

Sailortown: Theory and Method in Ordinary People's History

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parallels the evolution of the port; were both changes part of the same historical process? Comparison of harbour development in Saint John with that in other leading North American ports would also have illustrated more clearly the specifically urban, as opposed to regional, dimension of Saint John's port development.

The Port of Saint John cannot be read quickly. It is a detailed study and at times the narrative is rather laboured and obscure. But in the end the book does reward its readers with numerous insights both about the relationship between region and nation on Canada's east coast and about the evolution of Canada's urban system. For this reason it provides a useful addition to the historical literature of Canada's Atlantic seaboard.

R.A.J. McDONALD

Sailortown: Theory and Method in Ordinary People's History

THE BOOK TO BE REVIEWED IS Judith Fingard's *Jack in Port: Sailortowns of eastern Canada* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1982). It is a significant book because it sharply poses the problem of the application of orthodox theory and method to the attempt to write the history of ordinary people. Ostensibly, there is no theory and method. Her people are sailors of the big wind-ships, and their crimps. The context, labelled sailortown, comprises the three 19th-century ports of Halifax, Saint John, and Quebec. Her sympathy for the sailors is declared. The utility of theory is evidently denied in relation to the seafarer: "His life and work do not readily conform to the models and theories favoured by social historians" (p. 3); but, willy-nilly, a structure of analysis is implicit in the determination of the material presented. And method is purportedly settled in the early assertion that the study is "Largely descriptive in nature" (p. 3). This appears to be true, but it mostly takes the form of instancing given in demonstration of the implicit analytical framework and in support of some statement closeby in the text. In history one cannot merely describe. Despite the formal position to the contrary in this book, description must remain secondary to explanation.

There can be little doubt that Judith Fingard has landed on an important group of ordinary people in the Canadian past, since the massive ebb and flow of sailors in and out of the eastern ports in the last century must have as surely shaped the contours of early Canadian society as the massive tides have the Fundy coastline. She has probably met her own target of making a "rescue" (p. 3) of sailors from obscurity, by placing them on the agenda of common Canadians who have been professionally examined. The simple act of selection of sailors and crimps as subjects of her work represents a quantum leap forward in the writing of Canadian and Quebec maritime history, when compared to the sterile elitist and sometimes technological focuses employed by most of the older

writers, and the entrepreneurial and econometric tendencies displayed in much of the recent work in the field.

By far the most important of the non-professional, older writers is surely Frederick William Wallace. His "Iron Men" were the masters and mates, not the generality of seamen. His admiration for masters was unrestrained. "Some of them looked like farmers or horse-breeders, but no men, not even in Naval Service, ever exacted more deference and respect from their subordinates". Mates were drawn slightly less enthusiastically, since he felt compelled to explain the "brutal subject" of physical discipline aboard ship: "the young Blue-nose second mate, unlike his brother in the British service, had no great fear of the law, and never hesitated to strike and strike quickly at the first sign of insubordination. Quickness to enforce discipline...coupled with seaman-like ability, made them the smartest second mates that ever stepped a deck". Wallace's poop perspective of deep-water sailors and crimps is undisguised: "where the foremost hands had to come from a crimp, [in the large ports such as Quebec and Saint John] the gang would be either good, indifferent, or frankly bad — mostly indifferent and bad". He identified directly with the poop in the matter of shipboard, physical discipline: "The writer has been at sea on sailing ships with such crews and has known what it was to put up with a crowd of foremost hands the half of whom were pure hoboies, unable to do the work they were getting paid for".¹ Whether consciously or not, Fingard, to me, employs the same perspective. Most of the other works in this category, as known to me, concentrate on shipbuilding and master shipbuilders, being generally as silent on ordinary shipyard workers as they are on ordinary sailors.² Technological determinism colours three of the older, main analyses of the decline of the deep-sea wooden sailing ships.³

Most of the recent effort in maritime history has been more or less directly connected to the Maritime History Group (MHG) of Memorial University. The econometric tendency of the MHG appears to be rooted in part in the problem of wrestling with one huge quantitative source, the crew lists. This concentration has led one friendly critic to suggest the group has become a prisoner of the data base.⁴ The entrepreneurial perspective is arguably implicit in their econometric

