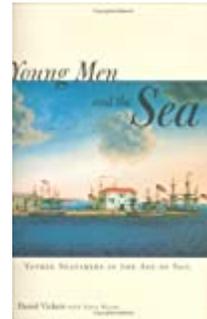




Daniel Vickers. *Young Men and the Sea: Yankee Seafarers in the Age of Sail.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005. ix + 336 pp. \$31.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-300-10067-9.



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A Master of the Sea

If the “new maritime history” has revealed anything, it is that in British North America sailors were far from unique. In fact, they constituted the region’s largest wage-earning labor force. Scholars have uncovered within the British Atlantic a multi-ethnic, multi-racial, and multi-gendered seafaring culture—from sailors’ attacks on economic markets to the ocean routes plied by crews of seamen, from the tattooed bodies of sailors to seamen’s wives on shore, from white freeholders’ landless sons to men of color who also took to the deep.[1] Adding to this vast literature of maritime studies and Atlantic-oriented history is a major new contribution from Daniel Vickers. While the men he studies might have been unexceptional, his book about Salem, Massachusetts and its sailors is quite the opposite. Vickers navigates readers through a stunning history between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries in which he brings together evidence about shipboard life and procedures, as well as what happened to Salem, its seamen and the families and associates of the men who went to sea. What he discovers is that for young men from Salem it was just as normal to go to the ocean as it was for other regular men of the British Atlantic. But as soon as

Herman Melville and his contemporaries gazed inward at the expansive United States, Vickers argues, Salem went from a vibrant “sailortown” to a town with sailors. There is a clear distinction here. Colonial Salem was a “sailortown,” one in which the world of seafaring was perceptible in all aspects of town life. By the nineteenth century, the dramatic shift in employment opportunities toward a nascent industrialism meant that crews and any other elements related to shipboard employment were pushed to the margins of Salem life. Although centered on one coastal town, *Young Men and the Sea* is as wide-ranging in its analysis as any single maritime history can be, for Vickers takes as much interest in what happened on shore as with the town’s seafarers. Vickers offers radically new perspectives on the unpredictable interplay with ocean waters sustained by people of colonial and early national New England. Contained in *Young Men and the Sea* are powerful lessons about Yankee relations with seafaring that were intimate, unstable, and highly lucrative for some people, but painfully costly for others. Masterfully written, the book represents a tour de force in the field that will reach teachers, students, and a general audience.

Scholars, of course, will pay close attention to a maritime history of early New England that is highly readable, though built on a complex, imaginative methodology with multivariate and rich lines of investigation. According to Vickers, Salem had the necessary balance of population density and productivity for a sophisticated maritime history. Salem was never so big (as were some other port cities) as to render it unmanageable to trace individual voyages and sailors' lives, and it was never insignificant enough to leave potentially overwhelming holes in the evidentiary record. But to command the vast resources of Salem's maritime history, Vickers needed a few hands along the way. He found a crew of students from the Maritime Studies Research Unit at Memorial University, Newfoundland, where he taught for fifteen years. With his young seafaring devotees, Vickers gathered evidence from a host of ocean-related materials—logbooks, merchant records, personal manuscripts, diaries, and court cases. *Young Men and the Sea* is a fine testament to how teaching can influence research. Many of us might desire a sophisticated confluence of pedagogy and scholarship, but rarely attain what Vickers has in this book; during various phases of production Vickers learned as much from his students as they learned from him. Vickers and his researchers, including the indefatigable Vince Walsh, produced an immense database of some ten thousand man-voyages from Salem. As if the database was not enough, Vickers and Walsh undertook the daunting process of discovering "linkages," determining when Salem seafarers sailed, how many times, where they lived in Salem, if they worked in landward trades, if they had family ashore, and what sort of wages they earned. Exercising necessary caution, Vickers eliminated suspect linkages where the evidence was less strong than needed. Some of the fruits of this intensive work are presented in eleven accessible graphs. All of the evidence produced from the linkages would overwhelm the average historian, but not Vickers. He has mastered the ability to reduce such hard-won findings into exquisite prose.

