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***Tempest: The Royal Navy and the Age of Revolutions* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2023)**

### **Chapter 1: Lawless Mobs and a Gore of Blood: Impressment, Resistance and State Violence, 1793-4**

The outbreak of war in February 1793 found John Nicol hiding from a press gang. He had just arrived in Gravesend after a long trading voyage, and was determined to make his way to London where he hoped to find work on an Indiaman. As a sailor of long experience, Nicol was a prime target for the Royal Navy, and he was terrified at the prospect of being impressed. When a naval ship came alongside his vessel, Nicol took evasive action: he and another sailor stowed themselves so deeply among bags of cotton that they were 'almost smothered', and the two men escaped detection. Alarmed at this close call, Nicol decided to travel over land, this time using disguise to evade the Navy. He changed into his shore-going clothes, and complemented them with a powdered wig, cocked hat and cane purchased from a customs-officer, with which he hoped to impersonate a clerk going about his daily business. 'I am confident my own father, had he been alive, could not have known me', he recalled. His impersonation required no little initiative: at one point he called for a pen and ink when dining at an inn to throw a suspicious local off the scent; under their watchful gaze he made himself busy 'writing any nonsense that came in my head'. Throughout his journey, the threat to Nicol's liberty was very real. 'Had [he] suspected me to be a sailor', he later wrote, 'he would have informed the press gang in one minute. The waiters at the inn would have done the same'.<sup>1</sup>

Nicol's tactics of evasion were colourful, to be sure, but his narrative of fear, avoidance and popular surveillance was typical of countless sailors operating across the British Isles in the spring of 1793. In years of peace the Royal Navy could rely on a small, skeletal workforce of only a few thousand men, but war brought mass mobilisation and

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<sup>1</sup> John Nicol, *The Life and Adventures of John Nicol, Mariner* (London: William Blackwood, 1822), pp. 157-60.

the need for tens, if not hundreds of thousands of sailors.<sup>2</sup> Most in demand were skilled sailors like Nicol, identifiable by their muscular frame, tarry hands and distinctive gait fashioned by years on a rolling vessel, who could be easily integrated into the complex systems on board a naval ship. Such men were not easily produced, however, presenting the Admiralty with a problem its military counterpart did not have. Nicol himself noted that 'could the government make perfect seamen as easily as they could soldiers, there would be no such thing as the pressing of seamen'.<sup>3</sup> The Admiralty hoped for volunteers, but there were never enough to fill the navy's ranks, and the British government instead resorted to impressment, a deeply controversial practice by which seamen were forced into the navy against their will. This began a cat-and-mouse game, played out around the world, as press gangs searched for recruits, and sailors attempted to resist. Across the eighteenth century, impressment had become a tried-and-tested means of securing maritime labour, but it became all the more intense in the tumultuous environment of the early-1790s. The press gang came to represent the worst excesses of a tyrannical and undemocratic government, while in the minds of Westminster elites, opposition to impressment aligned ominously with escalating levels of political protest.

The press gang loomed large in the 1790s, and it has cast a long shadow over the history of the navy in this era. In recent years a heated debate has emerged around naval impressment prompted by J. Ross Dancy's quantitative study, which argued that the number of sailors coerced into the navy was far lower than previous calculations had allowed.<sup>4</sup> His work built on a longer historiography of sailors' labour in the Atlantic World, and it has received a critical response from a number of scholars including Isaac Land, Christopher Magra and Nicholas Rogers, who have taken his methodology and conclusions to task.<sup>5</sup> While all of these studies have advanced our understanding of

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<sup>2</sup> For an example of the more relaxed recruitment policies followed during peacetime see Huntington Library, Hamond Collection, Box 16 (12), 'Regulations for Carrying on the Impress Service, also at Dover, Folkestone, Ramsgate, Deal and Margate, with Remarks', 11 May 1790. The document sought to find 'the most Economical' solution to competition between the naval and merchant service, and to 'prevent *by any means*' irregularity or improper conduct'. As this chapter will suggest, in wartime these concerns were notable by the absence.

<sup>3</sup> Nicol, *Life*, p. 205 ; See also Margarette Lincoln, *Representing the Royal Navy: British Sea Power, 1750-1815* (Routledge, 2002)

<sup>4</sup> J. Ross Dancy, *The Myth of the Press Gang: Volunteers, Impressment and the Naval Manpower Problem in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> For wider scholarship on sailors' labour see Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Denver Brunsman, *The Evil Necessity: British Naval Impressment in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2013). For critiques of Dancy, see Isaac Land, 'New Scholarship on the Press Gang', parts 1 and 2. See

impressment, its intersection with wider patterns of resistance and political activity in Britain has been overlooked. This chapter seeks to explore coerced naval labour in the context of Britain's 'Age of Revolution', focusing particularly on the wider context of political engagement that shaped both the activities of sailors and the British government. It will suggest that while resistance to impressment was not a new phenomenon, it was turbo-charged in the heady political environment of 1793-4, and prompted an unprecedented response from the British state. Escaping the clutches of the press gang proved a considerable challenge for sailors, as the Navy and British government took ever more intrusive and violent means to secure maritime labour.

John Nicol would himself discover that the reach of the state was difficult to avoid. Having escaped the press gang's clutches in 1793 he arrived in London and found work on board a merchant ship, the *Nottingham*, bound for China. On its return to Britain a year later, he once again began to work on a disguise in the hope of avoiding naval service. Nicol allowed his beard to grow longer and he stopped washing, hoping to make himself as unappealing as possible to the naval crews that intercepted and searched mercantile vessels returning to Britain. Briefly, it seemed that fortune was on his side. The *Nottingham* was examined by a naval recruitment party in the English Channel but Nicol was down in the hold at the time and he avoided being selected. However, his luck would not hold out. One of the sailors seized had an injured leg, and the naval officer returned to the vessel and took Nicol in his place. 'Thus were all my schemes blown into the air', he wrote, and 'I found myself in a situation I could not leave, a bondage that had been imposed upon me against my will...Remonstrance and complaint were equally vain'.<sup>6</sup> Like many thousands of others, Nicol found himself coerced into the navy, his liberty removed and his future prospects uncertain.

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<http://porttowns.port.ac.uk/press-gang-1/> and <http://porttowns.port.ac.uk/press-gang2/>. ;Christopher P. Magra, *Poseidon's Curse: Naval Impressment and Atlantic Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Nicholas Rogers, 'British impressment and its discontents', *The International Journal of Maritime History*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2018), pp. 52-73. This follows his earlier work: Nicholas Rogers, *The Press Gang: Naval Impressment and its opponents in Georgian Britain* (London: Continuum, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Nicol, *Life and Adventures*, 171-2

War brought an urgent need for maritime labour. In an ideal world, the Royal Navy would be manned solely by enthusiastic volunteers determined to serve their country, and judging by the propaganda of the time, there was every expectation that such men existed. Recruitment posters appealed to 'Royal Tars of Old England' and called on all those who 'love your country' to repair to their local recruiting officer.<sup>7</sup> Local rendezvous points, usually inns or taverns, acted as recruitment centres where dedicated Regulating Captains flew flags, dispensed alcohol and displayed literature that was designed to appeal to the patriotic and xenophobic instincts of potential volunteers. One such appeal called on 'Englishmen willing to defend their country', and created an alarmist picture of a French enemy who would imminently 'invade Old England', to make 'whores of our wives and daughters' and to 'rob us of our property'.<sup>8</sup> Britain was also awash with loyalist ballads, written and performed in the hope of encouraging further recruits. The song *The British Tars*, for instance, advocated that 'true hearts of oak' will 'put to sea again' and offered an example for all to follow:

When War at first assail'd us,  
I quickly left my trade,  
Our Country was in danger,  
I flew to lend my aid...<sup>9</sup>

The balladeer Charles Dibdin was paid a pension by the British government to produce patriotic ballads that celebrated the simple loyalty and manly courage of the British sailor, and he would go on to produce over one hundred such songs in the course of the French Wars.<sup>10</sup>

There is evidence that this propaganda – and culture more generally – did inspire some hearts and minds. John Nicol had been encouraged to go to sea in the first place having read *Robinson Crusoe* 'many times over', though given the nature of

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<sup>7</sup> National Maritime Museum (NMM), PBB7084, Naval Recruitment poster, c. 1797.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Lloyd, *The British Seaman 1200-1860: A Social Survey* (Cranbury NJ: Associated University Presses, 1968), p. 121.

<sup>9</sup> Cambridge University Library, Madden collection, 8,833, *British Tars* (J. Pitts, London).

<sup>10</sup> Anon, *Songs, Naval and National, of the Late Charles Dibdin; With a memoir and Addenda. Collected and arranged by Thomas Dibdin, with Characteristic sketches by George Cruickshank* (London: John Murray, 1841). See also James Davey, 'Singing for the Nation: balladry, naval recruitment, and the language of patriotism in eighteenth-century Britain', *Mariner's Mirror*, Vol. 103, No. 1 (2017), pp. 43-66; Isaac Land, *War, Nationalism and the British Sailor, 1750-1850* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 5.

Crusoe's trials there is some question about whether he got beyond the first chapters.<sup>11</sup> Another sailor, John Gibbs was so determined to join the Navy that he lied on his recruitment form, stating that he was 'entirely free from all Engagements' and that he 'voluntarily enlisted myself to serve His Majesty's King George'.<sup>12</sup> Enlistment activities went hand-in-hand with loyalist celebrations: recruitment parties were prominent during an effigy-burning of Thomas Paine in Plymouth in early December 1792 that was attended by thousands. Newspapers, particularly those of a pro-government bent, published numerous stories that described volunteers marching happily to recruiting stations with flags flying and drums beating.<sup>13</sup> In reality, more pragmatic decision-making probably lay behind volunteering. Most recruitment literature also advertised the pecuniary rewards available, and it seems likely that these were more important motivators. Edward McGuire, for instance, came to England in the early 1790s as a labourer, but finding 'the work being slack & times very dear', he volunteered for the Navy. Financial considerations also prompted the Jamaican sailor Thomas Ottery to join, to help pay a debt of £40.<sup>14</sup> Sailors could also expect to receive free medical care, and well-manned naval ships were less arduous workplaces than their mercantile equivalents. In this sense, the naval labour market was much like any other, with a complex mix of social and pecuniary incentives offered in exchange for work.

The problem for the Navy was that patriotism and a steady wage only went so far. An Able Seaman (someone with more than two years' experience at sea) earned 24 shillings a month, while an Ordinary Seaman (someone with more than one years' experience) earned 19 shillings. A raw 'Landsman' was paid a mere 18 shillings. These wages were not entirely representative, for naval sailors were given free food and shelter as part of their service, and prize money allowed fortunate sailors to supplement their wages.<sup>15</sup> Even taking this into account, however, their salaries placed them

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<sup>11</sup> Nicol, *Life and Adventures*, p. 4

<sup>12</sup> When his prior employer complained the Admiralty discharged him and forced him to pay costs. The National Archives, ADM 1/3683, Oath of John Gibbs, 5 July 1793

<sup>13</sup> *Trewman's Exeter Flying Post*, 13 and 27 December 1792; Rogers, 'British Impressment', p. 70, referencing *Sun*, 5 January 1793; *True Briton*, 23 February 1793; *Whitehall Evening Post*, 7–9 March 1793.

<sup>14</sup> TNA, ADM 1/5336, court martial of John Johnston, Edward McGuire and John McGuire of the *Castor*, 2 May 1796; NMM, AML/K/7, Letter of Attorney from Thomas Ottery, 20 October 1797.

<sup>15</sup> That said, food and shelter mattered little if a sailor had a family on land that needed support, and agricultural workers – for example farm servants – could also receive food and lodgings as perquisites. On average sailors stood to benefit from prize money, in reality this was concentrated among a lucky few. On battleships, the captain's share of prize money was about 550 times that received by a seaman, and preliminary research by Dan Benjamin suggests that while on average, captains could expect to earn more from prize money than they could from monthly wages (even more so if they commanded a frigate),

squarely among Britain's 'lower sorts', on a par with agricultural labourers who in the early 1790s could expect to earn around 26-27 shillings per month, and below the estimated average male wage of between 39-45 shillings per month.<sup>16</sup> What is more, the Navy could not compete with rival professions, in particular commercial shipping, where skilled sailors could earn as much as 60-70 shillings per month.<sup>17</sup> Rather than increasing pay, the Navy's solution was to offer one-off enlistment bounties of £5, £2 and 10 shillings, and £1 and 10s for able, ordinary and landsmen respectively. Only reluctantly did the government seek to intervene further in the labour market for seamen directly in the labour market, and it was not until March 1795 when manning concerns forced their hand. The 'Quota Acts' were intended as a limited form of conscription in which maritime counties were instructed to provide a set number of trained seamen. They too resorted to bounties to encourage men to come forward, and the best estimate is that the around 31,000 seamen were recruited in this way.<sup>18</sup>

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for the rest of the officers and men, prize money was a supplement, not a living. Daniel K. Benjamin, 'Golden Harvest: The British Naval Prize System, 1793-1815'. Clemson University and PERC (unpublished), 2009. I am grateful to Professor Benjamin for sharing his work.

