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Britain as a maritime civilisation: economy, culture and place in the making of a seafaring nation

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Abstract
Civilisation, the Oxford English Dictionary tells us, is: "The culture, society, and way of life of a particular country, region, epoch or group". How do we define and distinguish between different civilisations across time and geography? In this paper I argue that Britain, from about the Tudor sixteenth century, was overwhelmingly characterised as a maritime civilisation. Shipping and the sea permeated through all aspects of British life - economic, social, cultural, political, and geographic.

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I. Introduction

Civilisation, the Oxford English Dictionary tells us, is: "The culture, society, and way of life of a particular country, region, epoch, or group." How do we define and distinguish between different civilisations across time and geography? In this paper I argue that Britain, from about the Tudor sixteenth century, was overwhelmingly characterised as a maritime civilisation. Shipping and the sea permeated through all aspects of British life - economic, social, cul-

1) Sometimes it is given a very positive connotation, that civilisation means highly developed and the opposite of barbarism but this is not what we mean in this context.
Maritime History – Concept and Scope

Maritime history has come a long way in the nearly forty years since Ralph Davis, the leading specialist of his generation, defined it as, ‘the history of men in ships and boats and of those who employed, directed or served them’, 3) Davis made valuable suggestions for future research – more on the organisation of ship owning, recruitment, shipping costs, and technology – but these ideas ventured little from his original and rather narrow conception of the subject.

Traditionally, the study of maritime history had bifurcated into the mercantile marine and the military navy, and with a particular focus on the progress of the European and North Atlantic powers. 4) This approach was consistent with one of the main definitions of ‘maritime’ in the Oxford English Dictionary, notably, ‘connected, associated, or dealing with shipping, naval matters, navigation, seaborne trade’. While this conception of maritime history continues to generate important scholarly and popular books, the subject has become a much broader field of endeavour in a variety of respects. One of the earliest advocates of a broad perspective was Frank Broze who in 1995 wrote, ‘the first step must be to agree that its purpose is the study of all aspects of the interaction between mankind and the sea’. 5) Broze’s call was increasingly taken up by other

2) Examples of this approach for other nations include F. Broze, Island Nation, A History of Australians and the Sea (St Leonard’s NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1998); D. G. Kirby and M.J. Hinniker, The Baltic and the North Sea (Routledge, 2000).


writers, especially those scholars interested in the interaction between the mercantile and the naval, particularly during major periods of warfare such as the American and French Wars. In the last decade, interest in the interaction between economic and political aspects of maritime history has leapt forward.

What has particularly changed in the last two decades is an expansion to a broader understanding of ‘maritime’ as the study of oceans and littoral communities. The maritime history group at the University of Exeter was something of a pioneer as early as the mid-1990s in writing about ocean resources broadly defined. This is consistent with our much broader understanding of the sea as an economic resource, for example as a source of energy, farmed aquaculture, and bioprospecting. On the negative side, the dangers of environmental pollution, loss of species, and of natural disasters also feature keenly in modern thinking about maritime matters. These are all topics for further investigation and analysis under the rubric of maritime history, the knowledge of which will help us to understand and engage with these opportunities and challenges in the future.

From a disciplinary perspective, a largely economic (mercantile) and political (naval) focus has given way to one that includes, for example, culture, law, gender studies and religion. Glen O’Hara’s recent book is essentially a cultural study of maritime history, for example. Broad maritime histories, as well as specialist articles, adopt this wider remit. Major journals of the field have also expanded their subject matter considerably of which the International Journal of Maritime History has been a pioneer. In effect, maritime history has become a significant interdisciplinary field in its own right. Critics of this approach, however, argue that in the search for empirical breadth maritime history often comes up short in its theoretical depth. However, it might alternatively be argued that interdisciplinary research does not have to eschew theoretical rigour, indeed it provides the opportunity for the coalescence of differing theoretical traditions and the deployment of methodologies towards the solution of complex research questions.

