

# The Making of a Nineteenth-Century Profession: Shipmasters and the British Shipping Industry

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## Article abstract

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the occupation of shipmaster was transformed. It was remade as a profession of and for the middle class. This development followed from the specialization and division of labour in the shipping industry, and reflected the social divisions of an increasingly class-stratified society. The thesis advanced in this paper assigns a key role in this process to the dynamic of industrial capitalism. The paper argues that class-specific recruitment to the shipmaster's occupation put the values of the professional middle classes to the service of shipowners in the extension of their control over labour.

The study examines several facets of this transformation: the state's contribution in the abandonment of mercantilist regulation of maritime labour and the introduction of masters' and mates' certificates of competency in the mid-nineteenth century; the role of the technological change from sail to steam on the nature and organization of the workforce; the owners' efforts to reduce the shipmaster to a wage employee whose self-interests and self-image made him distinct from other workers; and the structural changes in both the shipping industry and the systems of recruitment and training which ensured that the profession of shipmaster would gradually emerge as a middle-class preserve.

The remaking of the profession of shipmaster illuminates the larger processes of social differentiation and cultural/ideological production associated with the division and specialization of labour in Victorian Britain. Examining this case in detail advances our understanding of class division in industrial society, particularly as it relates to the important, but singularly neglected, middle-management professions.

# The Making of a Nineteenth-Century Profession: Shipmasters and the British Shipping Industry

VALERIE BURTON

## Résumé

*During the second half of the nineteenth century, the occupation of shipmaster was transformed. It was remade as a profession of and for the middle class. This development followed from the specialization and division of labour in the shipping industry, and reflected the social divisions of an increasingly class-stratified society. The thesis advanced in this paper assigns a key role in this process to the dynamic of industrial capitalism. The paper argues that class-specific recruitment to the shipmaster's occupation put the values of the professional middle classes to the service of shipowners in the extension of their control over labour.*

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*The remaking of the profession of shipmaster illuminates the larger processes of social differentiation and cultural/ideological production associated with the division and specialization of labour in Victorian Britain. Examining this case in detail advances our understanding of class division in industrial society, particularly as it relates to the important, but singularly neglected, middle-management professions.*

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*À la suite de certaines transformations, le métier de constructeur de navires put redevenir une occupation de la classe moyenne, durant la seconde moitié du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Ce changement résultait de la spécialisation et de la division du travail dans l'industrie maritime et reflétait les tensions internes d'une société de plus en plus répartie en classes sociales. C'est la transformation du capitalisme industriel qui aurait apporté un tel changement, selon l'hypothèse de travail de cette recherche. D'après son auteur, le recrutement des constructeurs de navire en fonction des origines sociales a contribué à mettre les valeurs des classes moyennes professionnelles au service des armateurs qui ont accru ainsi leur contrôle sur la main-d'oeuvre.*

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I wish to thank Robin Craig, Joe Melling, Tony Lane, Harold Perkin, David Zimmerman, and Judith Fingard for their comments on earlier versions of this paper.

*L'étude examine différents aspects de cette transformation : le rôle de l'État dans le déclin de la réglementation mercantiliste du travail maritime et l'introduction, au milieu du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, de certificats professionnels pour les maîtres et les apprentis; les répercussions des changements technologiques sur la nature et l'organisation de la main-d'oeuvre, suite au passage de la voile à la vapeur; les efforts des armateurs pour réduire les constructeurs de navire au rang de salariés dont les intérêts et l'image de soi les rendaient différents des autres travailleurs; les changements structurels dans le commerce maritime et dans les systèmes de recrutement et de formation qui devaient assurer que la profession de constructeur de navires reste la chasse gardée de la classe moyenne.*

*Le changement touchant la profession de constructeur de navires met en lumière les procédés de différenciation sociale et de production culturelle-idéologique associés à la division et à la spécialisation du travail dans l'Angleterre victorienne. L'examen minutieux de cette situation permet de mieux comprendre les divisions de classes dans la société industrielle, en particulier celles qui touchent les professions importantes, mais souvent négligées, appartenant à la catégorie des cadres intermédiaires.*

In the eighteenth century the profession of shipmaster was informally structured around specialist knowledge of seamanship, navigation, and commercial and business practice and the shipmaster was, to a degree, autonomous and financially independent. During the nineteenth century it was transformed into an occupation characterized by premium apprenticeship, formal training, qualifying examination and state supervision, salaried remuneration, professional association, and the self-conscious assertion of professional status.<sup>1</sup> Concomitant with these changes was a narrowing of the social base of recruitment such that the shipmaster's occupation became a profession of and for the middle class.<sup>2</sup> It is that development which forms the central focus of this paper. The remaking of the shipmaster's occupation is a singularly important case of occupational change in Victorian Britain.<sup>3</sup> Focusing upon the still-neglected ranks of middle management, it sheds light on the specialization of labour in a large-scale, capital-intensive and technologically sophisticated industry.<sup>4</sup> Most important, it opens to examination the pro-

1. There have been few studies of shipmasters. The standard work of reference for the eighteenth century remains Ralph Davis, *The Rise of the English Shipping Industry* (London, 1962), Chap. 8; for the nineteenth century, see R.S. Craig, "Printed Guides for Master Mariners as a Source of Productivity in Shipping, 1750-1914," *Journal of Transport History* 3:2 (September 1982): 23-35. Craig's paper gives a fuller account of the master's range of duties than can be attempted here.
2. This development was neither uniform in its timing nor universal across an industry which was profoundly differentiated between sail and steam, between foreign-going and home trade, and between liner and tramp. The embourgeoisement of the shipmaster's occupation was, however, a key trend in the foreign-going service and, as I shall argue later, it was the pivot of capitalist labour strategies in the second half of the nineteenth century.
3. For a broad survey of professionalization in this period, see T.R. Gourvish, "The Rise of the Professions" in *Later Victorian Britain 1867-1900*, eds. T.R. Gourvish and Alan O'Day (Basingstoke, 1988), 13-35.
4. There is a large chronological gap in the British literature dealing with managerial labour between the end of Sidney Pollard's seminal study, *The Genesis of Modern Management: A Study of the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain* (1965), which was purposefully con-

cesses of ideological formation associated with occupational change. The key argument to be developed here is that class-specific recruitment to the shipmaster's occupation put the values of the genteel, professional middle classes to the service of industrial capitalism in the extension of its control over labour.<sup>5</sup>

British shipping underwent unprecedented growth and change during the second half of the nineteenth century. The expansion of overseas commerce in an environment of free trade was a catalyst to increased capital investment and technical innovation. Relations of production were reshaped under capitalist imperatives of profit maximization. Since shipmasters occupied a key position between capital and waged labour, the remaking of the profession was central, indeed pivotal, to this process. Command and technical control were always key issues in the merchant marine. They gained a new urgency after the advent of steam. The essential question for shipowners was how to advance both the technical competency and disciplinary authority of shipmasters while subordinating them more fully to capitalist control — in sum, how to strengthen the hierarchy of authority and control from shipowner through shipmaster to the lowliest hand on a merchant vessel.

The solution came through professionalization, though it was not employers, but the state, which made the all-important initial innovation — qualifying examinations and certificates of competency. First introduced in 1845 and compulsory for masters and mates in the foreign-going service from 1851, certification was supervised by a government department, the Board of Trade.<sup>6</sup> This extension of state regulation stands in curious relation to the developing momentum of *laissez-faire*, symbolized in its free-trade aspects by the reform of the Navigation Laws. The coincidence of these measures is far from accidental. Together with a second reform — the repeal of laws which had

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cluded about 1830 when, Pollard suggested, management was about to become more specialized and professional, and the studies of management in the early-twentieth century, the most recent of which have argued for a specifically British style of management (distinct from Taylorism) but with little attempt to delineate its roots: H.F. Gospel and C.R. Littler, eds., *Managerial Strategies and Industrial Relations: A Historic and Comparative Study* (London, 1983); L. Hannah, "Visible and Invisible Hands in Great Britain," in *Managerial Hierarchies: Comparative Perspectives on the Rise of Modern Industrial Enterprise*, eds. A.D. Chandler and Herman Daems (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), 53-55. See, however, the excellent discussion of middle management in J. Melling, "'Non-Commissioned Officers: British employers and their supervisory workers, 1880-1920,'" *Social History* 5:2 (1980): 183-221.

