Articles of agreement: the Seamen's Union of Australia, 1904-1943 a study of antagonised labour

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ARTICLES OF AGREEMENT:
THE SEAMEN'S UNION OF AUSTRALIA, 1904-1943;
A STUDY OF ANTAGONISED LABOUR.

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the
award of the degree

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by

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I HEREBY CERTIFY that the work embodied in this thesis is the result of original research and has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution.

Donald Fraser
This thesis examines the faulty relationship between leader and led which inhibited the establishment of democratic process within the Seamen's Union of Australasia, under successive leaders, in the period from 1918 to 1943. In arguing that the leaders of the union during that time allowed the pursuit of their particular ideological agendas to supplant the interests of the union's membership, it has been necessary to lay stress upon the peculiarity of the maritime workplace. This was a workplace that was not only occupied but inhabited by the merchant seaman. It is contended here that the special circumstances of the maritime workplace were such as to render seamen vulnerable to exploitation not only at the hands of their employers but also at the hands of their industrial leaders.

It is shown here that for the membership of the Seamen's Union of Australasia the period 1918-1943 was one of division and convulsion. None of the leaders that this work considers in historical succession was able to rectify the prevailing situation, regardless of their widely varying ideological agendas that ranged from utopian socialism through anarchistic individualism to realpolitik. It is argued that as a consequence of the breakdown of social polity within their industrial association, Australian merchant seamen were subjected to manipulation by forces that were beyond their power to control. Alienated from a landward society that was little aware of their special circumstances and that was generally unsympathetic, the seamen became an antagonised occupational group. Thus, by 1943, they were readily available for deployment in support of an ideology that was not of their making.

This thesis necessitates consideration not only of the physical circumstances but of the psychological consequences of seafaring in the development of an attitude and
subsequent behavioural patterns within the historical period under examination. It has also been necessary to take a number of contextual themes into consideration. Thus, shipping being crucial to the economic viability of the nation, maritime industrial relations routinely involved recourse to the coercive power of the state. And, since it was vital for Britain's economic interest to restrict competition in the operation of the liner link between the United Kingdom and Australasia, British 'shipping nationalism' had a dire effect upon the crewing of Australian ships. Then there is the matter of the widening gap between the levels of skill reserved for and exercised by ships' deck and engineer officers and those of the seamen, as recognised in the anachronistically punitive disciplinary clauses of the Navigation Act. Yet another theme is the internationalism of seamen which while making them conscious of their advantages in comparison to other national seamen, also rendered them apprehensive of disadvantage. Australian seamen feared regression to the conditions endured by British national seamen. Worse still was their fear of supersession by those 'superexploited' Asian, African, and Indian seamen who under the terms of Asian articles sailed in many ships of Great Britain's merchant fleet, a situation that gave point to the factional power struggles which occurred within the body of the union.
DEDICATION.

I dedicate this study to the merchant seamen with whom, in former days, I sailed in order to earn a living.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT.

This work would have foundered without the supervision of Associate Professor Andrew Wells and Dr Ben Madison of the University of Wollongong. I am grateful to them for both their encouragement and their practical advice. I am also grateful to Emeritus Professor Jim Hagan for his advice early in the project and for steering me into the archives of the University of Wollongong, where I found much of value.

Unfailing courtesy was shown me by the librarians and archivists of the University of Wollongong, the Mitchell Wing of the State Library of New South Wales, the National Library in Canberra, and the Australian Archives in Mitchell ACT - for which I thank them. I am especially indebted to Michael Saclier and Emma Jolley of the Noel Butlin Centre at the Australian National University, custodians of a treasure-trove that now sadly is under threat.

And finally, I thank my wife and children for their forbearance during my absence on this prolonged voyage.
ABBREVIATIONS.

AA
Australian Archives, Canberra.

AB
Able-seaman.

ABL
Noel Butlin Archives of Business and Labour. ANU.

ACLS
Australian Commonwealth Line of Steamers.

ADB
Australian Dictionary of Biography.

AGM
Annual General Meeting.

AIMPE
Australian Institute of Marine and Power Engineers.

AMWU
Amalgamated Marine Workers' Union.

ASU
Australian Seamen's Union.

AUSN
Australian United Steam Navigation Company.

BHP
Broken Hill Proprietary Company.

BISN
British India Steam Navigation Company.

BSU
British Seafarers' Union.

CAR
Commonwealth Arbitration Reports.

CC
Central Committee (Communist Party of Australia).

