal-democratic war aims espoused by the allies, provoking strikes and unrest as an indignant workforce accused employers of double standards and hypocrisy.[31] Chinese seafarers felt a similar exclusion and were ultimately treated even more harshly. Liverpool's Chinese community, for example, was clustered around Pitt Street behind the south central docks in the 1920s and 1930s, in a crowded district of older terraced housing with shops, restaurants and clubs on the ground floors.[32] Enforced slum clearance followed by bombing in the early part of the war drove the Ocean Steamship Company to convert houses into dormitories for 200 Chinese seamen in 1941. Even this only happened after lengthy discussions between the shipping companies and the Port Welfare Officer, and some company philanthropy was conditional on a ban of strikes. There was much controversy over whether to establish an opium clinic.[33] The result was unpleasant, overcrowded housing, alleviated slightly by the provision of nearby canteens and leisure facilities. Chu Hsueh Fan, a Chinese labour leader, reported that there were nine or ten boarding houses for those he represented in Liverpool, some with no electricity; he joked pointedly that he could not see why Chinese seamen should have to endure the air-raid blackout inside as well as outside.[34] Many of Liverpool's Chinese mariners were then deported in 1946, often losing all contact with wives and children left behind.[35]

Decolonisation after the Second World War ironically made matters worse for some mariners by limiting their mobility and job prospects in

the shipping industry, even while they gained independence for their new nations. Just as imperial states had reclassified seafarers as subjects or aliens in arbitrary ways, so sailors from newly created nations were vulnerable to being defined as aliens, virtually overnight. Middle Eastern and South East Asian mariners encountered many such difficulties in the 1950s and 1960s.[36] By then, mixed communities in the near-waterfront zone of seaport cities had fully inherited the defining myths of sailortown. Residents of Cardiff's Butetown claimed that police took bribes from cafe proprietors fronting for brothels, and that prostitution was tolerated in their district so that it would not spread into the city proper. Half the cases of venereal disease in the Welsh valley mining towns were allegedly the result of visits to Butetown, when tens of thousands of men came to Cardiff for major sports events, and visited Butetown as well.[37] Lurid accounts of continuing vice casually lumped together settled and transient populations alike, and people grew to resent their 'Tiger Bay' representation in the media.[38] In the 1960s, when new tower blocks were being built in the district and the vibrant, mixed community had hopes of better housing, Bute Street itself—the original focus of the nineteenth-century sailortown—intensified as a red-light zone. In a revealing and common clash of perspectives, residents argued that the prostitutes came from outside to work the street, while the police claimed they were locals.[39] In Liverpool, too, the persistent habit of police officers equating the Liverpool 8 district with prostitution and crime was revealed in striking detail by the enquiry into the 1981 Toxteth riots.[40] Sailortown, long dead in any maritime economic context, was kept alive as an excuse for social and racial exclusion.

## War, Depression and the Welfare of Seafarers

At least part of the maritime working class was living in better conditions by the early twentieth century, thanks to the increasing proportion of seafarers working on regular steamship voyages, and the efforts of urban reform movements. Extreme forms of coercion, such as shanghaiing, declined with the sailing ship into maritime legend, although waterfront districts did not suddenly lose all their sailortown characteristics. The pubs and brothels remained, even if they developed into a generic red-light district no longer dominated by visiting seafarers. Seamen abroad still wanted to get away from their ships and spend their off-duty hours in bars. The four British seamen Laurie Lee met in Malaga in 1935—'Jock, Geordie, Lenny, and Bill'—can stand for all the others. They traded the ship's carbolic soap

for bottles of brandy and spent the evening getting thoroughly drunk, somehow making it back to their ship. But they were not beaten, robbed or shanghaied.[41]

Merchant seafaring, which had become a somewhat safer occupation with the rise of the steamship, was much more dangerous again during the great wars of the twentieth century.[42] While not belittling the perils facing seafarers in earlier conflicts, there is no doubt that submarines, and then aircraft, posed far greater threats. In addition, the new world of the steamship men was always vulnerable to a reversion into old patterns when placed under serious stresses. The wars caused important shifts in attitudes, both of seafarers towards the societies they helped sustain at great risk to themselves, and of those societies towards the merchant marine. Experience taught seamen that the positive press they received for their service rarely translated into meaningful reform once the immediate crisis was past. Seamen's unions, after a long struggle to organise their transient members, became more influential as new bodies, such as the International Labour Organisation, tried to coordinate waterfront welfare provision worldwide. Seafarers faced the old problems of unemployment and underemployment during economic downturns, and they struggled particularly in the 1930s when trade suffered worse than even badly hit land-based industries. New technologies could also cause disruption, as when oil began to supersede coal, putting large numbers of stoke-hold men out of work.[43]