5. Martin Weiner's *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980* (Cambridge, 1981) is, despite much criticism, still the fullest account of gentrification in relation to British industry. This paper does not address his thesis directly. However, the evidence presented here, quarried at a much more detailed level than Weiner's, suggests that, far from being seduced by gentlemanly ideals incompatible with the entrepreneurial spirit, British industrialists made these ideals work for them in the shape of a non-entrepreneurial, genteel professional class of middle managers.
6. *Mercantile Marine Act*, 13 & 14 Victoria c.93; T.W. Vasey, "The Emergence of Examinations for British Shipmasters and Mates" PhD diss., University of Durham, 1980; C. Jeans, "The First Statutory Qualifications for Seafarers," *Journal of Transport History* 6:3 (November 1973): 248-67.

made it compulsory for shipowners to carry apprentices on their vessels — it signified an important shift in government policy, a new readiness to give free rein to the shipping interest in the recruitment and employment of maritime labour.<sup>7</sup>

If British commerce was to be free while other nations maintained protection, she was not to be outpriced in competition for carrying trade. The lower labour costs of foreign competitors seriously disadvantaged British shipowners, so the owners argued when called before the Select Committees on the Navigation Laws.<sup>8</sup> Focusing on the expense of compulsory apprenticeship, they protested that its universality was a disadvantage, forcing the shipowner to spread his resources instead of concentrating upon training future masters and mates. The apprenticeship laws formed the cornerstone of a mercantilist policy which had designated the merchant marine a ‘‘nursery of seamen’’ for the Royal Navy. Parliament’s willingness to repeal them was an important concession to the shipping interest: even more so was the institution of a state system of certification for masters and mates. Under the expediency of national interest, certification addressed the shipowners’ perennial complaints of the poor quality of officers.<sup>9</sup> Though scarcely politic to acknowledge it, a Liverpool shipowner stated: ‘‘We cannot, as a shipowning community, be too thankful...for having a system of examination for our merchant captains and officers previous to their being appointed to our ships.’’<sup>10</sup> As a system for validating the calibre of labour, it was unprecedented and quite without parallel in any other industry.<sup>11</sup> Since no expense devolved upon the employer, it was a covert subsidy to the British shipowner, the like of which existed in no other maritime nation.<sup>12</sup>

Certification and the repeal of compulsory apprenticeship opened the way to the strategies for labour savings which were prefigured in the evidence to the Committees on the Navigation Laws. Though rarely the main item of a shipowner’s expenditure, labour costs were flagged as the chief target for economies and were to be cut through the reduction of manning levels.<sup>13</sup> The creation of an elite class of labour, distinguished

7. V.C. Burton, ‘‘Apprenticeship Regulation and Maritime Labour in the Nineteenth Century British Merchant Marine,’’ *International Journal of Maritime History* I:1 (1989): 29-49.
8. ‘‘Reports from the Select Committee [of the House of Commons] on the Operation and Policy of the Navigation Laws,’’ *British Parliamentary Papers (B.P.P.)*, X (1847), q. 4803-5, q. 5157; ‘‘Report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords on the Operation and Policy of the Navigation Laws’’, *B.P.P.*, XX (1847-48), part ii, q. 670.
9. ‘‘Report from the Select Committee appointed to inquire into the causes of the increased number of shipwrecks,’’ *B.P.P.*, XVII (1836) Qs. 660-97, vi and viii-ix.
10. Alexander Balfour to the Liverpool Committee of Enquiry into the Condition of Merchant Seamen, 1880, quoted in Thomas Brassey, *The British Navy: Its Strength, Resources and Administration*, Vol. 5, *British Seamen* (London, 1883), 48-49. In public British shipowners took an extreme laissez-faire position and usually made a point of calumniating government intervention.
11. State certification was later to be introduced for mine managers, railway inspectors, and midwives, though in none of these cases was the system so comprehensive as that for masters and mates: A.M. Carr-Saunders and P.A. Wilson, *The Professions* (Oxford, 1965), *passim*.
12. Karel Davids, ‘‘Technological Change and the Professionalism of Masters and Mates in the Dutch Mercantile Marine, 1815-1914,’’ 7. I am grateful to Dr. Davids for providing me with a copy of his unpublished manuscript.
13. House of Lords debate on the Navigation Laws, *Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates*, CV (24 May 1849), 875.

from the casual labour which formed the mass of the industry's workforce by premium apprenticeship and a professional career structure, was a key part of the strategy. This class was to take the burden of increased managerial responsibility. It was the salient development in the organization of seafaring labour during the second half of the nineteenth century. Galvanized by the increasing scale of investment in the industry and greater sophistication of operations, the formation of an officer elite was, nevertheless, a social phenomenon locked into the process of stratification in Victorian society.

## i

Mandatory certification created a professional career structure for shipmasters, but access to and progress along the professional ladder increasingly depended upon the possession of material resources and this, in turn, was an index of social class. Discrimination against the lower classes was overt in the recruitment of masters, though masked by the legitimating ideology of a hegemonic class. Professional examination was a case in point. In a society where employment opportunities were increasingly determined by social position, competitive examination was a touchstone of the liberal faith in the existence of a meritocracy.<sup>14</sup> The much-vaunted reform of the civil service by examination had divested it of patronage and privilege, opening positions to the lower-middle class. In the merchant marine professional examination had the opposite effect, that of closing off employment but, significantly, closing it to the poorer classes. Patronage and privilege accounted for the elevation of few men to the position of shipmaster in the early-nineteenth century, for most were recruited from the ranks on the basis of proven ability. Certification, however, fractured the career ladder up which seamen had moved to the command of merchant vessels. It was said that the examination of masters and mates "only allows a certain class of men to work their way up."<sup>15</sup>

Three things counted against men of limited resources: examination fees, the costs of study in a navigation school and, as a prerequisite, a good general education beyond the standard which could be obtained in the public elementary schools.<sup>16</sup> Class stratification and its sustaining ideologies flourished in the Victorian education system. In separate institutions each class was equipped to take its place in society. The task of the elementary schools was to educate the lower classes to their station, not above it.<sup>17</sup> School boards, established in 1870, were discouraged from providing technical or secondary education from the rates. Seven years previously, in a gesture equally parsimonious of taxpayers' money, science and art department grants were withdrawn from

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14. John Roach, *Public Examinations in England 1850-1900* (Cambridge, 1971), 3-4.
  15. W. Allingham, "Mercantile Marine Education," *London Shipmasters' Society Course of Papers* 28 (1893): 39.
  16. Examination fees of £2 for the master's examination applied in 1850 while the cost of a course of study in a navigation school was ten guineas or more. The standards required in written examinations of seamanship and navigation are given in "Returns showing the qualifications for certificates of competency of masters and mates . . .," *B.P.P.*, LXIII (1867), 289.
  17. Roach, *Public Examinations*, 35; Harold Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society 1780-1880* (London, 1969), 301 and "Middle Class Education and Employment in the Nineteenth Century: A Critical Note," *Economic History Review* 14 (1961): 122-30.

private technical institutions, including nineteen navigation schools. In 1860, a suggestion that navigation school scholarships should be created for needy individuals was roundly derided by a shipowner: "one of the great faults of the age," he said, "is to over-educate the working classes." Shipowners were committed to a policy of "raising the class" of shipmasters.<sup>18</sup>