CE
Central Executive (Communist Party of Australia).

CGL
Commonwealth Government Line.

CIB
Commonwealth Investigation Branch.

CoM
Committee of Management.

CPA
Communist Party of Australia.

CPD
Commonwealth of Australia, Parliamentary Debates.

CPP
Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers.

CPSU
Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

CPUSA
Communist Part of the United States of America.

CSOA
Commonwealth Steamship Owners Association.

ECCI
Executive Committee Communist International.

FIA
Federated Ironworkers' Association of Australia.

FRO
Federal Returning Officer (Seamen's Union of Australia).

FSUA
Federated Seamen's Union of Australasia.

IWW
Industrial Workers of the World.

LSA
Licensed Seamen's Association.
MHR
Member of the House of Representatives.

MIC
Maritime Industry Commission.

ML
Mitchell Wing, State Library of New South Wales.

MMM
Militant Minority Movement.

MM
Minority Movement (of the MMM).

MMO
Mercantile Marine Office.

MP
Member of Parliament.

MSG
Merchant Service Guild.

MTC
Maritime Transport Council.

MWIU
Maritime Workers Industrial Union.

NLA
National Library of Australia, Canberra.

NSFU
National Sailors’ and Firemen’s Union.

NSW
New South Wales.

NUS
National Union of Seamen.

NZ
New Zealand.

NZSU
Seamen’s Union of New Zealand.

OS
Ordinary Seaman.

P&O
Peninsular & Oriental Steam Navigation Company.

PB
Political Bureau (Communist Party of Australia).

PDHC
Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons.

RAAF
Royal Australian Air Force.

RILU
Red International of Labour Unions.

SA
South Australia.

SJ
The Seamen’s Journal.

SMH
The Sydney Morning Herald.

SUA
Seamen’s Union of Australasia.

TUC
Trades Union Congress.

WA
Western Australia

WUA
University of Wollongong Archives.
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INTRODUCTION.

John Masefield sang romantically of the seafarer's "vagrant gypsy life".\(^1\) Richard Henry Dana, a pioneer advocate of seafarers' rights, wrote passionately of "obtaining justice and satisfaction for these poor men."\(^2\) Joseph Conrad, who as a master mariner had represented the shipowners' interest, spoke paternalistically of seamen. They were, he said: "Men hard to manage, but easy to inspire; voiceless men but men enough to scorn in their hearts the sentimental voices that bewailed the hardness of their fate."\(^3\) He mourned the passing of the pre-industrial sailing ship seamen who, no matter how exploited, "were strong and mute... effaced, bowed and enduring."\(^4\) Theirs were "simple hearts - ignorant hearts that know nothing of life, and beat undisturbed by envy or greed."\(^5\) But when it came to the de-skilled steamship seamen of the industrial age with their new sense of alienation, Conrad's tone became one of contempt.\(^6\) This new breed was "not our descendant, but only our successor."\(^7\) They were "the grown-up children of the discontented earth. They are less naughty, but less innocent; less profane, but perhaps

\(^1\)Masefield, *Sea-Fever*.
\(^2\)Dana, *Two Years Before the Mast*, p.100.
\(^3\)Conrad, *Nigger of the Narcissus*, p.30.
\(^4\)Ibid.
\(^5\)Ibid., p.36.
\(^6\)Skill is a recurrent theme within this thesis. Initially, it might be noted here that Bullen, who was contemporary with Conrad, described the steam-ship AB in 1900 as "...really only an unskilled labourer." Bullen, who had emerged from before the mast to attain chief officer rank in both sailing and steam ships commented that "...no skipper of a sailing ship dare take steamboat men, unless he has absolute proof that they know the work on board a sailing vessel." A few months in a steamship, he concluded, "rusts a sailor." And, "...what is wanted in a steamer is only a burly labourer who is able to steer - that is, as long as all goes well." Bullen, *Men of the Merchant Service*, pp.258, 262, 277. Mr Justice Higgins referred selectively to page 259 of Bullen's book in handing down his steamship seamen's award of 1911. 5CAR160-173. See also, Higgins Judgment 1911, A432/86 29/3433 FT2, p.11, AA. Higgins quoted Bullen's statement that "...an AB properly so called, is a skilled mechanic with great abilities". In fact, Bullen had been referring to the capability of an AB who had learned his duties in a sailing ship and had gone on to say that "...I must admit that the class of AB which is capable of answering to such a description as this is growing yearly smaller and smaller. That, of course, is the fault of steam... they are not wanted in steamships and so the supply dwindles with the demand." Bullen, *op cit*, p.259-260. The maritime historian, Sager, sees maritime legislation of the later 19th century as a consequence of a deteriorating labour force. Thus, Sager, *Seafaring Labour 1820-1914*, p.103.

