THE BRITISH MERCHANT SEAMAN IN THE AGE OF FREE TRADE : GOVERNMENT AND BRITISH MARITIME LABOUR 1815-1860

BY

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In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the merchant seaman occupied a central position in British government policy towards shipping. The Navigation Acts, dating from 1660 and refined by subsequent measures, for all their complexity in terms of detail were based on a simple premise : that maritime power ultimately depended on the ability to man the Navy with skilled men, which in turn relied on the merchant service to supply this need. In the classic phrase, the merchant navy served as the "nursery" of seamen.

The navigation code as it existed in the early nineteenth century embraced virtually every facet of the British shipping industry : the vessels themselves, their ownership, their access to trades and the way they were manned [1]. Over and above the protection afforded by the Navigation Acts shipowners benefited from the host of discriminatory charges and duties to which foreign ships and their cargoes were subject in British ports, as they did from timber duties favouring colonial timber, a trade from which foreigners were excluded. Exceptional though protection for shipping was in its range and coherence, as also in the way it tended to be justified in terms of national need, it fitted the context of a commercial policy characterised by trade restriction and monopoly [2].

The forty years after 1815 saw a fundamental reajustment of that policy. As trade became increasingly regarded as the essence of Britain's prosperity, so the arguments of the new science of political economy in favour of a free flow of goods across national boundaries found support among manufacturing and mercantile interests, as also in parliament. Britain's progress to freer trade proceeded tentatively and

[1] See Lawrence A. HARPER, *The English Navigation Laws. A Seventeenth-Century Experiment in Social Engineering*, New York, 1939, Appendix 1, for a detailed summary of the Acts.

[2] See Ralph DAVIS, *The Rise of the English Shipping Industry in the 17th and 18th Centuries*, Newton Abbot, 2nd ed., 1972, pp. 310-313 ; Arthur R. M. LOWER, *Great Britain's Woodyard, British America and the Timber Trade, 1763-1867*, Toronto, 1973 ; J. POTTER, *The British Timber Duties, 1815-1860*, in : *Economica*, n.s., XXIII, pp. 122-136.

unevenly, but the underlying trend in this period was clearly set in the direcion of lower tariffs and reduced colonial preference [3].

For shipping, the opening of Britain's coasting trade to foreign vessels in 1854 has sometimes been characterised as the final stage of a movement to unrestricted sea carriage which had begun in 1823, when Britain first offered to negotiate reciprocity treaties. In fact while reciprocity treaties put British and foreign vessels on an equal footing in terms of duties and local port charges, they did not strike in any formal way at the Navigation Acts. These were recodified and simplified in 1825, possibly at the instigation of the shipping interest but certainly with its support, and were the subject of minor uncontroversial modifications in 1833 and 1844, but survived intact until 1849. "The Act to Amend the Laws in Force for the Encouragement of British shipping", usually referred to as the repeal of the Navigation Acts, which removed all barriers to foreign shipping in overseas trade, fell short of a total rejection of protection. The laws which protected British seamen against competition from foreigners, as also the coastal trade, were left unscathed – to be dealt with by another administration a few years later.

Much could be said about the factors leading to Britain's decision to dispense with protection for its shipping industry and the way in which this effected one sector or another. In the present context it is proposed to concentrate on a single aspect only – maritime labour. One issue here is whether the repeal of the Navigation Acts meant that the British mercantile marine was no longer regarded as the "nursery of seamen" and what connection there might be with contemporary discussions of manning reform within the Navy [4]. Another is how far the ending of limitations on shipowner's freedom to employ whom they wished was indicative of a generally more liberal state attitude to maritime labour questions. Consideration of both of these throws light on an intriguing subsidiary problem : why the major manning restrictions survived the repeal of the Navigation Acts in 1849 but were ended in 1853 [5].

