

# PORT TOWNS AND URBAN CULTURES

INTERNATIONAL HISTORIES OF THE  
WATERFRONT, C.1700–2000

EDITED BY BRAD BEAVEN, KARL BELL  
AND ROBERT JAMES



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Brad Beaven • Karl Bell • Robert James  
Editors

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International Histories of the Waterfront,  
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was the rich array of papers and quality of the discussion we undertook to publish an edited volume on the strongest themes in the conference. We thank all of the volume's authors, not only for their contributions but also for their enthusiasm and commitment to the project. It has made the whole editing process an enjoyable one.

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Brad Beaven

Karl Bell

Robert James

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## Introduction

*Brad Beaven, Karl Bell, and Robert James*

The cultural life of port towns has largely remained a hidden history. Ports, as liminal urban spaces where communities lived and worked, have been foreshadowed by conventional historiography that analyses these for their global trade and imperial networks.<sup>1</sup> However, the waterfront was the intersection of maritime and urban space and the port town was often a unique site of cultural exchange that both reinforced and challenged local, national and imperial boundaries.<sup>2</sup>

The aim of this book, through the exploration of a series of ports from around the globe, is to advance our understanding of how the port was a crucible for the forging of distinctive urban and maritime identities. Moreover, it will examine the port's relationship with its urban hinterland together with the cultural connections that may have existed between international ports. Ports commonly shared land-based maritime districts or 'sailortowns' that

<sup>1</sup>Jackson, G. (2000), 'Ports 1700-1840', in P. Clark (ed.) *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain. Volume II, 1540-1840*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 705-731.

<sup>2</sup>Leggett, D. (2011), 'Review essay: Navy, Nation and Identity in the Long Nineteenth Century', *Journal of Maritime Research*, 13,152; Broeze, F. (1985), 'Port Cities: The Search for an Identity.' *Journal of Urban History*, 11:2, 209-225.

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were associated with drink, sex and money lending services.<sup>3</sup> These localities were populated with cheap boarding houses, brothels and ‘low’ entertainment venues that were usually concentrated along one main thoroughfare. Thus, for example, London’s Ratcliffe Highway, Gothenburg’s Herring Street and Hamburg’s Hopfenstrasse acquired, among seamen, an international notoriety.<sup>4</sup> Sailortowns’ pubs and boarding houses also enabled sailors to tap into a maritime network of shipping news, job opportunities and local information that they relied upon to navigate themselves around their temporary urban home. However, this transient and international workforce, which was concentrated in streets close to the waterfront, provoked fears that sailortowns operated beyond the moral boundaries of civic life.<sup>5</sup> One religious missionary of Portsmouth’s Queen Street claimed that ‘if you have penetrated into the dens of lust and violence which are closely packed within the slice of brick and mortar that lies between St George’s Street and Queen Street, your head will have been sickened’. He added that the district had become ‘infamous from the Baltic to Japan’.<sup>6</sup> Sailortowns, then, exuded ‘otherness’ where visitors were confronted with a strange urban-maritime culture that was both exotic and dangerous. This book will seek to uncover the social and cultural dimension of port life and the shared maritime traditions that linked port town cultures.

In reviewing the literature on seafarers, Robert Lee has called for research to focus on the seafarers’ urban world as both urban and maritime historians have tended to neglect sailors’ familial ties and social relationships with those ashore.<sup>7</sup> Instead, historians have been more inclined to explore ports through tracking their urban and commercial development. Indeed, ports have traditionally presented historians with an opportunity to analyse global business and trade networks and the importance of imperial systems. Recently, Karen Wigen has noted that ‘when not ignored altogether,

<sup>3</sup> Hugill, S. (1967), *Sailortown* (London: Routledge Kegan Paul), p. xviii.

<sup>4</sup> Hugill, *Sailortown*, p. 140; note on terminology: while recent commentators favour the use of ‘seafarer’, contemporaries such as Charles Booth and census enumerators consistently employed the term seamen or sailors. See Moon, L. (2015), ‘Sailorhoods’: sailors and sailortown in the port of Portsmouth c. 1850–1900 (University of Portsmouth, unpublished PhD thesis), pp. 11–12.

