

‘Ghostlike’ Seafarers and Sailing Ship Nostalgia: The Figure of the Steamship Lascar in the British Imagination c.1880-1960

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In 1918 Joseph Conrad, by now critically acclaimed as one of England’s leading novelists, wrote this about his days at sea in the British merchant navy:

Of non-European crews, lascars and Kalashes, I have had very little experience and that was only in the steamship for something less than a year. It was on the same occasion that I had my only sight of Chinese firemen. Sight is the exact word. One didn’t speak to them. One saw them going along the decks, to and fro, characteristic figures with rolled-up pigtails, very grimy when coming off work and very clean faced when going on duty. They never looked at anybody, and one never saw them directly. Their appearances in the light of day were very regular, and yet somewhat ghostlike in their detachment and silence.¹

Conrad, a man of the fading sailing ship world, was profoundly ill at ease with the steamship. The writings of Polish sea captain, turned Anglophone writer of genius, cannot of course be taken as in any way typical of British attitudes. But in describing the Chinese workers as ghostly, he did something that is common to British representations of Asian and African seafarers in the era of the transition from sail to steam. These workers were often literally invisible to passengers and almost invisible to deck officers, for so many of them worked in the stokeholds, the coal bunkers and engine rooms, below the water line and out of sight - within, to use Marx’s phrase, the ‘hidden abode of production’. But even those colonized sailors who worked above the waterline, on the deck or in the catering services, were in a sense outside the racialised British vision. The sea, as everyone knew, was the British key to world power. Sailors who were not British had a spectral quality; their existence was ideologically anomalous and they came into focus when there was controversy about them but, otherwise, they were forgotten. Conrad never sees the labourers directly. They are in a social world so marginal that they are invested with the qualities of unearthliness. Outside moments of unavoidable contact, the presence of the lascar faded from British minds.

This article focuses on the paradoxes which infused the counterposed representations of Asian and African, as against British, sailors in the United Kingdom, during the era of steamship dominance and its immediate aftermath. In that time, writers, bureaucrats, politicians, ship owners, maritime officers, sailors and medical professionals engaged in intense contestations about the supposed characteristics of these groups, and the conclusions that followed for policies toward the merchant navy. Crucial in this debate was the category of lascar – a group usually understood as comprising Indian seamen and constituting a significant minority of the work force of the British Merchant Marine

throughout our period. The article examines the field of discourse generated by supporters and opponents of lascar employment, and how it changed over time. It puts forward an analysis of how the figure of the lascar changed, in the British imagination, between the moment, around 1880, when steam became dominant over sail in the merchant fleet, and the end of steam's replacement by oil-fired ships, in the post-Second World War years.

In the very late nineteenth century and into the early twentieth, contention developed around the employment on lascars in British ships. For those in favour of giving preference to the British mariner, their countrymen were unsurpassed in seamanship and endowed with plentiful moral fibre. In this view, the lascar was feeble and prone to panic. But many Britons, including experienced merchant marine officers, stood up for the virtues of the lascars, and some political leaders argued that excluding them from employment would be unjust. By the middle of the first decade of the twentieth century, this conflict was resolved in an uneasy stalemate – the anti-lascar forces won the discursive battle, but lost the economic war. Public opinion in Britain was very hostile to the lascar, but ship owners continued to employ them on a massive scale. Antagonism toward the lascars culminated in the Special Restriction (Coloured Alien Seamen) Order of 1925, which tried to push them out of British ports. A number of scholars have argued that this measure signified the consolidation of a harsh racial regime of state control over the lascar. But this article contends that the Order proved impossible to implement, that it was only thinly supported within the British state, and that it was soon followed by the evolution of a less restrictive relationship of the British state to the Lascars.² During the 1930s, the decline in the intellectual respectability of 'scientific' racism and the increasing influence of notions of social planning produced a more meliorist attitude to these seamen amongst British officialdom. And with the outbreak of the Second World War, the crucial importance of lascars to the Merchant Navy, rising labour militancy amongst colonized seamen, and the political pressure exerted by Indian nationalism, forced British political elites to become more conciliatory in their approach to Indian maritime workers. However, by the mid-1940s, a political emphasis on social reform within Britain itself, the imminence of Indian independence, and the decline in the demand for Indian stokers ('firemen') as oil replaced steam, moved the role of Indian seamen away from its previous centrality in British debates about the Merchant Navy.

Throughout the period covered in this article, there had been a strong tendency in Britain to glorify the age of sail and its seamen and to denigrate the world of the steamship; an attitude that reflected the anti-industrial ideological bias so prevalent in late nineteenth and early twentieth century English culture.³ As imperial decline, and the slipping of British maritime dominance, set in during the post- Second World War years, maritime enthusiasts intensified the cult of the age of sail. In doing so, they largely erased British memory of the key role that Indian seamen had played in the Merchant Navy during the age of steam. As with the Chinese sailors in the recollections of Conrad, in British memory the lascars were never fully recognised, and with temporal distance their blurry image was to fade to invisibility. The lascars remained in that secret dwelling into which, as Marx said, there was 'no admittance except on business'.

Four aspects of the analysis put forward in this article need to be highlighted.

Firstly, the article seeks to emphasize the slipperiness of 'racial' categories. The imperial mind was constantly wrestling with the problem of *who was* a Lascar. Lascars were generally thought of as Indian. Yet the term was, in the early 20th century, effectively defined by the government of India as embracing either 'natives' of India or 'natives' of Africa or Asia who signed on at the Government of India controlled port of Aden.⁴ The latter element comprised large numbers of Arabs and Somalis. All men hired in these categories counted as Lascars and signed a distinct contract. In the British marine racial lexicon, they were differentiated from Chinese, Malays, West Indians and West Africans, all of whom were engaged under differing forms of articles. But there is no doubt that an ethnographically ignorant, or commercially astute, British officer might well sign on a sailor under the 'wrong' racial category. There was no such thing as a 'real' lascar.

