

Jesse Lemisch, *Jack Tar vs. John Bull: The Role of New York's Seamen in Precipitating the Revolution* (New York: Garland Publishing 1997)

Jesse Lemisch's scholarship concerning eighteenth-century Anglo-American sailors has had a notable impact on the study of merchant seamen during the age of sail. While his work has also affected historians of nineteenth-century sailors, Lemisch's emphasis on the social history of sailing men and his desire to examine history "from the bottom up" has exerted a marked influence on scholars specializing in many different areas of early American history. The importance of Lemisch's work was readily apparent when the subscribers of the *William and Mary Quarterly*, the premier journal in the field of early American history, voted his 1968 essay, "Jack Tar in the Streets: Merchant Seamen in the Politics of Revolutionary America," as one of the ten most influential articles published in that journal during the last fifty years.

Since "Jack Tar in the Streets," evolved from Lemisch's 1962 Yale doctoral thesis, the publication of *Jack Tar vs. John Bull: The Role of New York's Seamen in Precipitating the Revolution* is welcome. Students of colonial America will have the opportunity of examining in greater detail the important role New York sailors played in provincial politics in the late eighteenth century and their participation in the political turmoil that led to the American Revolution. Although many historians will be pleased that Garland Publishing has made this study available, *Jack Tar vs. John Bull* suffers from a number of limitations, the chief of which is that it is not really a book. It is an unrevised PhD thesis written more than thirty-five years ago. As such, it contains many of the weaknesses of the genre.

Jack Tar vs. John Bull attempts to explain why merchant seamen played such a leading role in many of the violent episodes that eventually culminated in the American Revolution. Numerous sailors fought vicious street battles against naval-press gangs during the 1750s-1770s. Sailors also contributed most of the manpower in the mobs that attacked the stamp distributors charged with enforcing the hated Stamp Act of 1765. Moreover, Jack Tar was deeply involved in the series of brawls with off duty British soldiers, which led to the 1770 "Battle of Golden Hill," New York's less well known counterpart to the Boston Massacre. The prominence of seamen in these violent disturbances intrigued Lemisch. Rejecting the traditional notion that sailors were merely naturally violent, immature, alcohol-driven thugs, or that they were an easily manipulated, unintelligent rabble who preformed the dirty work of more informed merchants and lawyers who opposed British measures, Lemisch argues that sailors acted rationally out of a sense of their own self-interests. Because so many British measures hurt sailors as a class, seamen formed the vanguard of the movement that wanted to end British rule in America *and* change the nature of colonial American society. Jack Tar (and Jesse Lemisch) believed very strongly in the ideas associated with Carl Becker's dual revolution thesis.

The brief opening chapter offers an enigmatic portrait of Jack Tar as well as the book's major theme. At sea, Lemisch says, Jack was like the typical American colonist: young, optimistic, and stable. Ashore, however, he was another person: "He

is, except for his personal possessions, propertyless, his income unstable, and he did not build up any significant savings; he is a sea-going proletariat.” (9) Although Jack may have been optimistic away from home, because Lemisch focuses almost exclusively on sailors’ experiences ashore in New York, the proletarian aspects of Jack’s life provide the heart of the book’s content.

The book’s best chapters focus on Jack’s responses to British actions that especially harmed sailors: impressment, the Stamp Act, and competition with soldiers for shoreside employment. Of all the empire’s coercive actions, impressment was probably the worst because it attacked the sailor’s life, liberty, and property. Forcibly dragooned into service aboard the king’s ships, impressment made a mockery of the idea of the rights of Englishmen. Thus, Jack based his opposition to British tyranny on the natural rights of man long before most other Americans. The Stamp Act, with its tax on ships’ bills of lading and other documents, also struck at sailors by attacking their livelihood. American protests to repeal the act relied heavily on nonimportation, which offered constitutional relief only at the expense of Jack’s employment. Unsurprisingly, sailors supported the most radical protests. Instead of closing colonial ports and courts to avoid using stamped paper, American seamen wanted to carry on business as usual in open defiance of the law. Britain’s decision to station thousands of soldiers in American cities also injured sailors disproportionately. Since unemployment dogged sailors, they often sought jobs ashore between voyages. Off duty soldiers offered stiff competition for those jobs since they could afford to settle for lower wages. This competition prompted numerous violent encounters between soldiers and sailors, culminating in the Battle of Golden Hill.