<sup>5</sup> Bell, K. (2014), ‘Civic spirits? Ghost lore and civic narratives in nineteenth century Portsmouth’, *Cultural and Social History*, 11: 1, 51–68; Beaven, B. (2015), ‘The Resilience of Sailortown Culture in English Naval Ports, c. 1820–1900’, *Urban History*, 43: 1, Feb 2016, pp. 72–95. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0963926815000140>

<sup>6</sup> Shutte, R. N. (1866), *The Mission of the Good Shepherd* (Portsea), p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Lee, R. (2013), ‘The Seafarer’s Urban World: A Critical Review’, *Journal of Maritime History*, 25: 23, 27.

maritime topics are routinely relegated to subfields on shipping or migration, pirates or fisheries'.<sup>8</sup> Likewise Gordon Jackson's historiographical study on ports found that most histories focussed on the development of port facilities, port-based industries, trade, labour and urban elites as the key areas that historians have focussed upon.<sup>9</sup> More recently, ports have taken a greater prominence in imperial, Atlantic and global histories. For example, Sheryllyne Haggerty et al.'s recent edited volume on Liverpool argued that the city's important connection with the colonies in trade, business, commerce and culture had been consistently underplayed. This significant collection of essays demonstrates how the city's port placed Liverpool at the heart of an international imperial system.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the history of ports has traditionally been researched from a mercantile perspective and focussed on the connections between European and transatlantic ports through the analysis of trading routes and business ties.<sup>11</sup> This overwhelming emphasis on the merchant port has ensured that the cultural history of naval ports has largely been neglected. The bias towards the merchant seamen ashore has been compounded by the widespread assumption that naval sailors' influence in port towns was minimal.<sup>12</sup> Jackson has argued that because 'sailors were only drafted into the navy during wartime there was no proportionally large band of them within dockyard populations'.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, urban and maritime historians have tended to leave naval history largely in the hands of naval historians whose research interests invariably lie in the organisation and mobilisation of military personnel.<sup>14</sup> This book intends to break down this dichotomy

<sup>8</sup> Bentley J. H., Bridenthal, R. and Wigen, K. (eds.) (2007), *Seascapes: Maritime Histories, Littoral Cultures, and Transoceanic Exchanges* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii), p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Jackson, 'Ports 1700-1840', pp. 705-731.

<sup>10</sup> Haggerty, S., Webster, A. and White, N. J. (eds.) (2008), *Empire in One City? Liverpool's Inconvenient Imperial Past* (Manchester: Manchester University Press).

<sup>11</sup> Jackson, 'Ports 1700-1840', pp. 705-731.

<sup>12</sup> Leggett, 'Review essay: Navy, Nation and Identity', 152.

<sup>13</sup> Jackson, 'Ports 1700-1840', 721.

<sup>14</sup> Rodger, N. A. M. (1986), *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (London: Collins); McKee, C. (2002), *Sober Men and True: Sailor Lives in the Royal Navy, 1900-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). However, a new historiography is beginning to emerge as Mary Conley and Jan Rüger have explored the nature of naval authority, the ritual and pageantry of shipbuilding and the creation of the naval sailor as a late nineteenth century imperial icon. See Rüger, J. (2007), *The Great Naval Game. Britain and Germany in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); Conley, M. A. (2009), *From Jack Tar to Union Jack. Representing Naval Manhood in the British Empire,*

within maritime history and draw upon case studies in both merchant and naval ports to explore the contrasts and connections between maritime communities and their urban hinterlands.<sup>15</sup>

This book will offer a new and challenging perspective on the port by exploring the formation of port town identities through a range of cultural forms in a variety of national settings. It will focus on the two core themes: (i) the nature of urban-maritime cultures, and (ii) representations of the port town. In doing so it highlights the ports' intriguing liminal nature, located as they are at the border of land and sea. Through its broad, international focus, this book will demonstrate how port towns were open to a rich array of cultural exchanges derived from both domestic terrestrial and transnational maritime influences.