Secondly, the article emphasizes the close, if complex, relationship between racial ideologies and material interests. At the end of the nineteenth century, the rise of unionization amongst British seafarers made them less attractive to ship owners as a labour force, as they pushed for higher wages and better conditions. At the same time, the move from sail to steam meant that it was no longer necessary to have a workforce with long experience of the sea. It took perhaps two years for a deck hand to become fully conversant with all the complexities of working on a sailing ship. By contrast, the skills of shoveling and raking coal in the holds of steamers could be picked up quite quickly. And deck hands now spent much of their time on the grinding, but fairly unskilled work of scraping and painting the ships. It was therefore feasible for shipping companies to replace the now relatively expensive labour of experienced British sailors with the cheap labour of African and Asian colonial subjects who may or may not have come from seafaring communities. The fact that British workers were newly politically enfranchised, while lascars were colonial subjects, made all the difference to their respective abilities to advance their interests in the labour market. It thus came to be in the interests of the shipping industry to advocate the employment of lascars. Employers viewed lascars as docile and sober, unlike their British counterparts. White British sailors increasingly tended to become hostile to the employment of men of colour in the merchant marine, supporting their position with ideas drawn from the rising flood of racial ideology that characterized the last decades of the nineteenth century. Their antipathy focused chiefly on lascars and Chinese sailors, whose competition they saw as threatening to lower their wages and take away their jobs.

Thirdly, the article views British representations of British and of African and Asian sailors as mutually dependent on each other. The lascar was constituted through his differentiation from the British sailor and vice versa. This was the case even for portrayals of British seafarers which overtly said little or nothing about the lascars; lascars haunted the representation of British sailors. Denigration of lascars overtly or implicitly contrasted them with British sailors. And in assertions of the superiority of British sailors, the lascar was the implicit or explicit comparison.

Fourthly, though the article focuses on British attitudes to lascars, it is informed by a view of these seamen as having social agency, and thus as, in part shaping the way that the British viewed them, through their own actions. In recent years, a historiography of the steamship era lascars, which was for so long completely lacking, has been constructed and it has provided a rich documentation of their lives. All the scholarship agrees both that lascars suffered immense hardships and were subject to complex forms of state regulation, but also recognizes that they found ways to both circumvent and directly resist the forces ranged against them. It can fairly be said though that one strand of the literature, represented by the work of Visram⁵, Tabili⁶ and Ahuja⁷ focuses more on the coercive forces brought to bear on the lascars, whilst another, comprising the work of Ewald,⁸ Balachandaran⁹ and Bald¹⁰, gives greater attention to the agency of these seamen. This article supports the latter view - lascars were active agents rather than passive victims. Though British views of them were important to how they were treated, those views evolved in a context where lascars were often evading, and eventually openly defying, attempts to control them.

British Seamen and Lascars 1880-1906

Almost universally, the major figures of British sea writing in this period, whether Conrad at an elite level, or Kipling and John Masefield at a more popular one, glorified the mariners of the age of sail and pitied the lives of steamship workers. In this, the writers both mirrored and reflected the views of many sailors, intellectuals and politicians who saw the end of sail and the accompanying rise of the steamship as a combined tragedy of racial politics, aesthetics and community. The era of sail was constructed as an era of skilled seamanship, beautiful vessels, and moral integration amongst the crew. The age of steam on the other was rendered as one of mechanical crudity, grubbiness, anomic social disintegration and workforces composed of unreliable, uncommunicative Asians and suspect white lumpen proletarians. Both in the time of the steamship, and afterwards, the idea of the tall ship as the historic pinnacle of seafaring has remained dominant.

Yet this view was certainly disconnected from the realities of the lives of maritime workers. The last years of sail were simply murderous. The romantic interpreters of sailing ship life did not acknowledge that the age of steam, for all its grim features, represented a much better chance of survival for crewmen. In the eight years between 1875 and 1883, an incredible 26 188 British sailors died in accidents on, and sinkings of, British registered ships. The fatal accident rate for all sailors at that time was six times greater than that amongst British coal miners, and 150 times greater than that for British factory workers.¹¹ The age of sail was an age of mass death. By contrast, the coming of steam made following the sea much less lethal an occupation; mechanically powered ships were simply much safer in rough seas. Coinciding with the introduction of steamships on a mass scale, there was a qualitative drop off in fatalities; in 1874 3,533 British sailors died at sea; in 1904 1,113.¹² Although administrative reforms, particularly those associated with Samuel Plimsoll, played a role in this decline, the greater resilience of metal hulls and engine power was surely the key factor.

The romantic view of the era of sail also largely glosses over British sailors' appalling life conditions. In many ports around the world, British sailors were delivered to ships by 'crimps', dishonest boarding house keepers who defrauded the men of their money and forced them to take the next ship in exchange for payments from the captains. In the late nineteenth century's less well regulated harbours, crimps sometimes plied sailors with alcohol or drugs and dumped them on board in an unconscious condition, to awaken at sea: as late as 1906, this was common in Sydney.¹³ Moreover the accommodation and food on board for white sailors, while somewhat better than that for lascars, was often shockingly bad, both ashore and on board. In considering the representation of the lascar it is important to remember the very great limits to what would now be called the racial 'privilege' of white sailors. Lascars had a slightly lower risk than British sailors of accidental death.¹⁴ But lascars were almost always paid a fraction of what British sailors received. Their food was even worse than for British sailors, with some incidence of malnutrition-related disease amongst them. And lascar accommodation was more cramped and uncomfortable than that of their British counterparts. In the early twentieth century steamers, lascars were legally allocated only 40 to 50 cubic feet of space each in the forecabin, while British seamen had 72 cubic feet.¹⁵ This was undoubtedly a factor in the much higher mortality from tuberculosis and pneumonia amongst lascars than amongst British sailors.¹⁶