Finally, there is also a geographic broadening of maritime history, for example with a greater focus on understanding the nature of maritime communities often many miles away from the coast. Most importantly, though, the geographic focus of historical research has begun to shift away from celebrating empire towards a closer understanding of its effects on colonised economies and their populations. Part of this reflects the major historical movement, ‘The Great Divergence’, which has shifted the focus towards broader geographic comparisons and the interaction of economic and political development among nations. Thus, for example, the work of the

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6) David Sprott had been a pioneer with his _Shipping and the American War, 1775-83: A study of British transport organization_ (London: Athlone Press, 1970) and continued in this vein. Also see S. Vile, _English Shipowning during the Industrial Revolution, 1770–1830_ (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1987), who extensively analyses the contribution of a London merchant shipowner to the Admiralty’s transport service.


9) Glen O’Hara, Britain and the sea since 1600 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).


12) An important recent example is Peter Maw, _Transport and the Industrial City_ (Manchester and the Canal Age, 1750-1850 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).
likes of Prasannan Parthasarathi or Daniel Headrick contains an important maritime element to their story. In a modified form, perhaps, we return to the era of Alfred Thayer Mahan at the end of the nineteenth century in addressing the role of maritime power in economic success. Finally, more countries are beginning to write their maritime history in order to provide their societies with a clearer understanding of its role in national development. While the comparative element between nations has therefore become an important element in maritime history, it also engages with important movements in modern historiography, namely global history and trans-national history. An interesting counterpoint to this, however, has been provided by Joshua Smith who argues that while maritime history often aspires to global breath, 'local and national histories can be just as academically rigorous' and they provide the opportunity for in-depth analysis.

A recent quantitative analysis of publications trends in the International Journal of Maritime History from its beginning in 1989 up to 2012 has provided some clear confirmation of the trends discussed in this section of my paper. It reveals, above all else, the breadth of maritime scholarship in both time and space, and

existence of a broad and vibrant community engaged in maritime historical research. Perhaps most remarkable is not only the breadth of maritime history but the broad church of maritime historians themselves such that over this period more than 500 articles were contributed by more than 380 authors based in 34 countries on five continents.

This broader conception, integrating different fields of study, is the essential foundation for my analysis of Britain as a maritime civilisation.

III. Geography, Economy, Labour and Politics

1. The geography of place

Britain is an island that is relatively narrow with a long and winding coast of nearly 18 000 kilometres. This rises to around 30 000 km if the larger of its 130 or so related islands are added. The coastline of Britain is known for its ‘wiggliness’ (high Haussdorff dimension) meaning that its coastline is longer than other nations of similar area. Its narrow, wiggly, island prone nature means that nowhere in Britain is far from the sea; in fact, no more than about 110 km. If one adds to this the inland navigable waterways, the distance from water is smaller again.

15) KOREA refs
19) Ibid, p.34.
Britain's economy matured in an age when water borne movement was by far the most efficient form of transport and communications. Therefore, proximity to water was a major competitive advantage for the British economy until the coming of the railways from the mid-nineteenth century, which opened up inland economic development in nations like USA, Canada and Australia. The coastal trade, while notoriously difficult to measure due to lack of customs duties, was enormous. It efficiently moved from port to port the bulk trades of coal, iron, agricultural produce, building materials, small manufactures and much more at a fraction of the cost of overland haulage. The proliferation of navigable harbours and protected sandy beaches provided safe haven for coasters. Their hardy mariners - constantly engaged negotiating harbour bars, rocky coastal promontories and fierce weather - were the nursery of seamen hired, or forcibly impressed, to man the armed warships of the Royal Navy in wartime.