The inter-war years were a transition period, when old ideas about morality and paternalism sat alongside new recognition of the seafarer's right to independence. Reformers focused on providing facilities for healthy recreation in seaports, hoping to persuade mariners away from bars and dance halls. Sport features prominently in the labour investigator Granville Orde Browne's report from the Mediterranean in 1933: he evidently asked every British consul and mission supervisor he met about football fields and organised matches. The response was often disappointing, in large part because most mariners were ashore for ever-shorter periods of time.[44] In Singapore an alliance of shipowners, the port authority and the US Young Men's Christian Association created playing fields for mariners and other sojourning foreigners, which were held up as an example to other ports in the 1920s. Appeals to seamen linked health and wellbeing with family responsibilities, as manifest in a pamphlet called 'The Seafarers' Chart of Healthy Manhood', distributed by the British Social Hygiene Council. This listed athletic organisations and venereal disease

clinics in ports worldwide, and its cover slogan was 'Remember the girl you left behind you. Give her a square deal!'[45]

Indeed, the early decades of the twentieth century did see substantial improvement in facilities for seamen's welfare, with a less judgemental approach to venereal diseases. War forced states to take decisions about issues that had drifted unresolved for decades. In Britain, the problem of venereal disease was the subject of a Royal Commission in 1913, but it took on additional urgency with the outbreak of war in the following year, and major towns set up free treatment centres in 1916. As it became accepted that this approach could do far-reaching good, specific provision for seafarers followed. The locations of such facilities were always telling. Clinics were built in the old sailortown districts where the authorities assumed they would readily be found by visiting seamen, but of course this perpetuated the association of those streets with venereal disease and vice. In Marseille, the clinic was right on the quayside of the Vieux Port. Liverpool's Seamen's Dispensary was a short distance from the Sailors' Home, between Paradise Street and Park Lane, in the heart of the old sailortown. Although it treated seafarers for a range of conditions, it was always inextricably connected with venereal conditions in the public mind.[46] At this time, too, the concept of continuous, regularly updated paperwork, carried by the mariner and recognised by everyone he encountered internationally, was extended to the treatment of venereal diseases. In 1924 an international agreement created a 'personal card' system with space for clinic staff to record treatments. A mariner who had to leave during a course of treatment could present the card at his next port of call and continue the medication where it had left off. Commentators believed the system worked well. In 1933, Orde Browne interviewed a Lett mariner in Marseille, who had begun his treatment in Norway, then had four injections in Russia, one in Sunderland and one in Marseille, all duly recorded on his card. He had no trouble securing treatment despite having little grasp of languages.[47]

If attitudes towards seafarers were slowly progressing, their sailortown associates still existed in a world of stereotype. In the late 1920s, serious proposals to ban women from working in waterfront bars were revived at the International Labour Conference in Geneva. The arguments were long-established sailortown clichés, invoking barmaids as sirens who tempted sailors to drink more than they should, thereby exposing them to a range of depredations. Alison Neilans, a prominent women's rights campaigner and secretary of the Association for Moral and Social

Hygiene, feared that such a ban was a cheap gesture against the 'voiceless and defenceless' barmaids, included in the proposals because most of the good recommendations about the provision of seamen's hostels would be expensive. The *Manchester Guardian* accused the conference of building policy round the 'highly coloured figure well known to literature'.[48]

Perhaps ironically, for all the apparent liberalisation of attitudes towards seafarers, religious missions expanded their role in seamen's welfare between the wars. The old ambivalences about the links between evangelism, social provision, accommodation and mission work persisted in the new century. The remaining boarding-house keepers and their associates were great publicists, exploiting mariners' perceptions about the religious tone of institutions.[49] Orde Browne argued in 1933 that the 'modern seaman is prompt to resent the "hot gospeller" style, or on the other hand, any sort of superiority or patronage'.[50] Despite this, the missions kept building large institutes, often close to the new downriver docks and wharves that were changing the geography of major seaports. As they gained in resources and confidence, missions also moved into providing accommodation. The 1920s and 1930s saw an upsurge in building, almost in an echo of the Sailors' Home boom three-quarters of a century before. The Missions to Seamen, for example, had rapidly expanded its stations during the First World War from 74 to 125, and, while it cut back in the aftermath, by the mid-1930s it had 96 worldwide, some on a considerable scale. There were even new entrants to the mission landscape, with the Catholic Apostleship of the Sea establishing 40 institutes and 6 hostels by the end of its first decade in 1932.[51] The new mission in London's Victoria Docks Road (established in 1934) was a large, eight-storey block mixing accommodation with public rooms and social services.[52] Indeed, at the outbreak of the Second World War, missions had many more beds available for seamen in British ports than Sailors' Homes did, with just over 2500 compared with 1500.[53]

