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'Ten Thousand Times Worse than the Convicts': rebellious sailors, convict transportation and the struggle for freedom, 1787-1800

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London

Ralph Clark's comment about the seamen hired to man the convict transports, used in the title of this article, reveals more than the fact that he extended his vitriol beyond the 'damned whores' of the convict colony.[1] For a man who considered transported felons to be utterly insufferable, declaring seamen to be so much worse was denouncement indeed. Yet while Clark may be always quotable because of his hyperbole, he certainly was not alone in seeing sailors as a rebellious element. David Collins also thought that seamen from transports would disturb 'the tranquillity and regularity of our little town',[2] being unruly enough to disrupt a colony of convicted felons.

Such opinions are hardly surprising given the frequency of problems with sailors on board convict transports during long, perilous voyages to New South Wales. Ships' officers complained repeatedly that sailors were capricious at best, insubordinate, unreliable and downright mutinous at worst. This stereotype of the unruly seaman was prevalent during the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. British sailors were said to be 'always the first to turn out ... whether to fight, to drink, or to kick up a row'.[3] One man who was himself a seafarer, 'a common jack tar', wrote that seamen were 'wild and rakeeshly inclin'd, turbilant'.[4] It was perceived as mindless defiance by those in authority.

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[1] P.G. Fidlon and R.J. Ryan, (eds) *The Journal and Letters of Lt. Ralph Clark, 1787-1792* Sydney, 1981, pp. 32-3.

[2] D. Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales: With Remarks on the Dispositions, Customs, Manners, etc, of the Native Inhabitants of that Country,* Sydney, 1975, Vol. 1, p. 153.

[3] Quoted in E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, New York, 1966, p. 606.

[4] N. Owen, *Journal of a Slave Dealer*, E. Martin (ed.) London, 1930, p. 63.

Caught up with contemporary authorities' own opinions, historians have been unwilling to look beyond individual acts of recalcitrance to explain seamen's revolts on the long voyage to Australia, or to explore broader issues behind their non-compliance. This is increasingly indefensible in light of the growing debate regarding the disaffection and insurgence of eighteenth century seamen, particularly as it raises issues especially pertinent to Australian history. Although the debate is centred on the Atlantic arena, the random way in which a merchant ship's crew was recruited, and the life of Jacob Nagle who had fought in the American Revolutionary War before enlisting on the First Fleet's HMS *Sirius,* suggest that it might apply equally to the voyages of the convict transports.[5]

A growing historiography suggests that seamen played an important role in protests in the Atlantic arena during the revolutionary era. They were politicised before most other occupational groups and were central to arguments over the newly-important notion of liberty. Jesse Lemisch argues that seamen were pivotal to the earliest battles of the American Revolution, long before more moderate aims came to the fore.[6] Marcus Rediker in *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea* (1987) writes of seamen as an early proletariat, fighting against the commoditisation of their labour and for working men's rights more generally.[7] Julius Scott has even shown how they promoted the abolitionist movement in the West Indies by revealing the new sentiments against slavery to the bondsmen and women who were its primary victims.[8] Jeffrey Bolster has equally shown how white seamen offered a rough equality and something of a haven to their black colleagues, quite unlike anything available ashore in the same era.[9]

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[5] J. Nagel, *The Nagel Journal: A Diary of the Life of Jacob Nagel, Sailor, from the year 1775 to 1841,* J.C. Dann (ed.) New York, 1988.

[6] J. Lemisch, *Jack Tar vs. John Bull: The Role of New York's Seamen in Precipitating the Revolution,* New York, 1997.

[7] M. Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, Cambridge, 1987, pp. 75-6.

[8] J. S. Scott III, 'The Common Wind: Currents of Afro-American Communication in the Era of the Haitian Revolution', Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Duke University, 1986, pp. 64-5, 135, 169.

[9] W.J. Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail,* Cambridge, 1997, especially p. 70.

There were specific reasons why seamen were particularly attached to the idea of freedom. Seafaring was one of the first industries to pay monthly wages to its employees, and correspondingly to break down the bonds of paternalist hiring practices. Sailors should theoretically, therefore, have been free working men selling their labour for its market value. Yet they had traditionally been considered 'bondsmen of the sea', and the taint of bondage still clung to maritime labour in this period. The very rhetoric of the job suggested as much: shore leave was known as 'liberty', suggesting that work on board ship was just the opposite.