There was one set of solutions for masters and officers, another for deckhands. The solution for masters and officers was examination and certification; for deckhands, enforcement of discipline by embedding punishment in the contractual relationship between employer and employee.

\(^7\)Conrad, *Mirror of the Sea*, p.73.,
also less believing; and if they had learned to speak they have also learned how to
whine.\(^8\) And who better to represent these 'whiners' than Donkin, the malingerer, "who
never did a decent day's work in his life, [and now] no doubt earns his living by
discoursing with filthy eloquence upon the right of labour to live."\(^9\)

There has been sufficient discourse since, as Trainor has pointed out, to achieve a
"clear location of maritime labour in the wider historiography of the labour movement,"\(^10\)
at least in the case of Australia, New Zealand and Britain. That the maritime workplace
has influenced the labour movement is clearly evident. As agents in that historical
process, however, the part played by seamen is less evident. Thus Rediker has observed
that though the domains of social, economic, working-class and maritime history have
found connection in the lives of merchant seamen, it yet remains to give effect to that
connection as an explanation of historical change. He sees need to "carry maritime history
into the mainstream of modern historical analysis."\(^11\) But how is it to be done? Sager,
too, in identifying maritime history as "a study of historical conjunctures in which
landward society interacts with the sea"\(^12\) considers it self-evident, at least to labour
historians, that such a study must be flawed "if events at sea are abstracted from their
landward context."\(^13\)

In all humility this thesis, which involves an examination of the struggle for
power within an Australian maritime trade union, does not aspire to bridge that great
divide which lies between the concerns of 'esoteric' maritime and mainstream history.\(^14\)

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\(^8\)Conrad, Nigger of the Narcissus, p 30.
\(^9\)ibid, p 174.
\(^10\)Trainor, 'The Historians and Maritime Labour,' Broeze, Research in Maritime History No.9, p.294.
p.337. A significant proportion of the historiography of modern Australian and New Zealand maritime
labour must be considered in terms of apologetics rather than historical analysis. In that category I would
include commissioned histories, which must inevitably defend the interests of those commissioning
them, such as those of Bollinger, Against the Wind; Broomham, Steady Revolutions; Buckley &
Klugman, The History of Burns Philp, Fitzpatrick & Cahill, The Seamen's Union of Australia; McKellar,
The AUSN Story; Page, Fitted for the Voyage; and Riley, The Iron Ships. Economic histories
of the shipping industry such as Bach's, A Maritime History of Australia, and Burley's, British Shipping
and Australia, give only passing if disparaging attention to maritime labour.
\(^12\)Sager, op cit, p.10.
\(^13\)ibid.
\(^14\)Broeze, 'Introduction', Broeze, op cit, p.xviii.
Rather, it attempts to heave a line across the watery gap between ship and shore preparatory to coming alongside. While stimulated by the need to link seaward and landward events in a wider appreciation of the maritime worker at a specific moment in the historical process, this work also responds to the recommendation of Richard Price that since the struggle for power is an important feature of trade union organisation, "it would be a real gain for the internal history of trade unionism to be written from this perspective."\(^\text{15}\) This thesis attempts to provide a realistic interpretation of what happened within the seamen's union, and it has been largely constructed from the union's existent archival records and from other primary source material that is directly relevant to those happenings. The availability of such evidence, rather than conjecture, has determined the scope of the study. An examination such as this, however, involves more than compiling a record of competition between discrete interest groups within a coherent organisation. This is an historical investigation of how leadership authority was constructed and maintained within the confines of a peculiar industrial organisation. Peculiar, in that while its professional leadership was at all times located within the mundane environment of the labour movement 'shoreside' it was, to borrow Johnson's phrase, "uncoupled from the lifeworlds" of its membership.\(^\text{16}\) For each working member of this union was a mariner and as such "a man of distances and distancing".\(^\text{17}\)

In the period considered here, when not signed on a ship's articles a seaman was unemployed. Unless he had ready access to an alternative means of sustenance, his time ashore was necessarily of limited duration. Consequently there was a certain inexorability in the routine of seafaring. Ashore, he was likely to experience a sense of transience and of alienation, for the seaman who had always just arrived or whose departure was imminent was never really part of shoreside society. Not for him the satisfactions of the