The debate on the qualities of lascar seamen was an old one, but it really erupted towards the end of the nineteenth century as their numbers on British ships sharply increased. An idea of the character of this controversy can be gathered from the case of the sinking of the P&O liner *Tasmania* off Corsica in April 1887. Numerous survivors and others wrote to the British and Anglo-Indian press, arguing that the lesson of the wreck was that the lascars on board had shown themselves to be lacking in seamanlike abilities, and that fatalities amongst them on deck during a night in which survivors were forced to cling to the wreck in the face of a storm, showed they were not hardy enough to withstand cold. Those taking this view urged the unsuitability of lascar crews. However the lascars had their defenders. An anonymous correspondent in the *Times of India*, writing as 'D.R.' pointed out with some asperity that the passengers on the doomed ship had the protection of "the smoking room which was a shelter to them, while the firemen and coal trimmers had to find some shelter in the open rigging as best they could".¹⁷ An 'Old Salt of the Country Service' declared that he "would sail to any part of the world with a lascar crew. Many a noble sailor I have found amongst them, and my experience is that they can stand cold and hardship as well as any crew carried by English merchant vessels as well as being cleaner and more manageable".¹⁸ The P&O obviously had an interest in defending the use of lascars, but nevertheless it is notable that the Commodore of the line, George Cates, felt able to assert on the basis of his vast experience: "[t]hat lascars do [their] work better than any European is beyond question".¹⁹ The lascars of the *Tasmania* did manage to get their voice heard via a statement to the paper *Jame-Jamshed*, complaining of that their "strict obedience to orders and unflinching endeavours to afford every convenience to the passengers in the face of the bitter cold and buffeting waves to which we have been exposed" had not been appreciated.²⁰ A notable feature of the discussion is that both the Indian lascars and their defenders made a distinction between lascars proper and Seedis, the Afro-Indians extensively employed in the stoker and trimmer position. The tendency

was to suggest that true lascars were more of a seaman and better at dealing with cold than the Seedi. That the lascars' statement itself took this tack, suggests the complexity of the ethnic divisions within the workforce. Some correspondents did point out that the Seedis on the *Tasmania* had come out of the stokeholds and coal bunkers with little clothing and that this had made them vulnerable to the cold. A concern that emerged even amongst the defenders of the lascars was that the replacement of the earlier system under which captains could choose their own crews, with the system where the shipping office and labour brokers selected the lascars, did in fact mean that crews were less likely than before to be composed of experienced sailors.

Turn of the century racism amongst ordinary British seamen was primarily directed at the lascars and Chinese – who were seen as their real competition, - rather than at all people of colour. The mainstream of sailor racism on British ships somewhat by-passed sailors of colour from the Atlantic world. For example, in his fascinating memoirs, the African-American sailor James Williams told of how, in the mid 1880s, he and other members of the crew of an American vessel were brutalized by its 'bucko' (bullying) mates. By contrast he is enthusiastic about his experience on British ships. Describing how the quartermaster of a British steamer helped him escape from his 'hell-ship', Williams declared that:

There is a feeling of tacit freemasonry among deepwater sailors which always bids them help each other in distress and which does not take race, nationality and color into account.²¹

What gave racism its real power amongst British sailors was that it worked as a supporting ideology for a form of trade unionism that mobilized them as racial subjects, against clearly defined foes. It was the lascar and the Chinese sailor whom were constructed as the primary enemy, rather than sailors of colour in general.

The most powerful articulator of opposition to the use of lascars and other Asian seamen was J. Havelock Wilson's National Union of Seamen and Firemen, which deplored ship owners' alleged sacrifice of British workers' interests and jobs to the interests of Asians.²² But this position received broad support from the labour movement and from xenophobe intellectuals. The rhetoric of this position came in a variety of forms. After his election to parliament in 1891, Wilson often pretended that all he wanted was equality of conditions between the lascar and the Briton, at established British rates and conditions. The underlying logic though was that if ship owners had to pay the same for British, lascar and Indian sailors, they would hire the whites.

By the turn of the century, political tensions around the lascar issue had become acute. At the sittings of a parliamentary Manning Committee in 1896, a parade of experienced officers testified to the seamanship, reliability, sobriety and trustworthiness of lascar crews, a view the committee endorsed. In 1903 Captain W.H. Hood published a book, *The Blight of Insubordination*, not only defending the lascars, but damning the contemporary British seaman as drunken, undisciplined and irresponsible.²³

An interesting example of the politics of managing these discursive strands was provided in 1906, when the new Liberal government was faced with the problem of piloting maritime legislation through parliament in the teeth of hostility from trade-union linked MPs, notably Wilson. David Lloyd George, as President of the Board of Trade was responsible for the Bill. He argued that “ship owners had no alternative” but to employ lascars. The supply of sailors, the Welsh Wizard contended, was just not adequate. The tonnage of the British merchant marine had doubled since 1870, requiring many new workers. In roughly the same period, the navy had doubled its numbers to 129 000, taking “the cream of our men engaged in the seafaring life”. To stop foreign seamen from joining the British ships would be to “ruin the British mercantile marine”. Many British ships operated in foreign ports, only returning to the UK once in four years and “You cannot get British sailors to remain on ships of that kind”.²⁴ European sailors were returning to the ships of their respective countries because of improvements of conditions.

Lloyd George also invoked the powerful ideology which claimed that British law had no colour bar:

A lascar, however is a Britisher [A Labour Member: Like the Chinaman] You cannot make a Britisher out of him merely for the sake of bragging of the extent of your dominions, and then the moment he asks for a share of your privileges say “You are a foreigner”. That is not fair.²⁵

The Labour interjection called up the spectre of Chinese labour on the Transvaal gold mines. But Lloyd George was ahead of him on this game. One of the major issues in the preceding election was the Liberals’ opposition to the introduction by the Tories of Chinese workers into South Africa. While drawing support from many who opposed the economic competition of poor Asian workers to British artisans, the Liberals had pitched the issue around an ethical opposition to “Chinese slavery”, thus enabling their supporters to vote both for an ostensibly philanthropic position and racial protectionism at the same time. In the lascar case however, Lloyd George was casting the position of the lascar as one of voluntary employment, enabling him to connect his defence of the rights of colonial subjects to the existing form of labour dispensation. Wilson stuck to his guns, but he had been placed on the defensive. He then had to fall back on the argument of lascar incompetence, which was hard to sustain, given that so many marine experts opposed it.

Labour MPs would continue to play the card of the lascar threat to British seamen as a way of ‘defending’ the jobs of British workers. Paradoxically, because it was their cheapness that opened up jobs for them, by and large, until the late thirties, lascars and their Indian elite political supporters accepted unequal working conditions. They proceeded on the idea that the equalization of pay and conditions was an attempt by Wilson and his supporters to price them out of the labour market.