More importantly, sailors were subject to extensive periods as non-free workers. Men were still regularly trepanned on board merchant ships, and legally crimped into the Royal Navy. The naval press in particular became vilified as a form of enforced bondage and was increasingly regarded as unacceptable in an era of calls for justice and liberty. Nicholas Rogers pertinently notes that 'seafarers were the one class for whom indefinite service to the state remained a reality'.[10] They had reason to be aggrieved, particularly as their work in the transatlantic slave trade revealed to them exactly how horrific life without liberty could be.[11]

Protests against poor working conditions and the infringement of perceived rights, such as those in the Atlantic world discussed by Rediker, can certainly be identified in the early annals of convict transportation to Australia. It is well known that seamen on the First Fleet complained of the whippings they received on board HMS *Sirius.* The problem began not long after departing England in 1787 when the third lieutenant ordered the boatswain's mate to thrash all the men for a relatively small infraction. The ship's company informed their captain that if that was how they were to be treated, 'it would be better to jump overboard at once than to be murdered in a foreign land'. Arthur Phillip's common sense and humanity saved the situation when he quickly reminded HMS *Sirius's* officers that the crew were 'all we have to depend upon, and if we abuse those men that we have to trust to, the convicts will rise up and massecree [sic] us'. [12]

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[10] N. Rogers, 'Liberty Road: Opposition to Impressment in Britain during the American War of Independence', in C. Howell and R. Twomey (eds), *Jack Tar in History: Essays in the History of Maritime Life and Labor*, New Brunswick, 1991, p. 60.

[11] E. Christopher, 'The Sons of Neptune and the Sons of Ham: A History of Slave Trade Sailors and their Captive Cargoes', PhD Thesis, University College London, 2002.

[12] Nagle, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

Yet this was not an isolated incident. Flogging was a particularly inflammatory issue and an especial grievance in this era of argument over free versus bonded labour, when slavery increasingly became seen as morally abhorrent and economically unsound. In the hothouse environment of rapid social change that formed the background to the settlement of New South Wales, flogging and shackling became tainted with the stain of servitude. Hundreds of thousands of Britain's sailors had worked on board slave ships and knew about the reduction of man to thing through the lash of a whip. An even larger number had worked in the West India trade and had seen plantation slavery first hand. Sailors, both black and white, were an early force resisting slavery in the Americas and were likewise at the forefront of resistance to the use of one of its most visible tools in their own working lives. [13]

An even earlier incident was also symptomatic of seamen's protests. Some of the ships' crews in the First Fleet had argued over their advanced pay, and a number had to be put on board HMS *Hyena* to compel them to sail.[14] Frustrating as this may have been for the officers who were waiting to weigh anchor, this was hardly a unique event unconnected to a larger fight for sailors' rights. Advanced pay, the only way a man could support a family during his absence, was a long-contested issue and one over which sailors had already taken to the streets of Britain's cities in protest. *The Gentleman's Magazine* reported several such rallies in the years immediately preceding 1787.[15] On the inaugural voyage of convict transports to Botany Bay, the distance involved, the length of time required to sail there and return, and the many uncertainties inherent in such a venture, must have brought these concerns to the fore.

Such problems did not end with the First Fleet. There were two ships in the coming years whose safety was threatened by discontented seamen. On the *Prince of Wales* in 1796 the men refused to work. 'One and all said the[y] Would Do No More Duty Untill the[y] Had More Provisions', the men being so unhappy they announced an intention to usurp the captain and 'Deliver the Ship to…the Cheif [sic] Mate'. This was a serious affair. Regardless of the fact that their stated dissatisfaction was their food and alcohol allotment, in the tinderbox environment of a tiny sailing ship their objective had escalated to mutiny.[16]

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[13] The whipping of seamen became closely tied-up with pro-slave trade and pro-slavery arguments during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. See, for example, E. D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, New York, 1976, pp. 63-4.

[14] Collins, *op. cit.*, p. iv.

[15] *Gentleman's Magazine*, May 1783, November 1784.

Yet the impression given by the ship's journal is that the matter was more than one of food. In fact it was not the first trouble the ship had endured. Three months earlier John Scott and William Jay had 'rose a mutiny on bd by Fretning [sic] the Chief Mate With his Life' before deserting the ship in 'a Whery…with Drawn Knives'. Moreover, the officers' capitulation on the issue of food did not mollify. One of the men involved in this dispute, Alexander Dobson, later said that 'he would Put up with no Such usage as he had don[e]'. Dobson's complaint, therefore, was over the more general matter of his 'usage', or treatment. His words infer that he considered such treatment beneath his dignity, and less than he had a right to expect. Food had become a linked to a seaman's rank and his distinction as a worker, and dissatisfaction with his victuals threatened the entire security of the voyage.[17]

A similar predicament arose on the *Royal Admiral* in 1800. On that ship the sailors were apparently so discontented with their food and conditions that one told the captain he would rather go on board a man-of-war than continue on the voyage to New South Wales. When a quartermaster named Patterson was to be flogged, the captain, fearful that the other crewmen would try to rescue him, felt forced to 'shew his Pistols' to enforce his authority. The real anxiety of the ship's officers, however, was that the seamen could not be trusted to side with them if the convicts attempted to take the ship. Tellingly, the officers and some missionaries on board formed themselves into watches to protect the vessel against mutinies from both the seamen and the convicts.[18]