Ports were far more than geographical configurations - they were complex, often large, administrative, economic and social constructs. These littoral communities were of far reaching importance as centres of economic activity and first lines of defence for an island nation punctuated with so many access points and therefore conscious of the risks of invasion. Careful administration and regulation of these communities arose from both realities, Major ports of registry were defined as places where a ship could be registered and served as a unit for administrative, legal and fiscal purposes. Multiple port communities grew up within the legal boundary of the head port in response to trading opportunities. However defined, their economic importance was immense, generating not only wealth directly through trade and shipping but also by dint of the many linked and ancillary occupations and services covering all financial, organisational, safety, and technical aspects of the maritime economy from carpenters to provision merchants to brokers and beyond. In effect the multiplier effects were enormous - it took a whole community to enable a single ship to sail.

The maritime economy extended many miles inland from the ocean since upstream river ports were favoured for their close connection to hinterlands before the railways. Besides the notable example of the Port of London and the many trading points along the River Thames, important ancient and Medieval river ports included Rye, Hull, Fowey, Sandwich, Gainsborough, Norwich, and Exeter. However, improvements in inland navigation and the construction of canals, particularly from the eighteenth century, connected many inland settlements to waterborne transport including Goole and Gloucester. Famously, the monumental Manchester Ship Canal opened in 1894 to carry large ocean going cargo vessels of the age of steel and steam thereby foregoing the need for transhipment before entering inland waterways. The major industrial conurbation of Manchester was thereby connected directly to Britain's ongoing maritime economy.20)

Yet it was also global geography that mattered for the rise of Britain as a maritime civilisation. Its proximity to the North Sea connected it with the trading power of the Netherlands in the sev-

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enteenth century and ultimately an opportunity to challenge it, and it provided a supply of shipping and building materials from the Baltic states. While lacking the proximity to the centre of Mediterranean trade enjoyed by the Italian and Iberian states in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the shift of the locus of economic activity westwards to the Americas from the seventeenth century benefited British Atlantic facing ports such as Glasgow, Bristol and Liverpool, which emerged as major commercial centres by the eighteenth century. Through Liverpool, Manchester became 'cottonopolis' by the nineteenth century. British North America (Canada) renewed the depleting Baltic timber resources, while Honduran mahogany and West Indian sugar delighted British home furnishings and stomachs. The landmark study of shifts in economic performance between Europe and Asia, Pomeranz’s Great Divergence, goes further in suggesting that colonised North America had provided the ‘ghost acreage’ for British diets and industrial raw materials that enabled the island nation to focus its limited land space on industrial expansion, sometimes known as the industrial revolution.21)

As explorers set sail across more distant oceans in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it was the sturdy coastal and short sea vessels, products of the north-east coast ports – famously Cook sailing to Australasia on a former Whitby collier (coal vessel) HMS Endeavour (formerly Earl of Pembroke) – that carried their curious but navigationally experienced maritime explorers to distant, often unknown and uncharted, shorelines. Wool and wheat cargoes, later refrigerated meat and butter, provided further vast and rich acreages for British diet and clothing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

2. Economic development

Coal was the second leg of Pomeranz’s explanation of Britain’s economic ascendancy, a role also attributed to it by many previous writers.22) The Chinese, Pomeranz’s main comparator nation, also had coal. What Britain had, though, was immense maritime capability located in the main region of economic development. The coastal fleet of capacious colliers, manned by sturdy mariners (as above) delivered coal from the mines of Newcastle and Sunderland to various parts of Britain particularly to London where the Port (known as the ‘Pool’) had devised efficient cargo delivery and vessel turnaround practices.23) Michael Henley, a modest Thames waterman, was an important example of enterprising individuals who saw the opportunity for business success in this expanding industry. Within a little more than a generation, Michael and his son Joseph had built up one of the largest London shipping businesses on the Thames at Wapping and was one of the earliest firms to specialise in the occupation of ship owner. Indicative of the link between maritime activity, social status and politics, the Henleys invested their substantial wealth in country house living in a Georgian man-


sion at Waterperry near Oxford, and Joseph Warner Henley, Michael’s grandson, became President of the Board of Trade, a leading position in the national government of the day in the 1850s.\(^{24}\)