With the first two chapters Vickers establishes the seventeenth-century roots of Salem's eventual dependence on blue-water markets. From the start, Vickers never loses sight of the bigger picture as he sets Salem's growth within the context of economic, social, and cultural transformations wrought throughout a British Atlantic. At the same time, Vickers rightly asserts the natural connectedness between New England and the ocean, reinforcing an argument presented in his earlier *Farmers and Fishermen: Two Centuries of Work in Essex County, Massachusetts, 1630-1850* (1994). Even if settlers sought

"competency" from New England's fertile lands, saltwater employment always beckoned. In the seventeenth century, Salem's residents plied the coasts for travel and goods exchange. Vickers's discussion of coastal routes is significant, as most historians have tended to view the maritime world as one involving long-distance movements of peoples, material items, and knowledge. By the latter half of the seventeenth century, Salem's maritime world had yet to become as "specialized" and far-reaching as that of Boston. Bolstered by wealthy merchants, Salem fleets tended to dabble in the cod fishery and coastal trades. Vickers, however, quickly shifts to emphasize the importance of this seafaring employment in a port with less bustle than others: "for a merchant class in a small town that counted only two thousand souls to have acquired forty to fifty oceangoing vessels within a single generation" was surely impressive (p. 49). Economic and social foundations for a robust maritime industry had been laid, even if the evidence, as Vickers acknowledges, does not permit for a rigorous analysis of the seventeenth-century origins. In these first chapters, readers also get a glimpse of Vickers's control over his sources. Throughout the rest of the book, Vickers stays removed from far-flung conjectures, but imaginatively and cautiously employs other materials when Salem's well of sources runs dry. Vickers then shifts to an examination of Salem's maritime world in the eighteenth century, for which evidence abounds. Chapters 3 through 5 form the core of *Young Men and the Sea*. Unlike the anxious, unruly, revolutionary proletariat characterized by the likes of Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh, Vickers finds that Salem's eighteenth-century seafarers were a different lot. In chapters 3 and 4 he shows how Salem men moved within a small circle of maritime employers and employees, went to sea at a young age, hung on into their middling years with hopes of rising in rank, or returned home to labor in a host of other trades. A hierarchy among captains, mates, and the men before the mast was one in which most ship members knew one another and had a place within a specific set of social relations almost transplanted from shore en masse to Salem's vessels. Vickers's arguments, in which he weaves together multiple and ample strands of evidence, offer powerful counterpoints to the ways in which British-American sailors—the "Jack Tars"—have been portrayed over the past several decades. What made Salem's maritime market much different and perhaps also contributed to the rather insular nature of Salem's seafaring workforce was the fact that most ships traveled in short and not prolonged deep-sea voyages.

Salem was never too far away. Many young men went to sea as part of a masculine rite of passage only to return home and take up other trades. With chapter 4, then, Vickers brilliantly offers a social cartography of eighteenth-century Salem as a port of departure for close-knit crews. According to Vickers's findings, it was unlike larger ports in the British Atlantic which had segregated areas where sailors lived, drank, frolicked, and procured employment. A main street ran the length of the town, along which stood the buildings and some homes of merchants and families of wealth, all of which had a hand in maritime trades. Although "power" in the town may have traveled along that street, relations with the people who controlled the maritime trade were attainable from any point in Salem. And yet Salem was not a "social democracy," as Vickers supports an argument first made in the 1920s by Samuel Eliot Morison.[2] With a careful examination of town probate and court records, letters and diaries, newspapers and account books, Vickers reveals that the town's layout reflected "chains of personal dependency" (p. 136), rather than class stratification. The town's wards possessed men and families, widows and children, with ties to markets, creditors, and debt, in which everyone had a place. The tides of the market, the hardships of lives lost at sea, widowhood, and the ability to rise in rank coursed throughout Salem, making it "a sailortown from stem to stern" (p. 134). By the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Salem maritime world shifted in various directions. In chapter 5, Vickers follows Salem's maritime downturn after the American Revolution. Here Vickers draws parallels between Salem and Boston after the war—a brief economic upswing during the period of neutrality in the 1790s was marked by the almost paralyzing effect of a post-Revolutionary economy, where New England merchants tried to make their way as small competitors in a large and hostile globalizing economy, in which they were no longer under the protection of the British monarch. Though by the antebellum decades Salem's maritime industry had some colonial remnants, Vickers's work with a host of records reveals that Salem was a town with sailors, but not a "sailortown." Larger ships meant larger crews and longer trips, so Salem's sailors, as Vickers finds, began to search elsewhere for maritime employment, breaching the close-knit circle that had distinguished the colonial industry. Fathers might have found places afloat for their sons through a handshake or nod of the head, and, as is shown in chapter 7—which at first glance seems out of place—the rules of discipline at sea in the nineteenth century maintained a certain amount of continuity. "Old men," the patriarchs of the deep, still

