To Swear Like a Sailor

Anyone could swear like a sailor! Within the larger culture, sailors had pride of place in swearing. But how they swore and the reasons for their bad language were not strictly wedded to maritime things. Instead, sailor swearing, indeed all swearing during this period, was connected to larger developments. This book traces the interaction between the maritime and mainstream worlds in the United States while examining cursing, language, logbooks, storytelling, sailor songs, reading, images, and material goods. To Swear Like a Sailor offers insight into the character of Jack Tar – the common seaman – and into the early republic. It illuminates the cultural connections between Great Britain and the United States and the appearance of a distinct American national identity. This book explores the emergence of sentimental notions about the common man – through the guise of the sailor – on stage, in song, in literature, and in images.

Paul A. Gilje is a George Lynn Cross Research Professor at the University of Oklahoma, Norman. His book Liberty on the Waterfront (2003) won the best book award from the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic. He is the author or editor of ten other books, including the most recent, Free Trade and Sailors’ Rights in the War of 1812 (2013). He has lectured throughout the United States and in Europe and has received numerous grants to support his research. In 2009–10, he served as president of the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic.
To Swear Like a Sailor

Maritime Culture in America, 1750–1850

PAUL A. GILJE

University of Oklahoma, Norman
To my brother, Stephen Gilje
and my sister, Kathleen Gilje
## Contents

*List of Illustrations* |

*Acknowledgments*

*List of Abbreviations* |

**Introduction** |

1. To Swear Like a Sailor |
   - Son of a Bitch  |
   - Damn  |
   - Bitch  |
   - Gender and Sentimentalization  |
   - Implications  |

2. The Language of Jack Tar |
   - Cooper and Melville  |
   - The Anglo-American Stereotype  |
   - Americanization  |
   - Image and Reality  |

3. The Logbook of Memory |
   - What is a Logbook?  |
   - The Logbook as Journal  |
   - The Journal as Logbook  |
   - Becoming Literature  |

4. Spinning Yarns |
   - Origins  |
   - Why Spin a Yarn?  |
   - Book-Length Yarns  |

© in this web service Cambridge University Press  
www.cambridge.org
## Contents

5 Songs of the Sailorman

   English Ballads and Sea Songs 134
   The Elevation of Jack Tar 149
   American Legacy 157
   The Heyday of Sailor Song 169

6 The Pirates Own Book

   Pirates, Captivity, and Shipwreck 182
   Beyond Disaster 202
   Religion 215

7 Tar-Stained Images

   Imagining Jack Tar 225
   The Art of the Sailor 246
   Epilogue: The Sea Chest 263
   Appendix: A Note on Logbooks and Journals Kept at Sea 274

Notes 277

Bibliography of Primary Sources 345

Index 375
Illustrations

1.1 “The Sailors Farewell,” Henry Hudson, 1785 page 25
1.2 “The Sailors Adieu,” Baille and Sowle, ca 1845 26
2.1 “Sailors Drinking the Tunbridge Waters,” Thomas Rowlandson, 1815 45
2.2 “Jack in a White Squall, Amongst Breakers – on the Lee Shore of St. Catherine’s,” Thomas Tegg, 1811 46
2.3 “The Last Jig, or, Adieu to Old England,” Thomas Rowlandson and Thomas Tegg, 1818 47
3.1 Log of the Acastus, kept by Francis A. Burnham, 1817 72
3.2 Log of the Catherine, kept by Ebenezer William Sage, 1809 73
3.3 Log of the Emiline, kept by Washington Fosdick, 1843–44 83
3.4 Log of the Clara Bell kept by Robert Weir, 1856 87
4.1 “The Sailor’s Description of a Chase & Capture,” George Cruikshank, 1822 111
4.2 “Jack Telling His Stories,” in Francis C. Woodwoth, Jack Mason, The Old Sailor (New York: Clark, Austin & Smith, 1855) 116
5.1 “The Americans,” John Palmer Papers, 1776–86 153
5.2 “Wives & Sweethearts or, Saturday Night,” 1792 159
5.3 Music from Log of the Ann and Hope, kept by Benjamin Carter, 1799–1800 163
Illustrations

