Towards a transnational history of the eighteenth-century British Navy

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TOWARDS A TRANSNATIONAL HISTORY OF THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH NAVY[1]

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The "long" eighteenth-century British Navy is the subject of a vast and growing secondary literature. Almost all of it, however, has an exclusively national focus. This would not be problematic, given the Navy's character as a national institution, were it not for the fact that many seamen serving in it – likely at least 14% of crews in foreign stations – were not British or Irish. This article suggests that integrating them into the study of the Navy can significantly affect several ongoing historiographical debates, for example on the modalities of naval recruitment, or on the quality of life in the service, as well as, more predictably, discussions of seamen's patriotism. The aim is to propose the Navy as an example of how a transnational perspective can be enlightening even in the most unlikely historical context.

Keywords : naval history, seamen, mercenaries, press gang, Royal Navy.

"It would be difficult to give any adequate idea of the scenes these decks presented to any one who has not witnessed them. To the eye were presented complexions of every varied hue, and features of every cast, from the jetty face, flat nose, thick lips and frizzled hair of the African, to the more slender frame and milder features of the Asiatic. The rosy complexion of the English Swain and the sallow features of the sun-burnt Portuguese. [...] Costumes of the most various hues presented themselves

(1) I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr Renaud Morieux. This article stems from part of my PhD research at the University of Cambridge, generously funded by a Robinson College Lewis-AHRC Studentship, an Institute of Historical Research Scouloudi Fellowship, and the Cambridge Faculty of History Members' Fund and Fieldwork Fund.

> from the Kilted Highlander to the quadruple breeched sons of Holland. From the shirtless sons of the British prison-house to the knuckle ruffles of the haughty Spaniard. [...] To the ear was addressed a hubub [*sic*] little short of that which occurred at Babel. Irish, Welsh, Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish, French, Swedish, Italian and all the provincial dialects which prevail between Landsend and John O'Groats, joined their discordant notes"[2].

This passage comes from the memoirs of Robert Hay, a sailor from Dunbarton, in western Scotland. Written in 1820-1821, it describes his first impression of a Plymouth recruitment guard ship, HMS *Salvador del Mundo*, when he entered the Navy in 1803, a thirteen-year-old runaway boy. It may be coloured by nostalgia and narrative flourishes, yet it also illustrates very aptly a well-known but little studied facet of the eighteenth-century British Navy.

Maritime communities, seafaring work, and oceanic trade and travel are now firmly associated with transnational history[3]. Yet few fields have traditionally been further removed from transnational history than British naval history. In the eighteenth century, the Royal Navy came to symbolise Britannia herself and her might, and ever since then it has remained a powerful focus of national pride. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, histories of the British Navy were either biographies of admirals and captains, sweeping accounts of battles and campaigns, or, occasionally, ambitious, all-encompassing descriptions of the Navy's historical and strategic trajectory, like the work of William James and A. T. Mahan[4]. Around the middle of the twentieth century, new studies of the administrative, logistic and technological aspects of naval power began to appear[5]. The focus of this often genuinely impressive scholarship was then, and in many ways remains to this date, the same advocated by J. K. Laughton in 1898, at the height of the "New Navalism" movement[6]:

(2) Robert HAY, *Landsman Hay: The Memoirs of Robert Hay 1789-1847*, ed. M.D. Hay, London, Rupert Hart-Davis, 1953, p. 43-44.

(3) See e.g. Maria FUSARO and Amélia POLÓNIA (eds.), *Maritime History as Global History*, St John's Newfoundland, International Maritime Economic History Association, 2010.

(4) William JAMES, *The Naval History of Great Britain, from the Declaration of War by France, in February 1793; to the Accession of George IV. in January 1820*, 6 vol., new edition, London, Richard Bentley, 1886; A. T. MAHAN, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon the French Revolution and Empire, 1793-1812*, 2 vol., Boston, Little, Brown, and Company, 1892.

(5) For an overview see: Roger KNIGHT, "Changing the Agenda: The "New" Naval History of the British Sailing Navy", *The Mariner's Mirror*, 97, 2011-1, p. 225-242.

(6) W. Mark HAMILTON, *The Nation and the Navy: Methods and Organization of British Navalist Propaganda, 1889-1914*, New York and London, Garland Publishing Inc., 1986.

exploring 'the lessons of national importance which are to be sought for in the history of our navy, "the wall and fence of the kingdom"[7].

Recent studies have explored in detail the functioning of various branches of naval administration, as arms of the eighteenth-century British State[8]. From the 1960[s] onwards, thanks to pioneers such as Michael Lewis and N. A. M. Rodger, naval social history has also received much attention[9]. Research has now appeared on nearly all aspects of life in and social groups linked to the Navy, from officers to midshipmen to surgeons and chaplains, women cross-dressing to join and women left ashore, press gangs, "homosexuality" and religion, to name but a few[10]. Simultaneously, cultural historians have analysed representations and perceptions of the Navy[11]. Yet all of these topics, and related debates, have once again been tackled entirely within the framework of national history.

Given that the Royal Navy is a national institution, this would be in itself relatively unproblematic. Whilst its ships travelled all over the world, they remained legally national territory[12], and directly controlled and organised by a branch of the British state, fighting to defend national

(7) J. K. LAUGHTON, "The National Study of Naval History", *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 12, 1898, p. 81.

(8) Roger KNIGHT & Martin WILCOX, *Sustaining the Fleet, 1793-1815: War, the British Navy and the Contractor State*, Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2010; Janet MACDONALD, *The British Navy's Victualling Board, 1793-1815: Management Competence and Incompetence*, Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2010; Gareth COLE, *Arming the Royal Navy 1793-1815: The Office of Ordnance and the State*, London, Pickering & Chatto, 2012.

(9) Nicholas A. M. RODGER, *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy*, London, William Collins, 1986; IDEM, *The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain, 1649-1815*, London, Allen Lane, 2004 ; Michael LEWIS, *A Social History of the Navy 1793-1815*, new edition, London & Mechanicsburg (Penn.), Chatham Publishing, 2004 [1960].

