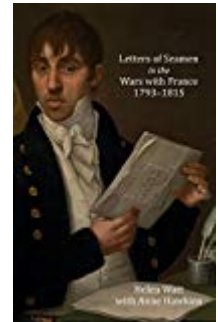


**Helen Watt, Anne Hawkins, eds..** *Letters of Seamen in the Wars with France, 1793-1815*. Rochester: Boydell Press, 2014. 384 pp. \$165.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-84383-896-8.



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**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air University)

British seamen found themselves characterized as jolly tars in popular culture—as free-spirited, profligate scamps proud to serve at sea, and truly suited to a life afloat. This collection of letters from seamen shows a different side to them. It illustrates their concerns for their families, their homesickness, and their financial troubles. Furthermore, this collection demonstrates the literacy of seamen and their eagerness to write and receive letters. The triumph of this work is in the care taken to treat each seaman as a figure worthy of further study and research. This volume not only transcribes the letters of seamen but also provides rich biographical information cultivated through careful and detailed research in multiple archives and online databases. This brings added depth to the letters, complementing the useful historical and historiographical context of the introduction to each section.

After the introduction, which emphasizes the literacy of seamen and why this mattered, Helen Watt and Anne Hawkins's collection is divided into two parts. The beginning of part 1—"Thus

Dear Father passes the life of a Tar': Letters of Seamen, 1793-1815"—details the backgrounds of the seamen, the processes by which they came to serve in the navy, and the recurring themes in their letters. In describing seamen's backgrounds, Watt and Hawkins take Michael Lewis's *Social History of the Navy* (1960) as their point of comparison. They show that although many seamen did come from seafaring families, as Lewis suspected, more seamen came from families that conducted other trades or followed other professions. They find that while a majority of seamen came from seaside counties, they did not always come from towns along the coast. By using the Trafalgar Ancestors database, Watt and Hawkins also concede that their sample of letter writers does not precisely match the demographics on-board ships, skewing toward English, Scottish, and Welsh writers and with fewer writers not from Britain or Ireland. This sample of letters may not be precisely representative, perhaps in part due to limiting their scope to family correspondence and excluding letters to officials. Yet

the similarities among the letters still reflect several important themes that seemed to weigh on the minds of seamen. In describing these common themes, Watt and Hawkins continually challenge the limited views of seamen. Their section on the “preoccupations” of seamen demonstrates the worries over money, clothes, and providing for their families that dominated many of the letters. Thus, the introduction to part 1 effectively establishes the backgrounds and concerns of seamen.

Watt and Hawkins present the letters in chronological order. Each letter begins with information on the source, address, any postmarks and dates, and notes on the source. This information helps clarify omissions in the text by discussing any damage to the letters, as well as providing a sense of what one might have seen by actually holding the letter—the stamps, marks, and other visuals not often described in collections of written primary materials. By organizing the information chronologically, Watt and Hawkins provide the reader with a sense not only of change over time generally but also of the developing concerns over pay, family welfare, and news from home (or lack thereof). This rich presentation of sources provides windows into the delightful idiosyncrasies of their authors. One fascinating example, the letters of James Atkins to his uncle, suggests some mysterious fight between Atkins and his aunt, although the letters only allude to his “Villainy” and his uncle’s “Goodness” (p. 194). In addition to their obscurity, Atkins’s letters serve as a useful reminder of the rich lives seamen led and the minimal sources available to fill in all of the details of their lives, no less fascinating than the better-documented lives of captains and admirals.

Part 2—“A great disturbance among the Fleet’: Letters, Mostly Intercepted, to and from Seamen during the Mutinies in the Royal Navy, 1797”—focuses on letters sent while seamen at Spithead and the Nore mutinied. Watt and Hawkins draw on Conrad Gill’s *Naval Mutinies of 1797* published in 1913. Here, they offer several useful ad-

ditions to the historiography on the mutinies. First, they challenge assumptions about outside influencers and the United Irishmen at the Nore. Second, they offer new information about similar, albeit smaller-scale, mutinies in other locations, such as Cork and Brest. Finally, they show the diversity of views regarding the mutinies held by both seamen and their families as revealed in their correspondence. The seamen in these letters have no apparent interest in the London Corresponding Society, an alliance with the United Irishmen or France, but focus instead on their rights and especially on their pay.

Watt and Hawkins offer a conclusion that points to several useful avenues of research, including the literacy of seamen, their relationships with their wives, the kinds of people on board, and the scope and scale of the mutinies of 1797. Their tireless research provides scholars of many levels and disciplines insights into seamen. Their work encourages further research that will reveal the nuances and layers of seamen’s lives.

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