The maritime dimension to economic development, however, goes far beyond coal. A plethora of technological and organisational innovations in the British shipping industry revolutionised its productivity to provide the cost basis for the expansion of internal and external trade. While we know much about the transitions from wood and sail to metal and steam during the nineteenth century, productivity improvements stretched back into previous centuries through improved vessel design, quicker port loading and turnaround, and improved and more focussed business practices to name but a few developments.\(^{25}\)

Alfred Imahs famously estimated the valuable invisible earnings shipping yielded to help balance the external accounts of Britain in the nineteenth century.\(^{26}\) The profits and wealth this generated for shipowners and traders of London, Liverpool and other expanding ports was often reinvested in emerging industries particularly in connected hinterlands that promised further business supply chain opportunities for these canny entrepreneurs. Shipping was at the forefront of technological innovation in the nineteenth century with investments in iron, steel, steam that were adopted in many industries. Shipping and shipbuilding in the process created a demand for inputs from many other industries. The massive investment in port infrastructures, particularly from the end of the eighteenth century - to protect valuable cargoes and facilitate larger steam vessels in need of rapid turnaround to justify their investment - set precedents for the planning and construction of large scale industrial works and urban settlements throughout the nineteenth century.\(^{27}\)

The informal, or black, economy substantially extended the importance of maritime activities beyond formal national accounts. Given the remoteness of the oceans, many illegal or dubious activities went undetected by governments and enforcement agencies. Besides piracy on the high seas,\(^{28}\) smuggling and ‘salvaging’ undoubtedly added much to the totality of maritime activities in a country with such a long and remote coastline as Britain. Privateering was in effect piracy against enemy fleets officially sanctioned by the issue of letters of marque.\(^{29}\)

3. Governing the Seas

The maritime sector featured heavily in government policy. The desire to bolster defence from foreign invasion by sea was an im-


\(^{27}\) A. Jarvis, Liverpool. A History of the Great Port (Liverpool: Liverpool History Press, 2014) provides a detailed focus on port infrastructure and planning.

\(^{28}\) Glen O’Hara, Britain and the sea since 1600 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 50-64.

\(^{29}\) This was a government licence allowing the owner of a vessel, known as a privateer, to capture enemy vessels. D. J. Starkey, British Privateering Enterprise in the Eighteenth Century (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1990).
portant consideration for a nation whose wiggly coastline and many landing points was an opportunity for foreign invaders as well as traders. The defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 may have sounded the beginning of effective naval defence but it was investment in the development of a powerful navy over the following centuries that mattered as Nicholas Rodger has demonstrated in impressive detail.30 James Thomson’s patriotic poem ‘Rule Britannia!’ (1740), set to stirring music by Thomas Arne, reflected the confidence and determination of Britain to ‘rule the waves’.

Political domination on the waves, however, also relied on economic strength. In addition, the economic and political resilience of Britain’s colonies was important to overall geo-political strategy. With these motivations in mind, the Navigation laws were passed in 1651, which effectively reserved colonial trade to British ships and excluded third country vessels from other trades. Traditional anti-cabotage practices prevented foreign vessels from trading along the British coast. The informal reach of empire was extended in the seventeenth century by granting monopoly rights to ‘chartered trading companies’ trading to distant parts of the globe. This allowed organisations like the East India Company and the Hudson Bay Company to generate sufficient ‘rents’ to become quasi-military organisations defending the interest of the British Empire. The famed East Indiamen were large armed merchant vessels designed to protect both economic and political interests. It is difficult to estimate the actual benefits to British shipping from protectionist policies but clearly the mercantile marine was larger and more profitable than it would otherwise have been and the maritime culture of Britain more pervasive.