(10) Examples include: Evan WILSON, *A Social History of British Naval Officers, 1775-1815*, Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2017; Samantha. A. CAVELL, *Midshipmen and Quarterdeck Boys in the British Navy, 1771-1831*, Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2012; Laurence BROCKLISS, John CARDWELL and Michael MOSS, *Nelson's Surgeon: William Beatty, Naval Medicine, and the Battle of Trafalgar*, Oxford, OUP, 2005; Nicholas A. M. RODGER, "The Naval Chaplain in the Eighteenth Century", *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 18, 1995, p. 33-45; Suzanne J. STARK, *Female Tars: Women aboard Ship in the Age of Sail*, 2[e] ed., London, Pimlico, 1998; Margarette LINCOLN, *Naval Wives & Mistresses,* London, National Maritime Museum, 2007; Nicholas ROGERS, *The Press Gang: Naval Impressment and Its Opponents in Georgian Britain*, London & New York, Continuum, 2007; Jeremiah Ross DANCY, *The Myth of the Press Gang: Volunteers, Impressment and the Naval Manpower Problem in the Late Eighteenth Century*, Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2015; Barry R. BURG, *Boys at Sea: Sodomy, Indecency, and Courts Martial in Nelson's Navy*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007; Richard BLAKE, *Evangelicals in the Royal Navy 1775-1815: Blue Lights & Psalm-Singers*, Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2008.

(11) Isaac LAND, *War, Nationalism, and the British Sailor, 1750-1850*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009; Margarette LINCOLN, *Representing the Royal Navy: British Sea Power, 1750-1815*, Aldershot and Burlington VT, Ashgate, 2002; Timothy JENKS, *Naval Engagements: Patriotism, Cultural Politics, and the Royal Navy, 1793-1815*, Oxford & New York, OUP, 2006.

(12) James Fulton ZIMMERMAN, *Impressment of American Seamen*, New York, 1925, p. 19-20.

interest. The aim here is not to suggest that the British Navy ultimately was not British, or that the national framework does not remain the simplest and most obvious way of approaching its study. However, there is one aspect which is currently not well-accounted for, and is worth investigating further.

It is commonly known, indeed, that naval seamen aboard British ships were not all British (or Irish) by origin, legal status, and/or broadly defined "culture". "Foreigners" from every corner of the world, subjects and non-subjects, also served, and they receive passing mentions in most general works: as N. A. M. Rodger puts it, "there were men from every nation under heaven in the Navy"[13]. They were a minority, but a significant one: in certain ships sampled so far men born outside the British Isles or Ireland represented up to 23% of a crew, and about 14% of the total across various foreign stations[14]. This is excluding supernumeraries and marines, both categories in which they would have been well represented. Until now, however, no one had dedicated extensive studies to them. The historiography has touched upon the naval service of men of African or African-American descent, as part of the broader history of the "Black Atlantic"[15]. The service of "Lascar" sailors (seamen from the Indian Ocean) has also been examined, although mainly in the East India Company and merchant service, rather than in the Navy[16]. American sailors have been discussed in relation to the War of 1812, because their impressment on the part of the British Navy is widely considered a precipitating

(13) Nicholas A. M. RODGER, *Wooden World, op. cit.*, p. 158. See e.g.: Michael LEWIS, *Social History*, p. 127-133; Stephen F. GRADISH, *The Manning of the British Navy during the Seven Years' War*, London, Royal Historical Society, 1980, p. 79-81; Christopher LLOYD, *The British Seaman 1200-1860: A Social Survey*, London, Collins, 1968, p. 122, 158-159, 196, 212-20, 267.

(14) Result of analysis of a sample of 4,392 seamen, part of my ongoing doctoral project.

(15) W. Jeffrey BOLSTER, *Black Jacks : African-American Seamen in the Age of Sail*, Cambridge (Mass.) & London, HUP, 1997; Charles R. FOY, "The Royal Navy's Employment of Black Mariners and Maritime Workers, 1754-1783", *The International Journal of Maritime History*, 28, 2016-1, p. 6-35 ; Philip D. MORGAN, "Black Experiences in Britain's Maritime World", in David CANNADINE (ed.), *Empire, the Sea and Global History: Britain's Maritime World, c. 1760-c. 1840*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 105-133; Isaac LAND, "Customs of the Sea Flogging, Empire, et "True British Seaman" 1770 to 1870", *Interventions*, 3, 2001-2, p. 169-185.

(16) Aaron JAFFER, *Lascars and Indian Ocean Seafaring, 1780-1860: Shipboard Life, Unrest and Mutiny*, Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2015; Michael H. FISHER, "Working across the Seas: Indian Maritime Labourers in India, Britain, and in Between, 1600-1857", *International Review of Social History*, 51, 2006, p. 21-45; Conrad DIXON, "Lascars: The Forgotten Seamen", in Rosemary OMMER & Gerald PANTING (eds.), *Working Men Who Got Wet: Proceedings of the Fourth Conference of the Atlantic Canada Shipping Project July 24-July 26, 1980*, Newfoundland, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1980, p. 263-281 ; Marika SHERWOOD, "Race, Nationality and Employment among Lascar Seamen, 1660 to 1945", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 17, 1991, p. 229-244.

factor in that conflict[17]. Finally, Niklas Frykman and Nicole Ulrich, following up on Marcus Rediker's study of the "working-class Atlantic", have shown the transnational sides of naval mutiny and unrest, which to some extent travelled across navies with foreign recruits[18]. All this research has tantalisingly begun to open up our understanding of the Navy, revealing it as part of wider realities of transatlantic maritime employment and global seafaring. However, these contributions are awaiting a study systematically focussed on the Navy itself, raising general questions on the role, position and experience of foreign recruits, and on the political and social implications of their employment. Moreover, with the exception of Frykman's pieces, all the existing literature remains largely within the sphere of a British and oceanic world. Yet Europeans were the largest foreign group, in the sample discussed above, and, whilst excellent research has now appeared on continental contributions to the British Empire[19]. European sailors in the Royal Navy are still a relatively obscure subject.

