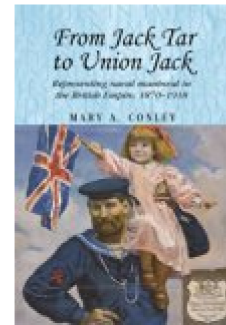
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mary A. Conley. *From Jack Tar to Union Jack: Representing Naval Manhood in the British Empire, 1870-1918.* Studies in Imperialism Series. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009. xv + 215 pp. $89.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7190-7534-6.



Reviewed by Timothy Jenks (East Carolina University)
Published on H-Albion (January, 2011)
Commissioned by Thomas Hajkowski

Empire and Navy: Constructing the Common British Seaman

This is a study of the image of the common British seaman in late Victorian and Edwardian Britain, as viewed through the accessible sources of late imperial popular culture. Necessarily cautioning that, due to the nature of the source base, her study will be an examination of elite constructions of working-class naval masculinity, Mary A. Conley explores the themes of domesticity, class, empire, and war through a selective but chronologically arranged series of episodes. *From Jack Tar to Union Jack* continues the scholarly interest in imperial masculinity that has emerged in recent decades. The latest installment in Manchester University Press's Studies in Imperialism series, the book investigates how by the Edwardian period "naval manhood came to be aligned with imperial manliness" (p. 1). From the perspective of 1815 this was an unexpected outcome. At the outset of the nineteenth century the prevalent image of the common British seaman was far from flattering. "Jack Tar" was stereotypically viewed as drunken and improvident, though undeniably brave. In contrast by 1914, as Conley shows and seeks to explain, "positive depictions" of the British seaman as "both patriotic defender and dutiful husband" proliferated in Britain's imperial culture (pp. 3, 4).

Such a transformation in the image of naval masculinity was profoundly informed by the altered strategic, technological, and imperial contexts of naval service in the Victorian and Edwardian periods. Fittingly then, the first chapter is devoted to establishing the institutional contexts for the various reforms that "facilitated the professionalisation of the service and the transformation of popular representations of naval manhood" (p. 20). Modernization rears its inevitable head, and the typically Victorian response is an imperative of institutional reform. From the new industrial technologies of the 1840s and 1850s sprang new manpower needs. Screw propulsion, advanced armaments and gunnery, and increasing mechanization required not only skilled and trained seamen, but also many more of them. Not that technological adaptation occurred in a vacuum. Britain's vast imperial responsibilities and strategic vulnerability were increasingly sensed by the latter third of the nineteenth century. Concerns about recruitment and national efficiency became organized (at least rhetorically) around the person of the naval seaman. Altered regimes of discipline, recruitment, training, and the arrival of the standardized uniform in 1857 created a new species, the "British bluejacket." This bluejacket was an increasingly professionalized and educated mechanic, and, as Conley explores in the remaining chapters, "a new foundation from which to envision naval manhood" (p. 58).

Conley's next chapter is an examination of naval philanthropy, a topic that permits investigation of the manner in which Victorian notions of domesticity affected the construction of naval manhood. What set naval philanthropy apart from mainstream Victorian philanthropy, in Conley's view, was the wide variety of services it targeted at seamen and their families. This flowed

from the Victorian understanding of domesticity. Once seamen were viewed as husbands, fathers, and breadwinners, a wide range of ameliorative strategies presented themselves as relevant to the national interest. Disaster relief efforts for bereaved families, mothers' meetings for sailors' wives, educational provision for naval orphans, and subsidized lodging for sailors on leave–anything that related to the social, economic, or spiritual condition of the sailor and his family was an object for naval philanthropy. The temperance efforts of Agnes Weston come in for particular scrutiny. The Royal Naval Temperance Society she founded in 1873 set itself a formidable goal–the establishment of temperance among the sailors of the Royal Navy. Her campaign asserted that individual temperance on the part of British seamen was ultimately a question of national security. Interestingly, in so doing, Weston purveyed the stereotype of the drunken and dissolute tar, if only to mobilize efforts to displace him with the ideal of the disciplined Christian bluejacket. Such language elicited objections from seamen themselves, whose protests against Weston's demeaning rhetoric revealed the degree to which a professional ethic of manly independence was attaching itself to the self-image of naval men.