<sup>16</sup> Calculations of cash and real wages are complex and disputed. These comparisons are taken from averages in Gregory Clark, 'What were the British Earnings and Prices Then (New Series)', *MeasuringWorth*, 2021, which are in turn based on the following works: Gregory Clark, 'Farm wages and living standards in the Industrial Revolution: England, 1670-1869', *Economic History Review*, vol. 54, No. 3 (August, 2001), pp. 477-505; Charles H Feinstein, 'Pessimism Perpetuated: Real Wages and the Standard of Living in Britain During and After the Industrial Revolution', *Journal of Economic History*, 58, No. 3 (Sep 1998), pp. 625-658; Charles H. Feinstein, 'Wage-Earnings in Great Britain during the Industrial Revolution', in Iain Begg and S. G. B. Henry, *Applied Economics and Public Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); A.L. Bowley, 'The Statistics of Wages in the United Kingdom during the last Hundred Years. Part I. Agricultural Wages', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, Vol. 61 (1898), pp. 702-722. It is worth adding that these series and averages are indicative and in recent years, economic historians have suggested that wages paid to London workers may have been different to those previously estimated: see Judy Z. Stephenson, '"Real" wages? Contractors, workers, and pay in London building trades, 1650-1800', *Economic History Review*, Vol. 71, 1 (2018), pp. 106-32; J. Hatcher, 'Seven Centuries of Unreal Wages', in J. Hatcher, J.Z. Stephenson, eds., *Seven Centuries of Unreal Wages* (Palgrave, 2018), pp. 15-69. The data on number of days worked in a year comes from Jane Humphries and Jacob Wiesdorf, 'Unreal Wages? Real Income and Economic Growth in England, 1260-1850', *The Economic Journal*, Vol. 129 (2019), pp. 2867-2887, which suggests that by the end of the eighteenth century the number of days worked per year was over 300 (data at p.2880). I have used 300 days as an infinitive figure, though again it is worth mentioning that employment was irregular and much more seasonal than current estimates of income infer. See Judy Z. Stephenson, 'Working days in a London construction team in the eighteenth century: evidence from St Paul's Cathedral', *Economic History Review*, Vol. 32, 2 (2020), pp. 409-30.

<sup>17</sup> Ralph Davis, *The Rise of the English Shipping Industry in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012, New edn), pp. 145, 151-2. William Atkinson boasted to his mother that he was earning £2 per month (40 shillings) working on a slave ship, as well as a share of the profits. NMM, AGC/A/6, William Atkinson to his mother, 4 July 1798; The Trans Atlantic Slave Trade Database (<http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search/faces>), quoted in Watt and Hawkins, *Letters of Seamen*, p. 146

<sup>18</sup> Roger Knight, *Britain Against Napoleon: The Organization of Victory* (London: Allen Lane, 2013), p.77; Christopher Oprey, 'Schemes for the Reform of naval recruitment 1793-1815' (unpublished MA thesis,

Further bounties were provided by local associations, keen to play their part in the war effort. This was a truly national endeavour, with successful subscriptions held at Carnarvon, Great Yarmouth, Ashburton, Wrexham, and the Isle of Wight, to name but a few locations.<sup>19</sup> In each place, lists of subscribers were published in local newspapers, allowing the middling classes to demonstrate their patriotic zeal in the most public way possible. *The True Briton* made particular mention of Manchester, for while there was ‘the greatest possibility of that Town being the first to suffer by a War’, due to its reliance on foreign trade, ‘such is the spirit of patriotism that pervades the Country...that a large sum was very soon subscribed there, for the purpose of raising men for His Majesty’s Service’. Eleven ‘gentlemen’ subscribed 100 Guineas each to raise a regiment of Royal Marines, and within the week 1,100 people had come forward to serve.<sup>20</sup> Later in the war – and somewhat less altruistically – naval recruitment also provided a means for local authorities to rid themselves of ‘undesirable’ people. A new statute introduced in 1795 allowed them to raise ‘able bodied and idle persons as shall be found within the said counties to serve in His Majesty’s Navy’: in April 1795, 30 such people were presented to the Navy at Newgate, and a further 42 at Dublin in November.<sup>21</sup> In Liverpool, the regulating officer Captain Worth admitted that one sailor, George Wood, had been forcibly-entered into the navy because he was a ‘common disturber of the peace’.<sup>22</sup>

Who were the men who came forward for the navy? A recruitment register for sailors recruited in the maritime country of Dorset offers a fascinating window into the backgrounds and appearance of the men that volunteered. It reveals that these were overwhelmingly young men between the ages of 17 and 22, with a few older hands in their late thirties and early forties; the median age of those coming forward from

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University of Liverpool, 1961), quoted in N.A.M. Rodger, N.A.M. Rodger, ‘Mutiny or subversion? Spithead and the Nore’, in T. Bartlett, D. Dickson, D. Keogh and K. Whelan, eds. *1798: A Bicentenary Perspective* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), p. 560

<sup>19</sup> For Carnarvon see the *Chester Chronicle*, 14 June 1793, where 3 guineas were collected for every Able Seaman, 2 Guineas for every Ordinary Seaman and 1 Guinea for all others. For Great Yarmouth see the *Norfolk Chronicle*, 2 March 1793, which allowed 2, 1.5 and 1 Guineas for the same, as did Ashburton, the full appeal of which can be found in TNA, HO 42/24, fo. 526. For Wrexham, which raised 40 shillings for every sailor that volunteered, and Newcastle, the raised a total sum of £235, see *The True Briton*, 16 February 1793. At the Isle of Wight, the Governor Thomas Orde was recorded as donating £50 alone, see *The True Briton*, 20 February 1793.

<sup>20</sup> *True Briton*, 23 February 1793; *True Briton*, 28 February, 1793.

<sup>21</sup> Brian Lavery, *Nelson’s Navy; The Ships, Men and Organization* (London: Conway, rev. edn, 2013), p. 125

<sup>22</sup> Roy Adkins and Lesley Adkins, *Jack Tar: The Men Who Made Nelson’s Navy* (London: Little, Brown, 2008), p. 59

Bridport, for instance, was 21. For the most part, they came from Dorset or neighbouring Somerset and Wiltshire, their options limited by the economic dislocations of the era. Half of the men recruited in Sturminster and Sherbourne were labourers struggling to find work amid the agricultural depression of 1795. This was not limited to the labouring classes, however, and among the other recruits we find a mason, sawyer, weaver and thatcher, alongside two cordwainers; skilled workers adrift amid a downturn. In the small town of Wareham, five of the 12 men who came forward were stonemasons, suggesting a quite specific regional decline. Men that had some experience of the maritime world were able to leverage their skills for higher bounty payments. A few described themselves as 'mariners', such as Joseph Lucas, who received £9 and 9 shillings, a vast sum. In some cases, labourers also pointed out that they had previously 'used the sea for some years' in order to command higher bounties.<sup>23</sup>

The enrolling officers scribbled brief details of each volunteer's appearance, giving us brief flashes of humanity. Some men had tattoos, such as Thomas Bates, who had depictions of Adam and Eve on his left arm. Joshua Cox had foul anchors engraved into his skin while Hillery Viell had a crucifix, suggesting that he was Catholic. Both of these men also marked their bodies with the initials of loved ones: Cox had the letters 'J.C.' cut across his hand, while Viell marked his arm with the letters 'F.N'. and 'R.F'. Sailors' physical appearance was also noted, giving us glimpses of what these recruits looked like. The majority were described as being 'fair' or 'ruddy', but Adam Davey, William Mitford and Joseph Jones were described as having a 'Dark Complexion', suggesting that they may have been black. We also learn of how many had been ravaged by disease. Of the 32 men who volunteered from Dorchester, five men – George Strickland, John Satchell, Thomas Summers, Christopher Buttriss, and John Keechland – were recorded as having been 'pitted with the small pox'. These are fragmentary details, and we are left attempting to reconstruct lives based on very little. Take, for example, the 36-year old James Burk, who is recorded as having lost the tips of two fingers on his left hand, and whose home parish was Cork in Ireland. We know nothing else about him, and quite why he found himself in Dorset in 1795 is a mystery. Still, there was something about the Navy – whether the lure of a steady wages, a generous bounty (he

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<sup>23</sup> Dorset History Centre, 10H/109, 'Men Raised for the Navy', 1795-1798



received £5 12 shillings) or other inducements – that encouraged him to come forward as a volunteer.<sup>24</sup>

The simple truth, however, was that the Navy could not rely on market forces to man its ships. As a result, from the outset of war, the Admiralty authorised widespread impressment in an urgent effort to find skilled labour. This was organised by the Impress Service which by 1795 consisted of 32 Regulating Captains overseeing 85 press gangs and a total of 754 men, stationed across Britain and Ireland. Their instructions gave them incredible license to find men wherever they could, with specific orders to procure volunteers and impress such ‘Seafaring men...as will not enter voluntarily’.<sup>25</sup> Impressment itself happened in two ways. Firstly, press gangs operated in maritime communities and seaports where they targeted mariners waiting for their next voyage. The second – and as the war went on the most common – means of impressment was to take sailors directly from merchant ships.<sup>26</sup> At the start of a war an embargo was placed on trade which allowed the Navy to take sailors from mercantile vessels, while for the remainder of the conflict commercial ships were searched and sailors forcibly removed. There was a balance to be struck here, and politicians tried to ensure that the mercantile trade on which Britain also relied was not decimated by shortages of labour.<sup>27</sup> Some officers took this consideration seriously: Admiral Richard Howe was desperate for trained seamen in the early months of the war, but insisted on leaving at least 40 sailors on returning Indiamen to ensure they got back to port safely.<sup>28</sup> However, there were others who cared little about the consequences of removing large numbers of men from trading vessels. The merchant master Samuel Kelly described a near-permanent conflict as naval officers attempted to take men from his ships. At one point his vessel avoided the port of Liverpool altogether when he had heard that extensive impressment operations were underway there.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Dorset History Centre, 10H/109, ‘Men Raised for the Navy’, 1795-1798. On categories of race in the eighteenth century see Roxann Wheeler, *The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000).

<sup>25</sup> NMM PLT/1/2, Impressment orders for John Platt of HMS Alligator, Thomas Affleck Esq. Commander; Lavery, *Nelson’s Navy*, p. 120

<sup>26</sup> Brunsman, *Evil Necessity*, p. 10

<sup>27</sup> Michael Duffy, *Parameters of British Naval Power* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1992), p. 7; Brunsman, *Evil Necessity*, pp. 89-90

<sup>28</sup> HL, HO 154, Howe to Curtis, 11 June 1793

<sup>29</sup> Crosbie Garstin, ed. *Samuel Kelly: An Eighteenth Century Seaman whose days have been few and evil, to which is added remarks etc. on places he visited during his pilgrimage in this wilderness* (London: Jonathan Cape), pp. 194-5. See also the account of William Henry Dillon, who records working with captains who both followed the rules and those who interpreted them less precisely: Michael Lewis, ed, *A Narrative of*

There were clear rules about who could be impressed. Only men aged between 18 and 55 who 'used the sea' could be taken, though this was a subjective term at best. The navy was also allowed to take those men who worked 'in vessels and Boats upon rivers', a capacious definition that included a range of occupations, not just deep-sea sailors. Numerous groups – including apprentices, masters and first mates of merchant ships, pilots, government officials, lightermen, foreigners, and those working in the Greenland fisheries and east coast coal trade – were given specific protections for fear of upsetting the rhythm of trades crucial to the British economy. In each case, sailors were presented with a document that explicitly banned them from being impressed.<sup>30</sup> The administration of protections took up a lot of government time, and some regulating captains took the regulations seriously.<sup>31</sup> Jaheel Brenton complained in June 1794 that he had been forced to discharge many recruits as they were 'old & inferior' or 'young apprentices', while in Hampshire, William Yeo bewailed that fishermen were not liable to be taken.<sup>32</sup> The rules could be bent, however. At times of great labour shortage, the government could declare a 'hot press', which allowed regulating captains to waive certain restrictions. Furthermore, naval officers were given incredible license to distrust protections, and instructed that if they had reason to suspect fraud, they could 'immediately to cause the parties to be impressed'.<sup>33</sup> A number of officers simply ignored the rules altogether. Samuel Kelly remembered that two Swedish sailors signed to his ship were impressed, and that the regulating captain simply ignored his appeals. The American sailor Prince Edward testified during a court martial that he had showed

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*My Professional Adventures (1790-1839)* By William Henry Dillon (London: Navy Records Society, 1953), Vol. I, pp. 368, 375.