I

The British Navy did not begin to approach the status of "a permanent, specialized fighting force of the Crown" until after the mid-nineteenth century. The years immediately before and after the Crimean War saw reforms of the recruiting system directed at encouraging continuous service, but these, and the creation of the Royal Navy Reserve in 1860, marked only the first stage in what proved to be a long

[3] See Lucy M. BROWN, *The Board of Trade and the Free Trade Movement 1830-1842*, Oxford, 1958.
[4] See R. TAYLOR, *Manning the Royal Navy : the Reform of the Recruiting System, 1852-1862*, in : *Mariner's Mirror*, First Part, 44, 1958, pp. 302-313 ; Second Part, 45, 1959, pp. 46-58 ; and J. S. BROMLEY (ed.), *The Manning of the Royal Navy : Selected Public Pamphlets 1693-1873*, Navy Records Society, 1974, Introduction pp. XIII-XLVII.
[5] 12 Vict. c. 29 ; 16 & 17 Vict. c. 131.

process of creation of a professional navy, distinct from the merchant service [6]. Even in the late 1880s a confidential Admiralty survey of manning could refer to reliance on "the general power of calling on all sea-faring men, or any class or classes of sea-faring men" [7]. The right of impressment of merchant seamen into the navy, to which this referred, was, however, only an extreme illustration of the relationship between the two services as it existed in the period with which we are concerned. With no standing navy, the commissioning of a naval vessel involved taking on a crew only for the time of that commission, nominally five years but in practice three. What happened to the seamen when the commission ended was described by Admiral Cochrane in 1848 : "the ship at last is paid off, when a disruption of their society takes place ; the bond that unites them is broken, at the very moment when its effects were becoming most beneficial they are scattered to the winds" [8].

This wasteful and inefficient traditional "hire and discharge" system of manning the Fleet was necessarily heavily reliant on recruitment of seamen who had previously served in merchant vessels. According to Admiralty calculations, between 1839 and 1847 68,559 men entered the navy, with the number of men borne in any year averaging just under 30,000. Of the total recruited, 22,543 were merchant seamen, 8,980 had never been to sea before, and 37,076 had seen naval service previously. (An unknown proportion of these men with naval experience would also have been employed in the past as merchant seamen.) In the competition for labour resources the two services were unequally matched. In wartime, bounties and impressment shifted the balance away from the mercantile sector ; in peace, the natural preference of seamen for merchant service reasserted itself and naval vessels could wait months to achieve their full complement of men. Desertion was also a problem. Twenty-six per cent of men who entered the navy direct from the merchant service, and sixteen per cent of those who had previously served, subsequently deserted [9].

There was much within the naval recruitment system to attract the attention of administrative reformers. As the Secretary to the Admiralty explained to the Treasury in March 1853 :

> This desultory mode of proceeding is a cause of great embarrassment and expense in conducting the ordinary duties of naval service. It creates uncertainty as to the period when ships may be expected to be ready for sea ; and the evil becomes one of great magnitude and a serious danger when political considerations suddenly demand the rapid equipment of Her Majesty's ships [10].

[6] TAYLOR, First Part, *op. cit.*, p. 302. See C. J. BARTLETT, *Great Britain and Sea Power 1815-1853*, Oxford, 1963, pp. 304-310, for a critical evaluation of the short-term impact of these reforms.

[7] BROMLEY, *op. cit.*, p. XIII.

[8] *Report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords on the Navigation Laws*, British Parliamentary Papers (BPP), 1847-48 (XX Part II); Q. 8218.

[9] *Report from the Select Committee of the House of Commons on the Navigation Laws*, BPP, 1847 (XLI), p. 439.

[10] *Copies of Correspondence between the Board of Treasury and the Board of Admiralty on the Subject of the Manning of the Royal Navy, together with copies of a Report of a Committee of Naval Officers...*, BPP, 1852-53 (LX), p. 11.

But few among those who sought to end the right to impress or among the many talented naval officers who offered alternative manning schemes in pamphlets or memoranda appear to have challenged the ultimate role of the mercantile marine in providing naval manpower [11]. This is certainly true of the manning experts who gave evidence to the two parliamentary select committees which examined the Navigation Laws in 1847 and 1848. Even Sir James Stirling, who denied that the merchant service in practice served as a worthwhile nursery for the navy and advocated a permanent standing navy, looked to the former for compulsory service in wartime, urged measures to improve the quality of training and wanted naval recruitment offices to be established in seaports [12].