The two thematic sections are ordered chronologically. Demonstrative of the collection's wide-ranging geographical and temporal scope, the chapters journey from eighteenth-century South Africa to mid- and late twentieth-century Scandinavia, by way of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European and Antipodean port towns. They are also demonstrative of the innovative ways in which the contributors have attempted to locate and reveal the multitudinous voices, experiences, and understandings of port towns across time and around the world. The contributors draw upon a rich array of sources to facilitate this, including police and judicial records, local and regional press reports, accounts from morality campaigners and social investigators, ecclesiastical commentary, songs, maritime and urban 'superstitions', civic celebrations and ceremony, architectural styles, tourist guides, and the oral and written testimony of port town inhabitants. As such this collection advances multifarious models of, and approaches to, the port town as a dynamic cultural nexus. Unlike previous urban and maritime histories of ports, this book argues for the value of understanding port towns as cultural entities in their own right, shaped by their geographical locality and cultural plurality, as something more than simple nodal points in broader national and transnational economic networks.

## URBAN-MARITIME CULTURES

This first theme explores the nature and character of land-based maritime culture, its often idiosyncratic fusion of domestic and transnational influences, and the exchanges and interaction between seafarers, local

1870–1918 (Manchester: Manchester University Press); Redford, D. (2010), *The Submarine: A Cultural History from the Great War to Nuclear Combat* (London: Tauris).

<sup>15</sup> Konvitz, J. (1993), 'Port Cities and Urban History', *Journal of Urban History*, 193:3, 115–120.



landlubbers and the port hinterland. While the notion of sailors ashore still remains something of an underexamined issue in maritime historiography, the chapters in this section demonstrate a broader, more ambitious engagement with the liminality of port towns, probing the ways in which their cultures were constructed from within and without, from the influences of land and sea.

Urban-maritime cultures were not necessarily as schizophrenic as the term may first suggest. Port towns formed a cultural confluence through which flowed and churned concerns and attitudes drawn from both inland and the sea. They frequently embodied the outflow of ideas from the hinterland, acting as sites where the flotsam of contemporary anxieties relating to developing urbanisation gathered. Given their (often justified) reputation for hard drinking, prostitution, and an exuberant and excessive leisure culture, port towns often provoked an intensified fear and response from national and local authorities concerning familiar issues such as public health and immorality, particularly if they threatened commerce or naval efficiency. Yet at the same time they also drew concerns relating to the inward flow of a multitude of maritime influences, drawn from the vast, shared continents of the oceans. As points of ingress from and egress to the wider world, they were sites for facilitating the dynamic exchange of goods, services (legal and illicit), ideas, beliefs, stories, and potentially less desirable things such as epidemic diseases; they marked the transition from work to leisure, from confinement to temporary liberation, and vice versa. As places of homecoming they were locations where their land-bound communities frequently looked out to the water and dwelt upon the risks of maritime endeavours, while mariners looked to the land for its promise of safe return, comparative liberty, and pleasures often long denied.

This confluence of outward and inward dynamics energised port town localities, granting them a distinctive cultural richness and vitality. Urban-maritime cultures offer the historian an opportunity to explore where cultural influences come from, how they variously jarred or merged in specific spatial localities, and ultimately how they become part of a gestalt culture embodied within the life experiences and representative imaginings of port towns. They illustrate how maritime practices and mentalities seeped into the city and how seafarers took their land-learned cultures with them to sea. Urban-maritime cultures are sites where domestic and far-flung foreign cultures from overseas met and cross-fertilised.

A number of themes emerge from the chapters in this section. These include a persistent, underlying concern with urban anxieties and maritime

'otherness', tensions between the cultures within sailortowns and the broader, authoritative urban power structures in which they coexisted, and the frequently fluid nature of personal and collective identities in the waterfront city. Firstly then, port town cultures were simultaneously constructed from within and without, generating iconic representations (both positive and negative) that derived from, but also vied with, the realities of lived urban-maritime experiences. Paul Gilchrist's exploration of song writing and maritime cultures in nineteenth-century Newcastle considers the shaping of social attitudes towards and representations of sailors, and the relationships between the everyday experiences of life in a port town and life at sea. Through its overview of poetry and song written by maritime workers, the chapter shows how sailors enjoyed a dual position from local versifiers, as both object of attachment and patriotism while also being subject to comic description and satire. Karl Bell's chapter explores the role of religion and religiosity in shaping representations of anxieties and enacted notions of otherness in Victorian Portsmouth. It examines the ways in which the rhetoric of religious authorities and moral reformers helped construct an image of Britain's premier naval town as a godless void, a place of heathen 'depravity'. Moving 'within' the town's community, it then considers Portmuthians' and naval seamen's popular religious mentalities, arguing that this fusion of Christian and 'superstitious' beliefs and practices offered sailors and their land-based families a sense of comfort and control over anxieties about the 'otherness' of life at sea.