The Second World War brought a stark and urgent set of problems to bear on those responsible for seamen's welfare on shore. Waterfront districts in much of Europe were badly damaged by bombing and ground battles, often never to be rebuilt in anything like their former complexity. Seamen's welfare organisations, located near the heavily bombed docks, were in grave danger. In Liverpool the main institutions—the Sailors' Home and the largest missions—were so close together that 'a stick of bombs could easily do in all three'.[54] Wartime dislocations also created a resurgence of old sailortown prejudices when transient, sometimes stateless

and homeless mariners found themselves in unfamiliar ports. Seafarers thought themselves excluded and unappreciated, unwelcome in supposedly friendly ports. Even survivors rescued from torpedoed vessels were at the whim of the local authorities; they received minimal help in Liverpool, where they were interrogated by immigration officials, although facilities were better in South Wales.[55] Actions taken for good reasons could still be insensitive. In the aftermath of waterfront bombing, government agencies tended to requisition surviving buildings, which put further pressure on facilities for seamen. A Mass-Observation writer argued that bombed areas should at the very least be provided with temporary canteens for seamen, in an urgent effort to mitigate the mariners' sense of 'not belonging'. The speed of change in wartime was also a cause for concern, with seamen feeling more dislocated than ever when confronted with the ruins of a once-familiar port: 'Most of the waterfront pubs have gone; very few cinemas are open; there are no theatres or music halls, no sports meetings; it is difficult or impossible to get a hot meal.'[56]

Gender relations on the waterfront gained further complexities in wartime. Merchant seamen had never been the only transient group passing through ports but had usually been a priority for sailortown's residents. Now they faced competition from other men with money to spend. In British ports, merchant seafarers resented their second-class status in relation to Royal Navy personnel. Not being 'in uniform'—at best, they wore a merchant marine lapel pin—seamen were often barred from service canteens, and objected to the false assumption that their work was less dangerous than that of the 'fighting' navy.[57] Evidence from Liverpool suggests that navy men were especially favoured by local women, in part because army and air force personnel preferred to go out with women from the female branches of their own services, the Auxiliary Territorial Service and the Women's Auxiliary Air Force.[58] A Mass-Observation report in the aftermath of the Christmas Blitz in 1940 is revealing (as much for the background and sensibilities of the writer as for the scene he reported): 'the centre of Liverpool after dark is a mixture between a bump supper night at Cambridge (when Pembroke is head of the river), and a Bank Holiday at Blackpool. Nowhere have we seen more drunkenness, more singing and shouting and catcalling, more picking up, or more people being sick.'[59] Most of the men involved were Royal Navy sailors rather than merchant seamen, although the latter feature in similar testimony. The reporter who visited Liverpool in March 1943 wrote that some waterfront bars were 'marts' for men and women alike, who made little effort to

camouflage their intentions. In such places, he claimed, 'the atmosphere is one of quiet bargaining'.[60]

Faced with a dramatic rise in the number of seafarers having to work away from their home ports, state and charitable authorities finally found ways to improve provision. The British Ministry of Labour in particular created new institutions for mariners. While it did not put it in these terms, it was trying to pre-empt the return of sailortown by providing facilities for a new generation of transient seamen so that they did not revert to the habits of their grandfathers. The new Merchant Navy Houses and Clubs were considered revolutionary for treating mariners as adults. There were bars on the premises and admission was granted to the 'wives and women friends of seafarers'. Such institutions, the ministry claimed, enjoyed 'instantaneous popularity'.[61] Even a decade before, observers had complained in vain that banning drink in Sailors' Homes simply drove the men into the nearest bars.[62] Unions accepted the need to curb the activities of 'harpies' but also wanted to thwart the 'kill-joys' whose actions drove seafarers away.[63] The tone of official rhetoric shifted during the war towards a long-belated acceptance that perhaps seafarers were not children after all.