In the latter years of the nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries, as the powerful British public health movement began to shift its focus beyond the newly improved

sewers of the metropolitan cities, some influential medical experts interested themselves in shipboard conditions.²⁶ But medical discourse tended to underpin hostility to lascars. Even when new medical technologies became available, the colonial discourse of the medical profession often obstructed their utilization in the merchant marine. For example the early years of the Twentieth Century it was still regarded by the *British Medical Journal* as an unresolved question whether Beri-Beri, prevalent amongst both lascars and white seamen, was caused by poisoning, infection or malnutrition.²⁷ The etiology of the disease – it is the result of vitamin B shortage - had in fact been established in 1899-1900 by Eijkman and Hopkins. But their findings were much disputed by *BMJ* contributors, often colonial and ship's doctors who appealed to the idea that they 'knew' conditions in the colonies.

A key example of how the medical establishment underwrote a negative view of the lascar was in the way that its opinions supported their exclusion from employment on certain key sea routes. The idea that Indians could not cope physically in cold climates was pervasive amongst British medical men for most of the period. They tended to see the problem as an irremediable biological one, and this notion was frequently used by political actors as a pretext for the exclusion of the lascar from sections of the labour market. Government of India (GoI) regulations, from the end of the 19th century, forbade Indian sailors from making voyages in high latitudes in the Atlantic. In 1902 the GoI had contemplated lifting these restrictions, but had decided against it under pressure from the Board of Trade (BoT) in London. Although a cloak of medical advice covered the move, the real basis was that the Board of Trade was by now under strong pressure from British unions to resist the growth of the numbers of lascars employed on British ships. In 1907 ship owners had pushed for the restrictions to be modified, but on the advice of the Board of Trade, the GoI rejected the call. The GoI was relatively isolated from British trade union pressures and there seems to have been a genuine belief amongst its officials that Indian sailors had real health problems in cold latitudes. The regulation was supported by the India Office which pursued captains over breaches of the regulations.²⁸

There was a complex relationship between racial ideology and medical discourse at work here. As Ryan Johnson has shown, colonial ideas about the importance of climatic factors in disease causation, and the ideas about appropriate clothing for whites in the tropics that went with them, often tended to persist well after germ theory had undermined their scientific basis.²⁹ If as Johnson suggests, climatic notions of disease and the associated practices helped reinforce symbolic lines of cultural and sartorial differentiation between the British and their colonial subjects, then the idea that lascars belonged in the tropical oceans and Europeans in the northern seas may have had a strong cultural logic of its own. The Government of India's officials could thus think that it was protecting the lascar by keeping him out of the north Atlantic, while at the same time having the psychological comfort of reinforcing the social lines between British and Indian people.

1906-1930: The High Point of Anti-Lascar Racism

After the first decade of the twentieth century, the debate on lascars reached a peculiar deadlock in which, on the one hand, ship owners continued to rely on their labour, but on the other, British and Anglo-Indian public opinion had a settled, negative, view of them. Those willing to defend the Lascar in public seemed to have been fewer and further between. For example, the press coverage of the 1910 sinking of the Ellerman Lines ship *Arcadian*, which crashed into a steamer in the Irish Channel, seems to have been accompanied by overwhelmingly hostile accounts of the role of the lascars on board, and produced almost no public advocates for the lascars. The *Times of India* discussed the conduct of the twelve lascars who had died in the accident in the most hostile terms, basing itself on the views British sailors in the wreck. The paper reported that:

An opinion was expressed by the English sailors that had the coloured men been more anxious to save their lives than to save rupees, the loss of life would in all probability have been small. . . . at the first shock an extraordinary scene was witnessed. The lascars, fearful of losing the most trifling personal possession, packed all their money, including their money into parcels, which they tied with coloured handkerchiefs. They then dashed up the ladders in frantic haste, but on reaching the deck many of them were swept into the sea.³⁰

The *Times of India* report thus drew on British sailors' characterization of the lascars as avaricious, incapable and lacking in fore-thought and altruism.

The political dynamics of intensifying naval rivalry saw the appearance of another line of attack on the lascars. Enthusiasts for naval power deplored the dilution of the British workforce by colonial subjects, contending that it would reduce the merchant marine's value as a reserve of manpower for use by the Royal Navy in war. At a meeting at Caxton Hall, London, in July 1910, Admiral Sir Edward Freemantle, declared that "he would like to see all British ships manned by British seamen, except those in the far East . . .", primarily because of the strategic need for a reserve of naval ratings in case a major war broke out.³¹

The introduction of the Special Restriction (Coloured Alien Seamen) Order in 1925 has been portrayed by most the contributors to the literature as marking an intense and systematic deepening of racial control over seamen of colour. But I would argue, that it represented a high water mark of anti-lascar racism, after which the state's drive against them seemed to weaken. There is no doubt it was an egregious racist measure; it compelled 'coloured alien seamen' to register with police. And it thus broke mainland Britain's taboo on including overtly racial language within the legal system.

But it did not represent a clear new policy direction for the British state as a whole. Indeed, the Order was far from commanding unanimous support in the Baldwin cabinet. It proved very ineffective, and yet there was no subsequent attempt to strengthen it under Baldwin, nor under his successors. The Order was in part the personal project of Sir William Joynson-Hicks, Home Secretary in Baldwin's cabinet. Joynson-Hicks was

responding to pressures from the Board of Trade, but the idea connected perfectly with his own ideological proclivities. Martin Pugh has pointed out that Baldwin's ministers were mostly liberal, paternalist or careerist in orientation. Joynson-Hicks stood out as a hard core ultra-rightist, a concession by the Prime Minister to the extremist wing of his party, at a time of frightening labour insurgency.³² A fanatical anti-semite, Joynson-Hicks was obsessed with the social dangers of immigration and his pursuit of black seamen was an indication of this. He clashed with his more pragmatic colleagues over the Order. Lord Birkenhead, Secretary for India, no liberal himself, condemned Joynson-Hick's approach in scathing terms. In a letter drafted at Birkenhead's direction, an India Office official wrote: "Lord Birkenhead is ... unable to accept the suggestion that this Order is of no concern to the India Office. Sir William Joynson-Hicks will no doubt recognize that it is undesirable on several grounds that Indians whose British nationality can readily be proved should even temporarily be treated as aliens in this country"³³