- 1 F.W. Wallace, *Wooden ships and Iron Men* (London, 1924), pp. 171, 179, 181, 187, 178.
- 2 B. Greenhill and A. Giffard, *Westcountrymen in Prince Edward's Isle* (Newton Abbot, 1967), Louise Manny, *Ships of Miramichi* (Saint John, 1960), J. P. Parker, *Cape Breton Ships and Men* (Toronto, 1967), S.T. Spicer, *Masters of Sail* (Toronto, 1968), E.C. Wright, *The Ships of St. Martins* (Saint John, 1974) and *Saint John Ships and their Builders* (Saint John, 1976). This is a partial list. Another prominent trait of many of these books is vessel fetishism, but that is not a subject in this review.
- 3 Albert Faucher, "The Decline of Shipbuilding at Quebec in the 19th Century", *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, XXIII (1957), pp. 195-215, Henry Fry, *History of North Atlantic Steam Navigation* (London, 1896), G.S. Graham, "The Ascendancy of the Sailing Ship, 1850-85", *Economic History Review*, IX (1956), pp. 74-88.
- 4 D.C. North, "Conference Summary", in L.R. Fischer and E.W. Sager, eds., *Merchant Shipping and Economic Development in Atlantic Canada* (St. John's, 1982), p. 236.

approach, given the assumption of an “equilibrium reality” in which the “variables” are defined by neo-classical economic theory. It is, however, explicit in most of the writing of the MHG, even in some of that aimed at ordinary sailors, as in L.R. Fischer’s study of sailors deserting ship. The title of this paper and a good part of the analytical framework dealing with desertion are taken from a statement made in correspondence in 1846 by a shipowner on the subject.⁵ Thus, to return to *Jack in Port*, there is a real sense by which in making ordinary seamen and crimps the centre of her book, Judith Fingard has introduced to maritime history the progressive focus which has marked the finer “landward” work in Canadian social history in the last 15 years.

But there must be more than focus. I believe that ordinary people’s history demands profoundly different theory and method, that orthodox approaches fail. It is my argument in this review that the nettles of theory and method have not been grasped by the author in a manner appropriate to her subject and declared sympathy. The resulting work is not a model of investigation of the history of an ordinary group of people. It does not purport to explain their appearance, experience and demise. It does not identify the real sailors within their actual, boarding-house society ashore. Nor does it deal with any of the class issues found in the relation: professional historian — ordinary people as subject — sources — discourse — audience. Aboard ship, sailors were quartered forward in the foc’s’l, officers astern below the poop — a short but profound distance. The history of the sailors in this book is seen from the poop. It is not history of ordinary people for ordinary people, not of the foc’s’l, not of the popular-class sections of the ports.

What, then, can be made of the theory of *Jack in Port*? At the level of appearance, this history has been written because sailors and crimps are there in the evidence of the past to be studied. The book opens thus:

Anyone visiting the seaport towns of Quebec, Saint John, or Halifax during a mid-nineteenth century shipping season could not have helped but be impressed by the number of sailors who crowded the nooks and crannies of the bustling dockside. This golden age of shipping — the 1850’s and 1860’s — was also the golden age of employment for merchant seamen. In their hundreds and thousands they moved in and out of the major Canadian seaports... (p. 3).

There is no attempt to explain the theoretical limits of time, people and place, nor of the relation of these to the empirical decisions made by the author to “rescue” the seamen of the three ports in the three “generations” of seafaring, from the 1820s to the 1890s. Why ports, and why these three? Why this periodization? Why the sailors?

5 “A Dereliction of Duty: The Problem of Desertion on 19th Century Sailing Vessels”, in R. Ommer and G. Panting, eds., *Working Men Who Got Wet* (St. John’s, 1980), pp. 51-70.

The idea of glimpsing wind-ship labour in port could have made sense had it been tied to any of a number of problems: sail and steamboat labour in the industrialization of shipping-work relations; ship labour in the development of local and "national" markets of commodities and labour; seafaring and class formation in the industrial transition; sailing and gender division; ship labour, port economy and the emergence of the Canadian state, etc. However, since this problem of the definition of location is ignored, there opens an abyss between evidence and theory, between the description of sailors and what the description is supposed to mean. The course taken lacks bearings, and thus meanders across the boundaries of ship and shore, time and place, description and explanation.

It is, of course, easy enough to find shortcomings in that which has not been done. The issue is to address what has been done, and that means here the inferring of the reasoning which conditioned the choice of the three ports, and further considering how that "theoretical" structure influenced the explanations. Very simply, the book is about big-sailing-ship seamen in port, and it would seem the author searched out the largest congregations of them. Since there is no formal reason given for the cut-off at three, or for inclusion of certain ports and exclusion of others, we must look further for explanation.

To begin, the author is mainly interested in the deep-sea sailor. Consequently labour engaged in riverine, estuarial and coastal traffic is largely ignored, as are the problems of understanding the relation of local to distant trades. Concerning Saint John, Fingard writes:

These coasting vessels are not the ones to which we look for the deserters and the rowdier elements of sailortown. To judge from their consistently native crews and the account of the names of the vessels on which the seamen had previously served, the sailors on the coasting vessels were not part of the international labour market which flourished in the three ports (p. 62).

