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978-0-521-19368-9 - Jack Tar's Story: The Autobiographies and Memoirs of Sailors in Antebellum America

Myra C. Glenn

Excerpt

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Introduction

Why Study Antebellum Sailor Narratives

Horace Lane (1789–1866) was in desperate trouble in the late 1830s. Alcoholism had destroyed both his health and seafaring career. It had also led to his imprisonment in Auburn and Sing Sing Prisons for burglary. By 1839 Lane was an ailing, destitute ex-convict and sailor with little family and no prospects for work. By contrast, Richard Henry Dana Jr. (1815–1882) came from a prominent New England family and had a bright future. A graduate of Harvard College and Law School, Dana began a long, prosperous career as an attorney, writer, and political activist in the early 1840s.¹

Despite their obvious differences, Dana and Lane shared common experiences. Both men were sailors on the high seas during the first half of the nineteenth century. Each also published an autobiographical narrative recalling their seafaring years. Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840) was a bestseller, earning its publisher Harper and Brothers \$10,000 in the first two years of publication.² By contrast, Lane's autobiography *The Wandering Boy* failed to attract much attention and had only one printing.³

¹ Chapter 1 discusses more fully the lives of Dana and Lane.

² Thomas Philbrick's introduction to Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast*, 18. The appendix lists the major sailor narratives used in this study and their bibliographic information.

³ *World Cat* lists only one edition of *The Wandering Boy*. *Nineteenth Century Masterlife: A Paratext Resource*, which lists citations to book reviews appearing in nineteenth-century periodicals and newspapers, does not mention Lane or any of his works.

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Lane's and Dana's books appeared when the American reading public sought stories about seafaring travels and adventures. Hundreds of short stories, novellas, and novels churned out tales about nefarious pirates, dashing naval officers, and beautiful women on the high seas. James Fenimore Cooper, now best remembered for his *Leatherstocking Tales*, first became a literary success through such sea novels as *The Pilot* and *Red Rover*, published respectively in 1824 and 1827. Herman Melville's sea novels, particularly *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847), earned him financial and critical success.⁴

There were also retired sailors who wrote their own works, even if they received some editorial assistance from friends and publishers. Like Lane, the majority of these men were impecunious hawkers of ephemeral tales that catered to the public's appetite for adventure and entertainment. After a career at sea, these men were often too sick or worn out to earn a decent living.⁵ Desperate for money, they peddled their yarns about adventure on the high seas or wrote exposés detailing abuses committed by arrogant, sadistic officers.⁶ Some also published memoirs and autobiographies. These works were generally longer and more introspective than the exposés, travelogues, and adventure narratives.⁷

⁴ Thomas Philbrick, *James Fenimore Cooper and the Development of American Sea Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), discusses these developments.

⁵ Although many antebellum ex-seamen achieved a modest competency for themselves, others lived impoverished lives. For recent studies of what happened to Jack Tar after his seafaring years ended, see Daniel Vickers with Vince Walsh, *Young Men and the Sea: Yankee Seafarers in the Age of Sail* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 156, 159–60; Vickers, "An Honest Tar: Ashley Bowen of Marblehead," *The New England Quarterly* 69, no. 4 (1996): 531–53; Simon P. Newman, *Embodied History: The Lives of the Poor in Early Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 104–24; Billy G. Smith, *The "Lower Sort": Philadelphia's Laboring People, 1750–1800* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 113–15, 142–43, 154–56, 173–75.

⁶ Such works were part of a mendicant literature peddled on urban streets. Richardson Wright, *Little Hawkers and Walkers in Early America: Strolling Peddlers, Preachers, Lawyers and Others from the Beginning to the Civil War* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, Co., 1927) and Ronald J. Zboray, *A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 37–54.

⁷ Louis Kaplan, comp., *A Bibliography of American Autobiographies* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1962), 362–63, lists seventy autobiographies and memoirs by sailors dealing with the 1800–1850 period.

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Who were the retired antebellum mariners who published their memoirs and autobiographies? How did these men remember and interpret their experiences at sea and in port? What common themes, rhetorical strategies, and tropes did they articulate? This book explores these questions by focusing on the self narratives of men who sailed on board American whalers, privateers, merchant and naval vessels during the first half of the nineteenth century.