In Pierre-Yves Saunier's definition, one of the roles of transnational history is to acknowledge and assess "foreign contributions to the design, discussion and implementation of domestic features"[20]. Casting foreigners' service as a "contribution" undoubtedly has its value, as well as important implications in the current political climate. Yet examining these men's employment also allows us to explore larger issues. Transnational history, as Sven Beckert puts it, is a "way of seeing"[21]. Integrating foreigners into the study does not simply add one little tile to the history of the British Navy : it significantly shifts the paradigm by which many historiographical debates on it are conducted. In the eighteenth-century armies foreigners were often

(17) See e.g.: James ZIMMERMAN, *Impressment, op. cit.*; Nathan PERL-ROSENTHAL, *Citizen Sailors: Becoming American in the Age of Revolution*, Cambridge (Mass.) & London, The Belknap Press of HUP, 2015 ; Paul A. GILJE, *Free Trade and Sailors' Rights in the War of 1812*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2013; Anthony STEEL, "Impressment in the Monroe-Pinkney Negotiation, 1806-1807", *The American Historical Review*, 57, 1952-2, p. 352-369.

(18) Marcus REDIKER, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750*, Cambridge, CUP, 1987; Niklas FRYKMAN, "Seamen on Late Eighteenth-Century European Warships", *International Review of Social History*, 54, 2009, p. 67-93; IDEM, "Connections between Mutinies in European Navies", in Clare ANDERSON *et al.* (eds.), *Mutiny and Maritime Radicalism in the Age of Revolution*, *IRSH* special issue 21, Cambridge, CUP, 2013, p. 87-107; Nicole ULRICH, "International Radicalism, Local Solidarities: The 1797 British Naval Mutinies in Southern African Waters", in Clare ANDERSON & *al.* (eds.), *Mutiny, op. cit.*, p. 85.

(19) Stephen CONWAY, *Britannia's Auxiliaries: Continental Europeans and the British Empire, 1740-1800*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017.

(20) Pierre-Yves SAUNIER, *Transnational History*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 3.

(21) Christopher A. BAYLY *et al.*, "*AHR* Conversation : On Transnational History", *The American Historical Review*, 11, 2006-5, p. 1459.

recruited into separate regiments[22], but in the Navy they were formally mixed with British seamen, and serving under the same employment terms. This means that their experiences cannot be studied in isolation from the history of the Navy as a whole. In particular, the conditions of and motivations for foreign sailors' entry, if not their service, could differ so substantially from those of their British colleagues that current discussions on the overall advantages and disadvantages of naval employment may have to be reframed. Of course, the opposite argument is also possible – the cosmopolitanism of the Navy can be deployed as a case study to cast light on the functioning of transnational processes. This is the objective of a broader, ongoing research project by the author. This article, however, aims to do the reverse: use transnational processes to cast a new light on the Navy.

Part of this discussion is peculiar to the "French Wars" era (1793-1815), characterised by unprecedented mobilisation of manpower, technology, and national feelings. However, whilst it is important not to conflate different periods[23], several themes can also be traced back to mid-century, and existing research often spans several decades. This article will look, in turn, at the current historiographical debate on naval impressment, at the connected question of standards of living and pay in the Navy, and finally at patriotism and loyalty.

Entering the Navy

Historians disagree on exactly how seamen were recruited into the eighteenth-century Navy, and with what implications. The two channels normally discussed are impressment (conscription through "press gangs", often accused of using violent means) and voluntary enlistment. Whilst Denver Brunsman's "impressment paradox" model has recently struck a conciliating middle way, stressing the negative sides of impressment but also the ways in which seamen once in the Navy made the most of it, the

(22) On non-subjects and non-citizens in eighteenth-century armies see: Stephen CONWAY, "Continental European Soldiers in British Imperial Service, *c.* 1756-1792", *English Historical Review*, CXXIX, 536, 2014, p. 79-106; Kevin LINCH, "The Politics of Foreign Recruitment in Britain during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars", in Nir ARIELLI & Bruce COLLINS (eds.), *Transnational Soldiers: Foreign Military Enlistment in the Modern Era*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 50-66; Christopher J. TOZZI, *Nationalizing France's Army: Foreign, Black, and Jewish Troops in the French Military, 1715-1831*, Charlottesville & London, University of Virginia Press, 2016.

(23) Nicholas A. M. RODGER, *Wooden World, op. cit.*, p. 12.

historiography remains broadly polarised[24]. On the one hand, Jesse Lemisch and Nicholas Rogers, among others, have exposed the violence, damage and disruption to seamen's lives and communities caused by impressment practices[25]. This scholarship has traditionally reported that between one third and one half of naval seamen were pressed[26]. Others, most notably N. A. M. Rodger and J. Dancy, have questioned this picture. According to Dancy, impressment during the Revolutionary Wars was much less frequent than is commonly believed – his estimate is that only one fifth of the men were pressed, merely "a supplement to a mainly volunteer force" –, and furthermore it was not in general the odious and "horrific" practice that the literature has depicted[27]. Contemporaries, including possibly seamen themselves, saw it as an overall "lesser evil" than "tyrannical" alternatives like registration or conscription on the French model[28]. Implicit to the whole debate is a moral judgement of the Navy, whose legitimacy and integrity is held at stake, and of the use that states make of their subjects in times of need[29].

The lines between volunteers and pressed men were very blurry even in the case of British seamen. For example, many men marked as "volunteers" in the musters were originally pressed, and then placed in front of the choice between continuing service as it was, or continuing it as volunteers, thus receiving a bounty[30]. Moreover, there were two further categories on whom some ambiguity exists: boys provided by the Marine Society, and men recruited through the 1795-1796 Quota Acts, who had to be supplied by local British authorities, with extremely high bounties, and on whose status as volunteers or coerced vagrants and petty criminals

(24) Denver BRUNSMAN, "Men of War: British Sailors and the Impressment Paradox", *Journal of Early Modern History*, 14, 2010, p. 9-44.