Under the banner of individualism the private system flourished, conferring the means to qualify as a shipmaster on those who could afford to pay. Payment itself was turned to a bourgeois virtue, a sign of independence and respectability. Thus the ending of state grants to navigation schools was justified by a government official on the grounds that subsidies were not required by the independent class of shipmasters and, what is more, he said, it would offend them to be offered a government dole.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, the institution of higher premiums for apprenticeships, alloyed with the progressive limitation of apprenticeships to future officers, was an even more explicit test of independent means.<sup>20</sup> It was in this context that the London shipowner Duncan Dunbar declared his intention of "raising the class of officers" by increasing the premium charged by his company to £60.<sup>21</sup> The status of the profession was tangibly changing. Under the combined agency of state functionaries and employers, the merchant marine shed the legacy of a reputation acquired when apprenticeship in the merchant service was for paupers and when the Marine Society had taken advantage of compulsory apprenticeship to send hundreds of poor boys to sea each year.<sup>22</sup> A bourgeois rehabilitation was underway. It was to culminate in the delineation of the profession as a middle-class preserve.<sup>23</sup>

The atrophy of channels of advancement for the lower classes at the expense of the widening of opportunities for the middle classes was most apparent in the fate of charitable navigation schools. In a development paralleling the middle-class appropriation of grammar-school endowments, these schools were transformed into fee-paying institutions and their facilities were turned to the advancement of the careers of middle-class youths. Charitable marine schools existed in a number of ports before the nineteenth century. In Whitehaven, for example, sixty poor boys annually were educated in "reading, writing, arithmetic, gauging, navigation and bookkeeping" to improve their chances of being taken on as officer apprentices.<sup>24</sup>

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18. "Report from the Select Committee appointed to inquire into the state of Merchant Shipping, the operation of the burdens and restrictions especially affecting Merchant Shipping," *B.P.P.*, XIII (1860). Q. 387.
  19. "Seventh Report of the Science and Art Department 1860," (2626), *B.P.P.*, XXIV, 38, 50.
  20. "Final Report of the Royal Commission on the Loss of Life at Sea," *B.P.P.* (1887), XLIII, Q. 18625; Brassey, *British Seamen*, 32.
  21. "Select Committee on Merchant Shipping, 1860," Q. 387
  22. *Ibid.*, 32-33.
  23. "We are tormented with boys applying to get on board ship," a Board of Trade official commented in 1897, "but the parents being poor working people, or an impecunious widow, cannot provide the premium and the boys are not taken on." W.F. Caborne, "British Merchant Seamen: Their Training and Treatment," *Shipmasters' Papers* 55 (1898): 27.
  24. T. Bulmer, *History and Directory of Cumberland* (Preston, 1901), 640.

The Brocklebank Company of Liverpool took apprentices from the school in the early-nineteenth century to serve in its expanding fleet of South America and India vessels. A number worked their way up to master.<sup>25</sup> The company's records are not wholly comprehensive in details of each apprentice enlisted; nevertheless, they rank as the finest apprenticeship records of any private company, and their long chronological scope gives a valuable insight into the changes in social composition of officer apprentices during the nineteenth century.<sup>26</sup> Among seventy-four apprentices taken on between 1820 and 1823, there were sons of artisans, manufacturing tradesmen, small farmers, seafarers and shipmasters and, significantly, several labourers' sons.<sup>27</sup> This was a period when the geographic catchment of the company's recruitment concentrated on the ports of Cumbria, but its social catchment was wide. In the late-nineteenth century, by contrast, Brocklebanks recruited from a national pool and were socially discriminating. Rather than seeking out born seamen from the coastal communities of Cumbria, the company looked for different qualities, the qualities of a class brought up to command.<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, the marine school at Whitehaven had become a fee-paying institution patronized by the middle classes.

Premium apprenticeship and certification delineated the shipmaster's occupation as a middle-class profession. Attractive to the middle classes as a suitable occupation for their sons, the attractions rested, however, on the advantages which premium payment and professional examination conferred on the privileged and educated classes. Professionalization drew the class lines of a stratified society around employment opportunities. From this perspective, it is difficult to see how the liberal interpretation of professionalization as a democratizing force can be sustained. One example may not in itself be sufficient to refute that interpretation, currently advanced in Harold Perkin's *The Rise of Professional Society*, but it does suggest that a case based overwhelmingly on the opening of positions of power and influence in the liberal professions (the law, medicine and, especially, the civil service), and neglectful of evidence that in other professions barriers were erected against the working class, may have taken as democratization what was in fact the extension and consolidation of bourgeois hegemony.<sup>29</sup>

25. Merseyside Maritime Museum (MMM), Brocklebank Archive, T & J Brocklebank Apprentices' Books, 8 volumes (1820 to 1898), Boxes 3 and 4.

26. The samples of indentures preserved at the Public Record Office (PRO BT 151) are too partial to permit systematic analysis and the Brocklebank records are in many ways preferable, though the company was atypical in its long and dedicated commitment to the apprenticeship system. An account of the company's apprentices can be found in Valerie Burton, "'A Man Cannot Make a Sailor Without Education': Merchant Navy Apprentices in the Nineteenth Century," *Liverpool Nautical Research Society Transactions* (1988): 17-25.

27. Eighteen of the apprentices are known to have become masters, sixteen of them in the service of the company during the period when its services were rapidly expanding. Their careers were traced in the Registers of Seamen compiled for the years 1835 to 1857; Public Record Office (PRO), BT112, BT114, BT116; and from the Agreements and Accounts of Crew, 1835 to 1856, in PRO, BT98.

28. The samples of indentures at the Public Record Office provide some evidence of a similar trend at the national level, though father's occupation was infrequently recorded; PRO BT151/18 and 151/19.

29. Harold Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England Since 1880* (London, 1989).



The Victorian middle classes were, after all, convincing exponents of a meritocratic ideal in support of an inegalitarian social order.

“For every boy who enters the merchant navy of Britain... there is no position which it is impossible for him to attain to.” This fulsome promise of a speaker to the London Shipmasters’ Society in 1900 was one of many propagated in the society’s papers and more widely circulated in the popular press.<sup>30</sup> Rarely was an opposite view countenanced but, on this occasion, a rejoinder came from the audience, from a man whose experience taught him that “ability, hard work and patience” were not enough for the boy who wished to become a shipmaster: “they will avail him little if he be friendless and poor.”<sup>31</sup> The myth was propagated all the more energetically in a period when the opportunities of advancement to a lucrative master’s berth had all but withered away.

The merchant service had its own Smilesian hero, W. S. Lindsay, who had risen from ship’s boy to shipowner.<sup>32</sup> His story was often told, but, since Lindsay’s days at sea, early in the century, differentiation of an officer class had cut the lines of mobility from ship’s boy to master. Furthermore, opportunities of moving into the shipowning class were restricted by the increased capital requirements of ownership and were additionally curtailed by the shipowners’ withdrawal of masters’ rights of independent trading.<sup>33</sup> In the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries some masters trading on their own account had accumulated sufficient capital and expertise to move into shipowning. Yet independent petty entrepreneurship was now perceived to compromise the interests of the employing concern and, just as seamen had earlier been divested of nonwaged perquisites and more effectively subordinated to the capitalist logic of wage payment, shipmasters experienced the same.<sup>34</sup> They recognized it for what it was, the stripping away of independence.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, they did not unite with other seafarers, not even, as we shall see, when faced with savage wage cuts during the 1890s shipping depression. Professional ethics and the chimera of social status obscured the interests which masters, as wage earners, had in common with their men. The resilience of capitalism during the deflationary crisis of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century owed not a little to shipmasters’ identification with the professional classes and loyalty to shipowners in the face of organized labour. If proof was needed of the successful remaking of the shipmaster’s profession, it was this.

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Premium apprenticeship and certificates of competency were the institutional mechanisms by which an officer class was shaped. Their impact was to create a separate and

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30. H.A. Blake, “Seafaring as a Vocation,” *Shipmasters’ Papers* 70 (1900): 1.
  31. *Ibid.*, 5.
  32. Samuel Smiles, *Self Help with Illustrations of Conduct and Perseverance* (1859; rep. London, 1929), 26.
  33. C. Lorimer, *Letters to a Young Master on Some Subjects Connected with his Calling* (London, 1849), 25.
  34. Markus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World 1700-1750* (Cambridge, 1987), 75, 132.
  35. “In numerous instances shipowning firms have made shipmasters the veriest hirelings in

distinct career structure for officers and, significantly, to transpose the class divisions of an increasingly class-conscious society onto the mercantile marine. Yet formal, institutional developments were underpinned by important changes in seafaring skills, in seamanship and navigation, and there were new skills quite foreign to the traditions of seafaring, namely the skills of the engineers who went to sea in steam vessels. These matters were closely related to labour organization and shipboard discipline. They go to the heart of the dual issues of command and technical control which, I have already suggested, were critical stimuli to the remaking of the shipmaster's occupation as a middle-class profession.