It views sailor self narratives as a hybrid form of literature, one that straddled different kinds of literary genres. They were partly coming-of-age narratives, didactic reform works, war stories, picaresque rogue tales, captivity narratives, exposés of cruelty and injustice, and conversion narratives.

For as complicated and fractured as some sailor narratives were, they grappled with their authors' quest to achieve manhood and to resist what they saw as threats to their manliness. The concept of manliness was a contested one in antebellum America. Traditional notions of masculinity that prized physical prowess, combativeness, and roistering were increasingly challenged by an evangelical model of manhood that stressed piety, self-restraint, and rejection of the pastimes associated with "rough" masculinity, such as drinking, whoring, and brawling. Irrespective of which model of manhood one subscribed to, however, most antebellum Americans agreed that a "manly" man was one who was brave in battle and defended his rights and freedoms against whoever or whatever threatened them.⁸

A major purpose of this book is to explore sailor autobiographies and memoirs as texts that tell multiple, at times conflicted, stories

⁸ Numerous works in the historiography of antebellum masculinity, especially working-class masculinity, note these characteristics. See, for example, Bruce Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women: Gender in the Antebellum City* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), esp. 14–28; Gregory L. Kaster, "Labour's True Man: Organized Workingmen and the Language of Manliness in the USA, 1827–1877," *Gender & History* 13, no. 1 (April 2001): 24–64; Michael Kaplan, "World of the B'hoys: Urban Violence and the Political Culture of Antebellum New York City, 1825–1860" (PhD diss., New York University, 1996); Kaplan, "New York City Tavern Violence and the Creation of a Working-Class Male Identity," *Journal of the Early Republic* 15 (Winter 1995): 591–617. See also Amy S. Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), esp. 135–69; Greenberg, *Cause for Alarm: The Volunteer Fire Department in the Nineteenth-Century City* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 9, 60–70, 87.

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about the contested meanings of manhood in antebellum America. Another goal of this study is to examine how seamen narratives contributed to Americans' sense of nationalism during the 1820–1860 era. In addressing this issue the book builds on the work of Benedict Anderson and other scholars who have explored how print culture helped forge a sense of national identity in the antebellum United States.⁹ This monograph argues that sailor authors often intertwined the themes of manhood and nationalism in their life stories.

The majority of the seamen authors discussed in this study fought in the War of 1812. All of the men also served on board American vessels at a time when the young nation was emerging as a major maritime power during the approximate period 1815–1860. Sailors' service on board American men-of-war, merchant vessels, and whalers during this time made possible the transatlantic market economy that enriched the United States while protecting it from Britain and other foreign powers.¹⁰

In recounting their military exploits and world travels antebellum sailor memoirists and autobiographers were not offering merely adventure yarns. They highlighted the vital role mariners played in making the United States a major power. Their narratives reminded American landsmen that the skeins of sailors' lives were woven into the fabric of their country, even though many of these men were absent for years from the United States.

Even more importantly, these life stories affirmed many Americans' belief that their nation was at the cusp of greatness. They portrayed Jack Tar as the embodiment of an exuberant, even strident, American

⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (1983; repr., London: Verso, 2006), esp. 37–46; David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776–1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); see also Trish Loughran, *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building, 1770–1870* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

¹⁰ George C. Daughan, *If By Sea: The Forging of the American Navy – From the American Revolution to the War of 1812* (New York: Basic Books, 2008); Ian W. Toll, *Six Frigates: The Epic History of the Founding of the U.S. Navy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006); Benjamin W. Labaree and others, *America and the Sea: A Maritime History* (Mystic, CT: Mystic Seaport Press, 1998), 164–335; Britton Cooper Busch, “Whaling Will Never Do For Me”: *The American Whalemen in the Nineteenth Century* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994).