<sup>30</sup> NMM, PLT/1/2, Impressment orders for John Platt of HMS Alligator, Thomas Affleck Esq. Commander. See also Lavery, *Nelson's Navy*, pp. 118-19; Brunsman, *Evil Necessity*, pp. 6-7, 65-66. The exemption certificate for Richard Dunn stated 'we have received testimony, that the Bearer Richard Dunn has bound himself Apprentice to Serve at Sea, by indenture dated the 28<sup>th</sup> June 1796 and that he never used the Sea before that time; and he being entitled to a Protection, in pursuance of the Said Act of Parliament, to free and exempt him being impressed for the space of Three Years from the aforementioned date of his indenture; We do hereby require and direct all Commanders of His Majesty's Ships, Press-masters, and others whom it doth or may concern, not to impress him into His Majesty's service during the said space of Three Years.' NMM, ADL/J/20, Impressment exemption certificate for Richard Dunn

<sup>31</sup> In the UK National Archives there are extensive volumes listing protections given to thousands of men – the majority of whom were apprentices of one form or another – who were given exemption from naval service. See ADM 7/398, Register of protections from being pressed. Apprentices, Foreigners and others, 1795-1801. An estimate based on 232 pages and an average of 20 entries per page suggests that around 4,640 sailors were given exemption from impressment in this period.

<sup>32</sup> See TNA, ADM 1/1509, Jaheel Brenton to John Ibetson, Esq., 19 June 1794; TNA, ADM 1/2743, William Yeo to Philip Stephens, 16 March 1794

<sup>33</sup> NMM, PLT/1/2, 'Impressment orders for John Platt'.

his protection to the press gang officer who 'tore it before my face' and subsequently impressed him.<sup>34</sup>

One of the most difficult tasks for the historian is to discover exactly how many of those recruited in this period were impressed, and attempts to construct a reliable figure are riven with methodological issues. A recent quantitative study of naval muster books across the 1793-1801 period concluded that only 16 per cent of sailors overall were impressed, and that the great majority of the remainder were volunteers.<sup>35</sup> However, there are numerous problems with this analysis, not least the definition of 'volunteer'. Even if a sailor was recorded as a volunteer, the reality was often somewhat different. When press gangs went aboard a merchant ship they asked first for volunteers and offered a generous bounty to those who came forward. They also announced that if the sailors on board 'refuse to go voluntarily, they will be excluded from those advantages', and likely pressed anyway.<sup>36</sup> These demands were often backed up with the threat of violence. When Lieutenant Dillon went on board a merchant ship, he made sure his men's muskets were visible and ordered that the guns of his schooner be loaded and readied to fire. Only then would he demand that 'volunteers' came forward: 'I shall order my men in the schooner to fire into you', he would shout, 'here I am, and will not quit you until I have at least 10 or 12 seamen out of this vessel'.<sup>37</sup> With escape unlikely and recruitment near-inevitable, many people took the money and were logged as volunteers, albeit in name only.

The government was well aware of the practice, and its moral ambiguity. In 1794 two apprentice master mariners, Thomas Allan and Alexander Fairweather, were impressed on *Curlew* but later voluntarily entered the service in order to receive the bounty. When they later appealed, the Admiralty solicitor was forced to admit that 'These Men are pressed' and that in 'a state of duress & Imprisonment under the Command of the Captain', their subsequent acts were void. He noted that the only option they had was 'entering to serve as Volunteers and [continuing] to serve as prest men', and that 'a Jury would never condone their continuing under such circumstances

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<sup>34</sup> Garstin, ed. *Samuel Kelly*, p. 251; TNA, ADM 1/5335, court martial of Prince Edward (alias Jackson) and Abraham Ramsden (alias Lennox) of the Ann tender, 2 April 1796.

<sup>35</sup> Dancy, *Myth of the Press Gang*, pp. 38-39

<sup>36</sup> NMM, PLT/1/2, 'Impressment orders for John Platt'. For a detailed critique of Dancy's arguments and methodology see Nicholas Rogers, 'British Impressment and its discontents', *The International Journal of Maritime History*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2018), pp. 67-68.

<sup>37</sup> Dillon, *My Professional Adventures*, Vol. I, pp. 391-2

as a Voluntary Act'.<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless, the Admiralty encouraged a fluid understanding of what a 'volunteer' was, and it seems that officers acted accordingly. In September 1793, Captain William Carthew noted that he had received 19 seamen who had come to him as pressed men, but who were 'desirous of becoming Volunteers'. He thought they were 'worthy of such indulgence' and that they ought to get the bounty as well 'for the purpose of more effectually attaching [sic] them to the Service'.<sup>39</sup> One naval midshipman happily admitted to a court martial that he allowed a sailor to take the bounty when it became clear to them that they were 'obliged to go'.<sup>40</sup> The smuggler John Rattenbury was caught by press gang, and with escape impossible and resigned to his fate he volunteered, 'if that can be called a voluntary act, which is the effect of necessity, not of inclination'.<sup>41</sup> While muster books report any number of 'volunteers', this is a misleading description of their status.

We will therefore probably never know exactly how many people were pressed, but even the most conservative estimate suggests that tens of thousands of men were forced into the navy against their will during the 1790s.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, the focus on calculating a specific number diverts our focus from the significant emotional trauma that impressment caused. Countless testimonies make clear that it was a brutal and damaging act. William Richardson recorded how 'Some of the poor fellows shed tears on being pressed after so long a voyage and so near home, while another later recalled his fellow sailors 'pitiable plight' in the hours after being impressed.<sup>43</sup> The longer-term psychological impact was no less severe. The naval physician Thomas Trotter observed coerced sailors succumbing to despondency, and wrote extensively about how

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<sup>38</sup> TNA, ADM 7/302, Case 22, 24 September 1795. The solicitor made it clear that 'the practice of pressing apprentices with the hope of getting them afterwards to enlist, ought to be discontinued. There is no doubt, that the pressing of them in the first instance is directly in opposition to the Statute and there, when this illegal hold has been obtained of them, to tempt them by the offer of a bounty to desert their masters, can hardly be considered as creditable to the service'

<sup>39</sup> TNA, ADM 1/1618, report of William Carthew, 30 September 1793; Nicholas Rogers, 'British Impressment and its discontents', *The International Journal of Maritime History*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2018), p. 70

<sup>40</sup> TNA, ADM 1/5335, Court Martial of Jacob Berry of the *Edgar*, 29 March 1796.

<sup>41</sup> John Rattenbury, *Memoirs of a Smuggler, compiled from his diary and journal* (Sidmouth: J. Harvey, 1837), p. 15

<sup>42</sup> Dancy, *Myth of the Press Gang*, pp. 38-39

<sup>43</sup> Spencer Childers, ed. *A Mariner of England: An Account of the Career of William Richardson From Cabin Boy in the Merchant Service to Warrant Officer in the Royal Navy [1780 to 1819] As Told By Himself* (London: John Murray, 1908), pp. 65-6, 96-7; William Robinson, *Nautical Economy; Or, Forecastle Recollections of Events during the Last War. Dedicated to the Brave Tars of Old England, By a Sailor, Politely Called by the Officers of the Navy, Jack Nasty-Face* (London: William Robinson, 1836, repr. London 1973), pp. 2-3.

impressment created a 'mind diseased' with hatred. In his view, impressment was 'a most fatal and impolitic practice... the cause of more destruction to the health and lives of our seamen, than all other causes put together'.<sup>44</sup> Even years after sailors had returned home, the traumatic impact of impressment remained. Following his discharge from the navy at the end of the war, John Nicol spent the early 1800s paranoid that the press gang would come for him again. He gave up his trade, left Edinburgh with his wife and retired to the country, but even there he could not shake the fear. 'I dared not to sleep in my own house, as I had more than one call from the gang'.<sup>45</sup>

Indeed, for every man impressed there were countless others affected. Parents, partners and children often had no idea where their sons, husbands and fathers were stationed, or even if they were dead or alive.<sup>46</sup> With limited means of communication, the emotional stress for sailors and their loved ones could be devastating. In October 1793, Frederick Hoffman helped impress sailors returning from the West Indies and witnessed their turmoil first-hand:

They had been absent nearly eighteen months from their wives and families, and were fondly looking forward to a meeting with those for whom they lived and toiled, but, alas! they were doomed to return to that foreign climate they had a few months before left, and from whence it was impossible to know when they would come back.<sup>47</sup>

John Marlow, a seaman of the *Bellerophon*, was 'pressed into the service' leaving his wife and small family 'without being able from Bounty or any thing else to give them the smallest assistance'.<sup>48</sup> Mary Quick's coach-maker husband, Michael, had never worked on water but was impressed in April 1791. She was to fend for herself, pregnant and with two small children, without any paternal support or indeed any idea of when he would return: it would soon, she predicted, 'bring her and them to ruin'.<sup>49</sup> On a larger scale, these absences re-shaped local economies and networks of philanthropy.

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<sup>44</sup> Thomas Trotter, *A Practicable Plan for Manning the Royal Navy and Preserving our Maritime Ascendancy, without Impressment* (Newcastle: Longman, 1819), p. 40; Thomas Trotter, *Medicina Nautica: An Essay on the Diseases of Seamen* (London, 1797), p. 44

<sup>45</sup> Nicol, *Life and Adventures*, pp. 200-1

<sup>46</sup> Brunsman, *Evil Necessity*, p. 153

<sup>47</sup> A. Beckford Bevan and H. B. Wolryche-Whitmore, eds. *A Sailor of King George: The Journals of Captain Frederick Hoffman, RN, 1793-1814* (London: John Murray, 1901), p. 11

<sup>48</sup> TNA, ADM 1/5331, Court martial of John Marlowe of *Bellerophon*, 19 February 1794.

<sup>49</sup> TNA, ADM 1/5119/16, Petition of Mary Quick, 23 April 1791.

Richardson returned to his native South Shields towards the end of the war and found it far from 'that merry place we had hitherto known...every one looked gloomy and sad on account of nearly all the young men being pressed and taken away'.<sup>50</sup> On Tyneside poor relief tripled in the early 1790s to accommodate the families of seamen taken up by the press.<sup>51</sup>

Even those who volunteered for the Navy quickly found themselves trapped. William Robinson, a volunteer, recalled how his ideas about naval life did not survive long on the receiving ship:

...it was for the first time I began to repent of the rash step I had taken, but it was of no avail, submission to the events of fate was my only alternative, murmuring or remonstrating, I soon found, would be folly.<sup>52</sup>

Once on board, there was little prospect of leaving the service until the end of the war. There were brutal punishments designed to intimidate potential deserters – the standard penalty was a flogging – and repeat offenders could be punished even more severely. Such punishments meant that even a sailor that volunteered found he could not later change his mind, and the many sailors that did come forward of their own volition found it near-impossible to leave the service until the Royal Navy allowed it. There were no maximum terms of service, and Navy proved expert at holding onto men once it had got hold of them. Its policy of 'turning over' men allowed it to take sailors from a ship at the end of its voyage and discharge them into another naval vessel preparing to go to sea. Through such means, even a volunteer sailor could find themselves imprisoned in the navy for the entirety of a conflict, and by the end of the 1790s, 'turned over' men represented the largest proportion of manpower onboard British warships. William Richardson was one such victim of the navy's strong-arming, turned over into *Prompte* after two years away at sea 'without a moment's liberty on shore', along with 36 others.<sup>53</sup> Even for volunteers, then, naval service could become a form of coerced labour, and impressment was often just the first in a long series of injustices that withdrew an sailor's agency and freedom.