While a powerful shipping industry lobby grew up in support of these laws, another important part of the maritime economy, traders, held a very different view. Excluding foreign vessels, they argued, raised freight rates and was, thus, an anti-competitive measure. The growth of the free trade movement in the nearly nineteenth century and the impact of several severe economic downturns, especially in 1833 and 1844, weighed heavily on the minds of legislators so that in 1849 the Navigation Laws were repealed.31 Similar sentiments led to the abolition of the monopoly rights of chartered trading companies, such as the East India Company, over specific and highly profitable trades. Nonetheless, a clear picture of the state of shipping industry and its economic and political role continued to drive a wide range of maritime legislation and regulation, particularly a sequence of merchant shipping acts, of the industry on matters as diverse as the registration of vessels, the organisation of a structure of legal ports, and safety at sea. The maritime sector was also used as a tool of development and colonial communication through subventions paid to operators of sea-going ‘packet’ services.

4. Human capital at sea

‘Working Men Who Got wet’ – the title of an important collec-


31 S. Palmer, Politics, Shipping and the Repeal of the Navigation Laws (Manchester University Press, 1990). Colonial trade had been liberalised in the 1820s.
tion of essays about onboard work - highlights but one of many predicators facing the maritime worker. Maritime work was demanding - of time and effort. It was also spatially constricting and involved considerable risk, as Samuel Johnson notoriously noted, 'No man will be a sailor who has contrivance enough to get himself into jail; for being in a ship is being in a jail, with the chance of being drowned.' R. H. Thornton in his history of British shipping observes pointedly and with examples, 'In short, the fast-sailing, full-rigged ship remains about the most dangerous vehicle ever invented by man. Travel under such circumstances must frequently have been nothing short of a nightmare.'

Some men were away from home for months or even years on end and some spent much of their life in this watery and flood-prone jail. This depressing picture stands in strong contrast to Masefield's poetic eulogy of the maritime world, A contrast or contradiction between the cultural portrayal and the reality of life at sea perhaps? If life at sea was so terrible, would only the most desperate members of society risk it? Clearly, this was not the case since Britons from all ranks of society regularly enlisted for the mercantile or royal navies. Despite the risks, demands and confinement, employment at sea often provided a guaranteed wage for weeks or months in an era when underemployment was a challenge particularly in rural areas dependent on the vicissitudes of season and climate. Monthly money was paid by port based shipowners to a seaman's family while he was away... assuming there was no news of the ship's loss or his desertion. Maritime labour also held the promise of promotion through the ranks in return for little formal education. As the correspondence of many a shipmaster demonstrates, nor was an absence of good literacy or social standing necessarily a reason for exclusion. Training however was valued - the apprenticeship and further on the job training thereafter in a range of navigational, accounting, carpentry, shiphandling and other skills. Moreover, as a recent study suggests, access to a more regular and plentiful diet for child apprentices reversed stunted growth.

Maritime labour exuded an apparently strong masculine flavour, particularly the physical strength generally required. However, maritime Britain was also a place of work for women. If not on the ships themselves, women featured heavily in dextrous port based activities such as filleting fish and making and repairing nets in ports like Grimsby with large trawler fleets. These 'pontoonites', as they were known, worked on the pontoon at Grimsby harbour, but also penetrated other male domains including forming one of the earliest female soccer teams in the 1880s - to the chagrin of some men. The recent work of Helen Doe, however, has also brought to the fore women's contribution to more traditionally male aspects of maritime business, such as shipping investment and managing shipbuilding enterprises.

was male dominated, and allowed views about women to circulate that would be unacceptable today. Port cities were notorious for the number of brothels that existed to 'serve' male seaman who had been at sea for months on end. Ships were also referred to in the feminine pronoun and ship masters formed something akin to a personal connection to them as their 'wooden wife'.