This last case is particularly revealing because it emphasises the fear that seamen and convicts might unite together against authority. This was partly a class-based assumption on the part of ships' officers. As convicts and seamen were overwhelmingly from the lowest strata of society, and both were considered equally insubordinate, there were acute fears that their shared backgrounds and temperaments might draw them together. Indeed, contemporary observers saw seamen's disobedience as an issue of unruly men being corrupted from their duty by inappropriate friendships and sexual liaisons with those whom they were transporting.[19] Thirty years after the First Fleet, a surgeon wrote that a sailor's 'careless, easy, and familiar manner…enables him to form an intimacy with the convicts'.[20] Many a sailor would have found such familiarity natural, recognising an old shipmate, neighbour, sweetheart or doxy among his cargo.

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[16] Log of the *Prince of Wales*, 1796, L/MAR/B/404R, India Office Library (British Library) London.

[17] *Ibid*.

[18] J. Wilshire, 'Journal kept on board the Royal Admiral from England to New South Wales, 1800' MSS 1296 f.13, Mitchell Library; Journal of Missionaries on board the Royal Admiral,' 1800 Haweis Papers, MSS 4190X (formerly A1963) Mitchell Library, Sydney.

In fact there were close links between the two groups. A disproportionate number of convicts had been seamen, or had had some experience of maritime employment. In *The Fatal Shore* (1987), Robert Hughes states that convicted seamen were the second largest occupational group on the First Fleet after labourers, and Mollie Gillen identifies far more ex-seamen among its ranks than Hughes.[21] It was certainly not impossible that members of the crew would recognise acquaintances among their shackled passengers. Two men on the *Neptune* in 1790, sailor Joseph Collins and boatswain Lundy Gowan, met an old shipmate, Matthew Hosier, among the group of convicts they loaded on the ship. Seeing that he was starving, they surreptitiously gave him extra food and water to save his life.[22]

Looked at from another angle, however, the issue was not only that seamen might have personal friendships with convicts, but that their liberties were in fact infringed in similar ways to those they were being paid to transport. Shackles, chains, physical punishments and enforced labour were the tactics used by governments of the age to keep malcontents under control. In the West Indies, for example, sailors were controlled by the same people and institutions that were primarily intended to hold sway over plantation slaves.[23] Given the bigger picture of the sailor's fight for freedom in all its multifaceted permutations, this was bound to be problematical.

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[19] On the issue of sexual relations on board convict transports see J. Damousi, *Depraved and Disorderly: Female Convicts, Sexuality and Colonial Australia*, Cambridge, 1997.

[20] T. Reid, *Two Voyages to New South Wales and Van Dieman's Land,* London, 1822, pp. 49-50.

[21] R. Hughes, *The Fatal Shore: A History of the Transportation of Convicts to Australia, 1787-1868,* London, 1987, p. 74; M. Gillen, *The Founders of Australia: a biographical dictionary of the First Fleet,* Sydney, 1989.

[22] Rex vs. Donald Trail and William Ellerington for murder, 1790, TS 11/381, National Archives, London.

[23] J. S. Scott, 'Crisscrossing Empires: Ships, Sailors and Resistance in the Lesser Antilles in the Eighteenth Century', in R.L. Paquette and S.L. Engerman (eds), *The Lesser Antilles in the Age of European Expansion*, Gainsville, 1996, pp. 130-1.

In the context of convict transportation this was especially germane as seamen were anxious not merely about their own liberties in the abstract, as might be the case in the Caribbean when compared to a plantation slave. In far more practical ways, the line between seaman and convict had been blurred long before the penal colony in New South Wales was founded. During the period of British convict transportation to the American colonies, absconding seamen were advertised for in newspapers alongside runaway slaves and indentured servants, convicts, soldiers and various horses and mules.[24] In later decades, to add insult to injury to men who loathed the naval press, those who had been caught by press-gangs were held on the hulks while they awaited a ship.[25] Many a tar had reason to recall Samuel Johnson's statement that 'being in a ship is being in jail with the chance of being drowned'.[26]

Nor was the association of seafaring and felony merely theoretical. Queen Anne's Act had established the principle that 'lewd, disorderly menservants … rogues, vagabonds and sturdy beggars' were to be sent to sea.[27] When the American Revolution caused the number of convicted felons in Britain to reach crisis point, with no obvious place to exile them, the idea of male convicts being sent into naval service was advanced. Thomas Robertson suggested they could be ironed under their trousers and made to do the worst jobs, for no pay and with no hope of sharing in any prize money.[28] In 1780 Duncan Campbell, owner of most of the hulks which housed the convicts sentenced to transportation, believed that employment by the armed services could be the motivation for their being transformed and turning their backs on the criminal life.[29]

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[24] For example, *Virginia Gazette*, 25 May 1739, 22 September 1768; *Maryland Gazette*, 8 August 1765, 29 August 1765, 5 May 1768.