Second, sailors in steam vessels are evidently excluded because they similarly do not appear to have been prominent in sailortown. "Given the ephemeral port experience of steamship crews, we must look for the sailortown habitués among the crews of the large sailing vessels" (p. 66). Third, an economic typology of ports is established. "Saint John was a hybrid port, combining independence upon the timber trade and shipbuilding (like Quebec) with participation in the short-range and long-haul carrying trades in the Americas (like Halifax)" (p. 22). There seems buried in this formulation the notion that ports were or can be considered ideal types, from whose position along the spectrum the larger firmament can be understood, including all the many ports not featured in this study.

That there were broad qualitative differences between the labour of local, long-haul and steam vessels is not at issue, nor is it questioned that there are different patterns of shipping and shipbuilding to be observed about the three ports. Rather it is the structuring of the qualities in such a way as to justify con-

centration upon big-windship labour — to provide an explanatory framework which, once raised to view, can be seen to be untenable. The effective exclusion of local and steam labour is simply a-historical, at least from the second quarter of the 19th century, when each of the three ports had its particular mix of shipping — specific modes by which local, regional and international exchange and productive systems intermingled. (Furthermore, the proportions between these “spaces” were rapidly shifting in the period of the study). However, not only are other kinds of shipping labour excluded from the descriptive/conceptual framework, but all other labour is kept out of sight. Only occasionally do we glimpse other workers, as in these dated stereotypes of the Quebec City work force: “those *inward-looking, homeloving* French Canadians who worked the timber and built the ships, or the *clannish* Irish immigrants” (p. 17; my emphasis).

From the vantage point of the transition to industrial production, the omission of steam labour is especially to be regretted, since the dichotomy between sail and steam-labour — recognized by the author in a descriptive sense — is left unexplained. The effect is a failure to see big-wind-ship labour of the 19th century as a transitional occupation between the artisanal and the industrial: in brief, a failure to see Jack as a worker in the process of being proletarianized. Moreover the problem of the relation of the production of machinery and of goods of consumption in relation to transport in circulation is untouched. Thus may the omission of Montreal be justified — but at the cost of seeing neither the three ports as “losers” nor Montreal as “winner” in the process of the transition, Montreal being the one Canadian port with a long tradition of local trade and machine production related in part to steam shipping.

Finally, the particular definition of sailortown and its use as the social location of the Canadian deep-sea sailor market is incongruous to me. The local labour markets are denied any role in sailortown, and hence the main host economic structures underlying the communities visited by the mainly non-Canadian sailors of interest to the author are invisible. Again, what is thrown out the theoretical front port reappears through the back flaps of evidential discourse, showing the disjuncture between the two and generally casting confusion over explanation. Desertion and crimping — two prominent features of sailortown — are thus anchored in economically uncharted harbours. One must wonder in any event about the relative importance of the three Canadian ports, since it is clear that the main source of labour for the long-distance, sailing-ship workers was in northern Europe. Moreover the choice of sailortown as the social location for this study in theory effectively displaces the shipboard relations of work, surely the principal economic theatre of the reproduction of the sailors.

Concerning periodization the author again resorts to a threefold model, three generations of international seamen visiting the three ports. The successive generations are equated more or less directly with the second, third and fourth quarters of the 19th century. The first-generation sailor is asserted to have been a generalist in terms of shipboard tasks, which included discharging and loading. He is held a member of a crew in which hierarchical divisions were blurred, a

trait reminiscent of that charged to North Shields seamen in the same era by John Foster.⁶ In a kind of preindustrial work condition, the sailor was likely to have stood in a kin or community relation to the ship's owners, officers and crew, to have shared in the profits of the voyage rather than have been paid as a wage labourer, and to have contributed substantially to port economy and society because of long shore stopovers. The second generation sailor is seen to have been subjected to what might be termed "stretch-out". Vessels got bigger and were driven harder, with simplified work tasks (mainly one suspects due to a more or less continual modification of rigging systems which required less manning), shorter port visits and sharper division of ship-and-shore labour, an increasing elimination of seasonal lay-offs, and a rising employment of foreign or non-British labour aboard ship. Ashore the seafarer was increasingly subject to the manipulations of the newly emerging boarding-house keeper/crimp and exposed to rising state intervention by all levels of government (with their new-fangled police forces), as well as having to undergo the assaults of the newly arriving middle-class, self-styled morality squads. On board, it was wage labour, often foreign comrades in the foc's'l and stranger-managers amongst the officers abaft. In the third generation sailing is seen as a shrivelling occupation. Quick stopovers and moral reformers struck hard at sailortown, and ship labour became mainly a steam affair, which, according to Fingard's remarkable understatement, "had little human impact on these ports".⁷

Had the author made it plain that the vessel was a machine, and that labour was undergoing the industrial transition — then there would have been a recognizable analytical framework consistent with some of the elements given, namely the move from sharing in voyage "profit" to wage labour, increasingly rigid occupational hierarchies on board and ashore (with separation of labour, management and ownership, and the emergence of crimps and other shore-based groups of "formal" and "informal" nature), the resort to "uncustomary" labour and state intervention by shipowners as means to break collective sailor resistance, and the degradation of shipboard working conditions via bigger loads, larger vessels, simpler work and fewer and shorter lay-offs. Despite the formal denial about the theoretical non-conformity of Jack, the author here veers implicitly onto a recognizable course.