There were many other forms of human capital onboard, some more reluctant travellers than others. Slave traders operated from Bristol and Liverpool prior to the trade's abolition in 1807. In wartime the 'press gang' forcibly enlisted 'landlubbers' as well as able seamen into the Royal Navy. Migrants were less reluctant seafarer travellers but often quite desperate. Irish migrants fleeing starvation and taking advantage of falling fares in the 1840s travelled to the New World via Liverpool in search of fortune or at least escape from their desperate plight.\(^{37}\) Their transatlantic experiences were unlikely to be happy memories, crammed into old damp timber ships often as return freight in that import trade. Nor were the London convicts - transported to Australia when the old Thames hulks used as prisons became too overcrowded - likely to look back fondly on their long time at sea, particularly those female convicts who sailed on the notorious Lady Juliana in 1789, referred to by its historian as a 'floating brothel'.\(^{38}\) Despite their maritime suffering, these migrants laid the basis for the rapid geographic and economic expansion of these settler economies, surpassing the standards of living of their erstwhile British imperial home in the late nineteenth century.\(^{39}\)

Passenger travel in larger faster more spacious steam vessels expanded in the second half of the nineteenth century reaching a peak in the first half of the twentieth century until the advent of air travel. White Star and Cunard were among the major firms in the highly competitive North Atlantic route particularly associated with this trade. The relatively leisurely travel and pleasant surrounds were heavily marketed. As accommodation became increasingly distinguished by social class, these created conditions in which people, brought together for days on end, facilitated social, cultural and economic interaction and exchange with other travellers.\(^{40}\)

\section*{IV. Maritime Culture, Leisure and Psychology}

\subsection*{1. Maritime leisure}

In spite of the association of seafaring with hard labour and the risk of death, Britons still looked towards the sea for leisure.\(^{41}\) Ironically, it was the expansion of overcrowded and insanitary industrial cities in the nineteenth century and the coming of the railway that triggered a popular desire and ability to take a vacation.

\(^{41}\) H.E.S. Fisher (ed.) Recreation and the Sea (Exeter, 1997).
away from home. Overwhelmingly, the population looked to the coast as a place for leisure assisted by the perceived health qualities of the sea air rather than a bucolic rural idyll. Travel agent Thomas Cook was among the first entrepreneurs to recognise the commercial opportunities of trips to the growing seaside resorts of Victorian Britain in the 1840s. Some of the more famous resorts included Blackpool, Skegness, Ramsgate, Scarborough, Llandudno, and Brighton, which emerged as seaside towns scattered among the traditional working port communities along the British coast. In some cases, coastal steamers also brought tourists to their destinations such as those travelling from Glasgow to resort towns in the Firth of Clyde. Although not exactly the surfing and lifesaving culture of warmer climes like Australia, the British managed to make the most of unpredictable cool summers through beach cricket, donkey rides, promenading along the pier, indoor amusement centres on rainy days, evening 'illuminations', the sending of amusing postcards, cheap 'boarding house' accommodation, live variety theatre, holiday camps for the more socially-minded, ...... and occasional sunbathing protected by windbreaks! Competitive sailing (regattas) and fishing were on offer for the more active 'holidaymakers'.

For those who wanted a more leisurely break at sea, the cruise industry was in its early stages in the late nineteenth century as companies like the The Orient Steam Navigation Company developed this as an alternative form of vessel deployment when freight rates and the demand for shipping were low.

2. Maritime culture and psychological wellbeing

John Walton, the leading scholar of the British seaside resort, refers to it as a British cultural export. Coastal pastimes, while apparently simple even contrived on one level, were also built around a basic attitude that eulogised the maritime 'condition' - the sight, smell, sound and sense of emotional and physical wellbeing that was associated with it. Its vast unending nature epitomised a sense of freedom from repression and drudgery and the promise of exploration, discovery, the unexpected and sometimes the mystical and mythical. Its changing moods and dark side were also part of this portrayal. These emotions were deeply embedded in the British visual arts and literature which has had a strong maritime tone over centuries. The Romantic movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries rebelled against the new industrial age through works such as Philip James de Loutherbourg, Coalbrookdale by Night (1801) and poet William Blake's reference to dark satanic mills, believed to mean factories, harked back to a rural idyll. However, while Romanticism influenced some painters and writers with an idealised view of the sea, realism, sometimes quite brutally portrayed, emerged as the dominant perspective.