[25] P. Linebaugh, *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century,* London, 1991, p. 67.

[26] Quoted in P. Linebaugh and M. Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*, Boston, 2000, p.160.

[27] Quoted in J. Sutton, *Lords of the East: The East India Company and its Ships*, London, 1981, p. 84.

[28] 'Abstract of Mr. Thomas Robertson's plan for the employment in His Majesty's Royal Navy of Convicts', 10 December 1782, HO 42/1 ff.429-31, National Archives, London.

[29] D. Campbell, 'Letterbooks', A3227 f.156-7, Mitchell Library, Sydney.

Although the wholesale conscription of male convicts in the Royal Navy never became policy, many convicted men were respited to do maritime duty even after the founding of the penal settlement in New South Wales. Men appealed to be released on condition of their serving in the navy and many, especially those with a seafaring background, were allowed to do so.[30] Some who had been sentenced to death managed to secure this option for themselves. A ship, just like Port Jackson, could apparently be substituted for the hangman's noose. In 1799 Edmund Field and John McNamara, sentenced to death for mutiny and piracy, were allowed to exchange their death sentences for work in their former profession.[31] The Royal Navy could, therefore, be punishment for a crime, and occasionally men were also respited to the merchant marine.[32] Other sailors were thus obliged, sometimes against their will, to serve alongside them.

In terms of the intersection of race and liberty in this period, it is interesting that black male convicts were also respited to sea service. Samuel Royal, for example, a twenty-four year old black sailor from Antigua was sentenced to death in September 1794 and then reprieved on condition he serve in the navy.[33] Twenty-two year old Henry Boxer managed to escape the death penalty imposed for having been found at large from his original transportation sentence. Condemned to death on October 26th 1797, this black man was respited just five days later on condition he join a ship of the line.[34]

Aboard a convict ship there were clear reasons why seamen would share with transported felons the will to have personal autonomy, as the line between the two was permeable in some unexpected ways. Men could exchange their status from crewmember to convict during the course of a voyage, and a few swapped at least temporarily from felon to crewmember. A seaman's disobedience could quickly see him in irons, and sometimes down in the prison with the convicts.[35] A convict with seafaring experience might well be temporarily let out of his shackles to take his place. On the wrecked

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[30] George III Letters and Papers, 1783-1795, HO 41/1 f.475; HO 42/2 f.65; HO 42/12 f. 260; HO 42/30 f.199; HO 42/35 f.351, National Archives, London. See Campbell, *op. cit.* for many mentions of convicts being suitable for service in both the army and navy.

[31] Newgate Records, HO 26/6 ff.34, 70, National Archives, London.

[32] Respites, SP 44/95-6, National Archives, London.

[33] Newgate Records , HO 26/2 f.21, National Archives, London.

[34] *Ibid.*, HO 26/6 f.7, National Archives, London.

[35] W. Noah, 'A Voyage to Sydney in 1798 and 1799' MS 32, Dixson Library.

Guardian, the *Neptune,* the *Queen,* the *Kitty,* HMS *Gorgon,* HMS *Glatton,* HMS *Calcutta* and countless other transports, convicts were used to help man the ship.[36]

Sailors convicted of insubordination could find themselves in the same situation as those they had been paid to transport, in a manner that circumvented the usual British judicial process. A seaman from the *Britannia* was sentenced to seven years transportation to Norfolk Island along with two convicts in 1797, and the following year two of his former crewmates, Robert Dean and Robert Seaton, were sentenced to work in the gaol gang for desertion.[37] In 1792, when three seamen on the *Kitty,* Benjamin Williams, George Johnstone and Robert Robertson refused to weigh anchor as the ship was supposed to leave Port Jackson, they too swapped places with three convicts. Lieutenant Grose, explaining that 'nothing might more to be dreaded in this part of the World than the smallest appearance of Mutiny', ordered them to be 'severely flogged in the publick parade directly they came on Shore'. Three time-expired convicts were allowed to go in their place and work their way back to England.[38]

The oppression of sailors and convicts was further exacerbated by the realities of deep-sea sailing. Ships were 'total institutions', far away from any other rule of law, where the actions of all were carefully bound to one man's will for the safety of the vessel.[39] Captains walked a tightrope of control, as Greg Dening has wonderfully illustrated.[40] The risk of a man overstepping the mark and provoking the men to mutiny was increased by the proximity of convicted felons. If the captain was a tyrant the only check on his rule was the mutiny of his men. On a convict transport all aboard would suffer from his cruelty and megalomania, regardless of their supposed status of felon or free man.

