

Book Review

Post-1800

SARA CAPUTO. *Foreign Jack Tars: The British Navy and Transnational Seafarers during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars*. Modern British Histories. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Pp. 320. \$99.99 (cloth).
doi: 10.1017/jbr.2023.240

The Royal Navy in the age of sail was a big, heterogenous institution. During wartime, its voracious hunger for hands, sailors to man its warships, led the state to a range of expedients. The navy acquired experienced mariners and landlubbers from the merchant fleet, press gangs, jails, even Britain's population of impoverished urban youths. Many who served on the crown's ships were seen as "foreign"—othered in some way that meant they were or were perceived as aliens. Often, this was the result of a non-English or non-British birthplace, language, accent, skin color, or religion. Jack Tar, the stereotypical British sailor, was white, English, and followed the state religion. However, a substantial portion of the navy's tars did not fit that description. Many hailed from the Americas, mainland Europe, and Scandinavia. Some came from even farther away—Eastern Europe, Africa, even China (39).

Historical memory, cultural mythology, and pop culture tend to forget the diversity of the navy's lower deck, the working-class sailors who made up the bulk of naval personnel. In this era, the navy came "to symbolize Britannia herself and her might," and the institution has "remained a powerful focus of national pride" (3). Modern visions of this most British of institutions usually depend on that narrow understanding of navy sailors, but scholars have long recognized that their communities were far more diverse and varied. In *Foreign Jack Tars: The British Navy and Transnational Seafarers during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars*, Sara Caputo offers a rich new account of "foreign" tars. Her work makes important contributions to naval and maritime history and to the study of foreignness, transnational working-class lives, British identities, and the modernizing state.

As its title indicates, the book focuses on the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when the navy battled Revolutionary and Napoleonic France and swelled to unprecedented size. It takes as its particular subject the lower deck, paying the most attention to working-class tars. The community of common seamen who lived on the lower decks of the crown's

ships was large, rising above 140,000 during the Napoleonic Wars. The navy's desperation for warm bodies to sail its ships and ply its guns is the most consistent theme. This need took priority over almost everything else, and administrators and officers were willing to ignore laws and prejudices for the sake of manning. Perhaps as many as one in seven navy sailors was foreign born in this period (2).

One of Caputo's key innovations is approaching her study from the perspective of transnational history. She shows that the maritime labor market was fundamentally transnational; sailors often moved between not only merchant and military ships, but also between berths on ships of different nations. Investigating foreign sailors as a "migrant workforce" (12) lets her explore topics such as subjecthood, alienness, and displacement. She draws on a range of methods and subfields in this investigation, including cultural and legal history, quantitative social history, and microhistory.

The book's arguments develop across seven thematic chapters. Caputo begins with a study of sailors' birthplaces and demographic profiles using muster records. The chapter draws on statistical analysis of a sample of 4,392 sailors who served on ships at naval stations distant from English waters. It also considers how foreign birth affected sailors' chances at promotion and place in the lower-deck hierarchy. The second chapter then investigates the meaning of "alien" status in the navy, concluding that it brought few formal disadvantages and could even confer privileges such as (theoretically) protection from impressment. She concludes that being an alien tended to have at most a limited effect on sailors' experiences at sea.

The two chapters that follow consider linguistic, religious, and racial difference, especially racialized notions of differing susceptibility to disease and acclimatization to foreign conditions. Although prejudices and discrimination abounded, naval administrators and officers generally adopted a laissez-faire attitude towards difference, making few efforts to "impose systematic uniformity and regulation" on personnel (116). Manning was the overwhelming concern. The navy's "utilitarian reduction of people to pairs of 'hands'" and commitment to obtaining as many as possible was "intrinsically leveling" (131). The "needy state" (17) was so desperate for sailors during wartime that its manning practices created a "somewhat exceptional bubble" (242). Caputo uses this unusual historical moment to explore ideas and practices around nationhood, citizenship, and foreignness.

The next two chapters consider two very different groups of sailors: southern Italians hailing from Sicily and Naples, and northern Europeans, particularly Dutch, Danish, and Norwegian tars. Britons often harbored intense racialized prejudices against southern Europeans, but Britain's "quasi-colonial" (145) relationship with Sicily meant that many Italian sailors and even some officers served the British crown. While there was much mutual antipathy, officers' views were malleable, and some came to respect these Italian sailors. British views towards northern European mariners were much warmer. Officers saw sailors from these places as highly desirable and easily integrable into their crews. This chapter includes an intriguing microhistory of the Vlieter squadron, a group of four Royal Navy ships commanded and manned entirely by Dutch sailors. In her final chapter, Caputo returns to her consideration of foreign sailors as a migrant workforce, asking how seafarers ended up in the navy and how the displacement they experienced affected their lives.

The book draws on impressive archival work in Britain, Continental Europe, and the United States. Caputo's painstaking archival research and quantitative analysis are in the best traditions of maritime social history. This book deserves readers beyond just those studying early modern sailors, though. "[B]y locating the transnational in the depths of the national," she is able "to question the very categories on which this distinction is built" (7). Her findings and arguments will be of wide interest, including to those exploring British identities, working-class lives, and the histories of foreigners and othered people.

Foreign Jack Tars also points the way forward for research on foreign sailors. For instance, this is top-down history, told from the perspective of the state and of officers and administrators, despite some use of sources like sailors' memoirs and court martial minutes. There is still

much to learn about this history through sailors' eyes. Caputo also raises pressing questions about historical memory. She gestures to the implications of her arguments in "the current political climate," in which "the crudest forms of mythology" often pass as history (7). Future scholarship should take up the question of how this history has been forgotten and whitewashed.

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