(25) Jesse LEMISCH, "The Radicalism of the Inarticulate : Merchant Seamen in the Politics of Revolutionary America", in Alfred F. YOUNG (ed.), *Dissent: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism*, DeKalb (Il.), Northern Illinois University Press, 1968, p. 37-82; Nicholas ROGERS, *Press Gang, op. cit.*; IDEM, "British Impressment and Its Discontents", *The International Journal of Maritime History*, 30, 2018-1, p. 52-73.

(26) For a detailed summary of the scholarship see: Nicholas ROGERS, *Press Gang, op. cit.*, p. 4-5.

(27) Jeremiah DANCY, *Myth, op. cit.*, p. 155-156, 187-188. For a very recent, more conciliatory article see : Jeremiah DANCY, "Sources and Methods in the British Impressment Debate", *The International Journal of Maritime History*, 30, 2018-4, p. 733-746.

(28) Nicholas A. M. RODGER, *Wooden World, op. cit.*, p. 150-151, 181.

(29) This point is also raised by Dancy himself : Jeremiah DANCY, "Sources", p. 739, 745-746.

(30) Nicholas A. M. RODGER, *Wooden World, op. cit.*, p. 163 ; Nicholas ROGERS, "British Impressment", art. cit., p. 67-70.

historians have disagreed[31]. As soon as we start considering foreign sailors, however, the dichotomy pressed-volunteer appears even more reductive.

First, impressment did not apply to them in the same way, at least in the case of men who were "foreign" in a legal sense. By an Act of 1740, in fact, "every Foreigner, being a Mariner, Seaman or Landman" was deemed part of a protected category, which could not be taken by press gangs[32]. British apprentices, landmen, and some types of seafarers were also safeguarded in the same way[33], but the bulk of skilled British seamen, the men whom the Navy truly wanted, remained liable to impressment. The 1740 provision was often ignored in practice, and therefore it did not always represent a significant advantage for a foreign sailor[34]. Yet it would have somewhat reduced his chances of being press-ganged, and increased the freedom with which he could roam the streets of British port towns, compared to his British colleagues. Moreover, even when he was impressed, the implications were very different, both for him and for the Navy, from those concerning a British sailor. For a foreigner, impressment was not the "unavoidable" fact of life described by Dancy[35], a legal and routine aspect of being a British mariner. It was a breach of British and international law, and an abuse of power, which could in theory be redressed through consular intervention, if a man's origin could be proved. Thousands of letters, addressed to the British Admiralty by other countries' diplomatic envoys, testify to this practice[36]. The Admiralty only allowed discharge if the men had not received bounty money upon entry[37]. This also meant that, whilst for a pressed British sailor resignation may have been the best policy, and accepting the bounty and the title of "volunteer" a wise conclusion, doing so would have sealed the previously unsealed fate of a foreigner. For the Navy, too, dealing with a non-British seaman did not have the same implications. Recent historiography has shown that impressment had radically different significance and impact in Atlantic

(31) Michael LEWIS, *Social History, op. cit.*, p. 87-90, 116-127 ; Jeremiah DANCY, *Myth, op. cit.*, p. 157-185.

(32) *Acts of Parliament*, 13e année du règne de George II c. 17 [henceforth 13 Geo. II].

(33) 13 Geo. II c. 28 § v; 2 Geo. III c. 15 § xxii-xxiv; 11 Geo. III c. 38 § xix ; 48 Geo. III c. 110 § xxvii ; 50 Geo. III c. 108; 51 Geo. III c. 34 § vi.

(34) Sara CAPUTO, "Alien Seamen in the British Navy, British Law, and the British State, c.1793 - c.1815", The Historical Journal, 62, 2019-3, p. 685-707.

(35) Jeremiah DANCY, *Myth, op. cit.*, p. 189; Nicholas A. M. RODGER, *The Command of the Ocean, op. cit.*, p. 499.

(36) Sara CAPUTO, "Alien Seamen", art. cit.; Kew, The National Archives [henceforth TNA], ADM 1/3849-58, Letters from Foreign Consuls, 1793-1820.

(37) See e.g. TNA, ADM 1/1065, Letters from Commanders-in-Chief, Portsmouth, 1804, nn. 1-150, 108, George Montagu to Evan Nepean, 23 January 1804.

imperial territories and at home, due to varying local circumstances and customs, and because it touched the sensitive issues of colonial rights and duties and the meaning of imperial subjecthood, eventually ushering or even contributing to the American Revolution[38]. The difference was even starker when the press-ganged were not subjects at all: if the impressment of British sailors could be justified as an "evil necessity", akin to modern conscription, that of aliens was utterly indefensible, as US governments often complained[39]. All this, it can be seen, transcends the debate on how "good" or "bad" impressment was for the sailor, how easy it was for him to acquiesce to it, or how necessary and justifiable it was for the conduct of the war.

Second, the channels through which foreigners entered the Navy cannot always be classed under either "impressment" or "volunteering". For example, the British Navy occasionally arranged manpower loans from other allied countries. In 1794, his Mediterranean fleet depleted by a wearing campaign, Admiral Lord Hood applied to the Grand Master of the Order of St John, in Malta, for a "Loan" of 1000 men, who were to be deployed only in Mediterranean waters, and returned when no longer needed[40]. He also wrote to the British consul in Naples to request 700 Neapolitan seamen to fill his ships' complements[41]. In December 1798, a clause providing for the Royal Navy borrowing "such a number of sailors as it shall require, to the amount of three thousand" was officially incorporated in the treaty of alliance between Britain and the Two Sicilies[42]. Many of these men were volunteers of sorts: in 1794 the Neapolitan authorities had to apologise to Hood for delays in recruitment, due to local seamen's reluctance to serve the British[43]. Yet their choice, when they had one, was mediated through the constraints and procedures of international diplomacy.