Part of the motivation behind new state provision was the long-standing sense that seamen were suspicious of charities and missions.[64] Late in the war a British government committee saw the separation of preaching from accommodation as likely to 'provide a better service in both the temporal and spiritual fields'.[65] Seamen's union leaders also objected to their men being met on the waterfront by missionaries and charity workers. Surat Alley of the All-Indian Seamen's Federation reported that this gave the impression that seamen were 'looked upon as great sinners'; while his American counterpart Joseph Curran thought it perpetuated old ideas of seamen as 'illiterate and low-type characters'. Curran saw it explicitly as a hangover from the sailing-ship days.[66] Communists were especially opposed to the waterfront institutions, seeing them as an extension of shipping industry control over seafarers, and resenting the barrier they presented to attempts to organise seamen, whether through unions or directly by party cadres.[67]

For all the British state's concern about seafarers' welfare during the Second World War, however, there remained a tendency to contract out responsibility for foreign and non-white seafarers. The situation in British ports was complicated by the presence of various governments-in-exile, which exercised jurisdiction over their displaced citizens, and the 'pool'

system, which aimed to redeploy foreign seamen among British ports. The Greek pool was based in Cardiff, for example, and the Belgian one in Liverpool. Seamen had to report daily to the relevant office. Standards of accommodation varied greatly for seafarers, depending on their nationality and the ability of churches, and national and ethnic associations to mobilise funds. Commentators also noticed differing expectations on the part of the men. Around 250 Norwegian seamen were in Liverpool at any given time in 1940/41, and while most were dispersed across private lodgings, their small hostel was popular, despite being 'carpetless, dusty looking, and barely furnished'. The reason might have been to do with an age-old priority—the 'food looked excellent and plentiful'.[68] Asian seafarers were lumped together on the assumption that they would be managed by serangs or other middlemen. Sometimes this happened on a substantial scale in the pressures of wartime. Coatbridge in Scotland had a seven-storey building turned into a hostel for seamen from South Asia, many of them the Sylheti seamen who had long been prominent among the Lascar workforce. Its location, well inland, was an attempt to avoid the bombing of waterfront areas on the Clyde.[69]

For white seafarers the Second World War brought a notable increase in union organisation and influence. Union leaders pushed the strategic role of their members' work to gain a voice in managing the wartime state. One common line of argument was to recall how quickly seafarers had been forgotten after the last war. James Tudehope of the Australian mariners' union noted in 1942 that current public concern for seamen was welcome but that care was needed to build up institutions and facilities to cope with the likely loss of interest as soon as the war was over.[70] There is some evidence that this worked, and that seafarers may have found something of a happy balance between life at sea and on shore in the 1950s and 1960s. Although we should not be nostalgic about difficult, dislocating jobs, wartime reforms and the post-war rise of the welfare state certainly created better facilities in major ports for those who wanted them, and seamen were better paid, fed and cared for medically. Ships spent less time in port, but they were not yet on the frantically short timescales that would face container-ship and bulk-carrier crews at the end of the century. The totality of the institution was nuanced by the voluntary nature of the seafarers' presence on board; mariners were often proud of their work in the face of the elements.[71] Testimony from British seafarers working in the 1950s–1970s points to the continuing importance, and possibility, of having 'a decent run ashore'. It was still the case that the 'underdog' could

become an important man for a night on shore, with money to spend and welcoming company.[72] But other testimony suggests a persistent fear of the dangers on shore, such as the dark, ominous portrait of Alexandria in R. W. Caswell's night-time journey to pay his ship's supplier, the mysterious 'Jim Irish'.[73] A member of catering crew referred to the 'seaman's insecurity ashore, his feeling of being alone in a hostile place'. After a night in a city such as Istanbul, the normal response would be '[I] don't go much on that place.'[74] Through decades of change in the industry and on the waterfront, the seafarer's place on shore remained conflicted.