The implications of this "model" are not clearly drawn. One must ask why begin with the 1820s, since the first period of long-distance sailing on a substantial and regular scale in Canada must be dated from the inception of the bulk wood and wheat trades in the last quarter of the 18th century. It is more than ironic in view of the book's concern with international trade that the starting point of the 1820s probably coincides with a flowering of local and regional trades. It thus prevents seeing the dynamism of the local economic and social structures compared to the imperial/international. Clearly there is here the

6 *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1974), pp. 120-3.

7 The generational scheme is set on pp. 2-6.

orthodox entrapment in the staple's paradigm, with the supposed economic van coming through foreign trade rather than local production.

Turning to the third generation of dying sailing, I find a similarly myopic conception. Without the notion of a national transition to industrial transportation to frame the demise of the big-wind-ship sailor, and sailortown, explanation is vacated in favour of a nostalgic indulgence not far removed from the spirit that placed the Bluenose on the dime as emblem of the Canadian maritime heritage, and that fired the technically deterministic work of Fry, Wallace and Faucher. So passed the big ship, so went seafarer and sailortown, due to external forces operating internationally in the developing ascendancy of the steamship. The causal agents are left ill-defined as some kind of extra-local technological determinants. No such vagary attaches to the lament for the fate of the sailor victim: "Because seafarers belonged to a declining sector of the economy, were subject to rigid maritime law, and were divided among themselves by ethnicity, race and language, they left few serviceable traditions to their steam-age successors in the twentieth century" (p. 244).

The generational scheme advanced by the author lacks explicit reference to ideas of periodization of shore-based labour, despite the assertion that the study is intended to "emphasize throughout the landward conditions that produced the labour market" (p. 7). We might note that such a position is consistent with the author's persistent descriptive focus on a subject group rather than on an attempt to explain its context. Sidestepped are major problems of historical understanding in terms of ship-and-shore relations. Sailortown, if we take Quebec as example, is described indistinctly as the total of the characteristics trotted out as a rule for that community, rather than the Champlain suburb which was surely the recognizable host community for the sailors of the timber ships. This historical specificity is not visible in the mist, with the consequence that the problem of periodization is effectively eluded by the failure to sharpen the social focus. Quebec — like Halifax and Saint John — thus assumes an amorphous, portlike homogeneity which belies the complex reality readily apparent in an urban society undergoing great social and spatial "differentiation" in the transition process. Not only are the particularities of the various *faubourgs* subsumed by the "mystery" port and the relative position submerged of the main port suburb, Champlain, in terms of the size and nature of the city's larger labour force, but the French-Canadian essence of the city, the "national question", is denied an effective existence! Indeed it is evident that Québécois historiography has been avoided by the author, judging by the bibliographical essay, footnotes and text.

The most frustrating part of the author's periodization is that it is a falsely flirtatious bit of foreplay, no sooner proffered than withdrawn on the grounds of obscuring "a number of persistent themes" (p. 6) and in favour of five "subjects" that cut across the generations. These subjects then become the theoretically "periodless" themes of the five chapters of the text.

The conceptual vision of sailortown's social structure is, once identified,

simplistic and a-historical. Formally the seafarer is pictured as a butt of increasing shore victimization by public and private authorities: police, jailors and judges, on the one hand — and, on the other, crimps and civic reformers. Some argument is made for the possibility of seamen's resistance, and of the ambivalence of port elites whose political sway comprised a mixture of outright force, accommodation and benign neglect. However, the precise structure of the groups above the seamen in any of the ports at particular moments and over time is not investigated, nor are its social interconnections identified. Similarly, the groups of landspeople with whom sailors intermingled ashore as class equals are not seen — save for repetition of the unsympathetic image of Jack as overly thirsty, belligerent and sexed.