controlled the rules of punishment. In a tightly focused portion of the book, Vickers also reveals how changes to work coincided with and influenced transformations to the town of Salem itself. A "sailortown" of working-class men was clearly set off from the main arteries of Salem. Other sources of employment were to be had which were not of the older labor system of social dependency. "It was the clattering of cotton machinery and not the moaning of the wind that sounded the loudest in the ears of Salemites after mid-century" (p. 212). Migrants, new families born of industrial wealth, and a dying generation of wealth from maritime investment revealed nineteenth-century Salemites looking elsewhere than the ocean to make a living. Discipline, or "mastery" as Vickers calls it, was also about class, because the interpersonal relationships where masters and captains once knew the men before the mast had given way to an impersonal workforce. Vickers's focus on this shift in shipboard employment in chapter 7 fills a large gap in the historical literature, and he has done it creatively through a study of maritime law and its continuities and discontinuities. Largely because of the work by Vickers on the whaling industry as well as studies by other scholars, it has long been known that the eighteenth-century colonial maritime world was one that almost replicated "master-servant" relations. But what Vickers shows with Salem is that, with the nineteenth-century New England industry, captains entrenched these same sets of colonial relations almost effortlessly into a new class structure pulled from the shore. And even as landward employer-employee relations in the North moved farther away from "patriarchy," seafaring took the opposite course. "Old men" regulated more stringent punishments on longer voyages amongst unrecognizable faces. "Mastery" and its patriarchal dimensions afloat, according to Vickers, made seafaring appear an antiquated industry. The comparison that Vickers's argument sets up is striking and suggestive. Seafaring in the North, like slavery in the South, maintained labor relations of a much earlier era. That meant patriarchy and dominance were not isolated to the "peculiar institution" of chattel slavery and plantation agriculture. In other words, access to independence in free labor was not available to every man of the antebellum North.

Young Men and the Sea is refreshing for multiple reasons. Vickers has single-handedly resuscitated a view of New England sailors which once held sway among the likes of Samuel Eliot Morison. Vickers argues convincingly that young men from colonial Salem did go to sea as "a customary apprenticeship for adult life" (p.

130). But in tracing their lives after they set foot back on land and in tracing what happened in a single maritime town, Vickers departs from other maritime histories of New England. As Vickers's research shows, many of Salem's sailors returned home to live quite different lives. The changes of the antebellum era (on shore as well as at sea) coupled with an old-fashioned labor system, still buttressed by patriarchal discipline, accounts for why Melville and other New England writers, who took to the deep, came home to tell nostalgic stories of the Age of Sail. What had vanished were the days in Salem during which a boy did not become a man unless he went to sea. What also separates Vickers's book from other recent portrayals of sailors is his lack of emphasis on collective action and ideology—an interconnectedness which New England sailors from smaller ports of call might have sustained in conjunction with a larger group of laborers who took up the language of republicanism to incite rebelliousness against impressment and other types of coerced but market-dependent systems of labor.[3] During the American Revolution and even afterward, Salem sailors were not side by side with other Atlantic working-class rioters, at least, that is, not according to Vickers. This is a deeply researched and highly nuanced work that fits within several strands of scholarship. The book is, in part, a New England town study, but it also contributes to maritime and Atlantic world history and labor history. To do so much with one small town and its population is no small achievement. Vickers should be applauded for writing an instant classic. Before picking up his fruitful pen again Vickers might want to enjoy the accolades from the community of scholars.

Notes

[1]. Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh, *The Many-Headed Hydra: The Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001); Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Simon Newman, "Reading the Bodies of Early American Seafarers," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., 55 (1998): pp. 59-82; Lisa Norling, *Captain Ahab Had a Wife: New England Women and the Whale Fishery, 1720-1870* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Michael Jarvis, "Maritime Masters and Seafaring Slaves in Bermuda, 1680-1783," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., 61 (2002): pp. 585-622; and W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African-American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998). For a collection of essays that covers multiple perspectives, see Margaret S. Creighton and Lisa Norling, eds., *Iron Men, Wooden Women: Gender and Seafaring in the Atlantic World, 1700-1920* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). On sons of white landowners in the whale fishery, see Daniel Vickers, "Nantucket Whalers in the Deep-Sea Fishery: The Changing Anatomy of an Early American Labor Force," *Journal of American History* 72 (1985): pp. 277-296.

[2]. Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Maritime History of Massachusetts* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1921).

[3]. For a recent interpretation of impressment, see Denver Brunsmann, "Everyday Escapes: The Art of Evading the British Press Gang," International Seminar on the History of the Atlantic World at Harvard University, *Working Papers: Transatlantic Networks, 1500-1825* (Cambridge, Mass.: 2003).

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