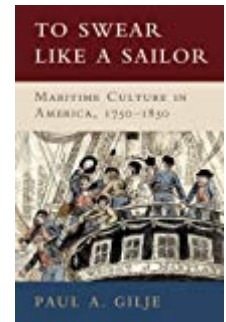


**Paul A. Gilje.** *To Swear Like a Sailor: Maritime Culture in America, 1750-1850.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. Illustrations. 394 pp. \$34.99, paper, ISBN 978-0-521-74616-8.



**Reviewed by** Ian Yunker

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Nicholas Rodgers memorably described sailor life as its own wooden world. In this engrossing cultural history, Paul A. Gilje reveals the permeability of those walls by exploring the links between maritime and mainstream culture through sailor language, songs, and literature. Focusing on blue water sailors, Gilje attempts to “articulate a generic American maritime culture” and to examine how it “reflected, intersected, and interacted” with mainstream society (pp. 2-3). Sailor culture was connected to the public sphere through language, writing, and imagery that were understood, embraced, and in turn altered by shore society.

Jack Tar became a stock figure in mainstream culture, particularly in theater and literature, and his evolution from buffoon to upright citizen reflected the rise of nationalism, the increased importance of maritime trade, and republican ideology. Sailors themselves embraced the stereotype to serve their own needs, whether to set themselves apart from mainstream society or to demonstrate their nautical expertise. Jack Tar rep-

resented an integral aspect of a larger Anglo-American culture and reflected changing notions of gender and class, national identity, democratization, and the shift from rationalism to romantic sentimentalism.

Gilje structures the work thematically around swearing, language, logbooks, yarn spinning, song, literature, and sailor art. This approach paints a rich picture of the culture of Jack Tar and provides a window into his world. Profanity in the forecastle both reflected and affected the profanity of the larger society. Swearing was culturally conditioned and was never a constant, and its use became an assertion of a maritime identity. Gilje breaks down the arch insult “damn son of a bitch” and uses language and evolving portrayals of women to show that its power was tied to changing views on animals, gender, and class. Sailor language was broadly understood in mainstream society, and both colorful maritime metaphors and the technical language of the sea were common in literature and plays. Although sailors are known to have written in a straightfor-

ward manner, they used the heady phrases of Jack Tar to establish their maritime credentials. Sailors, including those who were African American, “selectively” slipped into sailor language whenever it was most useful to them or to the image they hoped to project (p. 61). The logbook came to be seen as a metaphor for the sailor’s life. Gilje emphasizes its use as a memory tool, even going so far as to call it the sailor’s “memory palace” (p. 66), while such authors as Herman Melville and Richard H. Dana used it to popularize the romantic idea of life as voyage.

Both spinning yarns and sailor songs were links between mainstream and maritime culture and the image of yarn spinning Jack emerged as a powerful representative of the folklore of the romantic era. Songs celebrating nationalism and the importance of trade were common and popular ashore. Songs also reflected the everyday emotions and concerns of sailors. Shanties aided in work and were in part influenced by slave-working songs. Songs and yarns helped define and articulate nautical identity. Contrary to popular opinion, sailors read often and widely. Indeed, sailors’ reading lists were extensive, varied, and closely tied to mainstream culture. The astounding popularity of works like *The Pirates Own Book* (1837), both ashore and afloat, was in part due to the larger print revolution in publishing, technology, and marketing. The portrayal of sailors in art, evolved in parallel with a democratizing nation from crude caricatures played for laughs into a romanticized ideal that represented commerce and the nation. The art sailors made again demonstrated the intricate links between mainstream and maritime culture. While personal art like tattoos reflected how sailors viewed their world, scrimshaw designed for sale ashore largely depicted the popular stereotype. Gilje closes the work with a thoughtful rumination on the sea chest and the ways it represented both the continuity of a sailor’s world and the intertwined manner of maritime and mainstream culture.

In this book, Gilje has provided an insightful cultural history that builds on his own *Liberty on the Waterfront: American Maritime Culture in the Age of Revolution* (2003), though it is more ambitious in its attempt to reveal an overarching American maritime culture. The methodology is sophisticated and creative as Gilje examines a largely oral culture that is now preserved primarily in written form. He mostly succeeds and each chapter is insightful. Gilje is at his best when painting a vivid picture of sailor culture and in teasing out the myriad ways it interacts with and influences the larger society. He is aided by an impressive source base that includes copious archival research, particularly in logbooks, and the skilled use of songs, folklore, art, and literature. That said, there are some minor flaws. Gilje notes that the book began as a “series of semiautonomous essays” and this unfortunately shows (p. 1). While the book does add up to a larger whole, it is marred by the repetition of information within different chapters. One also has to question the extent to which this portrayal can be considered a “generic American maritime culture.” Gilje chose to leave out large portions of the American maritime community, including brown water sailors, river boatmen, coastal traders, and fishermen, to say nothing about stevedores, longshoremen, and others. Also, sailors were a notably globalized class and many sailors on American ships were foreign. Maritime culture surely included more than American sailors on long, blue water cruises and it would be interesting to consider how the inclusion of some of these others would change the work. Despite these concerns, this is an excellent book that sheds light on Jack Tar’s world and its connections to shore. It should be read by all interested in early American and maritime history.

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