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[36] See for example, L. Kennedy, 'The Log of the Guardian, 1789-1790, from the Journal of Captain Riou', *Naval Miscellany*, Vol. IV, London, 1952, pp. 296-358; Treasury Papers relating to the Queen transport, T1/714; Lieutenant Gross to Treasury, no date, T1/728; Commander Parker of the HMS Gorgon to Evan Nepean, HO 29/2 f.150; Return of convicts dead or run from the Pitt, CO 201/7 f.64; Log of HMS Glatton, ADM 51/1467, National Archives, London; 'Papers of HMS *Calcutta'*, MS 449, National Library of Australia; Captain J. Colnutt, 'Voyage to New South Wales in HMS *Glatton*', MS 164 f.8, National Library of Australia.

[37] Collins, *op. cit.*, p. 34; Bench of Magistrates, Sydney, Minutes and Proceedings 1/296 f.142, State Records of New South Wales.

[38] Gross to Treasury, no date , T1/728 ff.33-38, National Archives, London.

[39] V. Aubert, *The Hidden Society,* Totowa, 1965, pp. 236-58.

[40] G. Dening, *Mr. Bligh's Bad Language: Passion, Power and Theatre on the* Bounty, Cambridge, 1992.

A typical example of this was the Second Fleet ship *Neptune*, under Captain Donald Trail. Infamous in the annals of Australian history for having the worst death rate of any convict transport, the sufferings of those held below decks were unspeakable. The chaplain, Richard Johnson, wrote that the convicts who reached the shores of New South Wales were 'a sight truly shocking to the feelings of humanity', with the *Neptune* being 'still more wretched and intolerable'. Johnson was so traumatised he could not bring himself to go below in her hold to minister to his newly arrived parishioners.[41]

The seamen were evidently extremely badly treated too. John Beale, one of the ship's quartermasters, complained that the crew were flogged for very minor infractions and fed 'with the very bad provisions which had been provided for the Convicts'. This was terrible, as, according to Beale, the convicts were so hungry they sold their shoes for a few ship's biscuits. Surely the real complaint was that the seamen expected, and deserved, to be treated better than those criminals who had forfeited their freedom. A number of Beale's former crewmates made the same complaint, showing that this was a major cause of distress for the crewmen.[42]

Captain Donald Trail's cruelty went beyond starvation. As he lay dying, the sixth mate of the ship, Andrew Anderson, for whose murder Trail was later tried, wrote home to his father that he was 'wore away to a Skeleton' because 'the captain has used me very ill in his Voyage in beating & confining me'. With regard to the flogging that purportedly led to the death of the ship's cook, John Joseph (another of Trail's alleged murder victims), seaman Robert Fletcher declared that he had 'been several years in the Kings [sic] Service and never seen such a Cat [o'-nine-tails]' as that used on Joseph. Fletcher went on to say that he had 'seen a Cat made for punishing Thieves and suspected Sodomites on Board ship which is nothing like the Cat used on the Neptune'. Many of the crew mentioned their former naval service to justify their claims that Captain Trail's rule was excessive and outside the accepted system of crime and punishment. Trail, they protested, had infringed their liberty and endangered their lives.[43]

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[41] Johnson to Wathan, [August] 1787, CO 201/6 ff.353-357, National Archives, London.

[42] Rex vs. Trail, *op. cit*.

[43] *Ibid*.

It was fortunate that there was no large-scale mutiny on board the *Neptune*, though this is how Trail attempted to justify his oppressive rule. Yet there was clearly posturing on both sides. A Prussian sailor whose name was recorded as Ham Rust claimed that Trail had tormented some sailors he had shackled for supposed misdeeds by bragging that he had 'hung two men the voyage before for less trouble than you have given me'. Trail, in other words, had vaunted his omnipotence, his absolute rule over their lives and possible deaths. The crew answered him by deserting from the vessel in huge numbers. Prosecuting attorney Thomas Evans later claimed that two hundred men had run from the ship before she left England. So many deserted at Cape Town that Trail had to release convicts to help man the ship, and later had to get a contingent from naval ships after yet more desertions at Port Jackson and Whampoa [Huangpu].[44] By deserting, the sailors were asserting that they were indeed free men, of a different category to the convicts, whatever the limitations their profession placed on that.