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<sup>50</sup> Childers, ed. *A Mariner of England*, p. 121

<sup>51</sup> Rogers, *Press Gang*, 118; See also Hay and Rodgers, *Eighteenth Century English Society*, p. 158

<sup>52</sup> William Robinson, *Nautical Economy*, p. 1

<sup>53</sup> For the data on number of turned over men see Dancy, *Myth of the Press Gang*, p. 78. For the Richardson quote see Childers, ed. *Mariner of England*, p. 111

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Impressment was a fundamental violation of a sailor's liberty, and they were well aware that an injustice had been done to them. Naval service removed any control over their immediate future, and compelled them to earn lower wages while suffering long-term separation from family.<sup>54</sup> Some historians have attempted to offer a more consensual take on impressment, suggesting that sailors 'seem very often to have regarded it as an incident of their profession, soon to be got over', or that they acclimatised to naval service after about a year.<sup>55</sup> Certainly, sailors could be pragmatic about their immediate prospects, and the threat of severe discipline no doubt concentrated many minds. For every reference to acquiescence, though, there are others that offer critique. William Richardson recalled that he had initially resigned stoically to his fate on being impressed: 'I was young', he said, and as he 'had the world before me', did not 'fret much'.<sup>56</sup> Elsewhere though we find him despondent at his 'hard fate', or even offering dissenting utterances: 'Here was encouragement for seamen to fight for their king and country!', he declared after he was turned over in 1794.<sup>57</sup> William Spavens offered bitter realism, noting impressment was 'a hardship which nothing but absolute necessity can reconcile to our boasted freedom'.<sup>58</sup> As we saw above, John Nicol had no compunction in referring to his impressment as a form of bondage, a very deliberate reference to chattel slavery.<sup>59</sup>

Sailors understood the value of their work and how this fitted into wider patterns of forced labour in the Atlantic world. In the mid-1790s the Admiralty was bombarded with petitions from naval sailors appealing for higher pay and better conditions, in which they frequently compared their plight to enslaved Africans. Sailors on board the British frigate *Shannon* protested that their treatment was 'more than the Spirits and Harts of true English Man can Cleaverly [Cleverly] Bear for...we Are Bound

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<sup>54</sup> Brunzman, *Evil Necessity*, pp. 143-44

<sup>55</sup> See in Rodger, *Command of the Ocean*, pp. 397, 492; Dancy, *Myth of the Press Gang*, pp. 152-3; and Brunzman, *Evil Necessity*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>56</sup> Childers, ed., *A Mariner of England*, p. 67

<sup>57</sup> Childers, ed., *Mariner of England*, pp. 96-7

<sup>58</sup> Spavens, *Seaman's Narrative*, p. 36

<sup>59</sup> Nicol, *Life and Adventures*, pp. 171-2

free men and we are Determined not to be Slaves'.<sup>60</sup> Another petition complained that the Admiralty had:

...the Smallest idea of the Slavery under which we have for many years  
Laboured...[We] Labour under every Disagreement and affliction which African  
Slaves cannot endure...Most of us in the Fleet, who have been Prisoners ever since the  
war Commenc'd...Have we not a Right to Complain?<sup>61</sup>

The analogy to chattel slavery was contrived: sailors received wages, and they would likely be released from their 'bondage' at the end of the war. In this sense, the comparison was a rhetorical device, used by protesting workers across the Atlantic World to advertise poor working conditions and draw attention to their plight. However, these petitions reveal sailors' assertion of their 'freedom', a critique of their coercion and imprisonment, and spoke of a growing acknowledgement of their rights.

These concerns were not limited to sailors, and across British culture impressment was a deeply controversial issue; indeed, until the late eighteenth century, it inspired more widespread opposition than slavery. Impressment violated the 39<sup>th</sup> chapter of Magna Carta, which stated that 'No man shall be taken, imprisoned...or in any way destroyed...except by the lawful judgement of his peers and by the law of the land'. However, the constitutionality of impressment was never challenged, and even when individual cases came up in court, judges ruled that any legal issues were overridden by national necessity. Away from the courtroom, coerced naval labour sat uneasily in a nation that lauded itself for a love of liberty, and whose unofficial national anthem, 'Rule Britannia', declared proudly that 'Britons will never be slaves'.<sup>62</sup> It followed that numerous publications repudiated impressment, most famously James Oglethorpe's *Sailors Advocate*, published repeatedly across the eighteenth century, which denounced it as a fundamental violation of English freedom.<sup>63</sup> Caricaturists like James Gillray produced bitter swipes at the practice, while Samuel Colling's 1790 print *Manning the*

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<sup>60</sup> TNA 1/5125, Petition from HMS *Shannon*, 16 June 1796

<sup>61</sup> TNA 1/5125, declaration of sailors at the Nore, June 1797

<sup>62</sup> Brunnsman, *Evil Necessity*, pp. 35, 43-44; Nicholas Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 85-121; See Land, *War, Nationalism and the British Sailor*, p. 106.

<sup>63</sup> James Oglethorpe, *Sailors Advocate* (London, 1728), 4-5 and 10-11; Nicholas Rogers, 'British Impressment and its discontents', *The International Journal of Maritime History*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2018), pp. 56.



Navy depicted a press gang armed to the teeth attacking a would-be sailor.<sup>64</sup> Ballads, particularly from the 1780s onwards, paid particular attention to impressment. *The Press'd Sailor's Lamentation*, for example, tells the tale of an Irish farmer hauled away by a press gang, while *True Blue* attacked the incongruence of impressment in a country proclaiming to be a land of liberty. It argued that 'to be prest is not due to a Briton/ Whose bosom sweet liberty warms'. Press gang songs were particularly prevalent in the North East, the most famous of which was 'Here's the Tender Coming', in which the sailor's duties to his family falls foul of a press gang.<sup>65</sup>

Despite this hostility to the practice, it is notable how infrequently impressment became a Parliamentary issue. Opposition Whigs attempted to abolish practice in 1787, with Richard Brinsley Sheridan introducing bill to that effect, but it was defeated by the Tory majority. There were also numerous attempts to find new solutions to the problem of naval manning, but none was deemed practical without substantially raising naval wages and re-ordering the British economy, a step no government was willing to take.<sup>66</sup> Part of the explanation of this is that for every critical statement, there were others who saw impressment as a 'necessary evil', and even loyalist statements that defended or even sympathised with press gangs. *The Sun* newspaper noted approvingly in 1794 that a lieutenant at Harwich had 'secured many useful Seamen for the supply of His Majesty's Navy', while another reported the 'unlucky circumstance' of a midshipman belonging to the press gang in Bristol being wounded, and hoped that 'the greatest possible care' would be taken to prevent other disturbances.<sup>67</sup> A number of patriotic plays offering a very different take on the practices. *Love and Honour; or Britannia in Full Glory at Spithead*, performed to large audiences in Covent Garden in 1794, featured a press-gang that behaved responsibly and even altruistically, sympathetic to the circumstances of

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<sup>64</sup> Samuel Collings, *Manning the Navy* (London: Bentley and Company, 1790)

<sup>65</sup> Sir Frederic Madden Collection, University of Cambridge (hereafter 'Madden'), Vol. 5, No. 1561, *The Press'd Sailor's lamentation: A New Song*; No. 1841, *True Blue, Or, the Press Gang*; Oscar Cox Jensen, *Napoleon and British Song, 1797-1822* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 94.

<sup>66</sup> See for example the 1791 pamphlet by Rev. James Cochrane, *Thoughts Concerning the Proper Constitutional Principles of Manning & Recruiting the British Navy and Army* (York: Wilson, Spence, and Mawman, 1791). Cochrane suggested an embargo on all trade until the naval ships were filled to 'encourage' merchant ships to volunteer men, but ignored the disastrous economic impact this would have, let alone the agency of the sailors themselves. See also the 1786 pamphlet John Mackenzie, *Impress of Seamen: Considerations on its legality, policy and operation. Applicable to the motion intended to be made in the House of Commons on Friday, 12 May, 1786 by William Pulteney, Esq.* (London: J. Debrett and J. French, 1786), quoted in full in J. S Bromley, ed. *The Manning of the Royal Navy: Selected Public Pamphlets 1693-1873* (London: Navy Records Society, 1974), pp. 124-40.

<sup>67</sup> *Sun*, 16 November 1793; *The World*, 2 October 1793

the individuals it met, and selective in terms of the men it recruits. Similarly, Robert Benson's *Britain's Glory*, also performed that year, presented press gangs positively at a time when riots protesting army recruitment were dividing the capital.<sup>68</sup>

Indeed, the tumultuous political climate of the 1790s brought new meaning to critiques of impressment. Thomas Paine, a former sailor himself, made specific mention of impressment in the second part of his *Rights of Man*, in which he hoped for a world in which the 'tortured sailor' would be 'no longer dragged along the streets like a felon' and allowed to 'pursue his mercantile voyage in safety'.<sup>69</sup> The London Corresponding Society saw impressment as unnecessary consequence of an unjust war, noting how for 'fresh supplies of blood' the 'liberties of our country are invaded! the seaman is torn from his family!'<sup>70</sup> Charles Pigott's ribald *Political Dictionary*, published in 1795, characterised the Navy as a 'floating hell', manned by sailors who were 'torn by force from their wives and families'.<sup>71</sup> The publisher Edward Rushton, whose bookshop in Liverpool acted as a hub of intense networking for radical writers and intellectuals, was a relentless critic of impressment throughout the 1790s, culminating in his 1801 epic poem 'Will Clewline', subtitled a 'Tale of the Press Gang' in which 'the poor enslaved tar/ Is to combat for freedom and laws'. Its most memorable passage described a powerful scene of family life shattered by the actions of a press gang:

They seize on their prey all relentless as fate,  
He struggles – is instantly bound,  
Wild scream the poor children, and lo! his loved Kate  
Sinks pale and convulsed to the ground.<sup>72</sup>

Another radical writer, Mary Wollstonecraft, saw impressment as a practice that impacted most keenly on women and championed the cause of impressment widows.

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<sup>68</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the plays and their representation of impressment see Timothy Jenks, *Naval Engagements: Patriotism, Cultural Politics, and the Royal Navy 1793-1815* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 39-40, 48-49. See also *The World*, 10 May 1794

<sup>69</sup> Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man, Common Sense and Other Political Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, re-issued 2008), p. 321

<sup>70</sup> John Stevenson, *Popular Disturbances in England, 1700-1832* (London: Longman, 1992, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn.), pp. 208-12.

<sup>71</sup> Charles Pigott, *A Political Dictionary: explaining the true meaning of words illustrated & exemplified in the lives, morals, character & conduct of...illustrious personages* (London: D.I. Eaton, 1795)

<sup>72</sup> Shephard, William, ed., *Poems and Other Writings by the Late Edward Rushton* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1824), VI, pp. 115-6. For analysis see Franca Dellarosa, *Talking Revolution: Edward Rushton's Rebellious Poetics, 1782-1814* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014), pp. 51-61

Her novel *Maria*, published posthumously after her death in 1797, offered the story of Peggy, who loses her husband Daniel to impressment. Following his death, Peggy is left alone and vulnerable, but 'Had Daniel not been pressed...all this could not have happened'.<sup>73</sup>

Radical literature like this reached a wide audience and raised public awareness about the brutality of impressment.<sup>74</sup> Critics could do little to affect the immediate issue of severe labour shortage, however, or the government's policy of impressment. Sailors therefore faced a choice: to acquiesce, or to resist. Many chose the former option, intimidated by the threat of violence or simply resigned to their fate. However, countless others chose to defy the press gang. Here, sailors could also fall back on a number of proactive schemes, the most common of which were those employed by John Nicol: fleeing, hiding and disguise. Sailors paid close attention to newspapers, and reports of a declaration of war would prompt many to flee from maritime communities. In Jamaica in 1793, the news of war was 'discovered by the public papers' and a mass of sailors 'fled into the Country'.<sup>75</sup> Those that could not run attempted to fool or trick their would-be pursuers. Disability, mental illness, women's clothing, self-harm and even feigning death were used to avoid impressment. Sailors on merchantmen returning to Britain were frequently hidden in the dark recesses of ships, though the Navy was increasingly wise to this trick. During one search William Dillon found a seaman concealed behind mahogany bulkheads in the Master's cabin, and another three 'stout

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<sup>73</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *Maria: Or, the Wrongs of Women* (London, 1797); Brunsman, *Evil Necessity*, p. 156.

<sup>74</sup> On the audience for these texts see: Mark Philp, 'Introduction' to *Rights of Man and Common Sense*, pp. vii-xxvii; Bernard Vincent, *The Transatlantic Republican: Thomas Paine and the Age of Revolutions* (Rodopi, 2005); Edward Larkin, *Thomas Paine and the Literature of Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Christopher Hitchens, *Thomas Paine's Rights of Man: A Biography* (London: Atlantic Books, 2006); Marilyn Butler, ed. *Burke, Paine, Godwin and the Revolution Controversy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Dellarosa, *Talking Revolution*, pp. 51-61; Stuart Curran, 'Women readers, women writers', in Stuart Curran ed. *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edn), pp. 169-186; Cora Kaplan, 'Mary Wollstonecraft's reception and legacies', in Claudia L. Johnson, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Gary Kelly, 'Revolutionary and Romantic Feminism: Women, Writing and Cultural Revolution' in Keith Hanley and Raman Selden, *Revolution and English Romanticism: Political and Rhetoric* (Hemel Hempstead: St Martin's Press, 1990), pp. 107-30; Barbara Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Ralph M. Wardle, *Wollstonecraft: A Critical Biography* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1951), p. 316.