5.4 “Yankee Chronology, or Huzza for the American Navy, Songs, Ballads, &c. In Three Volumes. Purchased from a Ballad Printer and Seller in Boston,” 1811–18 166


6.2 “Piratical Station – Isle of Madagascar,” The Pirates Own Book … (Philadelphia: Thomas Cowperthwait & Co., 1839) 190


6.5 “The Sailor Boy” 200

7.1 “A Bug-a-boo to frighten John Bull, or the Wright mode for kicking up a Bubbery …,” James Akin [1806] 230

7.2 “The Bloody Arena,” James Akin [1806] 233

7.3 “The Cat Let Out of the Bag,” by William Charles, 1808 236

7.4 “Sailors Glee,” James Akin, (Newburyport: James Akin, 1805) 239

7.5 “The Boatswain’s Mate,” Naval Magazine, 1 (November 1836) 241

7.6 “Father Neptune Crossing the Line,” Hawser Martingdale, Tales of the Ocean, and Essays for the Forecastle … (New York: John Slater, 1840) 243

7.7 “Death of S’ip,” J. Fenimore Cooper, The Red Rover, A Tale (New York: W.A. Townsend, 1859) 244

7.8 “Ship Arab,” Log of the Arab, kept by Ephraim Harding, 1842–45 248

7.9 Scrimshaw 257

7.10 Busk 260
Acknowledgments

Although most of this book has been written since 2011, some of the writing and much of the research and thinking reach back decades as I labored on earlier projects. Over the course of this time span I have incurred many debts.

It costs money to do research, especially to travel to manuscript collections. Since 2008 I have been a George Lynn Cross Research Professor at the University of Oklahoma, which carries with it an annual research account. Before this award I was fortunate to have received numerous grants from the University of Oklahoma which all told add up to many thousands of dollars. I want to thank Paul Bell and Kelly Damphousse, who have served as deans in the College of Arts and Sciences during the writing of this book. The Office of the Vice President for Research under the leadership of first Lee Williams and now Kelvin Droegemeier has been the source of several research grants. Likewise I want to acknowledge two provosts – Nancy Mergler and Kyle Harper – for their support. Kyle, who is a classicist, also provided an important Latin translation for one of the images. President David Boren has offered inspirational leadership at the University of Oklahoma for more than twenty years and deserves to be singled out for creating and sustaining an intellectual atmosphere that values research and scholarship.

Because this book builds on the research I did for my Liberty on the Waterfront, the same institutional support I had for that book should also be acknowledged in this one. My first forays into maritime history began during a Rockefeller Resident Fellowship at the program of Atlantic History and Culture at Johns Hopkins University in 1987–88. I continued my exploration of sailors during the spring of 1991 at the
Acknowledgments

Center for the History of Freedom, Washington University, St. Louis, under the directorship of Richard Davis. My work for Liberty on the Waterfront was also supported by funding from the Massachusetts Historical Society, the Peabody Essex Museum, a summer stipend from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and two grants from the Oklahoma Humanities Council. Since the publication of Liberty on the Waterfront in 2004, I have received additional support for research and writing. In November 2008 I spent a wonderful month gearing up to begin writing To Swear Like a Sailor at the C. V. Starr Center for the Study of the American Experience in Chestertown, Maryland, only to find myself immersed in another project – Free Trade and Sailors’ Rights in the War of 1812. I owe a special thanks to Adam Goodheart for arranging my stay in Chestertown and to Jill Ogline Titus, Michael Buckley, and Jennifer Emily for facilitating my work at the Starr Center. As I explain in the introduction to Free Trade and Sailors’ Rights in the War of 1812, that book was supposed to be a chapter in this one but grew into a project all its own. After finishing this side project in 2011, I returned to my original plan of action and was able to complete a draft of To Swear Like a Sailor by the summer of 2014. I was particularly fortunate not to have a teaching assignment in the spring of 2014 and was able to focus all of my efforts on writing as a research associate at the McNeil Center for Early American Studies in Philadelphia. I thank Dan Richter for this opportunity and cherish my time working in that hotbed of scholarly activity surrounded by so many young and incredibly active minds. I especially appreciate the friendship of Katy Hemphill, my officemate, and Brenna O’Rourke Holland, whose office was across the hall. I also want to thank Amy Baxter Bellamy and Barbara Natello for everything they did to make my sojourn at the McNeil Center so pleasant and easy. I would also like to thank John Dixon for reading the chapter on logbooks and Alp Atay for assistance in running down some of the sources on Hugh Calhoun.