Another example of a despotic captain causing problems with both his crew and captive cargo, and failing to enforce a strict line between them, was the *Britannia's* voyage in 1796-7. At least thirty-one of the ship's convicts were alleged to have plotted a mutiny. Many of these were given three hundred lashes in order to make them confess, an extraordinary measure even by contemporary army and navy standards. A man named Burns suffered four hundred lashes after he denied any involvement. The 'infernell plott' was apparently motivated by a rumour, spread by a convict, that upon arrival in the colony 'they whare to be chaind by 8 or 9 togather and to be worked all day like horses and driven to their cells at night'.[45]

The *Britannia's* crew had been rebellious from the outset. At least five men deserted before she weighed anchor. The second mate, Lloyd, was confined in irons for disobeying orders and was later permanently removed from his post and put back before the mast. Seaman Donneall Mahoney was 'Confind…for Insolance and Refusing to do his duty', and then, 'as his behaviour Was Mutinous & Subservice of Order and Discipline', he received two dozen lashes with the cat-o'-nine-tails. By the time they left Rio de Janeiro another sailor, John Young, was put in irons for mutinous behaviour and threatening to strike the third mate. Young's troubles continued, for at Port Jackson he was 'Sent … on Board of His Majestys Ship Reliance for Insolance', whereupon five of his fellow seamen declared that they too would follow him if he was forcibly dismissed.[46]

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[44] *Ibid.*

[45] Massey, 'Journal of the Proceedings of the Ship Britannia from the Downs to Port Jackson and China Commencing upon the 3rd September 1796 and Ending on the 30th June 1798' MSS Q235, Dixson Library. See also the typed extract of part of this journal, relating to the convict mutiny, CY 2281, Mitchell Library

The *Britannia's* voyage was a typical example of how a tyrannical commander could affect all aboard. Charles Bateson calls Captain Dennott 'a sadist'.[47] The number of apparent suicides is immediately notable from the ship's journal. Two convict women named Jane Blake and Kitty Syms attempted suicide by jumping overboard, and were punished for their efforts. Another woman, Mary Caugham, was apparently more successful in her attempt, for she was 'supposed to have drowned herself from the Quarter Gallery'. Two soldiers were also reported to have committed suicide. John Blowfield apparently threw himself overboard in a 'fit of Insanity', and 'James Frazier Recrute Jumpt over Board and was drowned having 2 pairs of Irons on'. Suicides on convict ships were unusual. This many aboard the *Britannia* was evidence of a real crisis.[48]

The convicts' plot, the suicides, and the seamen's discontent were clearly all part of the same problem. All on board were required to abide by the absolute rule of the captain, no matter how unjust they considered him to be. In the case of the *Britannia,* that rule was rejected by both convicts and crew, and predictably there was some inference that their rejections were not mutually exclusive. A seaman named Clark, for example, was punished for his part in the convicts' mutiny.[49] Both the convicts and the sailors protested against their harsh 'usage'. Neither thought their lot in life was to be driven like horses.

In this light there is clear evidence that seamen on board convict transports had reasons that went beyond drunkenness, disobedience and general unruliness for assisting convicts to rebel. Although a code of their employment was that they guarded the convicts as well as sailing the ship, in some ways their condition was more akin to that of the felons than their officers. They shared similar grievances and sometimes acted accordingly. In 1798, for example, before the *Hillsborough* even set sail, twelve seamen decided to desert, informing the convicts of their plan so that they too might 'seize such a favourable Opportunity' to regain their own freedom. The sailors decided to recover their liberty, and offered those chained below decks the same prospect.[50]

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[46] *Ibid.*

[47] C. Bateson, *The Convict Ships 1787-1868,* Glasgow, 1985, p160.

[48] Massey, *op. cit.*

[49] *Ibid.*

Later, when this ship became wracked with disease and discontent on its long voyage to the antipodes, one seaman named Johnson tried to help the convicts escape from their shackles by giving them a chisel.[51] It was an extreme incident which, unfortunately for the authorities, was not episode. In 1795, when Irish convicts on the *Marquis Cornwallis* hatched a plot to murder the captain and officers, the conspiracy, it was believed, 'extended to some of the soldiers and the Boatswain's mate'. The plan apparently was to sail the ship to America, where it was thought the convicts could regain their freedom. The extent of the captain's fear was shown by the severity of the reprisals, with the ringleaders hanged and others dying from their punishments and neglect.[52]

Other sailors' assistance to convicts was less all-embracing. The second mate of the *Pitt* told convict Thomas Watling how to escape from the ship at Cape Town. Watling remained at large at the Cape for some time, eventually being taken to New South Wales on the *Royal Admiral* several years after his intended arrival.[53] Many other captains peremptorily punished seamen in an attempt to prevent this kind of deed. On the *Minerva,* which sailed in 1799, the captain discharged sailor Thomas Burn for 'holding communication with the prisoners'.[54] On the *Coromandel* in February 1802, quartermaster John Beeby was demoted for 'being refractory not only with the ships company but with the Convicts'.[55]

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[50] Noah, *op. cit.*

[51] *Ibid.*

[52] *Historical Records of New South Wales,* Vol. 3, pp. 102-10; B. Hall, *A Desperate Set of Villains: The Convicts of the Marquis Cornwallis, Ireland to Botany Bay, 1796,* self-published, 2000, pp. 13-17; R. Atkins, 'Journal and Letterbook', National Library of Australia, MS 4039 f.199. Atkins actually names the ship as the *Earl Cornwallis,* but from the date he must have meant the *Marquis Cornwallis.*

[53] Declaration of Thomas Watling before the Judge Advocate, 20 October 1792, C201/7 f.310, National Archives, London; [T. Watling], *Letters from an Exile at Botany Bay to his Aunt in Dumfries,* Penrith, no date, p. 2.