\(^{\text{17}}\)Mollat du Jourdan, *Europe and the Sea*, p.177.
intimate community life of the coal-miner with its network of familial relationships and its measured rhythmic alternation of work and domesticity.\textsuperscript{18}

It might be argued that the itinerant Australian rural worker, the shearer in particular, led a life similar to that of the seaman. Certainly the minimal standard of accommodation commonly provided by pastoralists for the shearers they employed is reminiscent of conditions endured by seamen. While pastoralist and shipowner were equally indifferent to the health, comfort and convenience of their employees there is similarity, too, in the strenuous nature of both shearing and seafaring and in the preponderance of young men engaged in both occupations.\textsuperscript{19} Just as onerous Masters and Servants legislation formed the precedent upon which the terms of shearing contracts were enforced by the state, so the terms of employment set out in the articles of agreement between masters and seamen were enforced by means of Australian legislation based upon the no-less onerous British Merchant Shipping Act of 1894, which was itself a compilation of earlier British legislation. And then there was the sense of fraternity common to both occupational groups, a sub-culture within the work environment, a sharing of grievances largely by word of mouth.\textsuperscript{20}

Shearing was a seasonal occupation in which men were engaged on a part-time basis that provided the relief of a regular alternation of activities. That relief was denied to the seaman who, as Mr Justice Higgins acknowledged in his judgment of 1911, were subject to a "general and unavoidable exile."\textsuperscript{21} Certainly the seaman could never lay claim to the independent status of many shearers whose social status as small-holders rendered their class position ambivalent. Then, too, as Merritt has described it shearing involved piece-work and as such attracted workers intent upon maximising their earnings in the limited time available. The shearer's occupation then, unlike that of the seaman, was by

\textsuperscript{19}Merritt, \textit{Making of the AWU}, pp.64-72. Also see Sager, \textit{op cit}, p.254.
\textsuperscript{20}Merritt, \textit{op cit}, p.100.
\textsuperscript{21}5CAR161.
nature competitive. Earning power, reputation, and self-esteem were dependent upon an individualistic capacity to out-perform.\textsuperscript{22} However, in any comparison drawn between the shearer and the seaman, the matter of identification is decisive. A land-bound Australian society readily identifies with the shearer - whether as a figure of reality or myth. Perceived as a symbol of the nation's egalitarian ethos and material well-being, the shearer retains his place within Australian popular culture. Not so the seaman. In an island continent, which has always been dependent upon the link provided by shipping for its economic survival, few Australians know anything of the merchant seaman and fewer still would care to identify with this alienated, even pariah-like, figure.

The seaman, in fact, is more an international than a national figure. Thus both Sager, in Canada, and Nelson, in the United States, observe that a seaman might well have more in common with the seamen of other nations than with his fellow countrymen. And as Sager also reminds us, the transnational influences to which the seaman was particularly vulnerable were often baneful.\textsuperscript{23} In that context, the British economic motive, that was fundamental to Brian Fitzpatrick's thesis and that has been explored more recently by economic historians such as Noel Butlin, Andrew Wells, and Luke Trainor must be taken into consideration. Throughout the period considered in this work, a period which Wells sees as one in which Australia laboured under an unstable economic and political regime,\textsuperscript{24} Australian merchant ships were identified in law as British. A commission of inquiry into Australian maritime legislation as late as 1976 reported that Australia did not possess its own exclusively national registry of ships. Ships were registered in Australia by Australian customs officers acting as agents of the British Government and since the Commonwealth Navigation Act contained no provisions for registration of ships exclusively in Australia's name, all ships that were registered in Australia were duly included in the British registry. Lack of an exclusively Australian register for Australian ships was considered by the commission to be not only a matter of

\textsuperscript{22}Merritt, \textit{op cit}, pp.82-83.
\textsuperscript{24}Wells, \textit{Constructing Capitalism}, p.166.
inconvenience when dealing with other countries, but detrimental to Australia's national prestige. While the Commonwealth Navigation Act provided "a corner post in the whole structure of maritime operations" and "a basis for the work and discipline of the men onboard the ship," in so doing it rendered Australia dependent upon British shipping legislation and "in many respects... still reflects British attitudes at the end of the nineteenth century."25