All researchers owe a great deal to librarians and libraries. The University of Oklahoma Library has been a refuge and incredible resource for me ever since I arrived on campus in 1980. My small library study has provided me with the space to research and write. And the staff of the library has always been helpful in the extreme, especially the interlibrary loan office and Laurie Scrivener, the history librarian. Beyond the confines of my own institution I am grateful for the assistance of the wonderful staffs at the following repositories: the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, Center for Maine
Acknowledgments

History, Connecticut Historical Society, the G. W. Blunt White Library at Mystic Seaport, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, the Kendall Whaling Museum, the Library of Congress, the Marblehead Historical Society, the Maryland Historical Society, the Massachusetts Historical Society, the Mariners’ Museum, the Nantucket Historical Association, the National Archives in New York and Washington, DC, the New Bedford Free Public Library, the New Hampshire Historical Society, the New-York Historical Society, the New York Public Library, the Old Dartmouth Historical Society at the New Bedford Whaling Museum, the Newport Historical Society, the Phillips Library at the Peabody Essex Museum, the Providence Public Library, and the Rhode Island Historical Society. Since I visited some of these libraries two decades ago, some of the staff have moved on or retired, while others have continued to render wonderful service to new generations of scholars. Whether they are still in the same institutions or not, I would like to single out a number of individuals who have been particularly helpful to me, and to especially thank a few people whose guidance in their archives was invaluable, including Paul O’Pecko, Chris White, and Kelly Drake at Mystic Seaport, Conrad Wright and Peter Drummey at the Massachusetts Historical Society, Michael P. Dyer at the Kendall (now part of the New Bedford Whaling Museum), Betsy Lowenstein at the Nantucket Historical Association, Tina Furtado at the New Bedford Free Public Library, Judith Downey at the New Bedford Whaling Museum, Rick Stattler at the Rhode Island Historical Society, Rick Sanger at the Providence Public Library, and William T. La Moy, Kathy Flynn, Charity Galbreath, and Irene Axelrod at the Phillips Library. I want to acknowledge the assistance I received in working on the images from Anna J. Clutterbuck-Cook, Massachusetts Historical Society; Louisa Alger Watrous, Mystic Seaport; Mark D. Procknik, New Bedford Whaling Museum; Nicole Joniec, Library Company; Jackie Penny, American Antiquarian Society; Peter Harrington, curator, Anne S. K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library; J. D. Kay, Rhode Island Historical Society; and Kristen McDonald and Susan Chase Jones, Yale University Library.

I wrote the original draft of the first chapter long before completing the rest of this book. I therefore had the opportunity to present it in a number of public forums. Needless to say there was always an audience for an academic paper on swearing and plenty of questions that have helped me to refine and rethink my argument. The first time I “swore like a sailor” at an academic conference – at least from a podium – was at the 2003
Acknowledgments

Organization of American Historians conference in Memphis, Tennessee. I also presented “To Swear Like a Sailor: Cursing in the American Age of Sail,” as a Presidential Lecture at Old Dominion University as well as at Carleton College, Northfield, Minnesota; the McNeil Center for Early American Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and the Phi Alpha Theta Oklahoma Regional Conference, Cameron University, Lawton, Oklahoma. In addition, under the title “The Worst and Most Profane Language I Have Ever Heard from Mortal Lips,” I offered my ideas on cursing at the C. V. Starr Center and Washington College, Chestertown, Maryland; the John Carter Brown Library, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island; the Glasgow Maritime Geographies Conference, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK; Warwick University, Coventry, UK; and East Anglia University, Norwich, UK. I have also presented an overview of my work to the staff at Mystic Seaport Research Library and Museum Collections and at the Phillips Library at the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts.