The idea that the 1925 order effectively regulated the movement of lascar seamen into the United Kingdom was certainly not shared by the bureaucracy itself. True, a year after its introduction the Home Office felt that the measure had had 'a useful effect'.³⁴ But in subsequent years, there was a deluge of complaints from immigration and police officials that they had no effective tools to prevent the inflow of lascars into the country. The Indian seamen were able to slip ashore and boarding house keepers would find them work. Boarding house keepers were often able to get pedlar's certificates for the men, giving them a form of legality. And seamen were very successful at obtaining British Indian seamen's papers, which allowed them to live in the country and to work in the merchant navy at the same rates paid to white British sailors. The latter strategy was keenly resented by British unions, which put some pressure on the Board of Trade to block it. But the Board of Trade was not able to interest the cabinet in acting on the matter.

A good five years after the 1925 Order, Inspector Thomas Blagg of the Immigration Department declared that in the Liverpool area the inflow of lascars was 'worse' than ever: "In all the villages and suburbs in this part one sees these coloured pedlars going from door to door".³⁵ For Blagg this were not only a racial but also a political threat: "I was told by a CID officer that some of them are rampant propagandists on the Indian question". A meeting of officials at the Board of Trade in May 1930 concluded that: "Lascar seamen desert their ship in this country either for the purpose of obtaining pedlar's licences, by means of which they are able to earn considerable sums of money before returning to India, or as a result of inducements held out by keepers of Boarding Houses for Asiatic seamen, who derive profit from corrupt practices in connection with the supply of corrupt stokehold crews to ships in UK ports".³⁶ In the same year, the Glasgow firm of P. Henderson and Co. complained to the Board of Trade that although the police in Glasgow made 'systematic attempts to trace deserters' this was not the case at any of the other UK ports.³⁷ The P&O Line was alone amongst its peers in operating a private system of tracing deserters and bringing charges against them: this practice was not replicated by other companies.³⁸ Most shipping companies could not be bothered to prosecute deserters even when the police told them the men's whereabouts.³⁹ It was eminently possible for seamen to simply ignore the registration requirements of the

Order. Sergeant J. Lawson of the Liverpool CID reported in 1930 that of 27 British Indian Seamen's Certificates of Identity recently issued by the Home Office to men in the city, only four of the recipients had been registered under the 1925 measure. In Lawson's analysis, the process of obtaining British Indian seamen's certificates was providing seamen who would otherwise face repatriation with a legal base to remain in and to work in the UK.⁴⁰ In his view, the Home Office issued the Seamen's certificates too easily, while the police had little legal basis to refuse pedlar's certificates.

In short, the 1925 Order seems to have been almost a dead letter. Rather than representing the introduction of a new level of control, it came out of the last moment at which there was a strong enough anti-lascar feeling at the topmost level of the British state to allow the introduction of a *new* outright discriminatory measure against them. It was followed by a lack of coherence in policy toward the lascars.

The Weakening of Anti-Lascar Racism 1930-1939

While there was no dramatic shift in policies toward the lascars in the next decade, the 1930s saw no attempt at renewed crackdown, and some improvements in their conditions of employment. And although anti-lascar discourse continued in some quarters into the 1940s, it seems to have been less dominant than in previous years.

This can partly be attributed to important shifts in racial and public policy discourses. As Barkan has shown, there was a strong turn away from biological racism amongst cutting-edge British and American intellectuals in the 1930s, under the influence of biologists such as J.B.S. Haldane and Julian Huxley and cultural anthropologists such as Franz Boas.⁴¹ This certainly affected the broader public sphere. In addition, there was, in Britain, a rising enthusiasm, across a surprisingly broad intellectual spectrum, for using planning and scientific expertise to address social problems.⁴² This new ideological climate seems to have made for more a slightly more progressive trend in state policies affecting lascars.

There was a reconsideration of the exclusion of lascars from the northern sea routes. Up to 1930, the BoT, because of its desire to please the British unions, and the GoI, for paternalistic reasons had firmly upheld the policy. But it now came under increasing pressure. In 1932, Indian trade unionists and sailors lobbied the GoI asking for an end to these climate restrictions.⁴³ H.S. Flynn, the Shipping Master of Bombay, pointed out that many of the 'Malay' sailors who were allowed to sail into far northern latitudes were actually Indians who had signed on in Singapore as Malays because of the more favourable conditions of the contracts prevailing there. Flynn observed that: "Masters report that these men always give satisfaction and stand the climate well whereas the actual Malay seaman is most unsatisfactory".⁴⁴ The GoI changed its position, now calling for abolition of the restrictions on the grounds that this would provide more opportunities for unemployed lascars, and was unlikely to have an impact on UK employment patterns. The BoT defended the ban, but was increasingly isolated on the question.⁴⁵ The GoI and the India Office however continued to gather evidence that

Indian seamen were perfectly capable of working in the north. A 1937 memo from the Ellerman Lines reported that they had had no difficulty with Indian sailors whom they had employed at very cold temperatures in the northern Pacific: “it is found that the percentage of Lascars going sick and having to be landed at North China ports is practically nil”.⁴⁶ Angered by the BoT’s uncooperative attitude, the GoI unilaterally suspended most of the climate-based regulations in 1938.⁴⁷

And lascars benefitted a little from general reforms in the maritime industry. Thus for example, many years pressure for reform of shipboard conditions from the Association of Port Health Authorities culminated in 1937, when the Board of Trade created new ‘Instructions to Surveyors’ which vastly raised the standards of sanitation, sleeping and cooking facilities for new ships. In 1939, a joint union-management National Maritime Board Agreement was introduced to improve onboard living conditions.