The division of labour between navigators and seamen and the structure of command which gave shipmasters authority over their crews were long established, indeed traditional, to the organization of labour on board ship. Seamen's tasks were handling, reefing and furling (i.e. sail handling), and steering. The skill content of these processes underwent little change between the early-eighteenth century, when innovations in rigging called for additional sail-handling expertise, and the late-nineteenth century, when sails began to disappear altogether from merchant vessels (after a period when most steam vessels still carried sail). Ship navigation, by contrast, became progressively more technical and scientific as cartography and navigation by instrument were perfected and knowledge of wind systems and ocean currents was systematized.<sup>36</sup> Latterly iron hulls gave rise to a technical problem of compass deflection, while the larger size of these vessels and the speed of steam called for greater exactitude of navigational observations and rapidity of judgement. The application of scientific theory to navigation increased the theoretical content of the skill, removing it from the practical plane and from the grasp of the seaman. Attendance at navigation schools on shore was to become indispensable for aspiring shipmasters. Divergence in the career paths of officers and seamen was thus implicit in the differentiation of intellectual and manual labour. Even before the Board of Trade began to examine officers in the theory of navigation, this trend was well established. Only later, however, following the introduction of certification, was the widening divide between masters and men institutionalized in a separate pattern of recruitment and training for ship's officers overlain by social class.

Deskilling was not in question at this period and it is doubtful whether any model of labour control premised on deskilling can satisfactorily explain the experience of labour on the nineteenth-century sailing vessel.<sup>37</sup> Skills were in no sense appropriated

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a vineyard where they are not permitted to taste the fruit." W. Allingham, "The Duties of Officers and Seamen in the British Merchant Marine," 2.

36. Navigation manuals, published in considerable numbers in the nineteenth century, evidence the increasing sophistication of navigational knowledge. See, for example, J. Taylor, *An Epitome of Navigation* (London, 1842 and subsequent editions). M.F. Maury's *The Physical Geography of the Sea* was first published in Britain in 1855; see F.L. Williams, *Mathew Fontaine Maury: Scientist of the Sea* (New Brunswick, 1963).
37. The difficulty of applying labour process theory to the actual content and nature of jobs is discussed in Stephen Wood, ed., *The Degradation of Work? Skill, Deskilling and the Labour Process* (London, 1982); see especially page thirteen of Wood's introduction. Eric Sager's unsuccessful attempt to apply an orthodox Braverman model to the Canadian merchant marine bears out Wood's reservations: Eric W. Sager, *Seafaring Labour: The Merchant Marine of Atlantic Canada 1820-1914* (Kingston, 1989).

from seamen in a managerial drive to deskill, dilute, and control. Instead, new skills derived from advances in science and technology were grafted onto the work of navigating officers. Managerial prerogatives were served, however, by restricting access to these skills to the officer class. A practical training on deck was, and remained, the first step for an officer, and shipmasters claimed their authority derived from being able to hand, reef, and steer better than any able-bodied seaman, but in truth their advantage lay in their monopoly of navigation skills. The drive to higher levels of technical competency among masters and mates thus served a purpose within the rationale of informal labour control. Social class and the push to recruit from the middle classes were, however, connected with formal labour control.<sup>38</sup>

The shipping industry was unlike any other in a system of labour management patterned on the military and backed up with an extensive legal code.<sup>39</sup> The shipmaster did not supervise the crew; his orders were passed to subordinate officers, who instructed petty officers who, in turn, supervised the execution of work by the hands. He was the supreme arbiter on board ship. Force of character was said to be the basis of the shipmaster's authority, but this was less important than the ascriptive authority embedded in the hierarchical order of the ship.<sup>40</sup> Based on the Royal Navy, the merchant marine drew from the procedures and traditions of the service, and not the least important feature to be taken from these traditions was the concept of an officer elite, born to lead and command.<sup>41</sup> In the eighteenth century, the quasimilitary East India Company was its archetype: in the nineteenth century, against the background of class polarization, the contract liner companies took up and developed the concept of an officer elite. The P & O, RMSP, and the Union Castle, for example, followed in the imperial tradition and built on an image of flagships of empire. Through imperialism and militarism they tapped into class values (indeed, aristocratic values) of breeding, service, and leadership and articulated them in an ideology of command. Company circulars to shipmasters spoke the language of an authoritative ruling class.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, they offered little in the way of practical advice: "labour management" in the industry was less a worked-out policy than an ethos. For their part, shipmasters embraced the notion of a "class brought up to command" as a solution to the dual crisis which faced them by the latter part of the nineteenth century. First were the strains arising from the reduction and reorganization of labour on board ship as shipowners sought to compensate for falling

38. Gareth Steadman Jones, "Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution," *New Left Review* 90 (March–April 1975): 65; Tony Elger, "Braverman, capital accumulation and deskilling," in *The Degradation of Work*, 30–31.

39. Mercantile marine legislation empowered masters to fine crew members or to have them tried in courts ashore. Many offences, including threatening behaviour to the master, were punishable by terms of imprisonment of up to two months with hard labour.

40. "At sea men are decidedly not equal. A man is a captain of his ship because he is ... a more experienced, a more competent and a more forceful person than those who serve under his command." W.H. Coombs, *The Nation's Key Men* (London, 1925), 143.

41. F. Fox, *How to Send a Boy to Sea* (London, 1886), 42.

42. A P & O Company circular of the late-nineteenth century, quoted in W. Allingham "The Duties of Officers and Seamen in the British Mercantile Marine," *Shipmasters' Papers* 21 (1892): 13; National Maritime Museum (NMM), RMSP Collection, RMSP Confidential Letterbook, letter from Deputy Chairman dated 26 September 1890.

profit margins with savings in labour costs: and, second, the threat to their own income and status which came from the employers' squeeze on officers' wages in an overstocked labour market.

## iii

The strains and tensions of labour management increased in the second half of the nineteenth century, though the causes were different between sail and steam. In sail the problem was work stretch resulting from the employment of fewer men relative to vessel tonnage than was justified either by economies of scale or by labour-saving innovations. Although aggregate statistics of tonnage and crew exist in annual government returns of shipping, their interpretation is problematic and the extent of falling manning levels can best be gauged from a specific example, that of the Brocklebank Company, which operated chiefly, but not exclusively, in the India trade. Crew per hundred tons on Brocklebank vessels declined from 5.12 in 1820 to 1.23 in 1900 with a particularly sharp decline in the period after 1860 when, following the opening of the Suez Canal, the company had competitors in steam.<sup>43</sup> Over the forty years after 1860, manning levels were reduced by almost 63 per cent. Nevertheless, speed was of the essence and, in their correspondence, Brocklebanks advised new masters that a speedy voyage was "both a recommendation to the master and the vessel" and added a reminder of the commercial interests at stake, "not infrequently a preference is given to freight in consequence."<sup>44</sup> Later in the century, the cable telegraph facilitated overseas communication and improved the channels of entrepreneurial control.<sup>45</sup> Pressure on ship's masters was translated into work drive over their crews.

On the evidence of official log-books, the frequency and seriousness of disciplinary incidents was increasing as the effects of operating at marginal levels of profitability in competition with steam registered on masters and crew.<sup>46</sup> Sailing ship crews experienced extended periods of engagement and lengthier absences from home as steam supplanted sail in the short- and middle-distance trades and steam liners displaced regular traders into the tramp trades. Longer voyages generated considerable tensions on board ship. Furthermore, crews were mixed in their national and international composition, more so than at an earlier period when the wage differential between sail and steam was narrower. Declining wage-rates made sail decidedly less attractive than steam, and the

43. Calculated from the Agreements and Accounts of Crew of the Brocklebank vessels held in PRO, BT98 and BT99; in Liverpool City Record Office (LCRO), 387 CRE; and Memorial University of Newfoundland, Maritime History Archives, Crew Agreement Collection. Changes in the specification of tonnage measurement in 1854 marginally increased recorded tonnage.