<sup>75</sup> John Ford to Philip Stephens, 14 April 1794, ADM 1/245; quoted in Julius S. Scott, *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution* (London and New York: Verso, 2018), p. 41

fellows' hiding elsewhere. The sailor Jacob Nagle recalled twenty seven men being hidden 'among the cargo' of the ship to avoid them being pressed.<sup>76</sup>

Rather than relying on merchants or local authorities, sailors could use the law to avoid capture. One such tactic was to use the loophole of debt, and in particular a 1758 Act of Parliament that prevented sailors from being arrested for debts under £20, but allowed them to be held for sums over that amount. With war on the horizon, enterprising men quickly went on a spending spree and racked up bills of precisely £21, though not every sailor read the memo correctly: James Seaton was arrested for a debt of £19, and was subsequently released from prison and presented to the navy.<sup>77</sup> Even those who gained a temporary reprieve soon found that the Admiralty was unwilling to give up potential recruits. Peter Kendle was imprisoned for a debt of £21, and while it was found that 'there to be no Reason to believe there was any collusion in it', he was discovered to be a deserter from the navy, and so was handed over all the same.<sup>78</sup> John Stormy was no more fortunate. It was decided that there was 'no Room for doubt' that his actions were 'for the sole purpose of getting him out of the Service'. It was arranged that he would be bailed, at considerable expense to the government, to make him liable once again for naval service. From the Admiralty's perspective it set an example for others considering a similar evasion: they hoped that a few such instances would 'tend very much to lessen the number of them'.<sup>79</sup>

A more secure means of evasion was to take advantage of statutory and customary legal loopholes. Quick-thinking seamen joined a protected trade or found proof of foreign nationality, and in 1796 the United States Congress passed legislation directing federal customs collectors to issue US Citizenship certificates to American sailors. There was a thriving black market in false protections, with the US Minister to Britain, Rufus King, reporting on fees changing hands, and acknowledged that 'some of those who have applied to me are not American Citizens'.<sup>80</sup> Similar business existed

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<sup>76</sup> J.D.M. Robertson, *The Press Gang in Orkney and Shetland* (Orkney: The Orcadian, 2011), pp. 94-103; Dillon, *My Professional Adventures*, Vol. I, pp. 375-6; John C. Dann ed. *The Nagle Journal: A Diary of the Life of Jacob Nagle, Sailor, From the Year 1775 to 1841* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988), p. 183

<sup>77</sup> TNA, ADM 1/3683, James Dyson to Stephens, 8 January 1795

<sup>78</sup> TNA, ADM 1/3683, James Dyson to Stephens, 6 January 1795

<sup>79</sup> TNA, ADM 1/3683, James Dyson to Stephens, 13 January 1795

<sup>80</sup> United States National Archives (USNA), M30, Despatches from U.S. Ministers to Great Britain, 1791-1906', Roll No. 4, Despatches from U.S. Minsters to Great Britain, 10 August 1796 - 28 December 1797, A2 Cab. 21/10, Rufus King to Timothy Pickering, 8 September 1796; Rufus King to Timothy Pickering, 13 April 1797; Brunzman, *Evil Necessity*, pp. 176-77

around the UK: in Sunderland, a fee of eight shillings and sixpence could solicit a forged document.<sup>81</sup> On rare occasions, cases of corruption came up before a court martial. In September 1793, Lieutenant Ralph Ridley was tried for receiving a bribe not to press a man: found guilty, it was deemed that he had ‘behaved in a fraudulent and scandalous manner unbecoming the character of an officer’, and was dismissed from the service.<sup>82</sup> Still, the Admiralty faced a dilemma when it came to punishing guilty men. In 1793 Henry J. Hardacre was discovered to have been selling fraudulent tickets using forged signatures. Rather than trying Hardacre and setting an example to others, the Admiralty solicitor recommended dealing with the issue more quietly, noting ‘the danger there may be in making publick, by means of such a trial, the easy manner in which such frauds may be practised’. Instead, it was suggested that they ‘dispose of this offender on board one of the King’s Ships that he might not soon be in a situation to practice similar frauds’.<sup>83</sup> We do not know what became of Hardacre, but there was nobody of that name tried for selling a forged certificate that year.

Sailors were on much stronger legal ground after impressment had occurred, when they could use writs of habeas corpus to protest an unlawful seizure. This long-standing device gained increased significance in the heated political climate of the 1790s, for even after the suspension of habeas corpus in 1794, cases that pre-dated the legislation continued to be heard. These appeals proved a continuous thorn in the side of the Admiralty, as attorneys clustered around naval ports to help seamen and their families apply for writs.<sup>84</sup> From January 1795 a steady stream of cases arrived with the Admiralty’s solicitor, James Dyson, which listed the manifold ways naval officers had impressed men illegally in the early years of the war. In almost every instance, the Navy was found to have illegally impressed the individual in question: in a sample of cases from January to July 1795, only one individual was found to have been correctly detained, and Dyson’s repeated recommendation was that the men should be released

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<sup>81</sup> Lloyd, *British Seaman*, p. 163

<sup>82</sup> TNA, ADM 1/5330, Court martial of Lieutenant Ralph Ridley, 21 September 1793.

<sup>83</sup> TNA, ADM 7/302, Case 8, 17 June 1793

<sup>84</sup> Brunsman, *Evil Necessity*, p. 194. Paul Halliday argues that there were more than a thousand habeas corpus cases in the last four decades of the century; 80 per cent of them were successful, much higher than the 50 per cent dismissal rate for all prisoners. Costello suggests that release rates decreased during the 1790s in response to the wider political situation, but almost all of the Admiralty cases I consulted were successful appeals. See Paul D. Halliday, *Habeas Corpus: From England to Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), pp. 23-37, 115-116, 133-4. See also Kevin Costello, ‘Habeas Corpus and Military and Naval Impressment, 1756-1816’, *Journal of Legal History*, 29 (2008), 239-240.

to avoid a damaging court case. Indeed, by March of 1795, it is possible to detect a hint of irritation in his replies, not least in the case of James Smith who was impressed despite being underage, an apprentice, *and* a foreigner.<sup>85</sup> In some instances the threat of legal action could be very profitable. John Nicolson threatened to sue the Admiralty for the losses incurred by a year-long confinement, and Dyson recommended that the press gang officers offer a settlement out of court, for if it came to trial 'no Defence could be made for them in such actions'.<sup>86</sup>

These examples of resistance were fundamentally peaceful, but sailors also responded with violence of their own. The most violent instances took place at the point of impressment: some simply fought their would-be prisoners off: Michael Thomas, a caulker who was impressed in Castle Street, Minorca, was dragged away, his clothes torn and watch broken, before he finally made his escape. Others were helped by loved ones. The partner of one sailor attacked a press gang with 'the assistance of some of her female friends', injuring one and allowing her lover to escape.<sup>87</sup> Flight was a risk even after the point of capture. The accounts of the local regulating officer at Greenock, near Glasgow, Jaheel Brenton, reveal almost constant desertion: in one week in late July 1793 he suffered the indignity of losing more men to desertion than he had secured.<sup>88</sup> Rescues were also attempted. In July 1793, one press gang was attacked by twenty seamen with blunderbusses, pistols and cutlasses, injuring two men of the press gang and forcing the release of two impressed men. The following year, a large body of shipwrights assembled and, using a spar as a battering ram, broke into the prison where a colleague was being kept, liberating all the men held within.<sup>89</sup> Sometimes the threat of

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<sup>85</sup> TNA, ADM 1/3683, letters from James Dyson to Alexander Stephens. Edward Willis, Richard. Forster, George Thompson and James Tyzens, released as apprentices, 12 January 1795. George Fletcher, employee of the coal trade, released, 3 March 1795; unnamed sailor, over the age of 18, could be legally detained, 16 January 1795; unnamed sailor, apprenticed to his father, released, 22 January 1795; Hennick Loughnaugh, foreigner and impressed out of an East India Company ship, released, 1 February 1795; William Davison, apprentice, released, 17 March 1795; unnamed sailor, under age, released, 18 March 1795; Josephus Grubalva, a subject of the King of Spain, released, 26 March 1795; John Spaven and John Usher, apprentices, released, 16 April 1795; Henry Alliston, apprentice. Released, 23 April 1795; Thomas Emslie, apprentice, released, 21 May 1795; Gilbert Story and Samuel Falkons, apprentices, released, 13 June 1795; John Ridley, apprentice, released, 27 June, 1795. For Dyson's irritated letter see TNA, ADM 1/3683, James Dyson to Evan Nepean, March 1795

<sup>86</sup> TNA, ADM 1/3683, James Dyson to Alexander Stephens, 7 January 1795. See also Rogers, *Press Gang*, 30

<sup>87</sup> HL, Hamond Collection, Box 74, 'List of Men Imprest at Mahon'; *London Packet of Evening Post*, 12 September 1800

<sup>88</sup> TNA, ADM 1/1508, 'An Account of the number of men procured for His Majesty's Fleet by Captain Jaheel Brenton...', 26 July and 1 August 1793

<sup>89</sup> TNA, ADM 2/1063/426-7, 19 June 1793; Garstin, ed. *Samuel Kelly*, pp. 270-71

violence was enough. Attempts by a press gang to board the Camden East Indiamen lying at Gravesend were abandoned when sailors on board appeared with arms in their hands, swearing they would injure anyone who came on board, after which they rowed off to find easier prey.<sup>90</sup>

Resistance to the press gang regularly occurred in combination with local communities, for while sailors acting alone might struggle against a press gang, crowds offered a degree of security and often success. Throughout the 1790s, the volume and variety of anti-impressment riots and affrays was remarkable: there were at least 104 such incidents reported between March 1793 and April 1802, and the real number is likely to be much higher, as not every incident was reported and gangs had a disincentive to report embarrassing failures or defeats.<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, the unrest of 1793-94 was different to anything that had come before. Whereas impressment protests had long operated in a reactive way to individual injustices, in the 1790s we see sailors organising proactively, in combination with local communities. For instance, at the very beginning of the recruitment effort in Newcastle in 1793, the sailors 'bound themselves to each other to resist any attempt to suppress them at the hazard of their Lives'.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, their activity concentrated in areas where political unrest was most apparent – for example in South Shields, Greenock and Liverpool – and harnessed the language of protest and radicalism.<sup>93</sup> As we will see, sailors showed no little political skill, developing petitions and appeals, working collectively with other communities of sailors, and using the local and national press to further their ends.

The earliest example of mass resistance came in Whitby in January 1793, when as many as 1,000 sailors assembled at the regulating captain's rendezvous spot and threatened to pull it down unless the press gangs were dismissed. The local regulating officer, John Shortland Philip Stephens, decided it was prudent to disperse the press gang 'until order has been re-established'.<sup>94</sup> Subsequent efforts to secure men in Whitby

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<sup>90</sup> *Times*, 19 Nov 1793

<sup>91</sup> I am indebted to Professor Rogers for sending me his working list of anti-impressment affrays and riots for the long eighteenth century. For more context, see Rogers, *The Press Gang*, pp. 13, 39. See also Isaac Land, New Scholarship on the Press Gang, Part 2, [http://porttowns.port.ac.uk/press-gang2/#\\_ftnref9](http://porttowns.port.ac.uk/press-gang2/#_ftnref9)

<sup>92</sup> TNA, HO 42/24, fo. 315-16, James Rudman to Henry Dundas, 31 January 1793

<sup>93</sup> Nicholas Rogers, 'Burning Tom Paine: Loyalism and Counter-Revolution in Britain, 1792-3', *Histoire Sociale/Social History*, Vol. 32, No. 64 (1999) pp. 139-71. For Liverpool as a site of radicalism see Katrina Navickas, *Loyalism and Radicalism in Lancashire, 1798-1815* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 38.

<sup>94</sup> TNA, HO 28/9, 68, John Shortland Philip Stephens, Whitby, 26 January 1793

proved equally futile: two days later, John Oaks' gang was met by 'a great Body' of sailors who had assembled, 'signing papers and sticking them up signifying they would not be pressed'. Oaks wrote to the Admiralty in some distress: 'I was told by a party of seamen that stood in the street, that if I returned with them, I and they must not expect to live'. This protest lasted for three days, until the press gang was driven out of the town, and the rendezvous destroyed.<sup>95</sup> The local magistrates offered little in the way of protection to naval officers, and drew a direct line between these events and wider fears of political agitation: in a declaration aimed at calming tensions they chastised the actions of the 'lawless mob' as 'Sedition & Insurrection' that served only to 'gratify the Enemies of this Country, and afford Pleasure to the Factions and Seditious'. The local community paid little heed however, and Whitby's opposition meant that it was virtually impossible for the Admiralty to recruit there.<sup>96</sup>

There were similar scenes 40 miles to the north, on the River Tyne, where uprisings broke out at Newcastle and South Shields. This had long been a site of political unrest, and sailors' capacity for collective action in the North East had been demonstrated the year before when seamen and keelmen organised strikes protesting their pay. The naval officer Cuthbert Collingwood, a Newcastle man himself, had earlier commented on the local sailors' eagerness to strike and their 'enthusiasm for liberty', while in 1792 a local correspondent had reported to the Home Office that a thousand 'six penny copies' of Thomas Paine's books had been sold by a local bookseller.<sup>97</sup> Sailors at that port produced a petition that represented not only their desire for collective action, but also showed how political language could be deployed against the policy of impressment:

We the Seamen of Newcastle upon Tyne...declare...we are shock'd to observe, that...we alone are deprived of the Rights of personal protection...[and]... it is our opinion that we are deprived of an equal Participation of those Rights by the cruel mode of manning the Royal Navy by Impress, a mode though countenanced by Precedents and supposed to have been a part of the common Law has never been

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<sup>95</sup> TNA, HO 28/9, 70-1. John Oaks to Admiralty, Guisborough, 28 January 1793; TNA, HO 42/24. Folios 351-356. James Rudman to Dundas, 4 February 1793; Rogers, *Press Gang*, p. 56.