There was also considerable hostility to attempts to restrict seamen of colour from entering the country in Whitehall and the legal profession. Even very conservative lawyers had an aversion to the use of racial terminology in mainland British law. The hypocrisy of this taboo in an imperial nation is obvious, but it did not prevent it from being a real political factor. A Home Office official wrote to the Ministry of Health in 1935 concerning the idea of keeping seamen of colour out of the country that:

Neither the Home Office nor any other Department has power to restrict the admission of British subjects to the United Kingdom, and it has been the policy of the government to maintain the principle that no restriction could be placed on the entry of any British subject to the mother country. Any proposals for reversing this policy and restricting the admission to this country of British subjects could not be limited to coloured subjects.⁴⁸

War, Reform, Independence 1939-1947

With the coming of the Second World War, there was an immediate destabilization of the existing racialised pattern of labour in the maritime industry. A very militant world-wide lascar strike threatened the imperial war effort in 1939 and resulted in the British cabinet forcing the ship owners into a massive improvement in pay and conditions. There followed a rather rapid change of official and professional discourses about the lascar. The delicate political situation in India, erupting into the Quit India campaign, encouraged both the British and Indian bureaucracies to favour reforms that might buy some time. A more progressive ideological climate affected the medical profession. In 1941, the GoI abandoned the last vestiges of the restrictions on lascars sailing in northern latitudes.

Indicative of this shift was an important symbolic gesture by the government. As tends to happen more generally to racial terminology used by officialdom, the word ‘lascar’ had become resented by those to whom it was applied. In November 1940, Minister of Labour Ernest Bevin called in a speech for dispensing with the use of the term.⁴⁹ The war

also saw, at last, the abolition of the restrictions on lascars sailing on North Atlantic routes.

Within the medical profession, stereotypical readings of the lascar were being contested. In a 1943 book on shipwreck survivors, MacDonald Critchley, a London neurologist who was also a naval reserve officer, told his readers that ‘Anglo-Saxon’ sailors stood up admirably to the ordeal of taking to the lifeboats, whereas ‘Coloured races, particularly low-class Indians, may behave badly while adrift ...’, leading to a much higher mortality rate.⁵⁰ But a change in the ideological climate was reflected in *The Lancet’s* anonymous review of Critchley’s work. The writer questioned Critchley’s racial assumptions, adopting a cultural relativist mode of explanation. He asked whether “an excessive response, (by Anglo Saxon standards) necessarily implies inability to endure; indeed, it may have the opposite significance ... It is possible that ... whereas the Anglo-Saxon behaves in a more controlled way under circumstances of stress, he is more liable to subsequent anxiety, while persons more outspoken in their emotional response throw off the after-effects more rapidly”.⁵¹

The contingencies of war produced a more active and interventionist role for Whitehall in shipping, with for example a Seaman’s Welfare Board set up in 1940 by the Ministry of Labour. There was also some improvement in the medical services available to sailors.⁵² There was great concern to improve their clothing especially for cold weather.⁵³ The ILO held its first postwar seaman’s conference in late 1945, with enthusiastic support from the new Labour government.⁵⁴ There were notable improvements in the quality of crew accommodation in newly built ships.⁵⁵ There is no doubt that lascars benefited from such changes. Yet what is striking is that the move in Britain toward a more welfarist and inclusive national community also resulted in a new form of exclusion of the lascar. Plans for post-war reform increasingly were underpinned by a vision of Britain as a nation, not an Empire. The imagined beneficiaries of these changes were the white British sailor. The social solidarity that was aimed for in Attlee’s Britain was of a specifically white and British workforce. Lascars were not excluded from the benefits of reform but the discussions around these issues were clearly addressed to an image of a better Britain, rather than a better Empire. In the texts of these discussions on the more egalitarian future, the sailor is not imagined as an Indian or a Somali. As a rehabilitated, modernized and national sailor became more visible in the British official imagination the lascar became less so.

With the coming of Indian and Pakistani independence, lascars ceased to be British subjects. But perhaps more important, the steamship era was coming to an end with oil-fired ships replacing the hundreds of vessels which had been sunk in the conflict. These required smaller crews for the need for huge numbers of stokers and trimmers was gone. The introduction of the flag of convenience heralded the beginning of the end for the British merchant navy, although its final doom would take a long time to play out.

The End of Empire and the Phantom Lascar 1947-1960

The post-war world saw an endless celebration of the British sailors' virtues, just as the country was losing its century and half long domination on the world's oceans. This wave of nostalgia also constituted a kind of silent attack on the lascar, whose role in the story was actively forgotten. The growing enthusiasm for sail went along with a fading of the memory of the lascar, even by those who had worked alongside him.

The presiding genius in the new phase of cultural production of age of sail nostalgia was the British-based Australian sailor, writer and photographer Alan Villiers. Villiers was undoubtedly a creative artist, publicist and entrepreneur of a high order. Between the 1920s and the 1970s he published some 45 books on the sea in Britain and America, a number of them bestsellers, 31 articles in the American *National Geographic* magazine, and many pieces in other publications.⁵⁶ He was involved in several projects of re-creation of historic ships, notably captaining the 1957 voyage of a mock *Mayflower* from England to America. This event attracted enormous publicity and acclaim, and Villiers was greeted at Plymouth Rock by Vice-President Richard Nixon and Senator John Kennedy.⁵⁷ He also took charge of the nautical side of a number of feature films, including John Huston's celebrated 1954 version of *Moby Dick*.⁵⁸ Villiers' formidable range of skills enabled him to both help generate and to ride a long wave of popular nostalgia for pre-industrialised seafaring. His work may indeed also have shaped the way in which elderly British and American seafarers remembered their youth

Villiers however had a very confined vision of maritime history. He was notably misogynist and intensely anti-Semitic. His enthusiasm for the age of Henry the Navigator made him into something of an apologist for Dr Salazar's version of the Portuguese empire. His racial attitudes were complex. He did acknowledge the achievements of Asian and African seafarers – for example in *Sons of Sinbad*, his beautifully written, if somewhat orientalist, account of a 1939 voyage in an Arabian dhow.⁵⁹ But lascars are consistently placed outside the mainstream history of western shipping by Villiers.⁶⁰

An interesting indicator of post-war maritime specialist attitudes to the past is to be found in the magazine *Sea Breezes*, published in London. *Sea Breezes* made it clear that having sailed in a tall ship, preferably around Cape Horn, remained the true test of seamanship. *Sea Breezes (New Series)* was enlivened by a remarkably dense stream of articles and letters from retired merchant marine officers, reminiscing about their early years at sea, a genre that persisted in its pages until through the 1950s. Given that British boys had often gone to sea in their mid-teens, many of these articles harked back to the late Victorian and Edwardian eras. What is notable in these narratives is that no one dwells on the lascar, even amongst those who worked with them for most of their lives. For example in the short memoir by Captain G.V. Clark, who made his career as a pilot on Calcutta's Hoogli, there is no mention of lascars.⁶¹ Captain C. Hesletine, an experienced officer of the British India Steam Navigation Company, viewed Bombay lascars favourably – 'fine fellows they were' – but said no more about them.⁶² Out of contemporary sight was very much out of mind.

