

efforts to dismantle the corporate village, and soon, it, "like the monarchy it had replaced, had become the protector of village properties and rights" (240).

Root's provocative study of the peasant-state relationship in eighteenth-century Burgundy makes an important contribution to the on-going debate over absolutism. Broader implications of this well-written monograph will be of interest to political, administrative, social and economic historians. The work is enhanced by a full bibliography, ample notation and an index.

Marie Donaghay  
Villanova University

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Eric W. Sager — *Seafaring Labour: The Merchant Marine of Atlantic Canada, 1820-1914*. Kingston, Montreal; McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989. Pp. 352.

For over sixty years, F.W. Wallace's classic study, *Wooden Ships and Iron Men*, has dominated the history of Atlantic Canada's merchant marine. That ascendancy has now been challenged by Eric Sager, whose experience with Memorial University's Atlantic Canada Shipping Project has become the basis for a revisionist perspective on our east coast "age of sail". In Sager's hands, the focus shifts from the ships to the men of Canada's high seas wooden, sail powered fleet. Simultaneously, the author makes a deliberate effort to rescue the sailors from the hostile stereotype created by Wallace and his disciples, a stereotype which suggests that these men were so sunken in drink and violence as to constitute a quasi-criminal class, isolated from the mainstream of the Canadian experience. Sager's reinterpretation is built around the notion that these "working men who got wet" participated in the process of industrialization which transformed the work place and working relationships for Canadian labour, both on land and at sea. Thus for Sager, sailor behaviour derived not from sloth and decadence, but rather from an entirely rational concern to protect themselves from the threat of hostile change.

In contrast to Wallace, who viewed wooden ships as being a rather static and simple expression of pre-industrial technology and organization, Sager argues that these vessels were "proto-factories", undergoing continual evolution of design and possessing a highly complex division of labour in their work force. Responding primarily to the challenge of falling ocean freight rates, builders and owners radically transformed the character of our high seas wooden fleet through the last third of the nineteenth century. Scrambling to salvage profits through increased productivity, they experimented with a host of innovations in everything from hull size and rig design to building materials and vessel routing. The effort paid off, in the sense that Atlantic Canada's wooden ships remained competitive with the foreign metal hulled steamers, in the international carrying trade, into the early twentieth century. Unfortunately, this success story imposed high costs on our merchant mariners.

Crew size diminished, the work load increased, real wages remained depressed, isolation from home and family grew and the risk of injury or death from disease and accident became ever greater. At the same time, labour relations deteriorated, as captains and mates, under mounting pressure from owners to make every voyage profitable, demanded more and more effort from the shrinking mass of ordinary and

able seamen at their command. Custom and usage, as well as traditions of paternalism, collapsed as sailors came to be seen primarily as a commodity to be exploited for the sake of the fleet's survival. In this context of growing crisis, the state played a role that was more partisan than neutral. The courts, along with government run labour exchanges, supposedly offered sailors protection from such things as denial of wages or assault by officers. Most often, however, law and the bureaucracy became instruments to coerce labour into an acceptance of the demands of capital.

Confronted by this pattern of growing adversity, sailors resisted, primarily by resorting to the tactic of desertion. For many, that meant abandoning the high seas fleet for work on coastal vessels or jobs on land. Atlantic Canadians were especially prone to react to change in this manner, on such a scale that soon, the Maritime presence in our high seas fleet was confined to the officer ranks. The rest of the marine work force increasingly came to consist of foreigners. Thus cultural contrast was added to class differentiation as a source of tension in shaping shipboard labour relations.

For Wallace, that relationship boiled down to violence and drunkenness committed by an essentially depraved set of workers. Sager, in contrast, insists that those who persisted with a working life at sea did not resort primarily to the bottle and their fists when seeking to resist the threat of change. Non violent behaviour was the norm. Sailors individually displayed a shrewd awareness of when and how to use the courts to their advantage, especially in disputes over wages. As well, they were capable of effective collective protest, most notably by going on strike through the device of mass desertion when a ship arrived in port. This resistance did not produce a strategic victory for the sailors labour, but Sager insists that it did give these workers an experience and awareness that made them potential members of a larger Canadian labour movement. If that potential went unrealized, the reason, Sager suggests, had more to do with Canadian withdrawal from the high seas carrying trade than with criminal mentality among the marine work force.

Specialists in labour history may find fault with certain aspects of Sager's analysis. For example, his discussion of the sailor as a skilled worker and the ship as a factory could have been more rigorous. As well, he appears somewhat ambiguous about the extent to which the merchant marine derived its structure and ethos from the navy. Other readers will emerge with a sense that they still have not been told why anyone with youth, physical fitness and sufficient education to be literate would opt into work as a labourer in Canada's sailing fleet. Lack of sources makes it difficult to grasp sailor motivation, especially those of a non-English-speaking background, but did work force mobilization really come down to pursuit of adventure? One wonders how many of the foreign born sailors saw life at sea as a step toward a better life at home, or as a means of becoming an immigrant to America.

Finally, some are bound to be disappointed because of the ambiguous title given to this book. It focuses on an important theme, but is not a comprehensive overview of Atlantic Canada's merchant marine. The larger picture awaits yet another monography, which Professor Sager should be encouraged to write, since his is a revisionism that is both well written and stimulating to the mind.

D.A. Sutherland  
*Dalhousie University*