The groups that are seen with any precision are two, seamen and crimps. Seamen are subdivided into four types — the career sailor (“He worked as hard and risked as much as any other sailor but the end in view was not to drink, whore or frolic in the next port [!]; it was to ascend the seafaring hierarchy as rapidly as possible” [p. 48]; the casual “scallywag” who was as likely to spend as much time in jail as at sea and for whom the push (by authorities) to go to sea was stronger than the pull — and the “stalwart young adventurer” who the author suggests was likely the most common kind of seafarer, for whom going to sea was only a stage in the work cycle of life (pp. 52-4); the foreign seaman (“non-English speaking, non-Canadian” [p. 54]) whose numbers increased substantially after the mid-century, and who “on an English-speaking vessel was more prominently subject to exploitation in an occupation that was often uncomfortable even for the most representative British or Canadian sailor” (p. 55). And lastly there were female sailors who are held up as a composite type since, though few in numbers, they shared characteristics common to the male types already enumerated: so much for the gender problem. The theoretically operative classification turns on the terms career, scallywag, stalwart, foreign and female. Partly normative and patronizing, and fully abstract chronologically, these terms place sailors beyond the possibility of understanding them in their material, intra- and extra-class contexts in sailortown, aboard ship, and in the ports of their signing-on and communities of origin.

Crimps are also prominent conceptual victims in this study. Since no allowance is made for internal and external changes over time, there is almost no chance of detecting the extending division of labour in maritime work, of seeing the increasing subordination of the mass of sailors and land-related workers around simplified, wage tasks, and of identifying the new and much smaller liaison groups such as crimps. Rightly enough, I think, the author gives considerable weight to crimps. But the framework is so neutered that they are studied because they are there, in the record. Just as sailors are victims, so crimps are victimizers — even though, at the same time they are held to have been of the same class, to have shared “Identity of Interest”. Theoretical confusion. Yet these two groups are as to two sides to the coin in the capitalization of the labour of the big wind-ships.

To summarize, there are two general points about theory. First, like denying the importance of wind to a sailing ship the author formally rejects theory only in practice to drive the vessel of her text with a very orthodox version of it. Second, the work may be said to be “subject priority” in its structure, and since formal theory is denied, no appropriate definition is given to time, place, and outer boundaries and inner fractions of the groups studied.

In categorizing her work as descriptive, the author simultaneously releases herself from the obligation of defining theory and method. But the orthodoxy of the method employed in this work is if anything more plain than the theory. It is established at the outset, by taking the position that the study is descriptive, and confirmed in the general tendency to unsupported or instanced statement, in the uncritical use of published sources — particularly newspapers — and in the failure to come to grips with the problem of class.

The author’s evidently deliberate refusal to formally consider method releases her from examination of the sorts of things which she is trying to demonstrate, which sources should be canvassed and how, and the technique by which sources and statement are to be brought into contact. No attempt is made by the author to review the sources and their utility for her purpose: certainly, the bibliographical essay does not perform this task satisfactorily. The ground is exceedingly unfirm, therefore, and there are two basic procedures, unsupported assertion and “instanced” statement, by which sources and evidence are related.

The former needs no elaboration here. By the latter I refer to the apparently random selection of evidence given either after a statement in support of it, or leading up to a statement. Thus is given an appearance of logical relation. But the procedure is not appropriate. There are two main ways of instancing in the study, the one respecting time and the other social location. Both tend to group instances which have no other inherent categorical sameness than a forced relation by the author to her statement: i.e. they are abstracted from their supposed category of time and place and put into an analytical structure. This is an epistemological necessity, but the test must be the closeness between historical and analytical structures, and we can see the former only through evidence. In Fingard’s procedure, there is by reckoning no structure: all bits of information being organized by topic and the text being compiled by stringing the topics together.

I have already argued that the abandonment by the author of periods for subjects was one of the main ways in which the study was theoretically cut adrift. This position shows the strong inclination to disregard time, place and social position in the presentation of instances. Five chapters are the body of the work, and here will be the frame for the discussion of statement logic, and, later, sources and class. The titles of the chapters are: (1) The Sailor Labour Market; (2) Patterns of Seafaring Life; (3) The Rhythms of Port Life; (4) The Sailor’s Labour Rights; (5) Crimps and Reformers. My first observation is the obvious one that this division of subject has a false air of neutrality, since the resulting slices of time, space and subject virtually prevent (in terms of method) con-

sideration of a specific historical society. The real connections of space, time and social character are broken down in the homogenizing technique of topical arrangement of subject and demonstration by instance.

Thus in Chapter One we find seasonal rhythm is a prime topic, stressed as a factor describing the economy of sailortown. A neat, economic interlock is portrayed — but incorrectly:⁸

Since many new ships sought their crew at Saint John, the labour shortage resembled that of Quebec. As in Quebec, *shipbuilding was a winter activity* and the shipbuilders were anxious to despatch the new vessels to the United Kingdom market with the opening of the spring trade. During the years when shipbuilding boomed, the demand for seamen invariably exceeded the supply, wages rose and incoming seamen seized the better opportunities that emerged (p. 22: my emphasis).

