ForeWord Reviews

Sober Men and True: Sailor Lives in the Royal Navy, 1900-1945
Christopher McKee
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What types of men became sailors and why? How did they cope with hardships, sexual frustration, danger, and discipline? How did they relate to each other and their officers? The author, a professor at Grinnell College, examines these questions for the period 1900-1945, emphasizing that his eighty-odd written and/or oral sources are a modest sample, and that on topics such as alcoholism and homosexuality, he received contradictory responses. The men tell a fascinating story, heightened by their diversity of temperament and intellect; they ranged from deserters through career men to an ex-chemical analyst.

Poverty, dysfunctional families, disappointment at curtailed education drove many (some as young as sixteen) to sign on for a twelve-year hitch. Lower-deck life was tough; brawny stokers, cock-of-the-walk able seamen, skilled mechanics, and better-educated telegraphists and clericals formed competing cliques. Officers were respected when competent, despised if uncaring of their men's welfare.

McKee is fascinating on discipline. Birching boy seamen and giving men solitary detention could be deemed harsh, but most accepted the offense-and-punishment equation. Discipline proved to be a flexible concept: smuggling alcohol on board was a serious offense, but staggering on board tipsy was a minor one, met with an averted eye. Small ships, with closer working relationships, offered more relaxed discipline than large ones.

The respondents reflected engagingly on alcohol, sex, and gambling. The Navy's daily issue to seamen of rum (diluted with water and known as "grog") is lovingly recalled ("It's just like taking the Holy Sacrament"), and the folklore of sippers, gulpers, tots, and plushers is engagingly explored. Heterosexual activity ashore is warmly recollected: "She was a craftsman… Sonia took me to the sublime," wrote William Batters who, post-Navy, wrote the strangely neglected *Confessions of a Sewage Works Manager*. Homosexual activity at sea was reported only as an activity of other persons, with older man/younger man pairings heartily condemned.

Not unnaturally, war was the most feared event and courage under fire the supreme test, and here the narrative is powerful. Nevertheless, for those who survived all hazards, re-entry into civilian life was often surprisingly difficult.

In this excellent study, McKee demonstrates that the sailor's drink-and-sex-in-every-port image needs to be coupled with shipboard reality shaped by competence, commitment, and comradeship. Readers interested in lower deck life in earlier centuries should consult authors Peter Kemp and Christopher Lloyd.

Peter Skinner