44. *Pro forma* letter sent by Thomas and John Brocklebank to masters on their first taking command of a company vessel; MMM, Brocklebank Archive, Box 1, T. & J. Brocklebank letterbook 1851-63, letter dated 29 July 1851.

45. W.C. Crutchley, "Ourselves," *Shipmasters' Paper* 32 (1894): 14.

46. The Mercantile Marine Act of 1850 required that every disciplinary offence punished by the master be recorded in the official log which was returned to the Registrar General of Shipping and Seamen together with the Agreement and Account of Crew. Not all have survived, but many provide valuable insights into discipline at sea.

British shipowner depended on recruiting men from seafaring nations (Scandinavia, Holland, and Germany) which still had a high proportion of sail in their fleets. Crew members less frequently shared common origins with their fellow ratings or, significantly, with officers in command, and the cohesion of crews diminished to be replaced with the enforced unity of an authoritarian system.<sup>47</sup>

Masters in sail interposed a greater distance between themselves and their crews but the system took the strain of increased disciplinary tensions. In steam, however, the workforce was not easily subordinated within traditional structures of discipline. A department quite separate from the deck crew existed on steam vessels — the engineer's department, with officers, petty officers, firemen, and coal trimmers. Its skills were different, its work was differently organized, and its men shared few of the customs of seafaring. Yet the shipmaster — a man whose entire career was spent in the deck department — was ultimately in command. The difficulties of his situation are evident in a P & O Company manual which underlined the omniscience of the master in no uncertain terms: "The commander is responsible for the safe navigation of his ship [and] her internal discipline. ... Although the *engineers* and other officers on board have specific and to some extent, independent duties, he is responsible for the *entire management* of his ship...."<sup>48</sup> The crux of the matter was the master's loss of technical initiative to the engineer's department. This accounts for the greater emphasis on formal authority evinced in P & O's missive. More significantly, it suggests a rationale for the remaking of the shipmaster's occupation as a middle-class profession. As we shall see, the skills of deck officers and masters were recast by reference to class values which lent social status to this group and compensated for their loss of technical initiative by transposing a class system and its values onto the cleaven hierarchy of the ship's crew. Changes in the recruitment and training of shipmasters played a key part in this process.

These developments predated the time when the majority of seafarers worked in steam. That point was not reached until the 1880s, more than four decades after the first viable steam services plied the North Atlantic. In the first generation of steamship crews, however, the potentially disruptive effects of a new department were minimized by several factors: the small size of the department; the fact, too, that its members were often recruited from deck seamen; and, most important of all, the low status of ship's engineers.<sup>49</sup> Here was no threat to the technical and managerial authority of the ship's master. By the 1870s, these features were changing and there were clear signs that the technical advantage was shifting to the engineer's department. In the first place, new vessels which came into service equipped with compound or triple expansion engines

47. These comments are based on a selective study of Crew Agreements for sailing vessels held in the PRO, the National Maritime Museum, and the Liverpool City Record Office, and from ship's reports published in the shipping press, notably *Lloyd's List* and the *Journal of Commerce*.

48. Quoted in Allingham, "Duties of Officers," 13.

49. T.W. Fish, "The Status of Engineers of the Mercantile Marine," *Transactions of the Institute of Marine Engineers* 5 (1893-4): 7, 36; H. Campbell McMurray, "Technology and Social Change at Sea: The Status and Position on Board of the Ship's Engineer, circa 1830-60," *Working Men Who Got Wet*, eds. Rosemary Ommer and Gerald Panting (St. John's, 1980), 37-50.

and only rudimentary sails were manned with larger engine than deck departments. Aboard passenger liners, total crew size increased dramatically during the latter part of the century. Typically a North Atlantic passenger vessel carried a crew of forty in 1860 but by the end of the century four hundred was the norm. This, in itself, heightened the difficulties of enforcing discipline, but the fact that the greatest increase was in the engineer's and steward's department further strained the authority of the master who continued to be identified with the deck department.<sup>50</sup> The *Majestic's* complement of 380 consisted of 150 persons in the steward's department, 182 in the engineer's, and a mere forty-eight men in the deck department.<sup>51</sup>

Shipmasters perceived the engineer's department and its growth as a threat to discipline. They did not have confidence in engineering officers as disciplinarians, and one source laid the blame squarely on them for having "[introduced] the more lax discipline of the workshop to the ship."<sup>52</sup> Yet the blackest invective was reserved for the men of the department: "incompetent, lazy, dishonest, foul mouthed, abusive and mutinous" was how one ship master described them and, he continued, "they are not seamen by profession or by accomplishments, or by love of the sea, but...because, as Dr Johnson put it 'they have not contrivance enough to be continually in gaol'."<sup>53</sup> These sentiments betray an insecurity stemming from the potential for loss of control in the absence of technical mastery of the department's work. Interwoven, however, are class anxieties. The words echo contemporary middle-class fears of the rise of an underclass,<sup>54</sup> and the steam revolution did bring a new class to sea — the proletariat of the large port cities. They were the industrial militants, the core of organized unionism (which first emerged on a national scale in 1889), and the agitators on board ship who kept worker resistance going through ca'canny (work slow) and rule-breaking when unionism foundered on the seafarers' perennial weakness in the labour market.<sup>55</sup> The last decade of the nineteenth century saw a heightening of labour tensions as a result of the formation of the Shipping Federation, a strike-breaking organization, described as "the most unscrupulous employers' organization that ever existed."<sup>56</sup> These tensions were played out at

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50. V.C. Burton, "Counting Seafarers: The Published Records of the Registry of Merchant Seamen, 1849-1913," *Mariner's Mirror* 71: 3 (1985): 314-15.
  51. Crew Agreement of *Majestic* for 1899, LCRO 387 CRE.
  52. Edward Blackmore, "The British Merchant Marine. Its Past, Present and Probable Future, Part III," *Shipmasters' Papers* (1891): 22.
  53. Captain E.L. Jones in a letter dated 7 May 1880, published in the *Nautical Magazine* 55:6 (June 1886).
  54. For which see Gareth Stedman Jones, "Working Class Culture and Working-Class Politics in London, 1870-1900: Notes on the Remaking of a Working Class," *Journal of Social History* 7:4 (1974): 460-508.
  55. "Discipline is more difficult to maintain since strikes and unions have become the order of the day," a shipmaster commented in 1892; Allingham, "Duties of Officers," 9. The recent history of the National Seamen's and Firemen's Union provides a chronology of union development but is disappointing in its coverage of the grass-roots movement which was always more militant than the union leadership: Arthur Marsh and Victoria Ryan, *The Seamen: A History of the National Union of Seamen, 1887-1987* (Oxford, 1989).
  56. John Saville, "Trade Unions and Free Labour: The Background to the Taff Vale Decision," in *Essays in Labour History*, eds. Asa Briggs and John Saville (London, 1960), I: 324-25.

the workplace and shipmasters found their authority constantly tested by the men of the engineer's department in a form of class attrition.

If shipmasters were right in supposing a greater capacity for militancy among men whose origin and experience differed substantially from deck seamen, they were wrong in assuming that engineering officers encouraged it. Engineers were, by affiliation, part of the officer class and had no doubt that their task was "to get the blood out of [the workman]." <sup>57</sup> Deck officers and shipmasters nevertheless had difficulty in accepting them as equals — they were not true seamen, they did not share the customs and traditions of seafaring — and, even after ship's engineers received the accolade of Board of Trade certification (in 1862), they were likely to be disparaged as "mechanics in overalls." <sup>58</sup> Wage increases for qualified ship's engineers only intensified these feelings, since the customary wage differential in favour of the deck department was overturned. By the late-nineteenth century the chief engineer was, with the exception of the master, the highest-paid member of a ship's crew. From the perspective of the traditional seafaring man, the shipboard world had been turned upside down. Tradition was the key to the restructuring of this world.