Halifax, the entrepôt of the northeast Atlantic, was noted neither as a timber nor as a shipbuilding port, but none the less timber was loaded and reshipped and ships were built, repaired and fitted out here. Had it been a major shipbuilding port it might still have escaped the chronic shortage of seamen that affected Quebec and Saint John....[Nova Scotia's] youth, be they sons of farmers, fishermen, shipbuilders, merchants, or sea captains, were bred to the sea. Few lived far from the smell of salty sea air, and few resisted the temptation of an exciting and hazardous, if temporary, acquaintance with life before the mast (pp. 25-6).

Regarding Quebec and Saint John, we may ask where are the real societies that enclosed the labour markets? Instead there is a discourse which is premised on an unsupported statement that is marginal and static in form, and wrong in content. And we see similarly unsupported assertions about Halifax's economy, combined with hackneyed, romantic racism in relation to the Nova Scotian labour market.

Chapter Two, "Patterns of Seafaring Life", comprises three parts. The first deals with "Types of Sailors". Having alluded to the theoretical shortcomings of the classification above, I point to the heavy reliance upon instancing, in four of the five sailor "types". The career sailor "is personified by William Lord" (p. 48) and the scallywag by James Prendergast, "a Haligonian, who spent more time in jail than at sea" (p. 50). The casual sailor is instanced by Harrison H. Barnes, "our example of the venturesome lad for whom the sea was a frontier to

8 My calculations, based on a six-year (1825, 1835, 1845, 1855, 1865, and 1875) analysis of all the new tonnage registered and "certificated" at Saint John, indicate that the average ratio of tonnage registered in the spring quarter (.21) was less than that of the fall (.28) and half that of the summer (.42). The rhythmic feature so striking about British North American shipbuilding was not the seasonal, but the cyclical. The latter is studied in Chapter Three, "Periodic Reverses": Colonial Shipbuilding Cycles", of my doctoral thesis: "Shipbuilding in British America, 1787-1890: An Introductory Study", University of Liverpool, 1978, pp. 36-44.

be conquered and an initial source of livelihood" (p. 52). The foreign sailor is illustrated by eight sailors in connection with Saint John, in this order of dates: 1879, 1894, 1870, and 1875. The "female seafarers" are much better treated, at least for Saint John in the decade 1881-1891: the shipping master engagement books are used to provide an analysis of a category which thus has by contrast to the others a quantitative definition that permits a vision of the limits and structure of women sailors signing on, an entry — however partial — into a real, historical society. An attempt to measure that partiality, a criticism of the source, is not made.

The second part deals with vessels and voyages, and here the investigation reaches a high point, concerning the pattern of vessels trading to and from Saint John in the early 1880s — again because of reliance upon the shipping master engagement books. They provide a comprehensive look at one aspect of the structure of seafaring for one place at a particular time. The author develops a section on desertion which is effectively done because of supporting evidence given on easterly and westerly wage rates. It is to be emphasized that the technique of linking evidence and statement by instancing is here avoided, with good result.

The last part is entitled the "Seafarer's Outlook". While one might be tempted to laud the author's attempt to employ what she terms "lusty sea songs and shanties" "to capture the language and manners of humble sailors before the mast" (p. 74), the result is stark instancing, compounded by an uncritical use of sources and a patronizing, middle-class view of sailors and sexuality. Three songs are cited at length, without the slightest sign of trying to establish their relationship, if any, to Halifax, Saint John and Quebec. Claiming that "The oral traditions of seafaring, represented by song, knew no national boundaries", Fingard introduces "A-rovin A-rovin" as "an explicit and earthy" song which "belonged equally to seamen visiting Canadian, American, European, or far eastern parts" (p. 74). Ratcliffe Highway", "one of the most popular fo'c's'le songs of the age of sail" is given to illustrate the contrast of its "seafaring jargon used to describe whoring and venereal disease" (p. 76) with the descriptions in the official logs of the venereal conditions of sailors. And, two verses of the pumping song, "The *Ebenezer Run*", are given as demonstration "that sailors' language was unlikely to resemble polite parlour talk" (p. 77). Following the songs there are paragraphs on "An illustration of sailors' more spontaneous obscenities" (p. 78), and sailors' "working garb", sea chest-contents, auctions of effects after death at sea, and burials at sea and ashore. The employment of instancing as method of linking evidence and statement is clear, but in relation to the songs there is no indication that these songs had anything to do with the sailors subject in the study. There is no specificity of evidence here. Surely there must be some direct reference to sea songs in her sailortown, if not in the newspapers then in records of trials of sailors. And regarding sexuality and "obscenities", the vantage point appears as bourgeois prudery. Thus the importance of "listening" to diction, metaphor and content of popular speech/song is

missed entirely in relation to two subjects crying out for better treatment in sailors' history, namely sexuality in the male division of labour so extreme (the apparent absence of women aboard, like steamships in sailortown, does not mean the subject was not of very great significance), and sailors' resistance and its modes of expression. The author has the mind-set of the official logs, and since these were filled out by the enforcers of work discipline their class-partisanship makes them a particularly refractory source, to be employed only with caution at arm's length. The language of resistance in one instance is cited in reference to an "obstreperous" [!] sailor who was operating a winch in timber loading at Sillery Cove in 1858. The mate's entry in the log reported of the sailor that "when called to heave he would call out heave your sister[s] cunt damn you and other such language" and further when reprimanded for swearing "he did not care a damn for any mate in the *Ben Lomond* and that the *Ben Lomond* has turned damn religious" (p. 78). The historical importance of this: "An illustration of sailors' more spontaneous obscenities"!