Class is the thematic focus of the third chapter. Here, Conley explores the tensions that, given the middle-class provenance of normative Victorian masculinity, were bound to emerge in naval manhood's transit from subcultural posture to representative type of imperial masculinity. Various literary forms (juvenile fiction in particular) reveal that a common technique for avoiding the obvious political implications of idealizing common sailors was a studied avoidance of the question of egalitarianism. Highly generalized accounts of historic naval exploits diverted attention from the reality that the careers of working-class seamen were class bound and static. The examples of naval juvenile historical fiction that Conley examines (by W. H. G. Kingston and G. A. Henty) telegraphed the self-improving, class-effacing language of juvenile fiction in general. The irony, in an increasingly democratic and economically developing age, was that the social mobility these tales hinted at was fictional in the extreme. Although the navy had the reputation of being a "model meritocracy," in reality it was not so (as the complaints expressed by naval reformers and lower-deck advocates testify). Moreover, authors typically found ways to subvert egalitarian messages in their works, and continued to view true manliness as essentially middle class. Gilbert and Sullivan's *HMS Pinafore* (1878) is, in Conley's view, a satire of this aspect of Victorian hypocrisy, and proof that the struggle for the true "democratisation of naval manhood" had yet to occur (p. 118).

What forces were working to transform the prevailing image of naval manhood by the century's end? Conley's fourth chapter gives the answer quite clearly: expanding democracy and imperial anxiety. The activities of two groups–lower-deck advocates for naval reforms and navalist activists for imperial defense–feature prominently here. Together their efforts solidified the image of the modern bluejacket as an educated and skilled professional (p. 131). Navalists were primarily interested in naval expansion, but their activist rhetoric rooted concerns for national efficiency and imperial health in conceptions of naval manhood. Lower-deck seamen were increasingly able to frame their identity as professional, educated, and disciplined–thus bringing it into proximity with traditional notions of middle-class masculinity. The same themes were extolled in the writings of the navalists. Their writings democratized naval manhood; extolled the discipline, work ethos, adaptability, and cleanliness that was associated with it; and presented it as model for all men. Naval manhood was becoming projected as a touchstone for imperial problems.

With naval manhood thus positioned at the nexus of masculinity and empire, it remained only for it to be tested in war. Conley investigates the resilience and relevance of the new image by examining how it was articulated in the commemoration of one wartime hero, the boy seaman Jack Cornwell. A heroic casualty of the battle of Jutland (May 31, 1916), Cornwell was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross and a state funeral for remaining steadfastly at his post even after receiving a mortal wound. The scale of his commemoration, Conley makes clear, was rooted in both his working-class origins and the degree to which he came to represent a revived chivalric notion of "duty, obedience and passive sacrifice" (p. 13). Cornwell's working-class ordinariness was emphasized in a commemorative culture that upheld him as a model for others to follow. Equally significant, perhaps, was that he was an unquestioning hero at a time when many in the British public were beginning to question the war itself. A portrait of Cornwell was commissioned by the Admiralty, displayed in the Royal Academy in the spring of 1917, and prints were distributed to schools throughout Britain and the empire. Undoubtedly few readers will have heard of him and for this Conley has an explanation: "the democratisation of heroism" Cornwell represented "was made redundant by the democratisation of suffering" in the interwar period

(p. 185). The episode, though, reveals for Conley the degree to which naval manhood had become normatively accepted as a primary social model for the understanding of masculinity.

From Jack Tar to Union Jack is an interesting, well-researched, and historiographically engaged study. Prospective readers should be aware that the discussion is limited to how an imperial image was projected within Britain and to a domestic British audience. This is not a geographically wide-ranging exploration of naval masculinity as projected or received throughout the larger empire. Several of the topics that Conley broaches have relevance beyond the area of imperial masculinity. The chapter on Cornwell, for instance, is relevant to the debate on whether the First World War created a deep crisis for the representational modes of traditional European culture. Similarly, although the story of the Navy League, "national efficiency," and the debate over naval expansion is a familiar one, it is interesting to see it recast through the prism of naval manhood. The context for Conley's analyses is consistently supplied throughout the study, though at times this does threaten to obscure the architecture of the overall argument.

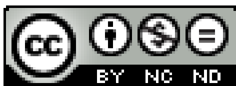
In spite of what her title might appear to suggest, the tale that Conley tells is not one of the linear displacement of "Jack Tar" by the image of the modern bluejacket. On the contrary, Conley emphasizes the degree to which the older stereotype remained potent and curiously persistent. Precisely why this was the case is not addressed, but it is one of several avenues that might have been investigated, all the more because doing so might allow us to more fully approach the question of how, in cases like this, culture "works." Similarly, given the amount of evidence from advertising that Conley presents, it is disappointing that the contingencies of advertising, consumption, and desire are not fully confronted. But these are small criticisms that fall into the category of "having left the reader wanting more"–never a bad thing, it has to be said.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion

Citation: Timothy Jenks. Review of Conley, Mary A., *From Jack Tar to Union Jack: Representing Naval Manhood in the British Empire, 1870-1918.* H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. January, 2011.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25834



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.