It obviously required a considerable feat of imagination to turn the world of crimps, bad nutrition and rampant mortality into a British mariner's paradise, but contributors to *Sea Breezes* generally rose to the task. A small explosion was evoked amongst them in October 1953 when someone dared to disrupt the consensus. A project had been launched to restore the classic clipper ship *Cutty Sark*. In response to a piece by Alan Villiers lauding the move, T.A. Porter, a tough-minded retired ship's officer living in Bournemouth, wrote in to pour cold water on the idea:

To support an epoch of sea-going when men were treated as dogs at appallingly low wages is unreasonable in this year of grace ...
I accepted conditions as they were before the First World War because I had to live somehow and jobs were hard to get, but I have no illusions that I was living in Arcadia.⁶³

Porter's views provoked a torrent of outraged letters to *Sea Breezes*. These insisted on the aesthetic of sail, linking it to their claims to skill, to self-reliance, to masculine identity and to Britishness. One correspondent wrote;

I spent 45 days doubling Cape Horn and 145 days from London to Frisco. It was this trial which proved to me that great comradeship which could not be found in any other phase of life, except perhaps in the trenches at Ypres, or in desert warfare in the 8th Army.
... we led the world in ships and seamanship ...⁶⁴

The contemporary world was seen in a perspective of decadence from the era of sail. Geoffrey Robertshaw, who had served four years in sail, recalled a recent gathering in a pub in Falmouth where

Eight real old-timers of the hard days of sail recal[ed] those happy days ... referring disparagingly to the molly-coddled young seamen (not sailors) of today Evidently Mr. Porter was a misfit in sail ...⁶⁵

Porter remained unrepentant:

there is some sort of concerted Hallelujah chorus in favour of the early shipowners. Do these vocalists, I wonder, admit that the present conditions are the ... result of hard-headed bargaining of the various associations and unions?⁶⁶

But in holding out for a rationalistic and collectivist view of the marine world, Porter was clear out of step with his peers. Their ideas about the sea was pervaded by a romantic emotionality and individualism.

Throughout this debate, the lascar and other non-British seamen were the absent presence. The invocation of the superiority of the white British seaman constantly begs the question; than whom were they better? To some extent the answer is of course, the allegedly molly coddled younger generation in the West. But it is also implicitly an

assertion that they were better than the lascars with whom they sailed. This may suggest a broader point about how to understand the operations of racial ideas. Racism is sometimes portrayed as consisting as highly theorized ideologies, but it often actually functions through a blunter process of non-recognition: the dominant group member simply cannot see the subordinate.⁶⁷ The lascar was often unreal to the British imagination. But the lascar was the doppelganger of the British seaman; the one could not be thought of without the other. The celebration of the British seaman was, and remains, a deeply racialised text, silently contrasting him with his usually unmentioned Asian and African crewmates, even when they seem not to be there.

¹ Conrad, "Well Done", in Conrad, *Notes on Life and Letters* [J.H. Stape with Andrew Burza eds.] (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004), p.143-4.

² For work emphasizing the effects of the 1925 Order, see Lara Tabili, "*We Ask for British Justice*": *Workers and Racial Subordination in Late Imperial Britain* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1994); Rosina Visram, *Ayahs, Lascars and Princes: Indians in Britain 1700-1947* (London: Pluto, 1986) and Ravi Ahuja, "Mobility and Containment: the Voyages of South Asian Seamen, c.1900-1960". *International Review of Social History*, 2006, 51, 111-141.

³ As documented in Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1750-1950* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1983), and Martin J. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981).

⁴ India Office Records, British Library (hereafter IOR) L/E/7/433/1 Revenue and Statistics minute Paper n.d.; IOR L/E/7/433 Lord Curzon, Simla to Lord George Hamilton, India Office, London, 10 May 1900; IOR L/E/7/439 Minute Paper 28 May 1900; Leo Barnes, *Evolution and Scope of Mercantile Marine Laws Relating to Seamen in India* (New Delhi, Maritime Law Association of India, 1983), p. 38.

⁵ Visram, *Ayahs, Lascars and Princes*.

⁶ Tabili, "*We Ask for British Justice*".

⁷ Ahuja, "Mobility and Containment".

⁸ Ewald, J. (2000) "Crossers of the Sea: Slaves, Freedmen and Other Migrants in the Northwestern Indian Ocean c. 1750-1914", *The American Historical Review*, 105:1, pp. 69-91.

⁹ G. Balachandaran, "Circulation Through Seafaring: Indian Seamen, 1890-1945" in C. Markovits, J. Pouchepadass, and S. Subramanayam (eds.) *Society and Circulation: Mobile People and Itinerant Cultures in South Asia 1750-1950* (Delhi, Permanent Black, 2003), 89-130.

¹⁰ Vivek Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2013).

¹¹ Stephen E. Roberts, "Fatal Work-Related Accidents in UK Merchant shipping from 1919 to 2005", *Occupational Medicine*, vol. 58, 2008, pp. 129-137.

¹² Roberts, "Fatal Work-Related Accidents".

¹³ Frank Broeze, *Island Nation: Australia and the Sea* (St. Leonard's, Allen and Unwin, 1998), p. 157.

¹⁴ It seems that because lascars worked below decks they were slightly less prone to fatal injury than white sailors, who were better represented amongst deckhands whose work was more immediately dangerous. See Roberts, "Fatal Work-Related Accidents".