Chapter Three, "The Rhythm of Port Life", opens with a lengthy section emphasizing the relation between employment on ships and in harbours, and "a myriad of subsidiary rhythms as each individual ship entered and cleared port" (p. 87). This is followed by three parts as "a way of portraying the relations between sailors and society" (p. 94): work, sickness and accidents, and rowdiness and violence. The first deals with instances of absences (!) of sailors from work. The second makes fetishes of kinds of sickness and accidents, providing instances of smallpox, frost-bite, exposure, falls, drownings, diarrhoea, etc. — concluding with a sort of institutional review of the Quebec Marine and Emigrant Hospital, the Kent Marine Hospital at Saint John, and the hospital situation for seafarers in Halifax. The last part on rowdiness and violence starts off with data based on the Halifax magistrate court registers for the period 1880-90 (1,237 defendants in all), but thereafter proceeds to instance — "the stereotype of Jack ashore when he was involved in drunken brawls; when he was being carried aboard his vessel senseless; when he was monopolizing the time of the magistracy in police court; and when he was gracing the city lock-up or presence with his presence" (p. 126).¹⁰ Whose stereotype are we getting anyway? Poor old Jack appears a very low-class sort of human in this assumption of the vantage point by the author of his supposed "betters". Again the gap yawns between subject, on the one side, and theory and method on the other.

The title of the fourth chapter is something of a misnomer, "The Sailor's Labour Rights", since few rights were had, and those were under considerable attack through the century. The chapter is concerned with moments of sailors'

9 The 's' was added to the quotation by the author of the book.

10 The author has evidently overlooked a rich source for Quebec on sailors and their prison visits. There survives a virtually complete series of registers of prisoners by name, age, committal and discharge — from just before 1820 on. These are readily found in the archives judiciaires, transferred sometime ago from the Ministère de justice to the Archives National du Quebec.

resistance — as expressed by desertion, absence and refusal to work. These are seen in newspaper notices of court proceedings. Instancing is, again, the linkage method. In relation to refusal to work, the author enumerates five reasons, each with one or more instance given: human factors (drunkenness, perversity of seamen, ill treatment); sailors' unease over seaworthiness of vessels; infringement of work practices; violation of contractual agreement; pecuniary considerations. The argument, once detected, is for a decline in legal sanction of sailors' resistance to his work and social definition. We should note the author's sweeping observation that justice for sailors "became far less certain" (p. 192) in the succession of transfers of jurisdiction of maritime labour law from vice-admiralty to Canadian magistracy to the (Canadian) Seamen's Act of 1873.

The last chapter, "Crimps and Reformers", is almost entirely devoted to the former, under the double purpose that "An examination of the rise and decline of crimping is central to an understanding of the character of sailortown....[and] the relation between sailors and crimp [was] the determining factor in establishing the features of the labour market" (p. 194). The introduction is remarkably untrammelled by evidence, save for a biographical sketch of human interest about one John Wilson, a "sailor-broker" who was not chosen as Quebec's first shipping master (in 1847) and thereafter was a simple crimp. In the next section on Quebec, Fingard suggests that "Because of their historical [?] notoriety as villains and powerful manipulators of the sailor labour market" (p. 206), crimps merit place in 19th century biography. Despite the probable hundreds of crimps in their time at Quebec, one of them — Jim Ward — monopolizes the text. His "career serves as an instructive example of a number of distinctive characteristics of crimping in Quebec" (p. 206). Moreover, he "may not have been entirely typical since his exploits were apparently world-renowned in seafaring circles of his day" (p. 206). Sketches of three other crimps are added, who are uncharitably characterized by "Violence and criminality" (p. 211). There is in this posture a liberal acceptance of the timelessness of crime and violence, an uncritical clasping of biased evidence, and a signal failure to consider the basic socio-economic structures underlying crimp behaviour and its middle-class labelling as criminal and violent.