(38) Denver BRUNSMAN, *The Evil Necessity: British Naval Impressment in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World*, Charlottesville (VA) and London, University of Virginia Press, 2013; Christopher P. MAGRA, *Poseidon's Curse: British Naval Impressment and Atlantic Origins of the American Revolution*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016.

(39) See footnote 16 above for the relevant historiography.

(40) TNA, ADM 1/392, Letters from Commanders-in-Chief, Mediterranean, 1794, Lord Hood to Philip Stephens, 21 January 1794. See also Lord Hood to Henry Dundas, [?] January 1794, reported in J. Holland ROSE, *Lord Hood and the Defence of Toulon*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1922, p. 161.

(41) TNA, ADM 1/392, n. 16, Lord Hood to Philip Stephens, 14 March 1794; Greenwich, Caird Library, CRK/7/57, Lord Hood to Sir William Hamilton, 19 February 1794; CRK/7/60, Hood to Hamilton, 15 March 1794.

(42) *The Parliamentary History of England, from the Earliest Period to the Year 1803*, 36 vols, London, T. C. Hansard, 1819, xxxiv, 1179.

(43) London, British Library, Egerton MS 2639, General Sir John Francis Edward Acton: Correspondence with Sir W. Hamilton, vol. i., 1781-1798, n. 162, 4 March 1794 [in Italian].

Neither the picture of a volunteer, nor that of an impressed man, tragically dragged from the arms of his family by a tyrannical state, accurately represent their experiences.

Finally, even when they did individually volunteer, often foreigners did so in different ways and for different reasons from their British colleagues. Most notable are the cases of runaway slaves and prisoners of war. The Royal Navy was not always keen to recruit runaway black men, for political reasons, yet some did inevitably join, especially in American and Caribbean waters[44]. Prisoners of war, instead, likely constituted a substantial proportion of foreign recruits. The Admiralty seems to have repeatedly changed its policy, throughout the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, on which categories of foreign prisoners could be accepted. Seamen from 'neutral' countries, however, were mostly allowed to enter. Whilst often officially barred from enlistment, in practice many 'enemy' prisoners, such as Frenchmen, Dutchmen and Danes at different stages of the conflict, were also received aboard[45].

Historians disagree on their overall assessment of living conditions in British war prisons and hulks, and obviously there would have been substantial variations from one to the next, and across the period[46]. However, it is easy to see that at least for some men captivity would have been an intolerable and unsustainable situation. For prisoners of war, then, the choice of enlistment could be dictated by a desire to pick the lesser evil between paid naval service and indefinite confinement, rather than by a genuine wish to volunteer. British seamen, of course, could be pushed to volunteer by personal and economic circumstances, but they were rarely faced with similar pressure. Whilst traditional portrayals represented the Navy as a receptacle of criminals and the dredges of His Majesty's prisons, Clive Emsley has shown that in fact only some British "petty offenders" were offered enlistment as an alternative to gaol, hard labour or other punishments[47]. Official numbers at least were low, just a few hundreds for

(44) Nicholas ROGERS, *Press Gang, op. cit.*, p. 92-95.

(45) Sara CAPUTO, "Alien Seamen", art. cit.

(46) Some of the most recent contributions include: Renaud MORIEUX, "Le dilemme de la sentinelle. Droit de la guerre et droits des prisonniers de guerre en Grande-Bretagne au XVIII[e] siècle", *Revue d'Histoire Moderne & Contemporaine*, 64, 2017-2, p. 39-68; Tim LEUNIG, Jelle VAN LOTTUM & Bo POULSEN, "How Bad Were British Prison Hulks in the Napoleonic Wars? Evidence from captured Danish and Norwegian Seamen", *The London School of Economics and Political Science – Economic History Working Papers*, n 232, January 2016.

(47) Clive EMSLEY, "The Recruitment of Petty Offenders during the French Wars 1793-1815", *The Mariner's Mirror*, 66, 1980-3, p. 199-208; Nicholas A. M. RODGER, *Wooden World, op. cit.*, p. 170-171.

the Navy and Army combined, throughout the French Wars[48]. Moreover, as was the case for vagrants and the unemployed scooped off the streets for the service, it seems that sometimes no choice was involved on their part : British prisoners often were not volunteering under pressure, but simply being coerced, like press-gangedmen[49].

Overall, then, considering foreign seamen helps to substantially complicate the question of how the Navy recruited its personnel, and how the men in the service had come to find themselves in it. Of course, the impressment of foreigners can still be subsumed under the umbrella of wartime *raison d'état*, and foreigners' volunteering under that of personal calculations, much like those of their British comrades. Yet a purely national framework cannot explain either phenomenon, or their consequences, besides failing to account for other recruitment channels unique to non-natives. A second, closely connected debate surrounds the quality of life in the service.

Life in the Navy

Dancy and Rodger, stating that impressment was infrequent and far from being the catastrophic event it is generally assumed to be, base their argument largely on a positive portrayal of life in the service, both at the end and in the middle of the century. Naval sailors, they stress, benefited from free healthcare, opportunities for promotion, widows' pensions and invalidity compensations, and a disciplinary system which was harsh but less arbitrary than in merchantmen[50]. The ratio of tonnage per man was much lower in the Navy than in merchant shipping, with the result that work was less "arduous", and life "relatively easy"[51]. Recent studies have also shown that naval seamen's diet was abundant, nutritious, and rarely inedible as the Navy's critics would have it[52]. Such provision, it is argued, contrasts sharply with the treatment that sailors received in the merchant service, deregulated and thus more open to abuse and exploitation[53]. This