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nationalism. Seaman narratives also illuminated how antebellum public discourses about nationalism resonated with those about manhood; how at times these discourses intersected, especially when sailors recalled besting the enemies of the United States.¹¹

Jack Tar's Story develops the arguments outlined above in five chapters. The first views sailor autobiographies and memoirs as coming-of-age narratives. It analyzes three themes that shaped sailors' recollections of their early lives and quest for manhood by shipping out to sea: escape, freedom, and captivity. The next two chapters focus on sailors' recollections of the international conflicts that roiled their seafaring years during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. [Chapter 2](#) examines sailor authors' accounts of resisting British impressments and incarceration as prisoners of war, and also their participation in the War of 1812. [Chapter 3](#) explores how mariners depicted the Haitian Revolution and the Latin American wars of independence. Both chapters discuss how attitudes about manhood, tyranny, and patriotism shaped the ways in which sailor authors recounted their experiences in captivity and in combat. In discussing these issues, the third chapter argues that seamen authors contributed to antebellum Americans' sanitized view of their revolution by stressing the shortcomings of the wars of independence in Haiti and Latin America. [Chapter 4](#) examines sailor autobiographies and memoirs as exposés of American cruelty. It explores sailors' discussion of harsh discipline, especially floggings, on board American vessels. This chapter analyzes why sailor authors viewed such punishment as threatening both their manhood and the welfare of the nation. Another vantage point from which to view sailor texts is to see them as conflicted rogue tales and conversion narratives, the subject of [chapter 5](#). It explores how sailor authors depicted the raucous pastimes of the waterfront culture and their ambivalent responses to religious revivals and evangelical reform. Discussion of such issues suggests that many sailor authors straddled conflicting notions of manhood.

¹¹ Historians have begun exploring how sailor doggerel and tattoos also articulated these themes: Dan Hicks, "True Born Columbians: The Promises and Perils of National Identity for American Seafarers of the Early Republican Period" (PhD. diss., The Pennsylvania State University, 2007); Newman, *Embodied History*, esp. 117, 119–21.

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It is important at the outset of this book to define key terms and to distinguish *Jack Tar's Story* from earlier historical studies on antebellum maritime life. Although many scholars use the terms autobiography and memoir interchangeably, they refer to different kinds of self narratives. Autobiographies examine authors' entire lives up to the production of their narratives. They offer a "chronology of self."¹² By contrast, memoirs generally focus on a particular experience or time in the author's life. Often they deal with the author's participation in a major historical event.¹³ This book will investigate both memoirs and autobiographies.

Although *Jack Tar's Story* builds on the historiography of antebellum maritime life, it differs from this scholarship in several crucial ways. First, this book is not primarily concerned with using sailor narratives to describe the lives of mariners during the Age of Sail. The rich body of work produced by Paul Gilje, Margaret Creighton, and other historians has already done this.¹⁴ Instead this book focuses on sailor narratives themselves to explore how mariner authors remembered, interpreted, their years at sea; how the lens of memory shaped their life stories.

Jack Tar's Story is also distinctive because it is the first study to systematically investigate the veracity of sailor narratives by using a wide variety of institutional records. These include: ships' logs, crew lists, pension files, impressment and prisoner-of-war records from both the American and British navies, census reports, and records

¹² Paula S. Fass, "Memoir Problem," *Reviews in American History* 34, no. 1 (March 2006), endnote 5, 122. See also Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, ed. John Paul Eakin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), viii.

¹³ Russell Baker and William Knowlton Zinsser, ed., *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1987), 21, and Robert F. Sayre, *The Examined Self: Benjamin Franklin, Henry Adams, Henry James* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964), 6–7.

¹⁴ Paul Gilje, *Liberty on the Waterfront: American Maritime Culture in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Margaret S. Creighton, *Rites and Passage: The Experience of American Whaling, 1830–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); see also Hicks, "True Born Columbians"; Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000); Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

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from the Sailors' Snug Harbor, the home for elderly and chronically ill seamen in Staten Island, New York.

By grounding mariners' autobiographical works in historical documentation, *Jack Tar's Story* seeks to complicate and enrich scholars' analysis of these texts. It especially challenges historians to explore the critical difference between what actually happened to antebellum mariners and how they interpreted, presented, that past in their autobiographies and memoirs. This book also cautions historians against accepting at face value self narratives purportedly written by former sailors. This point bears stress since at times historians have cited texts as genuine sailor autobiographies when they were actually works of fiction.