The second key theme, the way port town cultures were shaped, negotiated, and policed through a web of civic, popular, moral and local narratives and discourses, is most evident in the contributions from Tomas Nilson and Tytti Steel. Nilson examines sailors and male violence in Gothenburg's sailortowns between 1880 and 1930. During that period Gothenburg became the largest commercial port town in Sweden, mainly due to extensive redevelopment of the harbour to facilitate larger ships. Gothenburg developed at least three different sailortowns during the period of his study. By using police records of the first and fourth precincts (the location of the three sailortowns), Nilson explores the behaviour of seamen ashore, and, more broadly, engages with the public debates concerning alcohol and the activities of the Seamen mission, which informed how those behaviours were viewed, constrained and managed. Steel's essay explores the relationship between sailors and local people in the Finnish cargo harbours of Helsinki and Kotka in the aftermath of the Second World War. Although rather isolated from Western

Europe in this period, Finland's harbours were open places of meeting and exchange between local women and foreign sailors. Steel's examination of the transnational nature of ports illustrate how Finnish women on the waterfront were subjected to complex moral and legal attitudes that forced them to negotiate a fine line between gaining respectability and being suspected of prostitution, and thus being cast permanently as a moral destitute; by engaging with sailors, the maritime 'other', local women risked othering themselves.

Finally, and appropriately to the liminal nature of urban-maritime spaces, port towns were sites of shifting cultural identities. As Nigel Worden, John Griffiths and Tytti Steel demonstrate, this could apply to sailors as they transitioned from sea to land, to the women who had relationships with them, and, more abstractly, to the mutable strength of port towns' imperial allegiances. Worden's study of eighteenth-century Cape Town examines how sailors' identities shifted in the context of being on land or at sea. He argues that, once ashore, sailors were disadvantaged in comparison to their status aboard ship by a lack of kinship contacts, ethnic and linguistic differences resulting from their European origins, and limited experience as transients within a colonial society. Using judicial records, Worden's study of conflict and honour in a colonial port town demonstrates both the transnational and transitional character of sailor culture and identity in the eighteenth-century Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds. John Griffiths's essay questions the extent to which Antipodean port cities sustained an imperial cultural identity between the 1880s and 1939. Through an exploration of crowd behaviour during the South African War of 1899 to 1902, celebrations on the imperial calendar, imperial loyalty leagues, and the staging of international exhibitions in the port city, Griffiths argues that imperial values implanted themselves in rather shallow soil. Increasingly challenging the cultural influx from the heart of the Commonwealth were the maritime cultural influences of the Pacific, especially from the USA as it increasingly made its presence felt in Antipodean port towns in the era of the Second World War.

## REPRESENTATIONS AND IDENTITIES

The second section of the book examines depictions of port towns across the globe, along with the people who lived, worked, visited, and were entertained within their urban-maritime environments. While cultural representations of the port and its inhabitants remain an underdeveloped

theme in urban and maritime history, the chapters in this section portray these maritime spaces as vibrant cultural melting pots where these representations were constructed, disseminated and challenged. The contributors explore how seafarers identified themselves in these land-based environments, as well as the ways in which those living in these port town localities viewed their fixed and transient sailor populations. Identities are, however, forged from ‘above’ as well as ‘below’, from ‘without’ as well as ‘within’, and these chapters also investigate how outsiders viewed the seafarers and local inhabitants of these port side communities, revealing how they offered cultural representations that spoke at a more national and imperial level, and where the port town communities’ sense of ‘otherness’ was never far from the surface.