(48) Clive EMSLEY, "The Recruitment...", art. cit., p. 200.
(49) *Ibid.*, p. 201-206 ; Nicholas ROGERS, *Press Gang, op. cit.*, p. 10-11.
(50) Nicholas A. M. RODGER, *Wooden World, op. cit.,* p. 116-144; Jeremiah DANCY, *Myth, op. cit.,* p. 94-105, 187-188.
(51) Nicholas A. M. RODGER, *Wooden World, op. cit.*, p. 40-41, 116.
(52) Janet MACDONALD, *Feeding Nelson's Navy: The True Story of Food at Sea in the Georgian Era*, London and Mechanicsberg PA, Chatham Publishing and Stackpole Books, 2004; "Sustaining the Empire: War, the Navy and the Contractor State", University of Greenwich, 2006-9 https://www.gre.ac.uk/ach/gmc/research/projects/sustaining-the-empire; Nicholas A. M. RODGER, *Wooden World, op. cit.*, p. 86-87.
(53) Janet MACDONALD, *Feeding Nelson's Navy, op. cit.*, p. 11-12.

generally positive portrayal of the Navy is diametrically opposed not only to popular views, but also to those of another side of the historiography, for which life in the Navy was characterised by either "never-ending labor" or "mind-numbing boredom", the shocking violence of battles, and "a terroristic justice system" of cruel punishments[54]. Wages in the merchant marine were, especially in wartime, twice or three times higher than those in the Navy, and whilst the latter also offered bounties and prize money, it is argued that this was offset by the relative freedom of choice in merchant vessels, the shortness of employment, and availability of shore leave[55]. Privateers also were a convenient option in some parts of the world[56].

Ultimately, as recognised by both sides of the debate, the quality of life in the eighteenth-century navy can only be assessed *in relation to* the alternative options open to a man. Thus, according to some historians naval service was better than life ashore or in the British merchant service, whereas for others it was worse. Yet, precisely because this argument, and assessing sailors' preferences, only make sense in the light of the options available to them, ignoring foreigners, who would have a significantly different set of options, leaves our conclusions incomplete.

A foreign seaman joining the British Navy would mostly not be choosing between the quality of life in it and the quality of life ashore *in Britain*, or indeed in the British merchant service. It is true that the capping of foreigners at one quarter of each merchant crew, imposed by the seventeenth-century Navigation Laws, was lifted to three quarters during wartime, and British merchantmen would have needed to recruit foreigners, to make up for those of their men who were absorbed by the Navy[57]. However, many foreign recruits would join the Navy abroad. Moreover, it has been argued, the labour market for seafarers in Britain tended to remain broadly national, unlike for example the Dutch[58]. The complementary side to this is that, whilst it is true that in theory work in ships from other countries was also open to British sailors, in practice the Royal Navy and the British state were quite efficient in reclaiming their subjects serving

(54) Niklas FRYKMAN, "Seamen", art. cit., p. 76-83.
(55) Nicholas ROGERS, *Press Gang, op. cit.*, p. 6, 83-84, 117.
(56) *Ibid.*, p. 97-98.
(57) Lawrence A. HARPER, *The English Navigation Laws: A Seventeenth-Century Experiment in Social Engineering*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1939, p. 68, 349.
(58) Jelle VAN LOTTUM, Jan LUCASSEN & Lex Heerma VAN VOSS, "Sailors, National and International Labour Markets and National Identity, 1600-1850", in Richard W. UNGER (ed.), *Shipping and Economic Growth 1350-1850*, Leiden, Brill, 2011, p. 309-351.

elsewhere[59]. Foreign seamen, therefore, could have different options at the forefront of their mind compared to their British peers.

As such, the question of whether wages and general advantages would have been higher in the Navy or in the British merchant service is not necessarily the most pertinent here. Instead, we can look at what wages would have been like in these men's countries of origin: the seafaring labour market varied considerably across Europe[60]. During the early modern period, for example, the southern European shipping sector had come to lag behind the north, economically[61]. In 1800, the nominal wages of ordinary seamen in the Royal Navy were at least 29% and possibly 45% higher than in the Sicilian Navy (depending on whether we compare them to "*marinari di seconda classe*" or "*marinari di terza classe*", second - or third-class seamen), and 59% higher for landmen, or seamen at the bottom of the skill ladder ("*marinari di quarta classe*", fourth-class)[62]. Real wages, of course, would have varied depending on the cost of life in different areas, but because of the mobility of seamen they remain hard to assess, and are less important[63].

It seems clear, then, that some supposed disadvantages of naval service, such as "low" wages, were not seen as such by many foreign seamen. Similar examples are food and punishments. If naval victualling was better than is often assumed, a well-known problem of the naval diet was its lack in fresh fruit and vegetables, which caused frequent scurvy epidemics[64]. Nonetheless, whilst victuals would have been qualitatively and quantitatively similar in many contemporary navies, some, like the

(59) See e.g.: Danilo PEDEMONTE, "Deserters, Mutineers and Criminals: British Sailors and Problems of Port Jurisdiction in Genoa and Livorno during the Eighteenth Century", in Maria FUSARO *et al.* (eds.), *Law, Labour and Empire: Comparative Perspectives on Seafarers,* c. *1500-1800*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 263-265.

(60) For a survey see: Paul VAN ROYEN, Jaap BRUIJN & Jan LUCASSEN (eds.), *"Those Emblems of Hell"? European Sailors and the Maritime Labour Market, 1570-1870*, St John's, Newfoundland, International Maritime Economic History Association, 1997.

(61) Richard W. UNGER, "Overview. Trades, Ports and Ships: The Roots of Difference in Sailors' Lives", in Maria FUSARO *et al.* (eds.), *Law, Labour and Empire, op. cit.*, p. 16-17.

