

Eric W. Sager, *Ships and Memories: Merchant Seafarers in Canada's Age of Steam* (Vancouver: UBC Press 1993).

This slender volume will please students of working-class, labour and maritime history who have read Sager's more empirical previous volumes on seafaring labour and the shipping industry in Canada. Sager incorporates many of the findings of his earlier work here as well as that of a growing literature on maritime history. But the great strength of this book lies in its attempt to take the reader directly into the world of working-class experience, or at least that of workers at sea and in port. The primary sources used by Sager are oral: both interviews he conducted with seafarers in the 1980s, and those by Jim Green and the collaborators in the Canadian Seamen's History Project. (11) The result is a work short on narrative and analysis, although Sager does succinctly describe the rise and fall of Canada's steamship industry made uneven as it was by the demands of war. Such shortness is not a weakness, because Sager does not have a pedagogical goal here; he rather wants to revive the importance of workers' memories about their own creative role in the history of this industry during the first half of the twentieth century. The author also wants workers to remember, and act on, what they hoped and dreamed for as they struggled through their working lives.

Ships and Memories is a fascinating oral history. Individual chapters reveal the importance of seafarers' own yarns — stories or tall tales — in constructing their understanding about life working at sea. These are tales of resistance to exploitation, appreciation of officer paternalism, and the sexism of a male dominated working world. In other chapters seafarers, occasionally including women, recount both the financial necessity and quest for experience and adventure which led them to sea, their skills and toughness in an industrial occupation in an often hostile ocean environment, the sometimes contradictory experience of class aboard ships in which masters' and crews' very survival in this environment depended on cooperation, and how seafarers

ultimately saw through such contradictions to embrace the need for unionization. Sager highlights the importance of seafarers' definition of masculinity to men and women at sea and at home without accepting old clichés about it being exaggerated in any way peculiar to work at sea. Finally, Sager connects seafarers' reminiscences of sacrifice and patriotism during war with workers' sense of grievance about how the state sided with employers in expecting discipline for the sake of profit rather than giving a just compensation for their labour. This book explores how workers' vision of a fair and just Canada diverged from, and was frustrated by, capitalists and the state in the shipping industry.

Sager wants to let his sources speak for themselves, but is aware that he ultimately is the author of this work. Conscious of the problems of writing based on oral history, Sager defines his role as "listener, collaborator, and selector, and I arrange the text around major themes in labour history today." (12) The bulk of the text is comprised of lengthy direct quotes from interviews, with very brief introductory statements or commentary from Sager. What makes this book so successful is Sager's commitment to forging an alliance between workers and their historians in an attempt to learn about the injustice and degradation of capitalism, about workers' capacity to resist, and to use memories about past exploitation and resistance to find future success.

Sager does not make recommendations about future paths workers might take based on seafarers' experiences. There seems to be an unspoken belief in the work that historians cannot take it upon themselves to appropriate workers' own decision-making about their destinies. Historians, on the other hand, can facilitate workers' thinking about what the future should yield by encouraging their memories of the past. Sager does not want to address an academic audience, but rather a more general working-class one composed of people who "live in a wider culture which does much to suppress memory or to shroud the past in veils of romance or nostalgia. Recharging memory is the first step in charting a different and better future." (150)

Academic readers who might criticize the book for a lack of analysis or discussion of the criteria upon which Sager selected and presented evidence will have missed its point. This is not a work designed to sample representatively seafarers' memories, but to emphasize memories which have a transformative potential in shaping workers' consciousness. The design of this book will do much to attract a working-class readership as much as it will academics. Lavish use of illustrations and boldfaced type of quotes from the seafarers' own words set this book apart from the often monotonous presentations of more pedantic efforts. *Ships and Memories* may be brief in content, but it is not superficial in intent. The purpose of this book is not to give readers a dry study of workers in the shipping industry, but rather to set a new course by encouraging seafarers and other workers to value, and build on, the memories of their own experiences.

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Arlette Farge, *Fragile Lives. Violence, Power and Solidarity in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, translated by Carol Shelton (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1993).

Fragile Lives is an attempt to get at the life, aspirations, and mental world of the Parisian labouring classes in the eighteenth century. The book deals with two major questions. The first is the relation between public and private spheres; the second is the nature of power and resistance to authority. With its excursions into the role of women, of the family, and of the workshop, the book touches on many central issues of social history.

The approach is narrative. Arlette Farge has burrowed into the archives of the *Châtelet* and other Parisian law-courts, but she does not approach these quantitatively. From the outset, she makes clear her fascination with individual stories and her belief in the telling example. She is eager to let her sources speak for themselves, restoring the "voice" of the

forgotten. Her actual analysis of the cases is punctuated with reflections on the work of the historian. The historian must be sensitive to nuances and complexities even while trying to extract meanings and structures from past events.

The work revolves around the disputes brought before the police. The police, attempting to preserve the public peace, served both as guardians of order and as mediators of local conflicts. Yet by relying on rumours and by investigating them, the police actually relayed information and thus instigated resistance. Abstract goals, such as social control, were challenged daily. Life in the Old Regime capital, Farge thus concludes, involved a delicate balance. Everyone, the authorities included, had to reconcile hopes and expectations with real life. This gap intrigues Farge, and her book is an attempt to illuminate it. The fragility of life, as she defines it, is not primarily economic. It lies instead in the complex negotiations demanded by society.

For, despite the title which underlines the precariousness of existence, Farge is more interested in the positive ways in which people managed their lives. She stresses networks and support mechanisms. Farge's premise about this period is that people led much of their lives in public, within the confines of a neighbourhood. People relied on others but they were also defined by others. Preserving one's reputation was therefore crucial. One had to be careful not to challenge local norms and expectations. At least not too brazenly, for scandals ruined reputations and entailed loss of clients. Public approval mattered greatly, then, but exemplary punishment also had an effect, as did the *lettres de cachet* where private individuals obtained the imprisonment without a trial of wayward wives and children.

Farge has important things to say; then; about the nature of interpersonal relations. Here, through stories told by the victims, we read about the shattered hopes of unwed mothers, the attachment (even if not always sentimental) to children. We may, as Farge warns us, never know the truth about individual situations, but we can at least reconstruct a series of expectations of proper behaviour.