Port towns have often been identified as sites of national prestige, principally due to their military or commercial importance, and as such, any questionable activities that took place within them were thrown into sharper relief than if they had occurred in more landlocked regions. Unease and anxiety caused by the raucous and at times criminal behaviour of sailors and local inhabitants in the port towns’ sailortown districts, and the authority and power structures that sought to deal with such behaviour, emerge as major themes within this section. Seafarers have long been known for their bawdy and drunken behaviour ashore and port towns have long-standing associations as dens of iniquity where such behaviour thrived, often fostered by the local inhabitants’ encouragement for pecuniary benefit. These elements are captured most visibly in Brad Beaven’s chapter on Ratcliffe Highway in nineteenth-century London. Drawing on contemporary reports and local newspapers, Beaven describes how social investigators were simultaneously attracted and horrified by the activities taking place in this maritime location, revealing that their explorations into this urban space were often little more than prurient voyeurism of its exotic ‘otherness’. Beaven suggests that the shifting attitudes towards bawdy behaviour in this sailortown district over the course of the century operated as a metaphor for changing class and gender relations in Britain at the time. Concerns over coarse behaviour in these sailortown locations were echoed in the naval port town of Plymouth, the subject of Robert James’s chapter. James charts the perceived descent of Plymouth’s sailortown district into a sink of immoral behaviour that ensured it became the subject of escalating dialogue among social commentators and civic leaders during the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, all of whom were eager to sanitise the types of leisure activity on offer in

the town. However, James shows how changing, more positive, official images of the Royal Navy led to the naval sailor being appropriated in the twentieth century as a cultural symbol in which to foster notions of masculinity and patriotism in the wider port town community.

The mechanisms of authority and control evident in Beaven's and James's chapters are shown to have operated at a more forceful level when dealing with behaviour of a more menacing kind. William M. Taylor's contribution exposes the port town as an ideal site in which fears of criminality could flourish due to the transient nature of much of the local population. However, Taylor reveals that they were equally sites where draconian measures could be taken to protect the maritime space from the dangerous forces that were deemed to prey on its inhabitants and transient communities. Taylor's chapter explores the connections between the port and deviant aspects of material accumulation in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century London, focussing particularly on those engaged in handling cargo in the port, legally or otherwise. He reveals how the construction of the enclosed (walled and secured) docks in the years following the Napoleonic war acted as a 'fortress' to curb any illicit transactions. The authorities' attempts at cleansing these urban-maritime spaces of their less salubrious identities are shown in even greater detail in Vivian Bickford-Smith's chapter examining the work of civic leaders in Durban, South Africa, as they tried to transform the port into a tourist destination between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. Bickford-Smith reveals that while the city's tourist guides promoted the port's evidently 'unique' customs and 'local colour', they also greatly sanitised its history, playing down its more sordid past and partly concealing its role as a major port and industrial centre.

Hanna Hagmark-Cooper's contribution examines more positive representations of port town communities by focussing on the network of sailors' wives in the Finnish Aaland Islands in the twentieth century. Through a body of oral and written testimonies, she explores the representation of the seafarers' wife as independent and formidable characters in community life when their husbands were away. Hagmark-Cooper uses these testimonies to tease out the various discourses upon which seafarers wives drew both at the time the events were experienced and when they were related. In doing so she demonstrates the extent to which social ideals fed into subjective identity, and how common discourses were constructed and sustained through individual narratives.

The shifting cultural representations of the port town community and environment are equally evident in the final chapter of this section, in which Jo Byrne reveals how closely bound the identities of these urban-maritime settings are to the labours that went on both within them and at sea. Drawing upon a body of oral history testimony, Byrne explores the loss of identity felt by the maritime community of Hull, UK, when the town's staple industry, distant-water trawling, catastrophically declined in the late twentieth century. Byrne reveals how the locals' sense of communal identity, cultivated by the port's distinct sailortown—or 'trawler-town'—district, vanished once its industry died. Without its fishing fleet, Byrne argues, the rhythms and the culture of the port disappeared, and once the town's relationship with the sea was broken, its identity was irrevocably lost.

The collection concludes with Isaac Land's assessment of how the notion of the coastal zone can better facilitate our understanding of urban-maritime cultures, historical and contemporary. To do this he proposes three types of 'coastal-urban forms': the urban foreshore, the urban offshore, and the urban estuary. This innovative conceptual framework enables us to start moving beyond narrow, singular categories such as 'sailortown', the 'waterfront', and, perhaps most challengingly of all, even the 'maritime' itself. In doing so, this collection seeks to depart from the harbour of familiar historiographical approaches to the urban-maritime context, turning instead towards the enticing but as yet unseen horizon of future developments in the field.