<sup>96</sup> TNA, HO 28/9, Magistrates declaration, 26 January 1793; Rogers, *Press Gang*, p. 56.

<sup>97</sup> Collingwood to Nelson, 14 November 1792, G. L. Newnham Collingwood, ed. *A Selection From the Public and Private Correspondence of Vice-Admiral Lord Collingwood: Interspersed with Memoirs of his Life*. 2 Vols. (5<sup>th</sup> edition, containing some new letters, 1837). Vol. 1., pp. 24-25; TNA, HO 42/23, 1, Christopher Blackett to Home Office, 22 November 1792



sanctioned by the authority of Parliament; we think ourselves justified in endeavouring to resist this species of cruelty.

They resolved to communicate their resolutions to sailors in the 'Principal Ports of this Kingdom' and to print their declaration in newspapers. The editor of the *Newcastle Chronicle* duly obliged, an act condemned by local politicians increasingly concerned about the spread of potentially revolutionary ideas.<sup>98</sup> The situation grew steadily more tense – the local gang was told that if any of its members returned 'they should be torn Limb from Limb'.<sup>99</sup>

At the same time, links to radical politics in the North East became ever more apparent. During one press gang riot a liberty pole was erected in the marketplace and the local magistrate reported that hundreds of rioters drove the press gang through the streets under a banner carrying the message 'Liberty For Ever'. Sailors seem to have consulted the local Magna Carta Club, one of several political societies in the town.<sup>100</sup> Local authorities became highly concerned: the Mayor of Newcastle appealed for a detachment of dragoons to be sent to their area, while local MP's appealed to Dundas that 'no time should be lost in taking decided steps to quell the spirit of resistance which the sailors manifested'.<sup>101</sup> Just as alarming to the British government was the strong possibility that anti-impressment resistance was spreading. The rhetoric used by sailors suggested cohesion and solidarity, for while those operating on the Tyne spoke of themselves as 'the Seamen of Newcastle', increasingly sailors' declarations referred to one large community, united in their interests: one written in February 1793 began 'Friends and Fellow Seamen!'<sup>102</sup> Nervous correspondents noted the sailors' 'Firmness', while Dundas was informed that the unrest at South Shields had 'arisen from the Example set at Whitby', and that 'Two of the Ringleaders in that Tumult were seen at Shields a few days ago'.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> TNA, HO 28/9, Sailor's declaration, Newcastle Upon Tyne, January 1793, 63-5; TNA, HO 42/24, fo. 365, Charles Branding and Rowland Burdon, MPs for Newcastle Upon Tyne and County Durham respectively] to Dundas, 5 February 1793

<sup>99</sup> *Newcastle Courant*, 23 Feb 1793; Rogers, *The Press Gang*, pp. 53-4

<sup>100</sup> *Newcastle Courant*, 30 March 1793; Rogers, *Press Gang*, p. 107

<sup>101</sup> See TNA, HO 42/23/351, 1793, fos. 770-771, James Rudman, Mayor of Newcastle Upon Tyne to Henry Dundas, 11 February 1793; TNA, HO 42/24, fo. 365, Charles Branding and Rowland Burdon [MPs for Newcastle Upon Tyne and County Durham respectively] to Dundas, 5 February 1793

<sup>102</sup> TNA, HO 42/24, 1793, fo. 356. 'Friends and Fellow Seamen!'

<sup>103</sup> TNA, HO 42/24, Folios 351-356. James Rudman to Dundas, 4 February 1793

Little could be done to stop news and information travelling. A few days later, in the nearby town of Sunderland, the press gang was warned that they 'had better take care of themselves' for 'if they do not we will take care of them...We fully design that we will destroy them and very soon.'<sup>104</sup> In a printed declaration the sailors laid out their complaints in less foreboding language, framing their struggles within a broader discourse on patriotism and their fundamental rights as Britons:

...We have always shown a Readiness to meet the Enemies of our Country, so that our present Objections do not proceed from Cowardice, but from the dreadful Miseries which we have known, seen, and felt...therefore we cannot conscientiously, either as Men, Britons, or Christians, any longer countenance by Compliance, such a shocking Abuse of Power. – Twenty-two Shillings a Month, Fellow Seamen, is Five Shillings a Week!...For these we are *torn* and *compelled* to accept this small sum, which is not Half what we receive in the Merchants' Service...But this is not the worst – our Children and Dependents are neglected: They are exposed to all the Miseries of Poverty, and are hindered in the Courts of Life by Want of Protection and Education. These are great calamities...we only seek the same Rights of Protection from seemingly abused Power, as the rest of our Fellow-citizens.<sup>105</sup>

Impressment attempts continued, however, and the local community followed through on their threat, attacking local troops brought in to keep the peace with 'Stones, Bricks, Tiles and everything that could be picked up'. On 18 April 1793, Lieutenant Boulton was besieged at his rendezvous by 'hundreds of Seamen, Soldiers and Women', until the 30<sup>th</sup> Regiment was brought in to dispel the uprising.<sup>106</sup>

Resistance was not confined to the North East, and press gangs and their associates became targets across the country. In Greenock, a meeting of 'all the Carpenters, Beggars, Caulkers and Seamen of the Town' resolved to stand together and 'Support Each Other in case an Impress should take place', and threatened the local magistrates that 'if they...Countenance the Impress, they must abide by the Consequences'. By June, the matter had got entirely out-of-hand, with locals burning one

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<sup>104</sup> TNA, HO 42/24, 1793. Folios 354. Letter from 'Sunderland Sailors'.

<sup>105</sup> TNA, HO 42/24, 1793. fo. 356. 'Friends and Fellow Seamen!'.

<sup>106</sup> TNA, HO 42/24/218, fos. 538-539. 'T.S.' [Thomas Sanderson] to Rowland Burdon, [MP for County Durham], Sunderland, 19 February 1793; Rogers, *Press Gang*, p. 53

of the boats belonging to the rendezvous in the town square.<sup>107</sup> Here, sailors also benefitted from the protection of local and regional authorities, demonstrating the importance of negotiation between state and community for effective impressment efforts. The regulating officer, Brenton, was initially assured that he may rely on 'every assistance' of the magistrates of Greenock, but his arrival panicked a community reliant on maritime trade for its livelihood, and six months later he was complaining to the Admiralty that 'they give them no support when attacked by the Mob' and he was forced to suspend recruitment efforts.<sup>108</sup> The following month the magistrates were still refusing to back his press warrants: 'from what I learn', wrote Brenton, 'the Town in general are determined to oppose any Impress on Shore'.<sup>109</sup>

Elsewhere, local communities worked together to prevent specific individuals being impressed. In Swansea, a printer who had volunteered to be the 'master of ye Press Gang' was threatened by a local crowd who placed the struggle of impressment within its wider political context. They promised that he would find his house 'pulled about your ears, by ye unanimous multitude' if he persisted in 'that diabolical act' on behalf of 'a war, which more than half ye nation think to be most unjust & unnecessary', carried on with no other real intention than to 'stop the progress of civil & religious liberty'.<sup>110</sup> In October 1793, as many as 500 seamen tore down the rendezvous at Strand Street in Liverpool in retaliation for the death of a merchant master who had resisted impressment: here, the mayor turned a blind eye to the disturbances and no ringleaders were identified. In late 1793 a ropemaker working in Plymouth dockyard was illegally impressed, and after insulting the regulating captain was dismissed from his job; 300 ropemakers went on strike in sympathy, and he was re-instated within three days.<sup>111</sup> Nor was this confined to Britain. In Newfoundland, a local crowd acted in a 'Riotous and tumultuous manner' to liberate two impressed sailors, and beat a naval lieutenant,

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<sup>107</sup> TNA, ADM 1/1508, Jaheel Brenton to Philip Stephens, 3 February 1793; TNA, ADM 1/1508, Jaheel Brenton to Philip Stephens, 28 February 1793; TNA, ADM 1/1508, Jaheel Brenton to Philip Stephens, 6 June 1793

<sup>108</sup> TNA, ADM 1/1508, Jaheel Brenton to Philip Stephens, 14 March 1793; TNA HO 28/23, Brenton to Evan Nepean, 4 October 1797

<sup>109</sup> TNA, ADM 1/1508, Jaheel Brenton to Philip Stephens, 14 November 1793

<sup>110</sup> TNA, HO 28/13, 13 November 1793; Isaac Land, New Scholarship on the Press Gang, Part 2, [http://porttowns.port.ac.uk/press-gang2/#\\_ftnref9](http://porttowns.port.ac.uk/press-gang2/#_ftnref9)

<sup>111</sup> I am grateful to Nicholas Rogers for providing this example. See TNA, HO 42/27/499-502; *Morning Chronicle*, 2 Nov 1793; *E. Johnson's British Gazette and Sunday Monitor*, 3 Nov, 1793; *London Packet, or New Lloyd's Evening Post*, 1-4 Nov, 1793; *York Courant*, 28 Oct 1793; Clive Emsley, *British Society and the French Wars 1793-1815* (London: Macmillan, 1979), pp. 32, 35; *Williamson's Liverpool Advertiser*, 21 October 1793; *Newcastle Courant*, 2 Nov. 1793, *Bath Journal*, 28 October 1793.

Richard Lawry, 'in so unmerciful a manner' that he was killed. The government's response was swift and strong: dozens of suspects rounded up, and two men were tried and hanged.<sup>112</sup>

By August 1794, underhanded recruitment practices were creating protests in the nation's capital. Shortages of naval and military labour had led to a profusion of 'crimping houses', where vulnerable men were tricked into joining the army or navy. Often operating out of alehouses, potential recruits were plied with alcohol and encouraged to rack up large debts, which would be paid off by the crimps in return for the bounty for enlistment. When on 15 August a mentally ill man named George Howe jumped to his death from a second-floor window in Charing Cross while trying to escape impressment, it sparked riots across London and three recruiting houses were torn down on the night of 20-21 August. The links to radical politics were there for all to see. A handbill circulating during the riots lambasted the policy of impressment, and questioned 'Is this the land so famed for liberty?', while one of the ringleaders of the riot, an unnamed black man, was heard justifying his actions in the context of the revolution then in motion in Saint-Domingue. 'Now or never is the time to be free', he shouted, 'the black men are already made free in the West Indies by their exertions, and why should white men continue slaves in their own country?' He was one of twenty three arrested for their part in the disturbances, four of whom were later executed. The crimping riots were the most serious unrest the capital had seen since the Gordon Riots of 1780.<sup>113</sup>

Even for those sailors who failed to resist impressment, there was one last opportunity to abscond. Numerous sailors made one final attempt to secure freedom before they arrived at a warship and were read the Articles of War, making them liable for naval discipline.<sup>114</sup> Collaborative efforts were more likely to be successful, and mass

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<sup>112</sup> Keith Mercer, 'The Murder of Lieutenant Lawry: A Case Study of British Naval Impressment in Newfoundland, 1794', *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies*, 21 (2006), 255-98; Keith Mercer, 'Northern Exposure: Resistance to Naval Impressment in British North America, 1775-1815', *Canadian Historical Review*, 91 (2010), p. 214.

<sup>113</sup> For the newspaper quote see *Sun*, 21 August 1794. For the 'crimping riots' see Stevenson, *Popular Disturbances in England*, pp. 208-12.