As Britain began to surpass the Netherlands as the dominant seaborne power at the end of the seventeenth century, there grew up alongside the maritime economics and politics a flourishing cul-

44) J K. Walton, 'The seaside resort: a British cultural export', http://www.history.ac.uk/hr/Focus/Sea/articles/walton.html
ture in the visual arts and literature. Overwhelmingly, this was revealed in maritime paintings. The celebrated Dutch maritime artists began to migrate to Britain in the late seventeenth century, led by the dominant Van de Velde family. They were the first in a tradition of Anglophile foreigners who joined British painters in producing a massive record of British shipping over the next three centuries.

Samuel Scott (1701/2-1772) and Peter Monamy (1681-1749) led the first generation of modern British maritime painters at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Their paintings provided careful description and detail rather than a romanticised view of maritime activity. Dominic Serres the Elder (1722-1793) began with romanticised paintings but soon he too learned a more realistic style. It may be indicative of the official importance of marine art that he held the specific title of marine painter to King George III. By the late eighteenth century, Robert Dodd (1748-1815), Nicholas Pocock (1740-1821) and Thomas Whitcombe (c.1752-1824) were recording the famous naval victories of Britain.

Commissioned art work of famous sea battles or the launch of a new and advanced vessel was, thus, a tool of publicity and celebration by governments and businesses of the time. Whitcombe produced 50 plates for the celebratory publication The Naval Achievements of Great Britain from 1793-1817, while Pocock’s palatial aerial style painting of Chatham Dockyard (1790) was a stark reminder, to anyone who needed it, of the powerful resources of the Admiralty and Royal Navy.

However, most paintings were the product of a genuine desire of many ordinary individuals to portray the maritime world they observed around them. For some this romanticised the harsh life at sea, for others, often former seamen and officers, their specialist knowledge was used to good effect to capture accurate details of daily life. William Lionel Wyllie (1851-1931) painted such every day scenes. His appropriately entitled, Toil, Glitter, Grime and Wealth (1883) is an evocative image of ‘industrial’ life aboard Thames barges combined with a deeper understanding of the value of such work to the nation. By the nineteenth century, many ‘artisan’ painters from humble backgrounds worked in their spare time between voyages turning out many canvasses they hoped to sell ‘on spec’ to locals and holidaymakers, often for as little as five pounds or less. Many focussed on the popular genre of ship portraiture such as Reuben Chapell (1870-1940) from the port of Goole in Yorkshire. Nor was loss to the sea necessarily a discouragement to the artist; John Fraser (1858-1927) continued in this career despite the loss of two brothers to drowning. In some cases, the marine artist life, like that of the sailor, was a pathway to social elevation.

Not that the maritime genre suited all artists. The celebrated JMW Turner struggled with his maritime depictions. Although the subject of The Fighting Temeraire, depicting the assistance provided by an early steam ship to an old naval sailing vessel, was an evocative one, his scene from the Battle of Trafalgar was widely criticised at the time and since then.

Between them these various marine artists left behind a vast record. Many must have painted almost constantly leaving behind

literally thousands of works. They generated an outstanding visual record for maritime historians with major collectors like the National Maritime Museum (NMM) in Greenwich in possession of a massive output running to tens of thousands of items. Our knowledge of the development of shipping technology in the seventeenth century, for example, draws extensively upon visual sources, the work of the Van de Veldes in particular has meant that our understanding of that period is better than it is for much of the eighteenth century. Many other visual artefacts are housed in nearly 300 maritime museums dotted around Britain to reinforce the seafaring culture including preserved ships, ship models, shipboard artefacts, dioramas, correspondence, and much more.46