The slight to ship's engineers which was intended in the description "mechanics in overalls" conveyed with particular vividness a perception of the social value of skill. On board ship, as in the world beyond, engineering, a mechanical skill comparable with a trade, was less highly valued than navigation, a craft or an art. <sup>59</sup> Navigation was to be further exalted through a reworking of the attributes associated with it. Skill identity was, in effect, to be reproduced in a new ideology of skill.

The officer sail-training system played a major part in this for, as experience in sail became less and less relevant to work on board steamships and the great square-rigged vessels diminished in number, sail acquired a new romance, its mysteries were eulogized, and the men who held the key to these mysteries gained status and professional credibility. <sup>60</sup> Furthermore, sail training was conspicuously modelled on the public-school system, forging a closer link between the skills of navigation and seamanship and the values of a quasi-aristocratic order — breeding, service, and command. The object, implicit or explicit, was to reinforce the position of the master over the ship's crew, over the men and the officers of the engineer's department. Under pressure of technological change the shipmaster's skills were reconstructed by reference to traditional social values which preserved intact the logic of control disassociated from, but clearly not irrelevant to, changes in the concrete circumstances of skill.

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57. NMM, Oral History Recordings, Campbell McMurray's interview with W.E. McConnell.  
 58. Murphy, "Our Firemen," 21.  
 59. D.C. Coleman, "Gentlemen and Players," *Economic History Review* 26 (1973): 98; Robert R. Locke, *The End of the Practical Man: Entrepreneurship and Higher Education in Germany, France and Great Britain, 1880-1940* (Greenwich, Conn., 1984), esp. 30.  
 60. Robert D. Foulke, "Life in the Dying World of Sail, 1870-1910," *The Journal of British Studies* 3(1963): 106.

While the ending of compulsory apprenticeship in the mid-nineteenth century opened the way for an exclusive form of officer apprenticeship, the decline of sailing vessels later in the century brought its logical extension in cadet ships catering exclusively for officers. Within two decades of 1870, the number of foreign-going sailing vessels diminished ten-fold.<sup>61</sup> By 1890 there were only 2,113 such vessels in service and fewer than fifteen hundred apprentices were recruited to the merchant marine.<sup>62</sup> Sailing-ship companies, whose chief rationale for taking apprentices was to train their own masters and mates, were fast diminishing. Brocklebanks, still in sail in the 1890s, were an outstanding example: other, less scrupulous, operators took apprentices as a source of cheap labour. Steam was the dynamic sector, but steamship owners usually did not enlist apprentices, proclaiming their belief in the values of a sail training for masters and mates.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, Board of Trade regulations prescribed experience under sail as a necessary qualification for a full master's certificate.<sup>64</sup> The expansion of the prestigious passenger liner services fuelled a demand for apprentices' berths. Many of Brocklebank's recruits went on to make their careers with the Liverpool liner companies, though a boys' magazine warned its readers "it is as hard to get into these companies as it is pass through Sandhurst."<sup>65</sup> The allusion to an elitist military academy was apposite for, although the merchant marine had no exact equivalent of Sandhurst, changes in the recruitment and training of shipmasters in the second half of the nineteenth century were aimed at the creation of an elite corps in the merchant service.

In 1890 a sailing-ship company, Devitt and Moore, turned two of its vessels into cadet ships.<sup>66</sup> It thereby set the future pattern for officer training. The company made a point of advertising its apprenticeships as "professional education for the sons of gentlemen" and instituted a scale of charges which amounted to £170 over a four-year period, excluding the costs of clothing and food.<sup>67</sup> Previously £10 was sufficient to secure an apprentice's berth on a Devitt and Moore vessel. A profit motive predominated but the company rationalized increased charges by the need to improve the social class of officers (echoing Dunbar's comment of thirty years before).<sup>68</sup> None of the company

61. "Annual Statement of Navigation and Shipping for 1870," *B.P.P.* (1871), LXII, pt.ii, 480-82; "Annual Statement of Navigation and Shipping for 1890," *B.P.P.* (1890-91), LXXXII, 263-4.
62. "Statement of Navigation and Shipping for 1890," 263-64; "Tables Showing the Progress of British Merchant Shipping, 1900," *B.P.P.* (1901), LXVIII, Table 24.
63. "Report of the Board of Trade Departmental Committee on the Supply and Training of British Boy Seamen for the Mercantile Marine, 1906," *B.P.P.* (1907), LXXV, Q. 296-97, Q.722.
64. To qualify as a master a man had to have served at least two years as the mate of a foreign-going square-rigged vessel; "Returns showing the qualifications for certificates of competency of masters and mates ...," *B.P.P.* (1867), LXIII, 289; "Return showing the Educational Standard required from candidates for positions as Masters, Mates and Engineers ...," *B.P.P.* (1894), LXIX, 42.
65. *Chums*, 18 November 1894, 215.
66. A.G. Course, *Painted Ports: The Story of Messrs. Devitt and Moore* (n.p., 1961), 126.
67. *Ibid.*, 127.
68. PRO, BT 151/14, Devitt and Moore apprentices' indentures, 1875.



records allows us to determine whether increased charges had the desired effect. Brocklebanks, however, were attracting recruits from higher social groups. The sons of a doctor, lawyer, army officer, and banker joined the company in the 1890s. The significant feature of this later generation of potential ship's masters was the sector of the middle class from which it was drawn — essentially the non-industrial middle class. Seafaring as a deck officer or ship's master evidently represented an alternative to the industrial occupations which were disdained by the professional middle classes.<sup>69</sup>

The milieu of the cadet ship was all important, more so indeed than the training provided. Devitt and Moore's signal innovation was not in the quality of instruction, but in the adaptation of English public-school values to a vocational setting.<sup>70</sup> Thus, while instruction in navigation and seamanship was a means both to inculcate professional pride and impart distinctive skills (and the more arcane the skills, the more effectively this was seen to be done), the emphasis of sail training was on the character-forming aspect of life under sail. Apprentices should "rough it," opined one commentator but, he added, they should "rough it in good company."<sup>71</sup> Prowess, manliness, and *noblesse oblige* — these were the values of the English aristocracy, now put to the task of making "officers and gentlemen" of middle-class recruits to the merchant marine.<sup>72</sup>

This process gathered force from the larger dynamic of social change in late-Victorian Britain. It has been suggested that the refurbishment of aristocratic values in a bourgeois concept of gentility was a key development in this period.<sup>73</sup> As the ideological projection of a class embarking upon a new self-conscious phase of imperialism abroad and class domination at home, "gentrification" sustained the dominance of that class in a social order characterized by an hierarchical and ascriptive status system. The merchant marine was a quintessential forum for the working out of this ideology: its imperial and military connections and hierarchy of labour opened the way to an iconography of power shaped around the notion of a class born to command. Shipmasters were keen exponents of this class ideology. Organized in professional associations from the 1840s onwards, they sought to raise the prestige of the profession by accentuating key status values. The emphasis on selective recruitment, on the mystique of sail and the quasi-military character of an officer elite, tapped into the values of a traditional, anti-industrial section of society. Shipmasters' social aspirations were focused on the genteel professional middle classes.

69. "Professional men put professional sons to professional work"; W.J. Reader, *Professional Men: The Rise of the Professional Classes in Nineteenth-Century England* (New York, 1966).

70. C.F. Walker, *Young Gentlemen: The Story of Midshipmen from the XVIIth Century to the Present Day* (London, 1938).

71. R. Cornewall Jones, "Our Apprentices," *Nautical Magazine* 63:6 (June 1894): 488.

72. Tony Lane, "Neither Officers nor Gentlemen," *History Workshop* 19 (Spring 1985): 128-53.

73. Bernard Porter, *The Lion's Share* (London, 1975), 199; Reader, *Professional Men*, 203-05; Perry Anderson, "Origins of the Present Crisis," *New Left Review* 23 (1964): 26-54; Tom Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain* (London, 1977).