(62) Data for the British Navy come from A. M. RODGER, *Command, op. cit.*, p. 623-625 ; for the Sicilian Navy: Naples, Archivio di Stato, Affari Esteri, 3664, Marina Real Ministero – Giugno 1800, "Richiesta per il pagamento de' soldi dell'intero mese di Giugno corrente anno 1800...". Currency conversions are based on John JACKSON, *Reflections on the Commerce of the Mediterranean*, London, W. Clarke and Son, 1804, p. 161-162. The ratings do not overlap exactly (the Sicilian Navy had four tiers, the British three), so the comparison is approximate.

(63) Jelle VAN LOTTUM & *al.*, "Sailors", art. cit., p. 328.

(64) The literature is vast. For some recent contributions, see: Erica CHARTERS, *Disease, War, and the Imperial State: The Welfare of the British Armed Forces during the Seven Years' War*, Chicago & London, The University of Chicago Press, 2014, passim; Pat CRIMMIN, "The Sick and Hurt Board and the Problem of Scurvy", *Journal for Maritime Research*, 15, 2013-1, p. 47-53.

French, struggled even more than the British[65]. In 1808, the Swedish fleet was all but incapacitated by scurvy, and a few years later British observers described the food in the Russian Navy as "much inferior in quality, if not in quantity"[66]. In terms of discipline, too, if the harshness of shipboard punishments and naval justice were criticised by some contemporaries as a violation of British freedoms, for black ex-slaves in the service, who would have been used to arbitrary punishment and very few rights, a fair court martial and even a pardon based on their extenuating circumstances would have constituted a substantial improvement[67]. On the whole, Frykman's argument that foreigners in the Navy could be a source of mutiny and protest, carrying revolutionary ideas, seems convincing[68]. However, it is also the case that some of them would have found the British Navy an unusually safe and advantageous haven. A transnational history of the Royal Navy needs not be exclusively a history of rebellion and resistance.

The other side of the coin is that, like disadvantages, many of the supposed perks of naval life also did not apply to all seamen who came from different countries. Medical provision aboard Royal Navy ships was probably quite good by the standards of the day[69]. Yet contemporary accounts show that the attitudes of seamen from different countries towards their own health, and medical treatment more generally, varied immensely[70]. British naval surgeons, for example, observed that Russian sailors were culturally averse to seeking medical help[71]. Moreover, the wet and cold climate of the Channel and North Sea, where many British ships were stationed, would have been disastrous for the health of men who had always lived in warmer climates[72]. If scurvy and a lack of fresh fruit and vegetables were tackled relatively well by the British, especially towards the end of the

(65) Janet MACDONALD, *Feeding Nelson's Navy, op. cit.*, p. 140-150; Michel VERGÉ-FRANCESCHI, *La marine française au XVIII^e siècle: guerres – administration – exploration*, Paris, SEDES, 1996, p. 278-279.

(66) A. N. RYAN (ed.), *The Saumarez Papers: Selections from the Baltic Correspondence of Vice-Admiral Sir James Saumarez 1808-1812*, London, Navy Records Society, 1968, Valentine Duke to Saumarez, 12 September 1808, p. 46-47; *A Voyage to St. Petersburg in 1814, with Remarks on the Imperial Russian Navy. By a Surgeon in the British Navy*, London, Sir Richard Phillips & Co., 1822, p. 25.

(67) See e.g. the case of Naiad Suare, in Sara CAPUTO, "Alien Seamen", art. cit.

(68) Niklas FRYKMAN, "Connections", art. cit.

(69) M. John CARDWELL, "Royal Navy Surgeons, 1793-1815: A Collective Biography", in David Boyd HAYCOCK and Sally ARCHER (eds.), *Health and Medicine at Sea, 1700-1900*, Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2009, p. 38-62.

(70) I am currently starting a new research project on this subject.

(71) *Voyage to St. Petersburg*, *op. cit.*, p. 13-15.

(72) TNA, ADM 101/86/1, Journal of HMS *Arethusa* by Thomas Simpson, Surgeon, 14 May 1805 – 14 June 1806, f. 13.

century, they were still problems which some seamen would have hardly encountered in their homelands, for example in the Mediterranean. Lastly, the Navy's provision for wages and pensions to be paid to the seamen's families, or after retirement, only made sense if a sailor's domicile was within range of the British administrative machine, either directly or through allied governments. The system of pay by ticket intrinsically depended on having trusty agents ashore in Britain, and not all foreigners could rely on this[73]. Pension benefits, and the much-coveted spaces at Greenwich Hospital, were far less accessible to men who resided outside Britain, because of mere geographical distance[74]: out of a sample of Greenwich pensioners in the first half of the century only 3% were found to be born abroad[75]. Alien sailors serving two years in the Navy during wartime could obtain naturalisation, but this was a relatively useless accolade for them : British laws posed few barriers to immigration anyway, and at the same time legal subjecthood did not remove social, material or cultural obstacles to settlement in the country[76].

Ultimately, "foreigner" as a blanket term is in itself reductive: as has been seen, sailors coming into the British service from abroad would have perceived it very differently, both from Britons and from other foreigners, depending on their origin and circumstances. This is precisely the point: in debating something like general employment satisfaction it seems important to bear in mind that it would have varied considerably between individuals. Extending our view beyond the native British tars helps us to remember that.

Culture

A relatively new area of research in British naval history surrounds seamen's "culture", broadly defined. This involves for example studies of their patriotism, forms of dress and speech, material culture, gender identity, and sexuality[77]. Once again, the discussion rarely incorporates the non-British men who served in the Navy. Looking at them does,

(73) Margaret Hunt, "Credit, Crime and Gender in English Maritime Communities 1650-1750", The Eighteenth-Century Seminar, University of Cambridge, 23 October 2018.

(74) Charles R. Foy, "The Royal Navy's Employment", art. cit., p. 17-18.

(75) Martin Wilcox, "The "Poor Decayed Seamen" of Greenwich Hospital, 1705-1763", *International Journal of Maritime History*, 25, 2013-1, p. 71-73.

(76) Sara Caputo, "Alien Seamen", art. cit.