Further confirmation that the "nursery" concept had continuing force in this period is provided by legislation promoted by Sir James Graham in the mid-1830s. His Merchant Seamen's Act made written engagements compulsory, reaffirmed the right of seamen to break their contracts in order to enlist in the navy and re-enacted legislation of ten years earlier which compelled ships to carry apprentices in proportion to tonnage [13]. It also established a registry of seamen, with powers to supervise the apprenticeship scheme. Arguably, encouragement of apprenticeship owed something to concern about paupers, since it compelled masters to take such boys on if they were offered or otherwise incur a fine [14]. But the terms in which Graham presented his proposals to the House of Commons indicated wider concerns. They were :

> connected with the manning of His Majesty's Navy : for as the merchant service of the country was the nursery from which the King's navy was to be supplied ; it was necessary to protect the merchant seaman : otherwise the numbers to which the state would look in time of necessity would be greatly reduced [15].

Within the present context, where we are concerned with manning in relation to commercial liberalisation, the provisions of Graham's Act have a particular interest. Compulsory apprenticeship clearly represented an additional restriction on the freedom of shipowners to operate their vessels as they thought fit. In fact although the regulations were the subject of complaint by the mid-1840s, when they were more effectively enforced, their original introduction in 1825 appears to have been at the instigation of specialist shipowners, concerned to expand the supply of seamen, at a time of labour unrest [16]. In 1835 the pauper apprenticeship provisions excited some

[11] See the evidence taken by the above committee printed in BPP, 1859 (VI), Appendices 1-14, pp. 329-351, for a number of such schemes.

[12] S.C. Navigation Laws, 1847-48 (XX Pt. II), Q. 538.

[13] 5 & 6 Wil 4 c. 19 ; 4 Geo 4 c. 25.

[14] On the history of the registry, see the statement by J. H. Brown, Registrar of Seamen, S.C. Nav. Laws, BPP, 1847-48, XX, Appendix M, pp. 970-975. On apprenticeship, see E. G. THOMAS, *The Old Poor Law and Maritime Apprenticeship*, in : *Mariner's Mirror*, 63, 1977, pp. 153-161.

[15] Hansard, (Third Series), 1835, XXVI, 1121.

[16] S.C. Nav. Laws, 1847-48 (XX Part II), Appendix M, p. 973.

adverse comment in the Commons from the shipping interest, on the grounds that this devalued the position, but the general principle appears to have been acceptale [17]. No doubt large investors in shipping like Duncan Dunbar, whose apprentices normally remained in his service, did not require legislation to persuade them to train up boys to seafaring. But those with fewer vessels found the requirement to support the boys when ashore rather more oppressive [18]. Indeed, the number of apprentices indentured annually in the decade after compulsion ceased was approximately half the previous level, which certainly suggests that, left to themselves, shipowners would have taken on fewer apprentices [19].

II

In the above discussion the "nursery" concept has been separated from the context of the protective system. The two are often treated by historians as inseparable, whereas at the time when repeal of the Navigation Acts was under consideration it was precisely because some politicians regarded the two questions as distinct that they were able to support repeal whilst stressing the continued importance of the merchant navy for the country's defence. This explains Sir James Graham's marriage of enthusiasm for manning reforms and general interest in admiralty questions, with vocal support in parliament for the ending of protection for shipping [20].

What originally linked the "nursery of seamen" to the panoply of protection, epitomised by the Navigation Acts but extending beyond these, was the assumption that a large merchant navy was necessarily an artificial creation. Left to itself, it was thought, there wa no guarantee that the national merchant fleet would be of sufficient size to provide such a pool of labour ; it needed protection. From this flowed the main elements of the British navigation system as it still existed prior to repeal : absolute exclusion of foreign vessels from the coasting trade and trade between Britain and her colonies ; limitation of carriage of certain bulky goods from Europe to British ships or those of the producing country (after 1825 to ships of the country of export) ; similar restrictions on importing goods from distant regions ; and, finally, absolute prohibition on the entry of these via Europe in ships of any nationality.

Along with these provisions favouring British registered ships went manning regulations intended to ensure that the benefits of protecting the shipping interest did indeed have the effect of creating a national pool of seafarers. In the coasting trade, which included that between Great Britain and Ireland, the entire crew had to be British. In the foreign and colonial trades the manning requirement was less stringent ; here, up to a quarter could be foreigners [21].

[17] Hansard, (Third Series), 1835, XXVIII, 199.
[18] S.C. Nav. Laws, BPP, 1847 (X), Q. 4922 ; 5318-5321.
[19] BPP, 1859 (XVII, II), 180-186 ; 1861 (LVIII), 21.
[20] Hansard, (Third Series), 1849, CIV, 655-676.
[21] For a useful summary of the main provisions as they existed in 1847 see CS.C. Nav. Laws, BPP, 1847 (X), Appendix, pp. 146-155.

