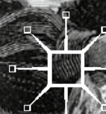
People, Place *and* Power *on the* Nineteenth-Century Waterfront

Sailortown

GRAEME J. MILNE



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

Preface

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

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

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

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

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

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

Literatures, Entanglements and Spaces

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Voices

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sailortowns in Time and Space: A Brief Tour

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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