<sup>114</sup> However, some recruiters got around this problem by reading the Articles on the tender ship. See a case from 1796, when Michael Goley, Robert Powell, Peter Weir and Robert Field were tried for mutinying on the *Castor* tender near Plymouth and it was explicitly stated in the trial that the Articles of War had been read. Powell and Field were acquitted, but Goley and Wier were found guilty of mutiny and sentenced to hanged, though such was the pressing need for men, this punishment was 'recommended them to His Majesty's mercy', TNA, ADM 1/5335, Court martial panel to Admiralty, 29 April 1796.

tender mutinies occurred across Britain. They were particularly common in locations where anti-impressment fervour was high, and a few examples here will suffice. On 20 November 1793, 32 men escaped from the *Mary* tender in the harbour at South Shields, and in March 1794 impressed men took over the *Eleanor* tender while the crew were at dinner, though on this occasion the majority of the escapes were recaptured.<sup>115</sup> In Liverpool in March 1795, 23 men escaped from the *Ann* tender at 4am in the morning, catching the sleeping guards unaware. In the subsequent court martial, the midshipman left in charge, Mr William Johns, acknowledged that this was not the first time the men had tried to run. In this last instance we also hear the political language of the era, for officers testified that the sailors shouted 'liberty or death' and that 'it was liberty they wanted', as they overtook the vessel. The combination of violence and radical language proved a terrifying prospect for the eight naval officers charged with trying the case. Two 'ringleaders' were subsequently court-martialled: they were acquitted of mutiny but found guilty of desertion, and received a severe punishment of 300 lashes.<sup>116</sup>

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Sailors' resistance, charged as it was by political radicalism and the wider threat of sedition and subversion, frequently ended in physical confrontation. That some sailors chose to fight fire with fire should not surprise us, for as we have also seen, the press gang itself relied on physical coercion in the first place.<sup>117</sup> The scale and nature of sailors' resistance in 1793-4 placed unique pressures on the British state, however. The threat was twofold. Firstly, sailors' defiant activities in the first years of the war challenged the state's authority at a time of revolutionary upheaval, when concerns about the growth of radical politics were most pronounced. Secondly, resistance to impressment specifically challenged the state's ability to man its ships and defend the country from a potential invasion: the autumn of 179 saw the first of many invasion

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<sup>115</sup> *Newcastle Courant*, 23 November 1793; *London Chronicle*, 18-20 March 1794; *Newcastle Chronicle*, 15 March 1794

<sup>116</sup> TNA, ADM 1/5335, court martial of Prince Edward (alias Jackson) and Abraham Ramsden (alias Abraham Lennox) of the *Ann* tender, 2 April 1796

<sup>117</sup> There is a tendency among historians to diminish the role violence played coercing men into the Navy. See for example N.A.M. Rodger, *Wooden World*, p. 182; Dancy, *Myth of the Press Gang*, pp. 136, 140. For critique of this see Isaac Land, New Scholarship on the Press Gang, Part 2, [http://porttowns.port.ac.uk/press-gang2/#\\_ftnref9](http://porttowns.port.ac.uk/press-gang2/#_ftnref9)

scares in Britain as Revolutionary France expanded its military might. The British government's response, therefore, was subtle and sinister. It utilised unprecedented state surveillance, collecting information about anti-impressment activities, as part of a wider campaign to observe the growth of a radical and increasingly subversive political culture.<sup>118</sup> The state would go further, however, ramping up its impressment activities, and excusing and – sometimes even protecting – those who committed violence in its name.

The British government watched anti-impressment activities closely. Letters from regulating captains arrived regularly at the Admiralty, while correspondence from local politicians about anti-impressment activity was sent directly to Dundas at the Home Office. This was but one part of wider surveillance activities taking place in the febrile climate of 1792-4. Regular reports of spies and informers flooded into the Home Office, reporting the formation of societies, meetings of potential revolutionaries, the publication and distribution of radical texts, and the movements of possible French agents.<sup>119</sup> It is not clear how far the government was able to keep track of all this information, or indeed how much of the information they received could be counted upon. Certainly, some of it was sensationalist, for example John Stockdale's report of 25 revolutionary Frenchmen 'sent over to the country armed with daggers for the purpose of assassinating and cutting off any obnoxious characters'.<sup>120</sup> This information was actively solicited: Dundas' secretary Evan Nepean wrote to one correspondent in 1792 thanking him 'for the information conveyed', and asked him to 'watch over the conduct of the disaffected people in your neighbourhood' as he could not at this moment 'render a more acceptable service, than by transmitting from time to time your observations on the conduct of people of that description'.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> On the wider policy of state surveillance see H. T. Dickinson, 'Conservative Reaction and Government Repression' in his *British Radicalism and the French Revolution* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1985), pp. 25-42; John Barrell and Jon Mee, eds. 'Introduction' in *Trials for Treason and Seditious Libels 1792-94*, Vol. 1 1792-1794 (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2006-7), pp. ix-xli; Boyd Hilton, 'Pitt's Terror', in *A Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People: England 1783-1846* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), pp. 65-74; David Worrall, *Radical Culture: Discourse, Resistance and Surveillance, 1790-1820* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992).

<sup>119</sup> Some examples of reports sent in late 1792 and early 1793: in Norwich it was reported that 'things wear a very threatening aspect', while at Bainham 'the minds of the lower people are attempted to be perverted, by persons who came about selling Paines & other libels'. In Leicester a printer named Phillips distributed Thomas Paine's book (*The Rights of Man*) among the soldiery, and 'the society are employ'd in printing 10,000 copies of the abstract, to be distributed gratis on Market day'. At Ipswich, 8 Nov, 'above a dozen Clubs in that town, where Paine's books are read and explained'. See TNA, HO 42/23 for all.

<sup>120</sup> TNA, HO 42/23, John Stockdale to the Home Office, 1 December 1792

<sup>121</sup> TNA, HO 42/23, Nepean to the Rev. W. Sproule, 1 December 1792

The government took a special interest in radical activity in ports and maritime communities. In Liverpool it was noted that 'a society for Parliamentary Reform' had been formed, while in Newcastle it was reported that 'two thirds of the people ripe for revolt, the magistrates afraid to act'. In Glasgow, the government learned that 'Great numbers' had signed a reformist declaration for parliamentary reform, and that their numbers would soon to 50,000'.<sup>122</sup> That these were all areas of intense anti-impressment activity was not lost on a government paranoid about the spread of radical ideas, and fearful of the prospect of sedition and subversion. In 1793, Britain's military resources were spread across the country not only to defend against external threats, but also to monitor internal disturbances. They were concentrated particularly in port towns and in areas here there been press gang disturbances.<sup>123</sup> By the summer of 1794, 'riots against the press gangs' remained one of the most concerning domestic threat discussed by Pitt's Cabinet, represented as being both menacing and politically motivated.<sup>124</sup> Just as correspondents informed the government, on a more local level, distrustful citizens let local magistrates know about suspicious arrivals or shady behaviour, or informed on sailors to local regulating captains. It was this climate of suspicion that John Nicol observed as he took extraordinary steps to disguise himself from wary locals in 1793. Nor was he alone in these thoughts, and his recollections chime with a memorable passage in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, likely written in 1794-5, in which Henry Tilney describes a country 'where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies'.<sup>125</sup> This was intended to be comforting, but it was also an uneasy recognition of national anxiety and paranoia.

The state's role went beyond surveillance, however, and extended to protecting those who committed violence on its behalf. One example concerns a sailor named Richard Tuart, who in October 1793 was indicted for the murder of a Swedish man named Lars Holmstans. Tuart was part of a press gang that had attempted to seize Holmstans, and beat him with sticks when he resisted impressment. Holmstans suffered severe injuries, and died one month later. At the subsequent trial, one witness testified

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<sup>122</sup> See TNA, HO 42/23 for these examples.

<sup>123</sup> Troops were concentrated into eight districts: Plymouth, Portsmouth, Kent, London, Harwich and Yarmouth, Newcastle 'Interior' and West coast. TNA HO 42/24, fo. 307-08, 'Proposed Distribution of the Troops in South Britain, 1793.

<sup>124</sup> Adam Zamoyski, *Phantom Terror: Political Paranoia and the Creation of the Modern State, 1789-1848* (New York: Basic Books, 2015) p.55

<sup>125</sup> Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (Oxford, 2003 edn), p. 145.

that he had seen Richard Tuart beating Holmstans: 'I saw Mr Tuart beating the deceased...he was beating him with a stick in the street...In consequence of being beat he tumbled down, and then he came and crawled to the bar, and then he tumbled down again...'. Another witness, a fellow Swedish sailor named Lawrence Leymon, stated that he too had been attacked:

I was shoved out of doors...and three of them were jumping on my breast with their knees, and beating me over my head with sticks; I saw no more of the deceased, till I was brought into the house, when I saw a man laying over a chair, and all over a gore of blood.

Three more witnesses, Michael Hedges, Eleanor Newton and Sarah Clark, testified that they had seen a number of men attacking Holman, 'beating him over the head with sticks', but could not identify the specific individual responsible.<sup>126</sup>

The trial then took an unexpected turn. A surgeon and his assistant took to the stand, and suggested that the link between the assault and Holman's death was not at all clear cut. They noted that following an examination, Holman's lungs were found to be much diseased and that 'The immediate cause of his death was a bleeding of the lungs'. While admitting that 'An inflammation might be produced there in consequence of violence', the surgeon suggested that it could have come from 'many other occasions', and while it was likely that the assault had played a role, they could not say for sure that the disease and bleeding were the 'result of the blows'. This assertion transformed the prospects of the accused. The judge intervened, and ruled that 'the indictment charged the prisoner with killing the deceased, by blows inflicted with a stick; now the evidence by no means proved that, and there was therefore an end to the indictment'.<sup>127</sup> The defendant, Richard Tuart, was found not guilty of murder; more surprisingly still, he was not charged with either manslaughter or even of assault.

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<sup>126</sup> Old Bailey Proceedings Online ([www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org), version 8.0, 20 January 2021), October 1793, trial of RICHARD TUART (t17931030-66). For more information on Old Bailey proceedings and their reportage of trials see S. Devereaux, 'The City and the Sessions Paper: "Public Justice" in London, 1770-1800', *Journal of British Studies*, 35, No 4 (October 1996), 466-503; Robert Shoemaker, 'The Old Bailey Proceedings and the Representation of Crime and Criminal Justice in Eighteenth-Century London', *Journal of British Studies*, 47, No. 3 (2008), pp. 559-580.

<sup>127</sup> Old Bailey Proceedings Online ([www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org), version 8.0, 20 January 2021), October 1793, trial of RICHARD TUART (t17931030-66); *The World*, 2 November 1793; *The World*, 2 November 1793



Had Richard Tuart's assault on Holmstans been an isolated event it might be considered exceptional, but earlier that month Tuart had been in court again for assaulting another Swedish sailor who had resisted impressment, Lars Nyman. Nyman accused Tuart of a 'violent Assault upon me', in a case that was heard in early October 1793. Once again Richard Tuart escaped without punishment. The injured party Nymans was paid the sum of 30 pounds, and he therefore decided to drop the charges against Tuart. Quite who covered this fee is not clear: this was an extraordinary sum, and there is little chance an everyday sailor would have access to this sort of money.<sup>128</sup> What is clear is that Tuart was acting under the auspices of the state, and doing so with impunity. He was able to commit repeated assaults on sailors, and avoided any punishment: acquitted and once again a free man, Tuart returned to his duties working on a press gang in the maritime boroughs of London. Even aside from the violence offered, the attempted impressment of Holmstans was illegal: as a Swedish national, he wasn't liable to be pressed, something that was also mentioned but not followed up in the subsequent trial. It was heard that Leymon had protested that 'I am a protected man, I have got this protection', upon which the press gang hit him again and called him a 'Scotch buggar'; while another swore that the press gang had cried 'Swedes, Swedes, come out!'.<sup>129</sup>

We also see the role of the establishment: two surgeons and a judge, figures of authority, had intervened to sway a trial. We know that judges could use cases to set examples, such as when a judge in Whitby considered Yorkshire to be 'prone to riots' and thus sentenced Hannah Hobson to death 'as an Example' for her part in an anti-impressment riot in Whitby in 1792.<sup>130</sup> This is not to suggest that this incident was a state conspiracy, or that politicians, lawyers and surgeons were acting together to acquit the accused. Instead, we should think of it as an example of institutional protectiveness, in which men of the establishment could influence trial proceedings in a way that favoured the status quo and those in power. In this, and as we have seen, they were operating in a culture in which resistance to impressment was deeply threatening,

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<sup>128</sup> London Metropolitan Archives, Middlesex Sessions Papers – Justices Working Documents, LMSMPS508910124, December 1793, accessed via londonlives.org ([https://www.londonlives.org/browse.jsp?id=LMSMPS50891\\_n924-10&div=LMSMPS50891PS508910124#highlight](https://www.londonlives.org/browse.jsp?id=LMSMPS50891_n924-10&div=LMSMPS50891PS508910124#highlight)), 20 January 2021.