¹⁵ Parliamentary Debates, First Session of the Parliament of the United Kingdom of Britain and Ireland 6. Edward VII volume CLXIII, col.263

¹⁶ W.E. Home, "The Deaths of Merchant Seamen in 1923", *The Lancet*, 3 October 1925, p. 731.

¹⁷ *Times of India*, 19 May 1887.

¹⁸ *Times of India*, 20 May 1887.

¹⁹ *Times of India* 24 May 1887.

²⁰ *Times of India* 16 June 1887.

- ²¹ James H. Williams, *Blow the Man Down! A Yankee Seaman's Adventures Under Sail* (New York, E.P. Dutton, 1959), p. 58.
- ²² Leon Fink, *Sweatshops at Sea: Merchant Seamen in the World's First Globalized Industry, from 1812 to the Present* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2011), pp. 117-141.
- ²³ Captain W.H. Hood, *The Blight of Insubordination* (London, Spottiswoode, 1903).
- ²⁴ Parliamentary Debates, First Session of the Parliament of the United Kingdom of Britain and Ireland 6. Edward VII volume CLIV 1906, cols 237-8
- ²⁵ *Ibid* 243
- ²⁶ Anonymous, "Steamship Sanitation", *British Medical Journal* (hereafter *BMJ*), 12 October 1889, p.832
- ²⁷ D.W. Keillor Moodie, "Beri-Beri Among Lascar Crews On Board Ship", *BMJ*, 28 March 1903, pp. 728-729; George A. Turner, "Ship Beri-Beri", *BMJ* 1 April 1905, pp. 712-713.
- ²⁸ See IOR L/E/9/970 throughout.
- ²⁹ Ryan Johnson, "European Cloth and 'Tropical' Skin: Clothing Material and British Ideas of Health and Hygiene in Tropical Climates", *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, volume 80, no. 1, Spring 2006, pp. 39-72.
- ³⁰ *Times of India*, 2 February 1910.
- ³¹ *Times of India*, 13 August 1910.
- ³² Martin Pugh, '*Hurrah for the Blackshirts!*' *Fascists and Fascism in Britain Between the Wars* (London, Pimlico, 2006) pp. 59, 88-89.
- ³³ IOR L/E/9/953/323 Draft letter from J.C. Walton, India Office, to Under Secretary, Home Office, 1925.
- ³⁴ IOR L/E/972/92 'Coloured Seamen Conference Held at the Home Office' 13 December 1926.
- ³⁵ IOR/L/E/9/962 T. Blagg note to P.R. Fudge, Immigration Officer's report Port of Liverpool, 'Subject Jaffar Shah – Lascars Deserters', 27 October 1930.
- ³⁶ IOR/L/E/962/162 'Note of Meeting held at the Board of Trade at 3.30 pm on the 5th May 1930'.
- ³⁷ IOR /L/E/9/962/147 P. Henderson and Co., Glasgow to Board of Trade, London, 25 July, 1930.
- ³⁸ IOR/L/E/962/162 'Note of Meeting held at the Board of Trade at 3.30 pm on the 5th May 1930'.
- ³⁹ IOR/L/E/9/962/121 Note from Police bulletin of May 1930
- ⁴⁰ IOR/L/E/9/962/121 Note from Police bulletin of May 1930.
- ⁴¹ Elazer Barkan, *The Retreat of Scientific Racism: Changing Concepts of Race in Britain and the United States between the World Wars* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992).
- ⁴² Richard Overy, *The Twilight Years: The Paradox of Britain Between the Wars* (New York: Penguin, 2010).
- ⁴³ IOR L/E/9/970 Syed Munawar, General Secretary National Seamen's Union of India to Shipping Master, Bombay, 26 December 1932.
- ⁴⁴ IOR L/E/9/970/216 H.S. Lynn, Bombay to Principal Officer, Mercantile Marine Dept 29/30 Dec 1932.
- ⁴⁵ IOR L/E/9/970/158 E. Foley, Mercantile Marine Dept Board of Trade to Under Secretary of State for India, India Office 22 August 1935.
- ⁴⁶ IOR L/E/9/976/117 R.J. Bucknall, Ellerman and Bucknall Steamship Co, 'Notes on Restrictions on the Employment of Indian Seamen in Northern Latitudes 1937'.
- ⁴⁷ IOR L/E/970/82 memorandum 4 May 1938.
- ⁴⁸ IOR L/E/9/972 Hutchinson, Home Office to A.N. Rucker, Ministry of Health 31 October 1935.
- ⁴⁹ Barnes. *Evolution and Scope*, p. 39, citing the Daily Mail, 25 November 1940.
- ⁵⁰ MacDonald Critchley, *Shipwreck Survivors: A Medical Study* (London, Churchill, 1943), p. 73.
- ⁵¹ Anonymous, "Exposure and Thirst", *The Lancet* 12 June 1943, p. 729.
- ⁵² Anonymous, "The Seaman's Able Body", *The Lancet*, 26 July 1943, pp. 807-808.
- ⁵³ *SBNS* vol 1 Jan-June 1945 pp. 150-153.
- ⁵⁴ *SBNS* vol. 1 Jan-June 1946 pp. 374-375
- ⁵⁵ *SBNS* vol. 1 Jan-June 1946 pp. 368-372.
- ⁵⁶ Kate Lance, *Alan Villiers: Voyager of the Winds* (London, National Maritime Museum, 2009).
- ⁵⁷ Lance, *Voyager*, pp. 218-24.
- ⁵⁸ Lance, *Voyager*, pp. 213-4..
- ⁵⁹ Alan Villiers, *Sons of Sinbad* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1940).
- ⁶⁰ Lance, *Voyager*, 267.
- ⁶¹ *SBNS* vol. 1, January-June 1946, p. 376-382.

⁶² *SBNS* vol. 18, July-December 1954.

⁶³ *SBNS* vol. 16, July-December 1953, p. 297.

⁶⁴ *SBNS* vol. 16, July-December 1953, p. 447.

⁶⁵ *SBNS* vol. 16, July-December 1953, p. 448.

⁶⁶ *SBNS* vol. 18, July-December 1954, p. 385

⁶⁷ Simon Dagut, "Racial attitudes Among British Settlers in South Africa c.1850-c.1895", D.Phil dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1997.