One such work was *A Short Sketch of the Life of Elijah Shaw*, published in 1843 and allegedly written by an ex-mariner who claimed he fought in all four of the United States' naval wars during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: the Quasi War with France (1798–1801), the wars against the major Barbary States, Tripoli (1802–1805) and Algiers (1815–1816), and the War of 1812 with Great Britain. He also said he experienced captivity in Tripoli and impressment by British press gangs.¹⁵ Shaw's narrative offers a riveting story of combat, heroism, suffering, and narrow escapes from death. But it is the proverbial "too good to be true" tale. Extant naval documents do not list Elijah Shaw as a crew member on the ships he claimed to be on.¹⁶

¹⁵ Elijah Shaw, *A Short Sketch of the Life of Elijah Shaw...*, 3rd ed. (Rochester, NY: Strong & Dawson Printers, 1843). Like many antebellum works, Shaw's text claimed there were earlier editions. But *World Cat* indicates no editions before 1843. For a recent citation of Shaw's narrative as a genuine autobiographical narrative, see Toll, *Six Frigates*, 111 and 368.

¹⁶ Naval records, for example, contradict Shaw's claim that he served as ship's cooper on board the USS *Constellation* when it captured the French frigate *L'Insurgente* on February 9, 1799 (7). His name does not appear on the ship's crew list and a Thomas Kelly is listed as ship's cooper. See *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War Between the United States and France...* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1935), 1:304–16. Shaw claimed he was a carpenter on board the *Philadelphia* when it was captured by Tripoli on October 31, 1803 (16–17). Yet his name does not appear on the crew list and a William Godby is listed as ship's carpenter. See *Naval Documents Related to the United States Wars with Barbary Powers* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1944), 6:276, 285–86, 484.

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A Short Sketch of the Life of Elijah Shaw illustrates what the literary scholar Laura Browder has described as “impersonator autobiographies,” texts written by individuals who fabricated their stories.¹⁷ Scholars have yet to determine why such fictional narratives claimed to be genuine autobiographies. No doubt various motives, besides the obvious desire to make money, promoted the writing and publication of such works.

This author leaves the analysis of “impersonator autobiographies” to others. *Jack Tar's Story* examines only those texts which can be documented as genuine autobiographies or memoirs. When determining the validity of these works the author has erred on the side of caution, omitting discussion of texts for which there was insufficient or contradictory historical documentation.

Of course to raise the issue of the authenticity of seamen narratives is to plunge into the thicket of recent controversies concerning the truthfulness of autobiographical writing. Although it is beyond the scope of *Jack Tar's Story* to discuss this controversy in detail, several salient points are pertinent. First, some contemporary scholars charge that all autobiographical narratives are fictional constructs, self-referential works with no meaning outside the text. Not surprisingly, poststructuralists in particular have made this argument. Paul De Man, for example, in a famous 1974 essay entitled “Autobiography as De-facement,” declared that autobiographies were a fiction which could not reveal “reliable self-knowledge” since they did not refer to a world outside the text.¹⁸

Scholars from different fields, especially cognitive psychology, literary studies, and history, have argued persuasively against this view. They have shown that the subjective nature of autobiographies and memoirs does not preclude their ability to refer to a world outside the text. Self narratives, they assert, are not only literary constructs but also historical documents since they are grounded in a referential world, subject to empirical verification. Autobiographies and memoirs, therefore, are inherently interdisciplinary. They straddle both literature and history.¹⁹

¹⁷ Laura Browder, “Fake Autobiographies: A Great American Tradition” <http://hnn.us/articles/21679.html> (accessed February 13, 2006).

¹⁸ Paul De Man, “Autobiography as De-Facement,” *MLN* 94, no.5, Comparative Literature (December 1979), 919–30, esp. 922.