Beyond swearing in public, I have had too many private conversations about my research and writing to be able to recount them all. But I would especially like to thank the late Bill Pencak for his long friendship and support. Among the many other people with whom I have discussed this work I would like to single out Lisa Norling, Frank Cogliano, Simon Newman, John Brooke, Alan Taylor, Peter Onuf, Dan Richter, Serena Zabin, and Myra Glenn. My colleagues at the University of Oklahoma have always been supportive, especially Robert Griswold and James Hart, who have served as the chairs of the department. Cathy Kelly, Rachel Shelden, David Wrobel, Jennifer Davis, and Kevin Butterfield have been particularly helpful. Josh Piker and Fay Yarbrough (who have left the University of Oklahoma for greener pastures) also should be singled out. I have discussed my work with several graduate students, past and present, including Robyn Davis, Dan Moy, Bethany Mowry, Bryan Nies, Heather Walser, Billy Smith, Patrick Bottiger, and Bryan Rindfleisch. The staff of the history department – Barbara Million, Christa Seerdof, Jamie Adkins, and Bobby Collins – have been wonderful over the years. I have shared some of my ideas about cursing with my noontime running group in Norman: Fred Carr, Dave Sabatini, and Randy Kolar. At Cambridge University Press I truly appreciate the support of my good friend and editor, Lew Bateman.

I have been fortunate in having a great family. I dedicate this book to my brother, Stephen Gilje, and my sister, Kathleen Gilje. They have known me all my life and I must confess that as we were growing up

© in this web service Cambridge University Press  www.cambridge.org
Acknowledgments

they occasionally made me swear. But they have always loved, watched out for, and supported their younger brother. I owe more to them than they can ever imagine. I have two exceptional children – Erik and Karin – who have started their own careers and their own families and two great children-in-law, Beth Gilje and Joshua Hignight. My life has also been brightened by the arrival of my granddaughter, Rachel Brooklyn Gilje, as I was working on this book. My greatest blessing remains my wife, Ann. As a scholar I have occasionally stumbled upon a passage that speaks to me directly across the ages. The reader will find one such passage in this book in a line of poetry from the logbook of Thomas Nicolson. “Amazing was thy love! God of my life / Hannah thou gavest me for a partner! Wife!” After more than forty years of marriage I understand Nicolson’s gratitude. I close these acknowledgments with a slight alteration to Nicolson’s words: “Amazing was thy love! God of my life / Ann thou gavest me for a partner! Wife!”
Abbreviations

Libraries and Museums

AAS  American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts
Beinecke  Yale Collection of Western Americana. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Room, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut
CHS  Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, Connecticut
HSP  Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
LC  Library of Congress, Washington, DC
MdHS  Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, Maryland
MeHS  Maine Historical Society, Portland, Maine
MHS  Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts
MM  The Mariners’ Museum Library, Newport News, Virginia
Mystic  G. W. Blunt White Library, Mystic Seaport, Mystic, Connecticut
NA  National Archives, Washington, DC
NBWM  New Bedford Whaling Museum, New Bedford, Massachusetts
NHS  Newport Historical Society, Newport, Rhode Island
NMM  National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, United Kingdom
ODHS  Old Dartmouth Historical Society (now part of NBWM)
PEM  Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts
### Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PPL</td>
<td>Nicholson Whaling Collection, Providence Public Library, Providence, Rhode Island</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RIHS</td>
<td>Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence, Rhode Island</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCSB</td>
<td>University of California, Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, California</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Journals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EIHC</td>
<td>Essex Institute Historical Collections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JER</td>
<td>Journal of the Early Republic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WMQ</td>
<td>William and Mary Quarterly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>