Burnett has concluded that, in the period 1820-1920, work for the unskilled and semi-skilled at least, though hard, "was a means to an end, not an end in itself". Even if that end was simply survival, there was life to be lived outside the factory gate. "Work was not a central, dominating influence."26 But for the seaman on articles it was, since both his working time and his leisure time were spent within the factory gate. There, he took his place at the bottom of a hierarchical social structure and was subjected to a particularly intrusive, restrictive and unrelenting code of discipline. Whether finding its precedent consciously or not in Dr Johnson's dictum,27 it has been both affirmed and denied that, like a prison, a ship may be categorised as a 'total institution' in which "all aspects of life are tightly controlled and scheduled by a central authority operating through a body of officials in order to fulfil the official aim of the institution."28 Certainly the seaman aboard his ship was restricted in all aspects of his life, as is the prisoner in gaol. He was confined within a 'territory' for long periods with a group of people not of his choosing among whom he must spend both his working hours and his periods of recreation. And the environment, at least during the period of this thesis, was unrelievably masculine. Differentiation between prison and shipboard life might be said to depend upon whether the individual's submission to his incarceration was or was not

26 Burnett, op cit, p.15.
27 "Why, sir, no man will be a sailor, who has contrivance enough to get himself into a jail; for, being in a ship is being in a jail, with the chance of being drowned." Boswell, Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, p.119.
voluntary. But then, depending upon the economic circumstances of the time, the degree of voluntarism involved when a seaman signed articles might well be minimal.

In investigating "the unromantic story of these seafaring workers" it is necessary to take into consideration what is known of the process of social-character development of merchant seamen as they have adapted to the cultural demands of life and work within isolated shipboard communities. And here there is opportunity to respond to Hobsbawm's recommendation that the historian should investigate "the internal logical cohesion of systems of thought and behaviour which fit in with the way in which people live in society in their particular class and in their particular situation of the class struggle."

In such communities, according to Fricke, "the relationships derived from working and living with others, from engaging in interdependent activities, are social relationships, and form the basis for the development of an occupational community." But within the integral "common living" of the shipboard community there existed a number of antagonistic occupational associations each of which was engaged in pursuit of its own interest. Throughout the period examined by this thesis, deck and engineroom ratings formed the base of the ship's social pyramid so that their association within the shipboard community might perhaps be said to have conformed to Lockwood's model of 'proletarian traditionalism' in which:

(a) the conception of social classes was viewed in dichotomous terms and as based on marked disparities of power; (b) career advancement was seen as either pointless or reprehensible; and (c) the typical orientation to work was solidaristic. In this last respect, then, relationships with superiors were defined as involving conflicts of interest; solidarity with workmates was valued and union organisation was seen as strength; work, while having an economic meaning, was viewed as a group activity and hence economic returns were at times sacrificed for solidarity and conformity with group norms; and ego involvement in work remained strong and was important.

29Sager, op cit, p.11
31Fricke, 'Seafarer and Community', in Fricke Seafarer and Community, p.1.
for the satisfaction of workers' expressive and affective as well as instrumental 'needs'.

According to that model a seaman's sense of identity was based upon his connection with his occupational group, in which case the more the seaman was dependent upon the strength that lay in unity, the weaker as an individual he must become. But, within his unusual occupational environment, the seaman did not entirely conform to such a convenient frame of reference. A unique attribute of seafaring was that seamen who, unlike their officers, were casual workers employed by the industry rather than long service company employees tended to exercise a degree of independence by moving from ship to ship regardless of company ownership. Thus Robert Shore, an able-seaman [AB] from the British ship Themistocles in Sydney in October 1925, stated: "I am a man who does not stay in a ship too long. I generally do one voyage in a ship and then change over." Lane found in the 1940s that other than among senior officers, and occasionally among such privileged ratings as chief stewards and bosuns, loyalty to a particular ship was unusual among merchant seamen. In fact, it was looked upon askance by the majority who greatly valued their 'independence.' Nelson considers that the seamen's "fabled 'independence'" was at times manifested in a tendency to rebellion and militancy. At other times, however, it would be demonstrated as an "anarchic individualism" that would induce seamen to leave a ship rather than seek amelioration of conditions by means of remedial industrial action. An excessively high turn-over of seamen in an individual ship might result and this has been identified by sociologists as the root cause of the seaman's difficulty in constructing "significant long-term work-situated primary relationships." But, in fact, the seaman's freedom to leave one ship upon completion of a voyage and to choose another at random (though only realisable in

33 Lockwood, 'Sources of Variation in Working Class Images of Society', cited in Poole, op cit, p.211
34 Fromm, Sane Society, p.69.
35 Transcript of Evidence Walsh/Johnson Deportation Board, Vol.4, p.886. A467/1 SF12/4 B32. AA.
36 Lane, Seamen's War, p.71.
37 Nelson, op cit, p.32
38 ibid, p.33.
times of full employment) was also his defensive mechanism against the insidious effects of prolonged shipboard confinement.