In 1897 a member of the London Shipmasters' Society stressed the idea of a class not merely brought up to be officers, but born to be officers. "If you train the [lower] class for officers," he stated, "you turn men into officers who are not fit to represent the nation in British ships."<sup>74</sup> On first reading, his statement was as confident as it was elitist: put in the context of shipping depression, of wage cuts and rising prices and, above all, of too many masters and mates chasing too few jobs, it takes on a different light. Undoubtedly the profession faced a crisis in the latter part of the nineteenth century. In this period an overstocked labour market gave shipowners leverage to cut wages and autocratic power over employment prospects. Since shipmasters had no way to control entry to the profession, class rhetoric constituted their only defence. Nevertheless, pursuit of ascriptive status values was no antidote to the shipowners' offensive. Rather, by enhancing the status attractions of the profession, it contributed to an excess of labour. The final section of this paper examines the nature and impact of the employers' squeeze on shipmasters' wages and employment prospects during the latter part of the nineteenth century. It will suggest that the strength of the employers' offensive, by comparison with the ineffectiveness of the shipmasters' response, signifies a major extension of control of this key grade of labour and a notable success for the capitalist initiative of remaking the profession through the incorporation of bourgeois-genteel values into its frame of reference.

## v

In the selection of masters, shipowners used official certification as a gauge of minimum standards, supplementing certificates with service requirements which varied, company by company, in degree of stringency. Tramp operators could least afford the niceties of selection; nevertheless, in 1900 the manager of a Liverpool single-ship company stated: "great care was exercised in engaging captains...they were men in whom every confidence could be placed."<sup>75</sup> Liner companies not only attracted many applicants for officer's positions and could be more selective, but they also had the bureaucracy to exercise careful supervision over masters and mates. Always over-subscribed, these companies insisted that even junior officers be qualified master mariners: promotion to master followed many years of loyal and efficient service and was by no means automatic.<sup>76</sup> By these means, the liner operators established exclusive labour markets long before segmentation was a recognized corporate device of labour management. Their effectiveness depended upon the attractiveness and continuing appeal of the occupation — on the romance of sail, the symbolism of a brass-bound uniform and peaked cap, and pride in the flagships of empire — in all that lent status to the profession of shipmaster. By any hard-headed criteria, however, the employment left much to be desired.

74. W.C. Crutchley's comments following W. Allingham's paper, "Sea Apprentices of the British Merchant Navy," *Shipmasters' Papers* 49 (1897): 24.

75. *Shipping Gazette Weekly Summary*, 4 April 1901.

76. M.M.M., Ocean Transport and Trading Archive, China Mutual Steam Navigation Company, Application for Officers' Posts 1895, Ocean 1049; "Report of the Departmental Committee appointed to inquire into the manning of British Merchant Ships, 1896," (8128), *B.P.P.*, XL, Q. 5211.

In 1890 the *Pall Mall Gazette* carried an article by the MP Thomas Brassey which commended seafaring as a professional career: shipmasters, he stated, were the peers of bank managers, their equals, he implied, in income and status.<sup>77</sup> Brassey was an authority on wages, and an expert too on the merchant marine, but this was not a piece of uninterested reporting. Its purpose was to attract to the merchant service a superior quality of recruit for the Royal Naval Reserve. In 1892, at the onset of shipping depression, a witness called by the Royal Commission on Labour estimated master's wages at between £8 and £16 per month — at their highest, only four times the wages of an A.B. seaman. This, he added, was too small for men of "considerable education and attainments in a scientific profession."<sup>78</sup> Brassey, admittedly, had a different sector of employment in mind, the comparatively small number of master's berths in the premier liner establishments which, in respect of wages, security of employment, and retirement benefits, were worlds apart from the tramp sector.

Detailed wage data for shipmasters are, by contrast with wage data for seafarers, difficult to obtain. The masters' records of the Ocean Steamship Company are unsurpassed, however, and since they pertain to a cargo line, they are, perhaps, more representative of wages in steam than data from a passenger line, even though the company was reputed to pay its masters well.<sup>79</sup> Wages were linked to seniority. Starting salary in 1870 was £25 per month and increments worth £5 per month were awarded every two or three years. In 1878, however, service increments were halved to £2 10s. Ocean's longest-serving and highest-earning master was paid £600 in 1882; together with bonuses and the interest on company shares, his total remuneration for the year reached £870. Although a substantial sum, this was, in fact, far less than a senior civil servant or lawyer might earn. Moreover, the earnings of other masters were very much lower: £380 was paid to the most junior master in 1882. Captain Kidd, the senior master, was exceptional: he joined the firm on the commencement of Alfred Holt's services to China in 1866 and held Ocean shares by virtue of his important role in its initial success. None of the later masters was a shareholder and, what is more, none had so familiar a relationship with his employer. Holt retreated into bureaucratic formality once he ceased to depend so obviously on the expert advice of his shipmasters.<sup>80</sup>

Master's salaries were unchanged until 1893; then, a 15 per cent increase in standard pay along with a 50 per cent reduction in bonuses was announced amidst regrets that "[this] revision, which has been postponed as long as possible, is now imperative."<sup>81</sup> The urgency originated in the company's falling profits during the shipping

77. T. Brassey, "Choice of a Profession — The Sea," *Pall Mall Gazette*, 25 July 1890.

78. "Royal Commission on Labour" *B.P.P.*, (1892), Group B, Vol. II, XXXVI, ii, Q. 13261-2.

79. MMM, Ocean Transport and Trading Archive, Ocean Steamship Company Masters' Salary Books, 1865 to 1900, Ocean 1219/1 - 1219/5. I am grateful to my former student, John Goble, for his detailed research in these records.

80. Retrospectively Holt was to write of the earliest of his masters who afforded him much assistance in establishing the line: "[he] became to me more a friend than a *servant*." [emphasis added]; Alfred Holt's diary, privately held, entry for 18 March 1876, p. 33. I am grateful to Mr. George Holt for making a typescript copy of the diary available to me.

81. MMM, Ocean Archive, Circular Letter to Masters, Ocean 737/1.

depression. It determined upon wage cuts as the first line of retrenchment. Significantly, however, the cuts were not restored on the revival of trade in 1899 and, together with the reductions effected in 1878, this signified a marked worsening in the financial position of shipmasters. In 1894, Ocean's lowest-paid master earned £315 and the highest paid £470. These were not the riches that Brassey had promised recruits to the profession.

The decline in master's wages during the last quarter of the nineteenth century gains perspective from comparison with the trend in seamen's wages. During this period, the basic wages of Ocean's masters were reduced by 15 per cent; payments to seamen, however, were increased by 45 per cent. On these figures, the company's most considerable wage savings were made where, perhaps, they were least to be expected — in the highest grades of labour. This phenomenon was not confined to Ocean; cuts in masters' wages were widespread during the 1890s.

The salient factor in all this was a long-term decline in employment for masters resulting from the replacement of wooden sailing ships by larger iron- and steel-hulled sail and steam vessels. Beginning in 1875, the number, as distinct from the tonnage, of foreign-going vessels on the British register fell — a fact which has been insufficiently regarded by maritime historians, though the economies of scale effected thereby merit serious consideration. Official statistics show a 42 per cent decrease in the number of foreign-going vessels during the last thirty years of the nineteenth century (from 7,692 in 1870 to 4,445 in 1900) even as tonnage increased by over 84 per cent.<sup>82</sup> Employment for masters fell, probably but not demonstrably in the same proportion as the decline in vessel numbers. Not until the late-nineteenth century were statistics of employment by capacity made available. Then seamen's censuses, conducted quinquennially from 1891 onwards, reveal that, as a proportion of the foreign-going labour force, masters were diminishing more rapidly than any other group.<sup>83</sup>

Shipmasters' employment contracted faster than that of any other seafaring group, and their wages fell further. In effect, they were the chief target of shipowners' retrenchment in the deflationary years of the late-nineteenth century. Ironically, shipmasters were the key group in the implementation of cost-reducing strategies and, as we have seen, technological innovation and labour reorganization increased the burden of their duties. As suggested above, the adoption of ascriptive status values was the shipmasters' solution to this dual crisis. Their response was, however, structured and conditioned by their employers, for it was the shipowners who merged status and skill

82. "Annual Statement of Navigation and Shipping for 1870," *B.P.P.* (1871), LXXIII,ii, 480-2; "Annual Statement of Navigation and Shipping for 1900," *B.P.P.* (1901), LXXV, 254-9.