The treatment of Saint John crimping is similar, though more space is given over to "reform" tendencies — largely the sailor's home movement, which is held to have experienced two periods of heightened activity (like Halifax), at the mid- and end-century. No attention is paid to economic structure and periodization as an area in which to seek the answer why do-gooders then levelled their moral weaponry at sailors. Rather, there is, in the place of analysis, institutional narrative and biography. Halifax, according to Fingard, had the most reforming and the least crimping, and the presentation continues in the biographical, instanced mode. Finally, in the last section, "Identity of Interest", crimps and sailors are asserted to have been allies after all, in sharing similar social origins, occupying similarly marginal roles in sailortown, being against "upper town" society (p. 241) and failing to support sailors' homes.

The targets in my criticism of the author's method are unsupported assertion and instancing. That the first is inappropriate procedure should be self-evident. The second requires elaboration. Instancing simply does not allow analytical penetration into a past group of people in a way which enables a view of its limits, internal divisions and linkages, and mechanisms of reproduction. It is an especially damaging procedure if there is no strict attention paid to the analytical framework and the ways of employment of evidence. In *Jack in Port*, we only rarely "enter" the past society. For the most part, narratives of a tiny number of sailors, and crimps, are given in the guise of analysis. Even if the number of biographies were vastly increased, the analysis would still fail, for manifestly individual biography will not serve the study of groups of people.

This method provides its own structure of understanding, and when the trait is combined with an uncritical reliance on printed sources heavily biased against the subjects of inquiry, then the full iniquity of orthodox method in ordinary people's history becomes plain. Newspapers mainly, government reports to a lesser extent, the occasional manuscript, and the rare reference to a scholarly study in maritime history are the sources employed by Fingard. Excepting the last, none is a rich source for community structure and mechanisms (social or economic), and this factor alone reveals the gap between subject and method. Records of work process, of family, of property — these are the sources wanted, but absent. Moreover, the sources consulted, except for the last, were clearly instruments of the dominant classes, and therefore only to be used with the most critical care in attempting to understand structure, process, or — in the author's words — gain "an authentic appreciation of the ethos of sailortown" (p. 283). The trouble is that this care is simply not taken.

Accordingly the author is imprisoned in the paradigms of her sources. Not only does this condemn the analysis to a superficial perception of reality, but it imparts a general middle-class bias. Thus we find the continuous negative epithets and categorizations of sailors and crimps in their persons and activities. Indeed for a historian of ordinary people, the reproduction of the antipathy of the sources for popular classes is a chilling indication of just how far apart orthodox method and ordinary people's history are.

I have tried by an extended review of this one work about sailors to show how deeply contradictory is the combination of progressive subject and orthodox theory and method. Here is the critical area where professional historians manage at once the progressive air with hegemonic practice. Here is the area of tension between appearance of egalitarian scholarship and the reality of bourgeois theory and method. Here is the area that needs open discussion, and a great deal of practical research and analysis.

It will not be enough to call for the application of explicit theory, societal definition, quantitative technique, group as opposed to individual biography, strict canvassing of sources and critical use of those selected, careful logic in relating evidence and theory, attention to the *problématique* of a national transition, and so on. More than that, class will have to be tackled. We may have

come a long way since the 1965 article which claimed class had been little used by Canadian historians since there was no "research to suggest that such an analysis is possible".¹¹ The word class has become acceptable in academic circles, but, as in the case of *Jack in Port*, the conceptual and methodological implications have not been taken up. We must leave the poop if we wish to learn the history of the foc's'l, descend from "upper town" to begin seeing "lower town" society. At the very least, the poverty of poop theory and method is to be recognized in order to progress towards ordinary people's history.

RICHARD RICE

11 S.R. Mealing, "The Concept of Class and the Interpretation of Canadian History", *Canadian Historical Review*, XLVI (1965), p. 212.

Saving the Children

THE PATTERN OF LITTLE FEET is getting louder in Canadian social history. No longer Clio's orphans, children are attracting the watchful gaze of latter-day child-savers who have set out to rescue them from further historical neglect. And in much recent historical writing these youngsters have been taking us by the hand and leading us back into the private, poorly-documented world of their families.

Canadian scholars and writers who are contributing to the growing international literature on childhood and family life have been particularly interested in the first "child-savers", those earnest social engineers who began their rescue work among the poor urchins of the urban slum in the second half of the 19th century. Earlier work in this field, probably best exemplified by Neil Sutherland's *Children in English-Canadian Society*,¹ tended to begin the discussion with generalized attitudes to children and childhood in the ranks of the child-savers themselves. As a result, much of the story of this kind of social activism was written through the eyes of the activists alone, and far less attention was directed to the specific social situation of the children in question. Fortunately, the wealth of new literature which has been appearing in recent years allows us to start to piece together a more complete picture of the children, their families, and the busybodies who intervened in their lives.

What is becoming clear is that an abstracted notion of a "childhood" shared by all Canadian children is none too helpful. Instead, we need to recognize that the centre of all this fluster in Victorian Canada was really the working-class family. No one has been making this case more effectively than Joy Parr —

1 (Toronto, 1976).