Though not readily admitted by seafarers, prolonged confinement within the shipboard environment could result in the seafarer becoming institutionalised. Sociological investigation has revealed that the institutionalised seafarer, regardless of rank, might well take on particular personality traits. Wall categorised these as: sexuality, verbal aggression, adventurism, initiative and authoritarianism and related them directly to the exclusively masculine environment aboard ship. Moreby, in a closer examination of the personality characteristics of the institutionalised seafarer, found that they became accentuated and were significantly different from those exhibited by 'shoreside' society. He provides a check-list of such characteristics, as follows:

Lack of choice; territoriality; superficiality of personal contacts; lack of personal knick-knacks; identification and labelling by work roles; emotional undernourishment; rejection of the sick as causing work overload on others; believed infallibility of decisions; greater tolerance of views; behavioural conformity; tendency to 'infantilize subordinates'; temporary ganging against outsiders; fantasy; avoidance of personal responsibility; irreversible nature of decisions; lower members seen as irresponsible and incompetent (and, in some respects, systematically abused).

Given the consistently stressful nature of the seafaring environment, there is no reason to suppose that such psychological traits were any less apparent during the period of this thesis. And then Nolan found that the institutional environment of the ship was both supportive and constraining. It was an environment, in which the seaman's immediate needs were supplied and his decisions and choices limited. Inevitably it encouraged a degree of dependence. Such dependence Nolan saw as limiting the seaman's "social awareness and maturation." But how could 'anarchic individualism' co-exist with a sense of dependence and why should such opposing traits be characteristic of the same workplace? At one moment solidaristic at another schismatic, the seaman would seem a

---

42Nolan, 'A Possible Perspective', in Fricke, *op cit*, p.94.
contradictory if not an irrational figure and such ambiguity must render him incomprehensible to the land-bound majority, at least until we consider the nature of his workplace.\textsuperscript{43} Then we are reminded by Mollat du Jourdan that the environment within which the seaman has his being, the workplace which informs his consciousness, is itself ambiguous. Simultaneously a source of life and of death, the sea is both beneficent and maleficent while as a geographical reality it both joins and separates.\textsuperscript{44} Little wonder then that the desire for some form of certainty imposes itself upon the restless few who sojourn upon the sea.

An investigation carried out among British merchant seamen in the early 1970s revealed strikingly uncompromising attitudes that would no doubt have been as firmly entrenched among that previous generation who play an active role during the period of this thesis. Many seamen experienced difficulty in 'getting on' with people ashore, but of all the categories of seamen tested it was found that deck officers experienced most difficulty in social intercourse ashore. A poll showed that of a number of deck officers sampled only 19 per cent had experience of shoreside employment, whereas of the engineer officers sampled, 75 per cent had previously worked ashore. The conclusion drawn was that:

\begin{quote}
Deck officers are likely to have been socialised into the shipboard life more rigorously and systematically and at an earlier age than other seamen and so might be seen to experience the deprivation of a total institution to a greater degree than other seamen.\textsuperscript{45}
\end{quote}

A sociological analysis carried out in 1978 by Wall supported that conclusion. A group of British merchant ships' officers sampled whilst ashore studying for certificates of

\textsuperscript{43}Describing the maritime workplace of 1900, Bullen observed that the seaman "...lives in a little world of his own". Invisible to people ashore, he was ignorant of shore-ways, and his opportunities to explain himself to shore people were limited. And then:

...one peculiarity I have often noticed among sailors is their preternatural suspicion, allied to a blind trustfulness - two opposing qualities meeting. Only, with the perversity of poor human nature, they exercise suspicion where they should be trustful, and confidence where they should be most cautious.