The notion of what constituted "British" was a somewhat selective one. The discriminatory Lascar Act of 1823 permitted recruitment of lascars only when British seamen could not be found. This meant in practice that seamen who were native of British India could not legally work on ships trading out from Britain to India. Another provision specifically excluded them from serving as British seamen for the purposes of the Navigation Act quota, although for other purposes they were regarded as British subjects [22]. No such limitation was placed on the rights of seamen from other British possessions. In the words of a Board of Trade official, "a negro seaman born in one of the British West Indian colonies is as much a British seamen as a white man would be" [23].

Wartime, when the Navy competed with the shipowners for the supply of men, saw the suspension of these provisions and an influx of foreigners into the British merchant fleet. With the coming of peace the provisions were re-imposed, remaining until the changes at mid-century as the legal framework within which masters worked when taking on crews. In practice foreign seamen continued to work illegally in the coasting trades. The introduction of a more detailed register of seamen in 1844 revealed the presence of a number (though exactly how many it is impossible to say) of foreign nationals, some of whom subsequently sought naturalisation to enable them to continue to work on British coastal vessels [24].

Despite the possibility of employing foreigners outside the coasting trade, there was little economic incentive to do so, given that in practice it was impossible to discriminate against foreign seamen in the level of wages. There were also possible managerial disadvantages such as that suggested by the Liverpool shipowner John Younghusband in 1848 : "the foreign seaman is so different from the British sailor in his habits of life and mode of diet that they never amalgamate well as a crew" [25]. Such considerations explain the small number of foreigners to be found on British vessels. In 1851, for example, 5,793 foreign seamen were employed on British ships, only 4.2% of the total [26].

III

Britain's movement to free trade had two main legislative phases. The first occurred between 1820 and 1827 under Lord Liverpool's administration ; the second began in the early 1840s under Sir Robert Peel, who was responsible for repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846. The momentum was maintained by Lord Russell's Whig cabinet, which brought forward the bill to repeal the Navigation Acts.

[22] 4 Geo. 4, c. 80. See Conrad DIXON, *Lascars : The Forgotten Seamen*, in : Rosemary OMMER & Gerald PANTING (eds.), *Working Men Who Got Wet*, Newfoundland, 1980, pp. 263-279.
[23] S.C. Nav. Laws, BPP, 1847 (X), Q. 67.
[24] S.C. Nav. Laws, BPP, 1847 (X), Q. 3725.
[25] S.C. Nav. Laws, BPP, 1847-48, (XX), Q. 5265.
[26] Manning Committee, BPP (1860 Sess. I), VI, Appendix 47.

The 1820s marked a major departure in British commercial policy. Three members of Lord Liverpool's government, Wallace, Robinson but particularly Huskisson, were responsible for refashioning Britain's complex code of trade restrictions. Their actions were informed but not dictated by an acceptance of the precepts of the new political economy of which David Ricardo was at this time the chief advocate. The Navigation Acts were necessarily part of this re-evaluation, but Wallace's aim was to update them (for example, by removing the by now anomalous restrictions on Dutch shipping), not to weaken them. Similarly, whatever the ultimate effect of Huskisson's reciprocity proposals were in encouraging foreign shipping in the trades affected, it was not his intention to strike at the principle of a protected British shipping industry [27].

In a speech delivered in May 1826 Huskisson, President of the Board of Trade, encapsulated the dilemma faced by those of a liberal economic persuasion confronting navigation laws. Commercially,he argued, they were disadvantageous : "the regulations of our navigation system, however salutary they may be, must, more or less, act as a restraint on that freedom of commercial pursuit, which it is desirable should be open to those who have capital to employ". Nevertheless they were based upon "the highest ground of political necessity" ; the need for national safety and defence, security of colonial possessions, protection of commerce from the risks associated with war and the "necessity of preserving ascendancy on the ocean".

In pursuing these ends, Huskisson contended that the interests of the shipowner should not be allowed to "cramp commerce" beyond what "state necessity" required, but nothing he said can be taken as a denial of the efficacy of protection in serving that national need [28].

This view, of course, was by no means inconsistent with the tenets of opolitical economy as set out by Adam Smith, whose oft-quoted comment in *The Wealth of Nations* – "as defence, however, is of much more importance than opulence, the Act of Navigation is, perhaps, the wisest of all the commercial regulations of England" – was by implication deeply pessimistic as to the ability of British shipping to prosper unaided.