83. At the time of the seamen's census of 1891, 2,239 masters were employed on foreign-going vessels; in 1901, the number was 1,865; *Return of the Number, Ages, Nationalities and Capacities of Seamen serving on the 5 April 1891 on vessels registered in the United Kingdom*, Board of Trade Internal Departmental Paper, 185 (1893), 17; "Mercantile Marine (Seamen Employed) Return of the Number, Ages, Ratings and Nationalities of Seamen serving on the 31 March 1901 on vessels registered in the United Kingdom," *B.P.P.* (1902), XCII, 15.

ideologies in the procedures for recruiting and training shipmasters. It is in this further sense that the remaking of the shipmaster's occupation as a middle-class profession may be seen as a mechanism for the extension of capitalist control of labour.

Shipmasters' espousal of the non-material values of the genteel professions focused them away from objective concerns — the reduction in their wages and the decline in entrepreneurial opportunities which they experienced in this period.<sup>84</sup> So long as shipmasters not merely subscribed in a general sense to the status values of the professional middle classes, but endorsed their embodiment in an ideology of workplace control, the interests of capital were secured against the potential of a united front. In their espousal of status ideology, shipmasters' professional associations sanctioned the stratified order of the workplace and legitimized capitalist control.<sup>85</sup> Conversely, they repudiated class ideology which potentially challenged this control. Their pro-employer orientation was particularly significant when organized labour briefly posed a threat during 1889-90.

Shipmasters' associations existed in a number of ports from the 1840s, but intermittently, until 1881 when the Merchant Marine Service Association was formed in Liverpool and incorporated by act of Parliament.<sup>86</sup> Its priorities were education and welfare and its declared aim to be "an instrument for union between employers and officers and for friendship of employers."<sup>87</sup> The London Shipmasters' Society, founded in 1889 (the year of the first national seafarers' strike), was equally concerned to disassociate itself from trade unionism: "they [trade unions] are too often aggressive," opined one of the society's members.<sup>88</sup> The associations were prepared, however, to fight a corner against the Board of Trade, initially to defend individual members against the suspension of their certificates for incompetence or misconduct, later to restrict the number of qualified masters and mates. Unlike other professional associations, shipmasters did not have the power to regulate their profession by qualification, and they were particularly sensitive to this weakness. Repeatedly the Board was petitioned to tighten the standards of examination. Yet, until 1898, the shipowners carried the day with their argument that wage rises would follow from any diminution of labour supply.<sup>89</sup> Meanwhile, instead of directing their antagonisms against the employers, shipmasters criticized the board for "manufacturing too many masters."

84. A shipmaster commented to the London Shipmasters' Society in 1894: "Now if we were to be asked individually and collectively what was the greatest grievance we had to complain of ... I do not hesitate to assert that few of us would put any question of pay or wages as anything seriously to complain about...but the one thing we would be unanimous upon would be the loss of...responsibility which has overtaken shipmasters of late years. That again is hardly correct, for the responsibility is in no way decreased." W.C. Crutchley, "Ourselves," *Shipmasters' Papers* 32 (1894): 3.

85. For a discussion of status ideology in relation to white-collar unionism, see Kenneth Prandy, *Professional Employees: A Study of Scientists and Engineers* (London, 1965), 44-45 and the critique of Prandy in Bob Carter, *Capitalism, Class Conflict and the New Middle Classes* (London, 1985), 157-59.

86. E. Blackmore, "The Evolution of Shipmasters' Societies," *Shipmasters' Papers* 58 (1898): 12; *Merchant Marine Service Association Reporter* 8 (1881): 1.

87. *Ibid.*

88. Crutchley, "Ourselves," 11.

89. Thomas Gray, Assistant Secretary to the Board of Trade, suggested by his comments in

Briefly, in 1890, a militant shipmasters' organization was formed and gathered support in a number of places where seamen, firemen, and dock workers had recently struck for wage rises. Identifying itself as a union, the National Certificated Officers' Union of Great Britain and Ireland, this organization sought the support of the seafarers and, for a short period, cooperated with the National Amalgamated Sailors and Firemen's Union in boycotting non-union companies.<sup>90</sup> Nevertheless it rapidly foundered on dissension, and its failure was taken as a sign of the essentially divergent interests of masters and men. "In such an alliance," remarked a member of the London Shipmasters' Society, "we should practically see the master governed by the voice of his servant."<sup>91</sup> The labour unrest of 1889-90 and its aftermath in workplace militancy ultimately had a polarizing effect. By reinforcing the commitment of shipmasters to the ideology of stratification in the workplace, it aligned them more conclusively with their employers against the rank and file.

Shipmasters identified with their employers' interests, but they did not identify with their employers *per se*. The distinction is important. Indeed, one of the most significant achievements of the capitalist initiative to remake the profession was in creating a class of shipmasters whose aspirations were focused single-mindedly rather than instrumentally on their profession. In sum, shipmasters perceived their employment as a vocation distinct from a means of moving into the capitalist class as shipowner or merchant. The middle-class values around which the profession was reshaped were those of the genteel, non-industrial bourgeoisie. It was to the advantage of the employers to have a class of labour dedicated to the advancement of standards and to service in a professional capacity in the mould of the non-entrepreneurial middle classes.<sup>92</sup> There was no conflict of interests. This was a profession at the service of capital. In shaping an elite of labour, imbued with a sense of its position in the hierarchy, subscribing to ascriptive status values, committed to the maintenance of the *status quo*, and dedicated to professional service, shipowners made this class the pivot of their organization of labour in the nineteenth-century shipping industry.

## vi

The remaking of the shipmaster's profession reveals the larger processes of social differentiation and cultural ideological production associated with the division and specialization of labour in Victorian Britain. Its key importance rests, however, not in generalized exemplification, but in specificity — in the particularities of social and cultural processes at work in an industrial environment unique in respect to labour structure and organization, in the means of labour control and regulation and, moreover, in

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1886 that the board was committed to increasing standards to reduce the surplus of labour; Thomas Gray, "1836-1886: Fifty Years of Legislation in relation to the Shipping Trade and the Safety of Ships and Seamen" in *On the Value of Technical Education to the Shipwright and Shipowner*, ed. E.J. Reed (London, 1887), 162. By the 1890s, eight hundred masters' certificates were awarded on average per annum.

90. J.H. Wilson, *My Stormy Voyage Through Life* (London, 1925), 190-91.

91. Crutchley, "Ourselves," 11.

92. Daniel Duman, "The Creation and Diffusion of a Professional Ideology in Nineteenth Century England," *Sociological Review* 27 (1979): 113-38.

its trajectory of technological change.<sup>93</sup> The specific context is vital if we are to understand how the industrial workforce became divided by class and how class differences were reproduced in recruitment and training. It is even more necessary to our understanding of the processes of ideological formation which underpinned these class divisions particularly as they worked through the definition of skill itself. Above all perhaps, it is in the context of a specific industry that the capitalist dynamic at work behind occupational differentiation and cultural formation becomes explicit.

The remaking of the shipmaster's occupation as a profession for the middle class traced a simple line of career prospects limited by pecuniary barriers. Its remaking as a middle-class profession, however, involved a more complex process of ideological reformulation locating the recruitment, skills, training, and aspirations of shipmasters within a bourgeois frame of reference. In the transposition of these values to the merchant marine the logic of capitalist control was served — at the expense of an increasingly class-polarized workforce.

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93. The need for case studies recognizing the individuality of the professionalization process is urged in Elliot Friedson, "The Theory of Professions: State of the Art," in *The Sociology of the Professions*, eds. Robert Dingwall and Philip Lewis (New York, 1983), 22; see also the article by Dietrich Reuschmeyer in the same volume, "Professional Autonomy and the Social Control of Expertise," 40.