\textsuperscript{44}\textcolor{black}{Bullen, op cit, p.256.}

\textsuperscript{45}\textcolor{black}{Jourdan, op cit, p.192.}

\textsuperscript{45}\textcolor{black}{Nolan, op cit.}
competence at various nautical training establishments displayed personality factors markedly different from the norm. Those differences, Wall reported:

would appear to be developed during the period spent at sea, since those officers who joined the service at later stages in life, for example direct-entry engineer officers, tend to have personalities nearer to those of the shoreside population; whereas those who have served at sea since an early age, deck officers for example, tend to have larger differences between themselves and the shoreside population.46

Significantly, it was from deck officers such as these that, on the basis of seniority, future chief officers and ships' masters and the marine superintendents of shipping companies would be promoted. Admittedly these were British officers, but in the period under consideration in this thesis training facilities for aspirants to a sea-going career were extremely limited in Australia so that many officers in Australian merchant ships were of British origin.47 Initially, these officers would have gone to sea as teenage cadets or apprentices fresh from school or training college. When sampled, still early in their careers, they were already showing the effects of institutionalisation by an environment in which "the social reality of the ship is seen in terms of relatively few fixed categories, in which considerations of formal rank and status are prominent."48 They were, as Sager has described them, inheritors of "British traditions of subordination and superordination."49

The professional training undertaken by ships' officers in obtaining their certificates of competence rendered them technically expert in matters relating to the safe navigation and propulsion of the ship and the efficient handling of its cargo. Effectively, they were trained to look after the shipowner's material interest, but they were not formally instructed in the development of shipboard morale. An individual officer, particularly a ship's master or chief engineer, might impress his personality for good or ill upon the seamen aboard a particular ship, but communication between officer and rating

46Wall, op cit, p.171.
47Section 22 of the Navigation Act 1912 states: "Any master's or officer's certificate recognised by the Board of Trade of the United Kingdom shall be recognised for the purposes of this Act."
48Nolan, 'A Possible Perspective', in Fricke, op cit, p.94.
49Sager, op cit, p.108.
was usually limited to matters immediately relevant to the performance of work tasks.\(^{50}\)

Whether on watch or off, as Lane has remarked, no emphasis was placed by ships' officers upon development of an *esprit de corps*. A common sense of unity and purpose cemented in the shared experiences of danger and discomfort, such as is fundamental to the combat efficiency of warships, was lacking.\(^{51}\) While the naval concept of a 'ship's company' was foreign to the merchant seafarer, the social structure of the ship was no less hierarchical than that of a warship. But within that structure there was little or no precedent for any sense of mutual obligation between the merchant ship's master, his officers and the crew members. The relationship, while conceding certain basic rights to the seaman, was essentially one that protected the material interests of the shipowner. It was a commercial relationship established in law and backed by the coercive power of the state - the ship's Articles of Agreement.\(^{52}\) Merchant seafarers routinely went to sea in order to earn a living. Any altruistic appeals to a higher sense of moral 'duty' on the part of those officers who were seen by the ratings to represent the economic interests of the shipowner would have been greeted, at least in time of peace, with profound scepticism, if not with resentment.

As Lane has pointed out, the term 'crew' was in fact largely inappropriate to a merchant ship. Departments not only worked separately but also lived and took their meals apart and would oppose any attempt at integration. Rights and privileges, which were the sanctions of skill and formed the structure of authority aboard a merchant ship in the period under discussion, were jealously guarded. This was so not only across the gulf of rank (as borrowed from naval usage) and company identification that separated officer and rating, but also in order to preserve interdepartmental craft divisions and their associated identification within the social stratification of the ship.\(^{53}\) Thus deck officers as a caste would see themselves as socially superior to engineer officers who could never

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\(^{50}\) Lane, *op cit*, pp.33-35.

\(^{51}\) *ibid*, p.70.

\(^{52}\) *ibid*.

\(^{53}\) *ibid*. Also Poole, *op cit*, p.214.
aspire to a command and whose origins lay in proletarian apprenticeship in heavy engineering ashore.\textsuperscript{54} Deck ratings, meantime, were inclined to condescend to engineroom ratings and members of both those departments looked askance upon stewards as a subservient race-apart. And this situation was exacerbated by the perceived need to maintain occupational loyalty and cohesion in the face of the inexorable process of de-skilling inherent in a developing marine technology\textsuperscript{55} which must lead to reductions in manning levels in accordance with Hobsbawm's 'iron logic of mechanisation'.\textsuperscript{56}