## Conclusion

In the 1970s, this recognisable maritime world changed very rapidly. Disruptive technologies once again transformed the shipping industry, accelerating its shift from being labour-intensive to capital- and equipment-intensive in a remarkably short time. Bulk-cargo shipping, tankers and container ships replaced mixed-cargo vessels. Mass air travel took passengers away from the old waterfronts to suburban airports.[75] Port authorities and shipping companies seized the new forms as the ultimate solution to what they had long seen as the fundamental problem facing their industries—too many people. Ships could be bigger while needing smaller crews. Ever shorter turnaround times reinforced the isolation, danger, and separation from family and society that continued to pose significant challenges to the welfare of the deep-water seaman.[76] Docks could be run by a handful of crane-drivers. Entire ports with many times the throughput of the old dock systems could be built away from cities out in deeper water. This proved brutally complementary to the movement for city-centre clearance, which in the previous decade had driven urban motorways through districts classified as 'slums', and now, because of the availability of straight lines and derelict land, could separate cities from their waterfronts with multi-lane highways. People knew they were seeing the very last of the old bars and boarding houses, and a few, like John Cornelius in Liverpool's 'Lucky Bar', wrote down their experiences.[77]

By the 1980s, seaport cities worldwide had many miles of abandoned land, much of it with attractive views of water. An international waterfront regeneration movement grew up to find new uses for these spaces, creating a set of signature building forms, most obviously warehouse apartments, office buildings, and leisure and retail attractions aimed at higher-margin consumers.[78] The idea of sailortown still lurks in many of these changes,

albeit rarely with a sense of historical context. Developers adopt positive echoes, such as bars decorated with maritime artefacts, souvenir and antique shops selling similar goods, and a built environment of cobbled walkways rooted in the commercial architecture of the mid-nineteenth century—'maritime kitsch', in the words of one recent commentator.[79] Naturally and properly, they reject aspects such as violence, squalor and poverty. Within these predictable responses, however, there are important questions about the people and places that are simultaneously at the heart of urban society and on its edge. Merchant mariners and the urban spaces that they occupied on shore were physically and economically central to major seaport cities, yet few were more feared and scrutinised by the wider society. Waterfront regeneration schemes therefore build nostalgia for a maritime past into projects that are nonetheless carefully disconnected from the old sailortown districts themselves, which were a short but crucial distance inland.[80] They create new maritime-themed venues on the docks, rather than renovating the originals that sometimes remain in the nearby streets. This enables the new developments to be gated and isolated from residents of old sailortown districts, most of whom have no connection to the sea and are simply recent immigrants, living as they do everywhere in the poorest, least secure housing.

The literature on waterfront regeneration is already huge and growing steadily. It is often limited chronologically, and, while it does an excellent job in analysing the new waterfronts, there is a tendency to assume that those sprang from a blank canvas sometime in the 1980s. A few texts offer a broader context, aware of the continuing patterns of individual and community life during this latest in a long series of transitions that seaports have had to manage.[81] Those books demonstrate that if questions of the maritime character of maritime cities are to be addressed properly in an era of regeneration, we need to understand the historical ambivalence of the port city towards its own waterfront districts, and, more importantly, towards the people who have lived and worked in them. Such research is necessary now that regeneration projects are creating that sanitised heritage from an exploitative and coercive history. This is not, of course, a call for historically accurate representations of sailortown to be built into waterfront redevelopments and reconstructions. Many seaports still have communities living in conditions of severe social deprivation just a few metres from the glass towers of docklands. For much of the twentieth century, those communities lived with the stigma and prejudice of wider city attitudes towards alien, transient sailortown, decades after that concept

lost its original meaning. We should never see sailortown as anything to be nostalgic about, but understanding it better can be a useful lesson for the world's great seaports as they come to terms with their maritime heritage.

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# Conclusion

'Ports are no good—ships rot, men go to the devil!'[1] The words of Joseph Conrad's former first mate seem like an epitaph for sailortown. When Conrad first published his memoir in 1906, the worst of sailortown was past in the big steamship ports, but traditions of hard drinking and 'a good run ashore' persisted. Also, the idea that the problems of a ship and its crew would disappear when they went back to sea remained common to a whole genre of maritime autobiographies in the first half of the twentieth century. Nostalgic for the age of sail even before it was over, former captains wrote of the clean, uncomplicated manliness of work at sea, in contrast to the grubby world on shore. The voices of those who actually did that work are much less audible, of course, although this book has tried to recover a few from history's indifference. They found danger, hardship, comfort and pleasure on land and sea alike.