It may not be surprising that a more romantic, idealised view of the sea emerged from some corners of literature, as suggested by Masefield’s Sea foam, and the mystical work of Samuel Coleridge Taylor who was a founder of the Romantic Movement in England and penned The Rime of the Ancient Mariner (1798). For poets like Alfred Tennyson (1809-92), the sea stirred deep feelings on profound matters of life and death. His Crossing the Bar, written three years before his death aged 83, is full of imagery about the passing to the afterlife:

Twilight and evening bell,  
And after that the dark!  
And may there be no sadness of farewell,  
When I embark;


For tho’ from out our bourne of Time and Place  
The flood may bear me far,  
I hope to see my Pilot face to face  
When I have crossed the bar

Stories of piracy took on an alluring and mystical quality as R. L, Stevenson’s Treasure Island (1883) and J. M. Barrie’s Peter Pan (1911) reached out to large audiences across generations. Nonetheless, a realist element was also strongly represented. William Falconer (1732-69) provided a very graphic description of loss at sea in his 1762 poem Shipwreck. How ironic that he was lost at sea only seven years later when the frigate Aurora founded. A strong tradition in maritime literary fiction developed from the eighteenth century with authors like Frederick Marryat (1792-1848) writing from his own naval experience, His characterisation of the opportunist Frank Mildmay rising through the naval ranks went beyond authentic description to criticism of official policy. Joseph Conrad (1857-1924), a Polish émigré and former shipmaster who became one of the literary giants of his era, deploying a strongly realist approach, did more than any writer to capture the power of association with the maritime in Britain with all its positive and negative connotations. His monument in Gdynia critically captures this with a quotation from his novel Lord Jim: “There is nothing more enticing, disenchanting, and enslaving than the life at sea”. His work, like Marryat, was also critical at times of official thinking and policy; Heart of Darkness (1899) challenged the assumed superiority of the conquering nation and race. Finally, Gilbert and Sullivan’s famous opera, HMS Pinafore, lampooned the navy and the ability of inex-
V. Conclusion: the Ebbing Tide

Glen O'Hara in his recent book, Britain and the sea since 1600, refers to the twentieth century as the ebbing tide as Britain's maritime dominance began to decline. A combination of factors – the relative decline of shipping's importance globally and of Britain's standing among maritime powers – had a major impact on Britain's cultural underpinning as a seafaring nation.

Over eighty years ago, Charles Fayle in a landmark book, described shipping as the key global industry. Shipping had certainly been central to British and global economic development over at least three centuries. By the time he made this observation, shipping already faced severe competition from road, air and telecommunications for its key role of integrating national and global economies. The wiggly coastline that benefited the maritime economy is a disadvantage for modern road and rail systems. Today, shipping remains the main ocean conveyor of bulk industrial raw materials but the land-based service sectors that dominate our post-industrial economies draw increasingly upon communication among people and the transmission of images by a range of telecommunications technologies. Both people and information increasingly travel many kilometres above sea level. As part of the expansion, convenience and cost competitiveness of international air travel since the 1970s, the cultural icon of the British seaside resort has yielded to foreign holidays.

The rise of other great naval and industrial powers, originally Germany and the United States and more recently China, overwhelmed British naval dominance. Similarly, the rise of low cost shipping nations such as Greece undermined British merchant shipping. Shipbuilding also fell into relative decline at the hands of rising industrial nations like Japan and South Korea.

Perhaps like the Dutch in the second half of the seventeenth century, when the economic foundations of a seafaring nation began to weaken its decline was accelerated by loss of the political and cultural underpinnings that were mutually reinforcing elements of being a maritime civilisation.

However, the maritime civilisation has not entirely disappeared. Despite road and rail connections through the Channel Tunnel, Britain remains essentially an island (or many) in which many people live near the sea and continue to enjoy the recreation associated with it, especially walking and sailing.

47) Glen O'Hara, Britain and the sea since 1600 (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
Author

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