[54] J.W. Price, 'A Journal kept on board the Minerva Transport from Ireland to New South Wales,' Add Mss 11380, The British Library, London.

[55] Log of the Coromandel, 1801-2, L/MAR/B/206A f.17, India Office Library (British Library) London.

Although it is clear that the reasons for sailors' rebelliousness on convict ships went beyond a simple propensity to belligerence and confrontation, any political aims behind their revolts are largely ambiguous. Moreover, personal ties and deeper motives were not necessarily antithetical, as an example from the First Fleet reveals. In 1787, the men of the *Alexander* allegedly supplied the convicts with knives and pistols so that they could take the ship. The two convicts specifically chosen for the task, later named as ringleaders in the rebellion, were Phillip Farrell and Thomas Griffiths, both former seafarers. Farrell had served on HMS *Goliath,* and had been sentenced to seven years transportation for stealing a cambric handkerchief worth one shilling, while Griffiths claimed to have worked on a French privateer, and had received the same sentence for stealing forty yards of black gauze.[56]

The background of these mutineers suggests that contemporary explanations for this event should not simply be accepted. Arthur Bowes-Smyth, surgeon of the *Lady Penrhyn,* thought that the problem was that their captain had not 'exert[ed] a proper Spirit amongst them'.[57] In other words, Captain Duncan Sinclair had not shown enough leadership over men who were in need of a strict regimen to control their disobedient tendencies. The seamen, just as the convicts, Bowes-Smyth evidently believed, were naturally wayward, rather like children, and needed firm control. Yet these men were experienced seafarers, revealing their maritime knowledge by planning their mutiny well and choosing a night when there was 'a fair Wind for France'.[58] Perhaps the crewmen who assisted them felt the injustice of banishing a man who had loyally risked his life for his country, sentenced for stealing goods worth only one shilling. Sailors were famously loyal to other seafarers and resolutely attached to their profession. It is not hard to imagine that a seaman might have had more sympathy for an old brother tar fallen foul of the law than for the alien, middle-class ethics of a ship's officers.

Likewise, there is some evidence, albeit inconclusive, of seamen and convicts occasionally sharing more political aims. This is suggestive of Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker's thesis, explored in *The Many-Headed Hydra* (2000). In a recent article Rediker hints at how this thesis would logically extend to convict transportation. He writes, 'The heads of the rebellious monster were dispossessed commoners, transported felons, religious radicals, insurgent servants and slaves, riotous urban labourers, and mutinous soldiers and sailors'.[59] Clearly several of these groups could be found on board convict ships, quite apart from the mention of felons as a separate category. In Rediker and Linebaugh's model, seamen and convicts might rebel together to oppose capitalism rather than simply because they shared grievances and cultural understandings.

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[56] J. Easty, *Memorandum of the Transaction of a Voyage from England to Botany Bay,* Sydney, 1963, pp. 7-8; *Old Bailey Sessions Papers,* 1784. pp. 915-75; Gillen, *The Founders of Australia*, pp. 124, 151.

[57] A. Bowes-Smyth, *The Journal of Arthur Bowes-Smyth: Surgeon,* Lady Penrhyn *1787-1789*, P.G. Fidlon and R.J.Ryan (eds), Sydney, 1979, pp. 39-40.

[58] N. Fowell, *'The Sirius Letters': The Complete Letters of Newton Fowell, Midshipman and Lieutenant aboard the Sirius,* N. Irving (ed.), Sydney, 1988, p. 44.

This is evidently a controversial theory, but interestingly there were at least two mutinies on convict ships where seamen were implicated that had explicit political overtones. On board the *Surprize* which was carrying the so-called 'Scottish Martyrs' into exile, the chief mate, MacPherson, was allegedly involved in a mutiny to take the ship. When the rumours first came to his attention, Captain Campbell took his right-hand man aside and tried to reason with him, asking 'him to remember his station in the ship at this Critical time, amongst a set of assassins, & reminded him of his Family at home who depend on him'. MacPherson, however, 'flew in [his] face' and refused to be calmed by the captain's words. Matters grew worse when a convict named John Starling reported that he heard the conspirators say 'they had [a] person in the ship to head them'. The man who replaced MacPherson as chief mate, John Burnet, later claimed that his predecessor had unambiguously stated that he supported the Scottish Martyrs' cause. Convict William Neale reported that MacPherson had been with the rebels, vowing to disable the rigging if they were met by a French ship in order to be captured.[60]