In general, it may be said, free traders seem to have been content in the 1820s and 1830s to regard protection of shipping as an acceptable exception to the general rule. In the free-trade campaign which gripped the country in the early 1840s the Navigation provisions were largely forgotten. Compared with issues like the Corn Laws, the Navigation Acts, touching as they did so indirectly on the interests of the consumer as to be virtually invisible, hardly seemed central. Indeed, as already noted, in 1844 a measure updating the current Navigation Acts passed both Houses of Parliament without opposition [29].

[27] On commercial policy in this period see Barry GORDON, *Political Economy in Parliament 1819-23*, 1976 ; ID;, *Economic Doctrine and Tory Liberalism 1824-30*, 1979 ; J.E. COOKSON, *Lord Liverpool's Administration*, 1975.

[28] Hansard, (First Series) 1826, 1146.

[29] 8 & 9 Vict. 88.

With the repeal of the Corn Laws, abolition of the Navigation Acts became a real possibility for the first time. The new government led by Lord John Russell was by no means united in its opposition to protection for shipping, but its supporters in parliament included some free-trade enthusiasts, among them J. L. Ricardo, nephew of the economist. Attention having been drawn to the Acts by the need to suspend their operation in relation to corn, back-bench pressure led the government to agree to the apointment of a Commons Select Committee in January 1847 to investigate the Laws. Free traders dominated the membership of this committee, but not its equivalent in the Lords, which the protectionists succeeded in setting up the following year. The two committees, neither of which in the event presented a report, between them sat for a total of 64 days, called 87 witnesses, and produced two massive volumes of evidence. Not surprisingly, no clear conclusion emerged from the mass of detailed information these two committees accumulated other than that the outcome of repeal was uncertain. The cabinet toyed with the possibility of conditional repeal and months elapsed while British plenipotentiaries tried to establish what foreign geovernments might be prepared to offer in exchange. Meanwhile the Board of Trade and the Colonial Office respectively reported threats from Prussia not to renew its reciprocity treaty, and from the North American legislatures appeals, equally threatening in their implications if not heeded, for the restrictions on shipping to be lifted. But it was not until the spring of 1849, two years after repeal was first mooted, that the bill to repeal the Navigation Acts finally came forward – to pass the Commons with a fair margin but to be approved by the Lords with a majority of only ten votes [30].

It should be clear from what has been said that repeal of the Navigation Acts was a far more politically controversial measure than is sometimes assumed. Undoubtedly, what made the final outcome so uncertain was the widely held belief in the continued role of the merchant navy as the source of naval manpower. A memorial sent to the Duke of Wellington by the General Shipowners' Society prior to the Second Reading in the Lords fairly characterised the question as being "reduced to this single issue, will or will not repeal diminish the number of British sailors employed in the merchant service and therebye endanger the nursery for seamen which that service affords" [31].

What distinguished supporters of repeal from their opponents was not their attitude to the nursery of seamen but their judgement of the results of abandoning the Navigation Acts. The philosopher John Stuart Mill expressed his view in *Principles of Political Economy*:

[30] See J. H. CLAPHAM, *The Last Years of the Navigation Acts*, in : *English Historical Review*, XXV, 1910, reprinted in E. M. CARUS-WILSON (ed.), *Essays in Economic History*, vol. III, 1962, pp. 144-178 ; S. PALMER, *Policies, shipping and the Repeal of the Navigation Laws*, Manchester, 1990.

[31] Wellington Papers, University of Southampton, MS 2/191/26.

> The Navigation Laws were founded, in theory and profession, on the necessity of keeping up a "nursery of seamen" for the navy. On this last subject I at once admit that the object is worth the sacrifice ; and that a country exposed by invasion by sea, if it cannot otherwise have sufficient ships and sailors of its own to secure the means of manning in an emergency an adequate fleet, is quite right in obtaining the means, even at an economic sacrifice in point of cheapness of transport. ... But English ships and sailors can now navigate as cheaply as those of any other country ; maintaining at least an equal competition with the other maritime nations even in their own trade. The ends which may once have justified Navigation Laws require them no longer and afford no reason for maintaining this invidious exception to the general mode of free trade [32].