And then there was the sea itself. Experiences of seafaring varied not only with shipboard role but also with the trade in which the ship was engaged. Perhaps the most arduous experience of seafaring is that of distant-water trawlermen in high latitudes of the northern hemisphere. In an analysis of crews aboard the relatively sophisticated trawlers of the 1970s, Horbulewicz determined that the seamen suffered deprivation of "psychosocial needs"\textsuperscript{57} In that deprived state each seaman could function normally for only a certain time, which varied with the individual, before deterioration set in. Initially that deterioration took the form of a decreased motivation to work and an increase in faulty activity leading to accidents. It also led to a worsening of personal relations onboard resulting in disciplinary violations, conflict and quarrels. The state of deprivation in which the seaman operated was essentially stressful and could result in an increase in the individual's emotional alertness and aggressiveness. An increase in emotional alertness, in particular, was found to decrease the individual's perceptual and intellectual activity and, in the long term, resulted in chronic fatigue symptoms. In summarising his findings, Horbulewicz advised that the relationship between individual deterioration and the length of the voyage was complex, being more cyclic than linear.\textsuperscript{58} But, in general, the longer the time spent at sea the more serious were the effects upon the psychological health of

\textsuperscript{54}Lane, 'Neither Officers Nor Gentlemen', \textit{History Workshop}, Vol.19, 1985, pp.128-143.
\textsuperscript{55}Poole, \textit{op cit}, p.216.
\textsuperscript{56}Hobsbawm, \textit{Age of Extremes}, p.414.
\textsuperscript{57}Horbulewicz, 'Psychological Autonomy of Industrial Trawler Crews', in Fricke, \textit{op cit}, p.73.
\textsuperscript{58}\textit{ibid}, p.83.
seamen and their motivation to work. That finding could reasonably be extended to those Australian merchant seamen who spent long periods confined aboard the small rudimentary steamships which plied the often stormy southern waters of the Tasman Sea, Bass Strait, and the Great Australian Bight during the first half of this century.

Page, on behalf of the Adelaide Steamship Company, has condemned militant industrial action undertaken by Australian seafarers in terms of intransigence. McKellar, as apologist for the Australian United Steam Navigation Company [AUSN], attributes the eventual demise of that company to the irrationality of Australian merchant seamen. He speaks of the "senseless disruption to which coastal shipping was subjected." But, from a detached viewpoint behaviour is easily depicted as ridiculous. The psychologists tell us that in order to appreciate the full meaning of what appears to be stupid behaviour one requires a caring, subjective, association with its origin. All behaviour is caused, they say, and an understanding of the cause will provide a rational explanation of the apparently irrational. And, further, to remove the cause of disruptive behaviour is the only sure means to alter that behaviour. But in practice what is more likely to happen is that:

Instead of seeking causes... when things go wrong, we usually blame someone, and, thereby, sometimes unconsciously, attempt to protect ourselves from criticism for perhaps having helped to bring about the undesirable results.

This thesis, which extends across most of the first half of the 20th century, endeavours to explain why 'things went wrong'. It explains the antagonism of a particular occupational group. It is not a conventional institutional history. It trumpets neither labour nor capitalist triumphalism. It is not an exercise in apologetics. If polemical, it is not produced by the union [now the Maritime Union], or for the union. It

59 ibid, p.73.  
60 Page, Fitted for the Voyage, p.226.  
61 McKellar, AUSN Story, p.606.  
62 Phares, Introduction to Personality, p.297.  
64 Brown, op cit, p.164.  
65 ibid.
is not necessarily intended for union members, as was Fitzpatrick and Cahill's centenary history. It is neither an account, sympathetic or otherwise, of the economic difficulties of the shipping industry, nor is it a systematic record of the union's gains and losses within the ambit of Arbitration Court legalism. What does concern this thesis is the uneven relationship between the leader and the led. Its theme is the fragility of democracy regardless of prevailing ideology whether that be the socialism of chapter two, the individualism of chapter three, the factionalism of chapter four, the communism of chapter five, the labourism of chapter six or the authoritarianism of chapter seven. In seeking to fill a perceived void, this study reveals the fate of those working merchant seamen whose special industrial circumstances rendered them largely invisible to landward society and who, as a consequence, were extraordinarily vulnerable to manipulation.

The argument that will be presented here is that in the period between 1918 and 1943 the members of the Seamen's Union of Australia became mere pawns, subordinate to the particular agendas of successive leaders of the union. It is also contended that the seamen's behaviour in submitting to that role can be properly understood only in terms of an attitude developed historically within a unique workplace environment. We must begin, therefore, with a consideration of that environment as it was at the beginning of the 20th century.