¹⁹ Major theoreticians Philippe Lejeune and John Paul Eakin stress this point. See Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, 22, 119–37, and Eakin's introduction to *ibid.*, ix–x,

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Numerous scholars have also stressed that autobiographical works are deeply embedded in the society that produces them. These texts reflect the language, values, and models of self available to the author/protagonist in his particular culture. It is for this reason that one of the leading scholars of American autobiography John Paul Eakin urges students to approach self narratives much as a cultural anthropologist would an artifact.²⁰ Ultimately autobiographies and memoirs are cultural constructs that illuminate not only the particular life of the author/protagonist but also the society in which they were produced.

In recent years historians have devoted increasing attention to the study of autobiographical works. Ironically the linguistic turn in history has promoted this development. Recognition that all historical documents are what Hayden White calls “fictions of factual representation,” has encouraged historians to be less dismissive or suspicious of self narratives.²¹ As books by Julie Roy Jeffrey, Alfred Young, and

xxi. See also Eakin's own works, esp. *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 3–59; *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 23–31, 59, 64–67, and *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self Invention* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 5–7, 181–206. See also James Olney, *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), 3–50; George Gusdorf, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography” and Robert F. Sayre, “Autobiography and the Making of America,” both in James Olney, ed., *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 28–48, 146–68; Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960), 61–84, 179–95. Cognitive psychologists argue that simply because autobiographical memories are complex reconstructions rather than snapshots or exact retrievals of the past does not mean that they are fabrications or fictions. In fact they note that autobiographical memories are fundamentally accurate in retelling the gist or core of a person's life story. See Daniel L. Schacter's books, esp. *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 93–95; *Seven Sins of Memory: How the Mind Forgets and Remembers* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), 5–6; see also Craig R. Barclay, “Schematization of Autobiographical Memory,” in David C. Rubin, ed., *Autobiographical Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 82–84, 95, 97. For historians' discussions of the validity of autobiographical works as historical documents, see the works cited in endnote 22.

²⁰ Eakin, *Touching the World*, 71–137, 94, 144 and *Living Autobiographically*, 22–31, 100–30.

²¹ Hayden White, “Fictions of Factual Representation” in Anna Green and Kathleen Troup, eds., *The Houses of History: A Critical Reader in Twentieth-Century History and Theory* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 214–229.

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other scholars illustrate, studies that place such texts at the center of historical inquiry have become a cottage industry in the profession.²²

Jack Tar's Story contributes to the rapidly growing historiography of autobiographical narrative. It recognizes that antebellum mariners had multiple agendas when they told their life stories. Eager to attract paying readers in a crowded literary market, they peppered their stories with tales of adventure on the high seas, travel to exotic places, and graphic descriptions of battles, storms, piracy, and impressments. These stories were grounded in fact. Sailors were world travelers, the pioneers of an expansive global frontier. They did suffer horribly from various manmade and natural disasters and they did have all sorts of adventures in exotic places.

Yet if their stories were based on fact, many sailors shaped their narratives to expose various abuses they had suffered, to gain the sympathy of the public, and of course to earn badly needed revenue. No doubt there were times when they padded their life stories, exaggerating or minimizing certain experiences. Like most autobiographies and memoirs, sailors' narratives straddle the boundary between fact and fiction.

In exploring these works *Jack Tar's Story* takes to heart what biographer Vincent Carretta noted about his subject, Olaudah Equiano, the late-eighteenth-century ex-slave, mariner, and autobiographer. Equiano, stated Carretta, had a "double vision" or "dual identity" as he wrote his narrative. Equiano was "speaking both from within

²² Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Abolitionists Remember: Antislavery Autobiographies & the Unfinished Work of Emancipation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Alfred F. Young, *Masquerade: The Life and Times of Deborah Sampson, Continental Soldier* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004); Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999). See also David W. Blight, *A Slave No More: Two Men Who Escaped to Freedom, Including their own Narratives of Emancipation* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Inc., 2007); Sarah J. Purcell, *Sealed With Blood: War, Sacrifice, and Memory in Revolutionary America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002); Ann Fabian, *The Unvarnished Truth: Personal Narratives in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Mechal Sobel, *Teach Me Dreams: The Search for Self in the Revolutionary Era* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Joyce Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Mary Jo Maynes, *Taking the Hard Road: Life Course in French and German Workers' Autobiographies in the Era of Industrialization* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).