In fact the competitiveness of English ships and seafarers was far from beyond dispute. Experience since the introduction of reciprocity treaties suggested that once discriminatory port charges and special imposts were removed from foreign shipping, the maintenance of Mill's "equal competition" was by no means assured. By the mid-1840s 42% of tonnage entering British ports in the North and West European trades was foreign owned. United States' shipping accounted for 68% of tonnage entering Britain in the trade between the two countries, and the opening of the trade between the North American and West Indian colonies with Britain promised one of several new fields for U.S. maritime enterprise. On such facts rested much of the protectionist case. The free traders' strongest card was the equally incontrovertible expansion of opportunities for sea carriage ; if the share of British shipping was falling, this was in the context of a rising market [33].

Convinced free traders and protectionists alike could find enough to suit their preconceptions or prejudices in the evidence given to the two Select Committees, but many of those who sat in the Commons or Lords could not be described in these terms. In the Second Reading division in April 1849 some MP's who had supported Corn Law abolition cast their vote against repeal of the Navigation Acts. It is reasonable to assume that the number of opponents of repeal, particularly in the Lords but also in the Commons, would have been larger had what was proposed in 1849 amounted to total repeal. But it was far from this. The measure which the British parliament passed in 1849 was a compromise.

In excluding the coastal trade from repeal, as in retaining the manning provisions in foreign and colonial trades, which laid down that three-quarters of the crew should be British, the Russell government sought to ensure that the merchant navy remained the province of British seamen. Only the apprenticeship regulations and the limitations on employment of Lascars were dispensed with. In part this approach was dictated by the immediate parliamentary political considerations already indicated. Another factor was the prominence of defence as a political issue at this time, while a further influence was fear of unrest among seamen, whose hostility to foreigners was

[32] J. S. Mill, *Principles of Political Economy. Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, III, Toronto, 1965), pp. 916-917.

[33] BPP, Trade and Navigation Returns.

well known [34]. But it also reflected the government's lack of confidence in its own rhetoric. Labouchere, as President of the Board of Trade, the minister responsible for the repeal bill, genuinely balked at removing protection from British seafarers and in 1853 was to vote against Cardwell's proposal to do so.

It was not only the free traders who were less than happy that the main element of protection of maritime labour survived the repeal of 1849. The General Shipowners' Society's Wellington memorandum notwithstanding, the shipping interest did not evoke the nursery of seamen argument as much as might be expected when presenting the protectionist cas. In his evidence to the parliamentary select committees G. F. Young, the industry's prime spokesman, preferred to rest the claim to protection on the importance of shipping and shipbuilding as great economic interests [35]. While appreciating the protection which the Navigation Laws offered, shipowners resented the accompanying restrictions on their freedom in the labour market. If some regarded protection as the condition for their survival, others put the emphasis rather differently – protection was the *quid pro quo* for the burden of serving as the nursery of seamen.

IV

If the Act of 1849 did not represent a clear break with the old navigation system, neither did it mark the beginning of a new non-interventionist phase of government policy towards shipping generally. In its immediate wake came such measures as the creation of the Marine Department of the Board of Trade, with new responsibilities for supervising the hiring and payment of seamen, and the compulsory examination of masters and mates [36]. The repeal of the Navigation Acts did not instigate these developments ; they all had a long genesis, but repeal reinforced the argument for improving the educational standard of seafarers. Other initiatives, for example reforms bringing reductions in the charges for lighthouses and pilotage, were an attempt to confront the shipowner's long-standing claim that such payments put them at a competitive disadvantage.

In contrast to these measures, which originated within government, the impetus to do away with the limitation on employment of foreigners in British ships came from within the shipping industry itself. In the first year after repeal became effective, in a number of ports shipowners and seamen found themselves united in opposition to the new system of shipping offices established by the Mercantile Marine Act of 1850. A memorial sent by shipowners, master mariners and seamen in South Shields to the Board of Trade in 1851 referred to the new system of engagement and discharge of

[34] See M. S. PARTRIDGE, *The Russell Cabinet and National Defence, 1846-1852*, in : *History*, 72, 1987, pp. 231-250.

[35] S.C. Nav. Laws, BPP, 1847 (X), Q. 5643-5645.