<sup>129</sup> Old Bailey Proceedings Online ([www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org), version 8.0, 20 January 2021), October 1793, trial of RICHARD TUART (t17931030-66)

<sup>130</sup> TNA, HO 47/16/23, Reports on Criminals, Correspondence, 9 April 1793.

and which frequently took the side of the state. Only two newspapers reported on the trial of Tuart, the *Sun* and the *World*, and neither saw any reason to query the curious intervention of the judge; the *Sun*, a government sponsored newspaper, did not even see fit to mention it at all.<sup>131</sup>

Although Tuart's assaults received little public outcry, state protection also occurred in cases in which local opinion did become inflamed. William Yeo was the regulating captain in Hampshire, and like his fellow regulating officers in Liverpool and the North East, he came up against obstructive local magistrates. In January 1794 he accused them of 'throwing obstacles in the way of the Officers employ'd on the Impress Service', and by April he was still complaining that local magistrates were complicit in impressment evasion, refusing to back press warrants and refusing to answer his increasingly irate letters of protest.<sup>132</sup> As a result, his officers began to take ever more drastic measures to locate trained seamen. In November 1794, an impress tender attempted to search a merchant vessel named the *Maria*, anchored at Poole in Dorset. The crew of the *Maria* refused to let the party on board, and resisted a physical attempt to board by arming themselves with handspikes to defend themselves, and threatening the naval vessel with violence if they attempted to come aboard. A change of tide allowed the *Maria* to weigh anchor, and attempt to escape the navy, but at this point, seeing their prey about to escape, the naval tender began to fire on the merchant ship. The first shot caused considerable damage, and despite pleas from the *Maria* to stop firing, the naval vessel continued to fire their guns: the next volley killed the pilot of the ship on the spot, and it began to drift. The naval crew kept up the fire, and two more men were killed, and seven wounded, before it submitted.<sup>133</sup>

The action took place publicly, and caused fury in Poole. The crew of the *Maria* had not used firearms, and the local community saw the naval response as hugely disproportionate. As the *Courier* newspaper noted that the funeral of the killed pilot, Thomas Allen, was attended by 1,500 people:

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<sup>131</sup> See *The Sun*, 2 November 1793 and *The World*, 2 November 1793.

<sup>132</sup> TNA, ADM 1/2743, William Yeo to Philip Stephens, Poole, 2 January 1794; TNA, ADM 1/2743, William Yeo to Philip Stephens, 6 April 1794. See also TNA, ADM 1/2743, William Yeo to John Lester, 23 May 1794.

<sup>133</sup> *The Courier*, 16 December 1794

an assemblage of persons, amounting to upwards of three thousand, with countenances full of fury and revenge, had surrounded the quay, and but for the timely and well-tempered interference of Mr Jeffrey the Magistrates, the lieutenants and their gangs would certainly have all been butchered in their own way.<sup>134</sup>

The coroner's inquest declared the action 'wilful murder', and the three men in charge of the relevant impressment services, Lieutenants Arthur Glover and Nathaniel Philipps and Midshipman John Oliver, were tried for murder. Once again, though, the apparatus of the state served to protect the perpetrators of violence; once again, there would be no convictions. In February 1795, as the Dorchester Assises began to arrange for the trial, the Admiralty solicitor James Dyson travelled to Dorchester to deal with the 'late unfortunate Affair' at Poole.<sup>135</sup> In the initial hearing, the Admiralty successfully intervened to move the trial to London, arguing that the trial should be held in an Admiralty Court rather than the Dorchester Assises. Since the offence had taken place at sea, they suggested that they had jurisdiction, and made the point that the significant public outcry, meant that 'the Prisoners are not likely to obtain a fair and impartial Trial there, by reason of the prejudices entertained against them by the Person who would compose the juries'.<sup>136</sup>

At the ensuing trial, the three men were acquitted of any wrongdoing: it was deemed that their press warrants were proven to be accurate, their attempt at entering the ship therefore deemed legal, and therefore that they were not at fault for the murders: the Admiralty Court found them innocent.<sup>137</sup> The people of Poole were furious, and bowing to public pressure, the Corporation of Poole offered fresh Bills of Indictment at the ensuing Dorchester Assises against the offending officers, 'for the several murders of Thomas Allen, Peter Rake and John Housley'.<sup>138</sup> Once again, though, the Admiralty' solicitor intervened, travelling to Dorchester to offer council to the accused, and once again meeting Yeo 'whose evidence may be wanted' at the King's Arms Inn at Dorchester, bringing with him press warrants issued to Lieutenants Phillip and Glover, and His Majesty's Order in Council for impressing seamen. Dyson ensured

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<sup>134</sup> *The Courier*, 16 December 1794

<sup>135</sup> TNA, ADM 1/3683, James Dyson to Alexander Stephens, 28 February 1795

<sup>136</sup> TNA, ADM 1/3683, James Dyson to Evan Nepean, 7 March

<sup>137</sup> *Courier and Evening Gazette*, 16 Dec 1794, *Sun*, 2 Dec. 1794; *Oracle and Public Advertiser*, 5 Dec 1794; *Morning Chronicle*, 11 June 1795; *Morning Post*, 2 July 1795. I am grateful to Nick Rogers for these references.

<sup>138</sup> TNA, ADM 1/3683, James Dyson to Nepean, 28 July 1795

that the defendants pleaded 'autrefois acquit'; namely, that they had already been tried. The twelve judges presiding over the case agreed, and the prisoners were once again set at large.<sup>139</sup> The navy took some steps to calm local tensions: the three accused officers were moved to different regions, and the regulating captain, William Yeo, was offered a position as Regulating Officer of Haslar Hospital; his position in Southampton had become untenable.<sup>140</sup> Other than that, though, there would be no justice for the three victims of the attack.

The state did not win every case, and we should recognise that local conditions and agendas could play an important role, and not every case saw courts take the side of the state. In Hull in February 1794, Mark Bolt was tried after resisting impressment, in which he shot and killed one of the sailors, Charles Darley. The coroner's jury recognised 'the principles of the Bill of Rights that every Englishman's house (or apartment) is his castle' and returned a verdict of homicide in self-defence.<sup>141</sup> But elsewhere, we see repeated examples of the practitioners of state violence being excused and protected. In 1794 a press gang from the frigate *Aurora* boarded the merchant ship *Sarah and Elizabeth* of Hull, killing a carpenter's mate, which the local coroner judged as murder. However, there would be no punishment, although the captain was transferred to another ship and sent to the West Indies. In 1797, a pregnant woman was struck on the head by a naval lieutenant and so 'ill-treated' by his press gang that she died the following morning. Two of the gang were arrested, but there is not record of a trial for either.<sup>142</sup> Two years later, an Irishman named Joseph Leahey was stabbed to death in a struggle against a press gang', but the gang pleaded that they had feared for their lives, and were found guilty only of manslaughter, and fined one shilling each. The lenient sentence caused public uproar, not least because a contemporaneous trial saw another man, Charles Eyles, fined 40 shillings for merely 'stealing coal'. A crowd gathered and one rioter was killed before the Wapping and Union Volunteers mobilised to keep the peace.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> TNA, ADM 1/3683, James Dyson to Evan Nepean, 15 July 1795; TNA, ADM 1/3683, James Dyson to Evan Nepean, 28 July 1795; *Whitehall Evening Post*, 6 August 1795

<sup>140</sup> TNA, ADM 1/2743, William Yeo to Evan Nepean, 8 August 1795

<sup>141</sup> *Bristol Gazette*, 20 Feb. 1794.

<sup>142</sup> J.J. Sheehan, *History of Kingston-upon-Hull*, 1864, p. 148; referenced in Brian Lavery, *Nelson's Navy; The Ships, Men and Organization* (London: Conway, rev. edn, 2013), p. 118; *Bell's Weekly Messenger*, 6 August 1797; *Courier*, 5 August 1797

<sup>143</sup> Old Bailey Proceedings Online ([www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org), version 8.0, 20 January 2021), January 1799; trial of James Eyles (t17990109-5); TNA HO 47/23/7 ff 27-30; HO 43/27/9. See also Margarett Lincoln,

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Countless sailors operating in the 1790s were confronted with a political institution able and willing to use violent means to secure maritime labour. Furthermore, the actions of those employed on press gangs, and those of the British government, allow us to think again about the reach of the state in the 1790s. At a time when leading radicals such as Thomas Hardy, John Horne Hooke and John Thelwall were tried very publicly and acquitted of any wrongdoing, the examples laid out here suggests a far more powerful – and even insidious – state. We see press gangs acting with impunity, committing violence and avoiding punishment. In this sense, impressment was a form of state-sanctioned violence: officers were given unprecedented means to seize men and combat opposition, while those who took part in press gangs and committed excessively violent acts were acquitted in courts of law. Scholars of state-sanctioned violence have noted that it need not take the form of an organised conspiracy. On the contrary, it can occur when an institution creates conditions in which individuals could act free of persecution from the letter of the law.<sup>144</sup> These examples suggest that we might start to think about the much murkier, ‘soft’, or hidden reach of the eighteenth-century British state.

The primary defence put forward by contemporaries was one of necessity. By 1795, shortfalls in skilled sailors forced Pitt to try increasingly controversial fixes, such as forcing shipowners to supply men to the navy, but the response was hostile, and merchants at Whitehaven petitioned Parliament pointing out the disastrous consequences this would have on their trade. It was the following month that they introduced the Quota Acts, in which the challenge of manning the navy was off-loaded

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*Trading in War: London's Maritime World in the Age of Cook and Nelson* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018), pp. 202-5.

<sup>144</sup> Francisco Herreros, ‘“The Full Weight of the State’: The Logic of Random State-Sanctioned Violence’, in *Journal of Peace Research* (2006); Jeffrey Ian Ross, *An Introduction to Political Crime* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2012); Jeffrey Ian Ross, *The Dynamics of Political Crime* (Sage, 2003); Melvin Delgado, *State-Sanctioned Violence: Advancing a Social Work Social Justice Agenda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Eric W. Shoon, ‘The Asymmetry of Legitimacy: Analyzing the Legitimation of Violence in 30 Cases of Insurgent Revolution’, *Social Forces*, Vol. 93, No. 2 (December 2014), pp. 779-801. Much historical literature on state sanctioned violence has concentrated on issues of race and gender: see for example: Treva B. Lindsey, ‘Post-Ferguson: A “Herstorical” Approach to Black Violability’, in *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (2015), pp. 232-237; Tyson E. J. Marsh, ‘Critical Pedagogy for Black Youth Resistance’ in *Black History Bulletin*, Vol. 79, No. 1 (Spring 2016), pp. 14-23.

onto counties. Although successful, this too was abandoned in 1797 when many counties chose to pay a hefty fine rather than disrupt the local labour markets. One solution to the problem that seems to have completely bypassed Admiralty and government officials was raising the wages of naval seamen, which had not been increased since the seventeenth century. This is all the more peculiar when we see that the government had made a connection between financial incentive and national service, and had been happy to throw money at problem through bounties. Nor were the government entirely ignorant of the needs of sailors: in 1795 the Seaman's Relief Bill was passed that allowed sailors to send a portion of their wages to their families on shore.<sup>145</sup> Nonetheless, there would be no enhancement of the sailors' wage until 1797, when sailors' took matters into their own hands.

Necessary or not, the government's approach to recruitment bore fruit. The wave of community resistance that emerged in 1793-94 was unprecedented, and in some regions severely hampered recruitment efforts, but the number of men serving in the Royal Navy steadily rose throughout the 1790s. A force that amounted to 14,303 seamen in October 1792 reached 55,843 men in April 1793, 79,703 by October 1793, and 94,499 by October 1794. This would not be enough, however, and it would not be until the summer of 1799 that numbers reached a peak of 129,884 men.<sup>146</sup> Even allowing for the fact that a proportion of these men came forward of their own volition, we are left with the uncomfortable truth that tens of thousands of men serving in the Royal Navy during the Revolutionary Wars were there through coercion. Sailors were not, however, pliant, unthinking cogs in a martial machine. Over the subsequent years, some chose to adapt and survive: John Nicol would later rationalise that 'he was as happy as a man in blasted prospects can be', and fought with valour at the Battle of the Nile in 1798. Even sailors that conformed, though, remained critical of coercion, and Nicol explained his new-found dedication as offering the quickest route to winning the war and thus being allowed to return home.<sup>147</sup> As the next chapter will demonstrate, it seems that many sailors followed Nicol's lead and found ways to survive a conflict unprecedented in scale and scope.

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<sup>145</sup> Troy Bickham and Ian Abbey, "'The Greatest Encouragement to Seamen': Pay, Families, and the State in Britain during the French Wars, 1793-1815', *Journal of Social History*, 2021

<sup>146</sup> TNA, ADM 8/68-70, 78

<sup>147</sup> Nicol, *Life and Adventures*, pp. 172, 179, 185-99