What, then, might be the wider lessons that we can learn from studying sailortown and its people? Questions of ownership and control seem fundamental to the lives of seafarers and their associates. The evidence from sailortown supports many of Henri Lefebvre's ideas about the production of space, and perhaps in particular his thinking about leisure space. Lefebvre argued that leisure space was a revealing scene of conflict over time, as working people gradually won paid holidays, only to have leisure itself turned into an industry and sold back to them in controlled spaces.[2] Sailortown was an extreme case in this regard, but as such it casts light on some important complexities. A sailing-ship mariner's leisure time on shore was rather different from a factory worker's day off, and in particular



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the length of the seafarer's 'leave' was determined by many factors. A seafarer could stay on shore while his wages lasted but could not always control how long that would be. If he wanted his stay to be lengthy and on his own terms, he had to appropriate some space that was not controlled by crimps, or even by the institutions and missions that were ostensibly there to help him. Although this was very hard to do, we have seen evidence that seamen could achieve this, usually in alliance with 'sailors' wives' or with the better kind of boarding-house keeper.

That long list of interested parties is another test of ideas about the use and creation of urban space, especially when seen as an arena of class and industrial conflict. Lefebvre himself was always careful to question crude dichotomies, and most of his thinking involved the interaction of three forces rather than two. Again, this has resonances in sailortown, where we have seen that few disputes and tensions were a straightforward binary struggle. In most shore-based industries it might be reasonable to emphasise the relationship between workers and employers, but the waterfront manifestations of seafaring life almost always involved a third party, whether that was a crimp, a state agency, a religious mission or a charity. The results for the seafarer were usually oppressive because this conjunction of forces amplified rather than diluted the pressures on him, although there were times when he could play them off against one another and win some space and time in between.

Sailortown also tells us about the way imperial states produced racialised spaces, populating them with segregated groups defined for the purposes of order and capital. Britain built global chains of trade routes in the late nineteenth century, awarding mail- and troop-carrying contracts to steamship firms, and investing in port infrastructure around the Asian and African seas. The workforce underpinning this 'ship nexus' was increasingly recruited in India, China, Africa and the Middle East, and employed in the stoke-holds of steamers, largely out of sight. Studying sailortown shows us what happened when this careful containment failed, and seafarers jumped ship to seek better lives and jobs on shore or on other companies' ships. Those men, often in alliance with sailortown women, created new trans-national communities in seaports worldwide. In so doing, they became targets for a raft of state, industry, union and popular action that attempted to push them back to sea, or at the very least to control, monitor and segregate them in the old sailortown districts.

The sheer weight of industry, state, charitable and legal apparatus built to contain the transient seafarer should give us pause for thought. The history of sailortown suggests that liberal states were remarkably willing

to develop extensive surveillance, administrative and policing systems, and to tolerate a substantial level of criminal predation and social exclusion in waterfront districts. They did this rather than require the shipping industry to take even the rather basic responsibility for its workforce that was becoming normal—albeit after decades of struggle—in most land-based sectors. Shipowners proved very effective at pushing many of their costs onto their workers and other residents of seaport cities. They were not unique in this, of course, and much of the history of industrialisation has been a battle to make capital pay its bills. Many industries would never have begun if owners, shareholders and consumers had been required to pay their environmental and social costs directly. Sailortown was partly the space that the shipping industry produced in order to contract out its labour relations, and it was then moulded in turn by the plethora of interests and forces that have been the subjects of this book. Sometimes, seafarers and their shipmates, wives, friends and families could turn sailortown into their own space of resistance, although in so doing they invariably crossed Victorian lines of legality, morality, racial distance and industrial discipline, provoking further responses.

Nevertheless, sailortown could be a place of liberation and independence. Seafarers' yarns and dreams of their next run ashore cracked the walls of the total institution that was the ship at sea. If the reality could be harsh, so the seafarer and his associates could be determined to exert their rights and have their voices heard. Laughing at preachers, dodging health inspectors and choosing their own boarding houses were forms of defiance at a time when a more direct struggle against the shipowners seemed far off. Seafarers from all parts of the world worked together on their ships, even if the racial and national barriers erected between them were substantial and, in many cases, supported by the men themselves. On shore, genuinely mixed communities grew up in the old sailortown districts. We must not romanticise these because the pioneering men and women who established them suffered great prejudice for the autonomy they achieved. This was an important moment, though, in which seafarers built families with the women of the waterfront, relatively free from the racial and national migration rules that became so much more rigid in the twentieth century. These communities struggled to overcome the legacies of sailortown and created their own cosmopolitanism from the ground up, made with the everyday courage of ordinary folk. Sailortown had always offered a sense that things might be different, and that made it a dangerous place indeed.

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