[36] J. H. WILDE, *The Creation of the Marine Department of the Board of Trade*, in : *Journal of Transport History*, Second Series, 1956.

crews as "servile degradation, vigorous coercion and oppressive taxation", and the P&O crews and management at Southampton were similarly in agreement in regarding the offices as unnecessary [37]. In other ports unrest was more pronounced. At Hull, it was reported in February 1851, the sailors with a "regular committee and committee room who issue placards ... do their utmost to prevent any men signing articles at the shipping office to go to sea", while in Sunderland the seamen rioted [38]. Labour unrest was not, however, directed solely at government. With freight rates rising in response to a boom in emigration the seamen were pressing for higher wages, with some success ; a distinct upward trend was apparent by 1853 [39].

These developments encouraged the shipowning interests in their campaign against the manning clauses. Consultations by the Admiralty Manning Committee of 1852 with shipowners in the major ports left it in no doubt as to the owners' resistance to any reintroduction of apprenticeship and their wish to dispense with the restrictions that remained.

> The shipowners appear to be disconcerted by recent legislative enactments and inclined to seek for relief in measures which we cannot but regard as prejudicial viz. the permission to navigate their ships without any restriction as to the proportion of British and foreign seamen [40].

But despite the judgment of the Manning Committee that to open British ships fully to foreign seamen would prove "highly injurious", driving British seamen into serving on colonial and United States vessels, and weakening the merchant service as the nursery, the shipowners won the argument as far as the Aberdeen administration was concerned. Cardwell's wide-ranging Merchant Shipping Amendment Act of 1853, which also did away with the register ticket, ended all restrictions on the employment of foreigners in both the foreign and coasting trades. The following year saw the final stage of the repeal of the Navigation Acts when the coastal trade itself was opened.

The repeal of the manning clauses did not pass without some opposition in both the Lords and the Commons, but the shipping interest, normally vocal in any discussion of maritime questions, was predictably quiet on this subject, where for once it found itself in agreement with the liberal free-trade lobby. The seamen, 47,000 of whom it was said had petitioned against the change, had to rely on aristocrats such as Lord Ellenborough to point out that this was a step "which would increase the profits of the shipowner by the reduction of the already small wages of the sailors" [41].

Those MP's and Peers who objected to the change did so on the grounds of national defence. Some assumed that shipowners would employ foreign seamen in

[37] BPP, Return of Memorials ... 1851 (LII), 307.
[38] Public Record Office, H.O. 45.
[39] Jon PRESS, *Wages in the Merchant Navy 1815-1854*, in : *Journal of Transport History*, Third Series, 2, 1981, pp. 38-39.
[40] Report of the 1852 Manning Committee, 1852-53 (LX), Para. 146.
[41] Hansard, (Third Series), 1853, CXXIX, 1671.

order to pay lower wages, others that it would encourage British sailors to look for employment elsewhere. "It would have the effect", Labouchere told the House of Commons, "of wounding the sensibilities of British sailors, and would involve us in a difficulty as to the national character of our ships" [42]. Against this, the fact that the ending of protection three years previously had failed to prove the disaster to shipping which some had predicted lent credence to Sir James Graham's view that :

> If they added to the commerce of the country, they infallibly added to the number of ships ; and if they added to the number of ships, they must infallibly add to the number of merchant seamen, and they thereby also increased the supply to the Queen's service from that nursery for seamen which he was anxious to see preserved [43].

V

In 1853, then, Britain finally broke the link between protection and the concept of the merchant service as the nursery of seamen for the Navy. In practice the long-term impact of the change was comparatively slight. Encouraged by circumstances associated with the Crimean War, the numbers of foreign seamen serving on British ships jumped spectacularly from 7,321 men in 1853 to 13,200 the following year, 8% of the total. Thereafter, their share of the workforce increased slowly ; by the late 1870s they still accounted for only 12% of seamen [44].

It is important, however, not to construe this victory for free trade as in any way a triumph for *laissez-faire*. The five hundred and four clauses of the 1854 consolidating Merchant Shipping Act were themselves ample testimony to the extent to which the British state continued to interest itself in merchant shipping. Arguably, no section of the British nineteenth-century labour force found itself in such close contact with officialdom as did the men who went to sea after 1850.

[42] *Ibid.*, 1853, CXXVIII, 1229.
[43] *Ibid.*, 107.
[44] BPP, 1860 (VI Sess. II), Appendix 47 ; Report on ... the Supply of British Seamen..., BPP, 1886 (LIX), 200.