This was a very perilous situation for the captain, for the mutiny was reported to be a deeply political affair. One of the rebels was alleged to have declared, 'Damnation to the King, His Family and all Crown'd heads', stating 'That they were absolute Tyrants and out to be Extirpated from the face of the Earth'. They must consider themselves 'in state of slavery' until they could foment a revolution on the lines of the French example, he was reported to have argued. A soldier in the guard claimed that the men drank toasts to 'The Rights of Man, The Tree of Liberty, The French Revolution, Destruction to Tyranny and success to Civil, religious and Universal Liberty. May a Branch of the Tree of Liberty be transported to the Dreary and Desolate Shores of New Holland may every Individual know his Right and have the Spirit to assist them'.[61] Again, while MacPherson's involvement in any actual plot must ultimately remain uncertain, clearly the captain had good reason for his fears. Seamen could easily be attracted to such radicalism. Sailor Daniel Paine, possibly distantly related to Thomas Paine, certainly was, becoming friendly with the men while in the colony.[62]

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[59] M. Rediker, 'The Red Atlantic; or, "a terrible blast swept over a heaving sea"', in B. Klein and G. Mackenthun (eds), *Sea Changes: Historicizing the Ocean,* New York, 2004, pp. 111-2.

[60] Judge Advocate of NSW, Miscellaneous papers and Documents, 5/1156, State Records of New South Wales.

The seriousness of such concerns was amply displayed by the stealing away of the female convict transport *Lady Shore*, an incident in which political aims and an aspiration to regain individual liberties clearly overlapped. Although some historians have seen the motive behind this affair in sexual terms, it seems certain that there were political reasons for the revolt.[63] The chief mutineers were mainly army deserters who, as they later complained, 'had been trepanned into the British service, without any means of redress'. Even before the convicts were embarked, Captain Willocks, who would be killed during the mutiny, had noted 'many suspicious characters' among the soldiers. John Black, the ship's purser, listed the mutineers as nine Frenchmen and Germans, seven Irishmen, and four Englishmen, who made the officers sign statements that they would not take up arms against the French for a year. Their republican sentiments were further shown by the mutineers declaring '*Il a mort pour la liberté*' [he died for liberty] at the sea burial of their fallen comrade. This was conclusively a soldier's revolt, and the position of the seamen was ambiguous. James Semple thought they had merely been easily led because of their 'ignorance'. Black was more damning, having feared that many of the crew were not trustworthy before they sailed from England. He believed some crewmembers were implicated in the uprising.[64]

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[61] *Ibid.*

[62] D. Paine, *The Journal of Daniel Paine, 1794-1797*, R.J.B. Knight and A. Frost (eds), Sydney, 1983, p. xviii, xxi.

[63] A. Summers, *Damned Whores and God's Police: The Colonization of Women in Australia*, Victoria, 1975 p. 269; Damousi, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

[64] J. Semple-Lisle, *The life of Major J.G. Semple-Lisle; containing a faithful narrative, written by himself*, London, 1799, p. 206; J. Black, *An Authentic Narrative of the Mutiny on Board the Ship Lady Shore, with particulars of a Journey through part of Brazil*, Ipswich, 1798.

All these cases suggest that sailors were likely to rebel not only because they were naturally unruly and shared a lack of discipline with convicts, but because their own fight for liberty was intertwined with that of the felons they were paid to transport. Convicts had definitive constraints on their liberty — both the fetters they wore and the sentences they carried — but a seaman's own condition was hardly less controlled. Banishment in the form of a sea voyage, and resistance to absolute domination, were part of the fabric of seafaring. If convicts protested because they hoped for better treatment in the short term, and liberation in the longer term, then so in many ways did sailors. Better treatment and protection from excessive physical brutality were the practical tenets of liberty to which many seamen aspired.

Sailors' liberty was infringed by the nature of their work, but they had protested their treatment and fought for their rights for many decades before the First Fleet sailed for Botany Bay. Sharing backgrounds, culture and understandings with those passengers sentenced to transportation, it was hardly likely that they would have put aside their battles in this environment. In light of the many limitations upon the liberty of seafarers, their protests have a larger context than a mere knee-jerk reaction to penal servitude or a propensity to drunken disorderliness. They were part and parcel of a worldwide fight for what they regarded as just treatment, a concept intimately bound up with perceptions and definitions of the rights of a free man. Small wonder that Ralph Clark could declare that 'there is no difference between Soldier, Sailor or Convict, there are Six of the one and half a Dozen of the other'.[65] All were metaphorically, and literally, in the same boat.

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[65] Fidlon and Ryan, *op. cit.*, p. 129.