In the brief foreword, prize winning historian Marcus Rediker rightfully says that “*Jack Tar versus John Bull* reads well after all these years.” (xiii) Lemisch’s skill in writing narrative history is one of the book’s major strengths. His eye for detail and story telling ability make the events during the Stamp Act crisis or the Golden Hill confrontation read like a novel. In addition, the extensive documentation reveals the solid research, especially in the local New York City court records — that supports Lemisch’s interpretation.

Despite these admirable strengths, *Jack Tar vs. John Bull* is not without its faults. The most important is its undeveloped potential, which perhaps applies to Lemisch’s career as well. This “book” is a doctoral thesis. It demonstrates the author’s ability to address the prevailing secondary literature and offer an original contribution to knowledge based on research in primary materials. Lemisch, of course, realized that he had completed a thesis and he outlined the additional work that he intended to undertake to develop his dissertation into a book.

As this study now stands, it is — if a graduate student may borrow a term from a great historian — “frankly fragmentary.” Although the dissertation limits itself to New York, the completed work will deal with other colonies as well: considering the seaman’s mobility, it is artificial to meet him in New York and ignore him elsewhere. Besides, I have evidence that he was equally active, in a political sense, in other

places. Thus, especially in connection with impressment, the study will have greater depth when approached on the continental scale. (xviii)

Unfortunately, he never completed this more developed work.

Even as it stands, the thesis is not a complete examination of Jack Tar's role in the coming of the Revolution in New York because it ends abruptly in 1770 after the Golden Hill affair. This is far too early. The disintegration of the empire was far from a certainty in 1770. Indeed, many historians characterize 1770 to 1773 as a "period of quiet" because Anglo-American relations notably improved in these years. The Tea Act of 1773 ended this hiatus in transatlantic tensions, and the Boston Tea Party and subsequent "Coercive Acts" sealed the empire's fate. Lemisch ignores these key events; there is no discussion of Jack Tar's role in any of these important episodes. This omission is especially unfortunate because of New York's rather desultory course in declaring independence. The Empire State was hardly in the forefront of revolutionary ferment. Why was this the case? Was Jack Tar less effective in the streets in the 1770s than he had been the years Lemisch discusses? These questions merited Lemisch's attention.

The undeveloped potential of *Jack Tar Vs. John Bull* mirrors Lemisch's career as a historian. The author of several path breaking articles — "Jack Tar in the Streets," (*William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., XXV [1968]), "The American Revolution Seen from the Bottom Up," (in Barton J. Bernstein, ed., *Toward a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History* [New York 1968]), and "Listening to the 'Inarticulate': William Widger's Dream and the Loyalties of American Revolutionary Seamen in British Prisons," (*Journal of Social History*, III [1969]) — Lemisch clearly demonstrated to historians of early America that sailors played important roles in colonial politics and society. Although it is extremely difficult to study this part of society, diligent scholars can track down the widely scattered scraps of evidence concerning sailors and working people and integrate their story into the study of the Revolutionary era. Unfortunately, Lemisch never moved beyond these essays to produce a book about Jack Tar. The author's left wing politics did him in, Rediker asserts in the foreword, and Lemisch has claimed the same in the collection of the *William and Mary Quarterly*'s best articles (Ronald Hoffman and Michael McGiffert, eds., *In Search of Early America: The William and Mary Quarterly, 1943-1993* [Williamsburg, Va., 1993], 137). The timing of Lemisch's publications suggests 'publish or perish' may also have been a factor. Although Lemisch completed his Yale doctorate in 1962, none of his influential articles appeared before the University of Chicago fired him in 1966. Whatever the reason, Lemisch's unfulfilled potential has prevented the full story of Jack Tar's role in Revolutionary America from being told. The publication of this book is a partial compensation.

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