(77) See e.g.: Isaac Land, *War, op. cit.*; Joanne Begiato (Bailey), "Tears and the Manly Sailor in England, c. 1760-1860", *Journal for Maritime Research*, 17, 2015-2, p. 117-133; Elin Jones, *Masculinity, Materiality and Space Onboard the Royal Naval Ship, 1756-1815*, PhD thesis, Queen Mary University of London, 2016; Barry Burg, *Boys at Sea, op. cit.*

however, return a more variegated picture than the usual profile of "Jack Tar". Exploring this in any depth would require multiple articles, but one important example can be briefly sketched here.

The question of Jack Tar's "patriotism", whatever its variations across the period, assumes a completely different light when we consider that naval crews were not entirely British. Traditional images of seamen's uncomplicated loyalty to King and Country have been questioned by Nicholas Rogers, but in his view even protests remained at least rhetorically framed and justified by reference to British free-birth rights[78]. Similarly, for Isaac Land British sailors fought a long "campaign" to be recognised and treated as full members of the nation, morally, racially, and in their masculinity (a campaign which, incidentally, bluntly excluded the non-white seamen)[79]. Niklas Frykman, instead, has argued for the development of an international 'lower-deck republicanism', which did not take the shape of an "explicit consciousness" or shake the structure of national loyalty in combat, but was nonetheless emerging as a shared 'ideology'[80]. Yet for foreign seamen in the Royal Navy loyalty was, predictably, an even more complex matter, transcending the simple dichotomy between allegiance to Britain and allegiance to a maritime radical transnationalism.

Some of them would admittedly be completely indifferent to national fealty, as shown by the scores of prisoners from enemy countries who regularly applied to join the Navy. Others, as discussed by Frykman and Ulrich, might bring a seditious revolutionary spirit with them as they joined[81]. Others still may have wished for recognition as British tars, but did not always achieve it, especially when, as argued by Land, seamen's national belonging became racialised. Many, however, whilst normally prepared to work for the British Navy, refused to go as far as betraying their homeland if Britain went to war against it, whatever their motivations for doing so. The Dutchman Otto Barrolds [*sic*], in HMS *Defence* in 1810, expressed "Scruples" "to serve against his Country"; in 1811, after learning that Sweden was now at war with Britain, several Swedes asked for discharge. The Navy denied discharges in these circumstances, offering prison as the only alternative, and often foreigners took it[82]. During the

(78) Nicholas ROGERS, *Press Gang, op. cit.*, p. 103-126.
(79) Isaac LAND, "Customs", art. cit.
(80) Niklas FRYKMAN, "Connections", art. cit.
(81) See footnote 18.
(82) TNA, ADM 12/147, Admiralty Digest 1810-11 – Part 3, 79.16, summary of letters from Sir Edward Pellew, 28 October 1810 and 9 January 1811.

War of 1812 against the United States, we find many an American sailor in the musters of British ships who was sent to prison "per his own request"[83].

Even among native born subjects, the loyalty of the Irishmen in the fleet has been questioned, although the jury is still out on their role in spreading mutiny and dissent[84]. In general, whilst the term "mercenary" is reductive, definitely the Navy as a whole assumes a less idealised patriotic outlook when we consider men in it who not only had no share in the British national community, but also had no wish for one, or had their loyalty firmly lodged with another nation. Again, whilst non-subject "foreigners" are not the sole example, they are a prominent one, and can serve to alert us to this variability.

Studying foreigners in the eighteenth-century Navy, that is, introducing a transnational perspective, lends a new dimension to several aspects of social and cultural interactions aboard ships. Robert Hay's account highlights some, including for example language, communication and miscommunication, racial stereotypes, or cross-cultural integration. Further, looking at these men helps to cast light on matters of law, religion, sanitary practices, state policies, immigration, sailors' demography, xenophobia, and international diplomacy, among other things. However, given the impossibility to cover so much ground in this short piece, it seemed useful to select those topics – manning, life conditions, and seamen's national allegiances – which have been at the core of recent naval historiography, and have been most closely connected to an evaluation of the efficiency, coherence, and even moral legitimacy of both the Royal Navy and Great Britain itself, in strictly national terms.

Historians disagree on how naval seamen were recruited, on how often, how traumatically and how justifiably they would be impressed, and consequently on how far the Navy as an institution behaved efficiently and ethically. Yet this discussion takes on a different light when we include men who not only could not be legally pressed, but also entered the Navy in alternative, peculiar ways. Similarly, the literature has long debated the respective advantages and disadvantages of life in Britain, in the British

(83) TNA, ADM 37/4214, Muster Book of HMS *Astrea*, July-August 1813, f. 3-4, 7-8, 14, 17.

(84) Ann Veronica COATS, "The Mutinies in the Channel Fleet: A Foreign-Inspired Revolutionary Movement?", in Ann Veronica COATS & Philip MACDOUGALL (eds.), *The Naval Mutinies of 1797: Unity and Perseverance*, Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2011, p. 132-137; Nicholas ROGERS, *Press Gang, op. cit.*, p. 109-110; Marianne ELLIOTT, *Partners in Revolution: The United Irishmen and France*, New Haven & London, YUP, 1982, p. 134-144.

merchant marine, and in the British Navy, again with the aim of evaluating the latter's functionality, and defending or attacking it on moral grounds; yet a transnational perspective helps to remind us of the subjectivity of "advantages" and "disadvantages", as well as of the fact that Britain and its Navy did not exist in an isolated bubble, but in a global labour marketplace. Finally, if studies trying to capture the general mindset and attitudes of the average naval sailor are valuable, this too bears emphasising differences, to avoid coming close to reinforcing stereotypes and national or class stock characters.

In 1953, John Ehrman stated that "if national history may be compared to a cake, the different layers of which are the different aspects of national life, then naval history is not a layer but a slice of that cake"[85]. Some of those layers, we may add here, are not national at all, and offer a wider range of flavours to our slice.

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(85) Cited in Roger KNIGHT, "Changing the Agenda", art. cit., p. 233.