

"The Master's Measure:" Remunerative Patterns for Hudson's Bay Company Captains, 1726-1736

Michael J. Broyles

In the 1680s, William Bond was a captain in the service of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC). After serving for several years, Captain Bond was required to take an oath "to neither Directly or indirectly drive any private Trade outward or homewards during the present expedition and to use all possible means he can to prevent private trade in others." For reasons unknown, Captain Bond initially declined to take the oath, yet he submitted when threatened with immediate discharge. Several points are apparent from this vignette: first, that the HBC had a problem with private trade carried on by its servants; second, that the company felt either that the captains were involved or at least could have done more to stop it; and finally, that something about HBC service appealed enough to Captain Bond to overcome his initial objections to the oath.

Why any vessel captain would choose to make the hazardous passage to Hudson's Bay is an interesting question. Moreover, since these masters would be impeded from conducting private trade — a lucrative activity condoned on most trade routes — a natural assumption would be that turnover among HBC officers would have been high due to the relative dearth of opportunities relative to other routes. Unfortunately, company records, which for the first century of operations contain only one brief section combining both the ships' compliment and officers' pay records, make a definitive study impracticable.⁴ Still, these documents do allow a brief glimpse at the income potential of a merchant vessel master over a sustained time and therefore deserve further examination.

These particular HBC vessel records span the years 1726-1736. During this period, the company annually employed between one and three vessels, with the latter figure the most common. Only three men were masters: William Coats, Christopher Middleton, and George Spurrell. Each made ten voyages as master: Middleton and Spurrell from 1726 to 1735, and Coats from 1727 to 1736. All three had served with the HBC before 1726 and continued to do so thereafter. This immediately makes the expected high turnover rate for captains appear suspect.

Potential income for these HBC captains came from three sources. The first, and most dependable, was their allotted monthly wage. A second, although less dependable, source was the gratuity the HBC gave to masters. Finally, several undependable, or even illegal, sources of income included prize, garnished seamen's wages, privateering, and private trade.

The monthly wage was the largest accountable income source for HBC masters. During the period in question, the company paid captains six pounds per month, which was about the industry average.⁹ A unique feature for HBC masters, however, was that they were paid for a full year, rather than merely for the five months most were actually at sea. Year-round employment was probably an attempt by the company to monopolize knowledge about the route to prevent interlopers from trading clandestinely with its servants or the natives. Regardless, a wage of six pounds per month, combined with full-time employment, meant that HBC captains earned seventy-two pounds per year in wages alone.

Supplemental to their wages, HBC masters normally received a yearly gratuity. Throughout the eleven-year period, this averaged sixty pounds per annum. According to materials in the company's archive, only once did a captain experience difficulty in receiving his gratuity. In 1736 Captain William Coats did not receive one; although no reason was provided, we know that the previous year Coats' vessel, the *Hudson's Bay Frigate*, was lost.¹⁰ The fact that Coats was initially denied a gratuity (although he later received a smaller sum) the year after he lost a company vessel suggests that the bonus was a type of performance-based incentive.¹¹ Yet although William Coats lost a company vessel, he continued to command vessels for the HBC into the next decade.

Another income opportunity for an enterprising captain involved prize.⁹ This was the term for the fees merchants paid for a vessel's lading and unloading. The average rate for prize has been calculated at sixpence per ton handled.¹⁰ Therefore, prize to either load or unload a 200-ton merchant vessel would have been about five pounds. On an HBC voyage, a vessel had to be loaded and unloaded twice, meaning that prize would have been earned four times. But since the crew did the actual work, seamen understandably demanded a percentage.¹¹ Since negotiations over prize were carried out for each individual voyage, it is difficult to estimate how much a captain earned. Moreover, company archives are unclear about who unloaded the vessels, and it is quite possible that in some years land-based employees may have done so, which would have decreased a seafarer's earnings. Still, while unloading a vessel required brute force, loading took some skill because an improperly stowed cargo could shift in rough weather and damage the vessel. As a result, lading was almost always entrusted to the crewmen whose lives hung in the balance.

In addition to his own wages, a captain occasionally was paid seamen's wages as well. The three HBC masters for whom we can document this are shown in table 1. It is apparent that the captain's receipt of sailors' wages was a spotty proposition at best because in many years nothing was earned. Yet there also existed the possibility for considerable profit. In 1735, George Spurrell brought in more than thirty-four pounds, and over the ten years he commanded company ships examined in this study, Spurrell averaged more than

nine pounds per annum. The other two captains in company employ earned considerably less, but still averaged more than three pounds per year each.

It is interesting to note who forfeited their wages to the captains. During this eleven-year period, twenty-four crew members lost wages to their masters.¹² One man was listed as a servant and seven more were classified as boys.¹³ The term servant in this instance suggests indentured servitude, and it is therefore likely that the master in question held his contract. Boys, as with any apprentices, would have given their wages to whomever they were apprenticed. While it was reasonable for servants and boys to hand over their wages to someone else, it does seem uncommon that only one in three crew members who lost their wages were servants or boys. Thirteen such crew members were classed as sailors. Additionally, one cook and one second mate lost their entire wages, and one carpenter forfeited his advance. What the captains were doing to cause sixteen officers and men to become indebted to them is a puzzle, although it is most likely that the masters lent the men money or posted bail for some legal trouble." But one fact is certain: in this period no man lost his wages more than once, so whatever the reason for the forfeiture, these seafarers never repeated it.

Table 1
Value of Seamen's Wages Received per Captain

Year	Captain Coats	Captain Middleton	Captain Spurrell
1726	0	0	0
1727	0	7.3.0	6.0.4
1728	0	0	0
1729	0	0	0
1730	6.15.0	12.12.7	5.7.6
1731	0	0	0
1732	0	0	10.2.0
1733	6.13.0	0	12.6.8
1734	0	5.11.4	24.11.8
1735	0	12.14.3	34.8.2
1736	18.4.10	0	0
Total	31.12.10	38.1.2	92.16.4

Note: All earnings are expressed in pounds, shilling and pence.

Source: See appendix.

One interesting opportunity for income, occasionally available to an HBC captain, was privateering. The eleven-year period was generally peaceful in Europe, although in 1739, shortly after the records ended, England and Spain went to war. In 1744, this war broadened to include France, and the HBC was quick to seize upon the additional chance for gain. In at least 1746 and 1747, independent vessels sent to the bay carried privateering commissions (in a later period company vessels were issued commissions as well).¹⁵ The standard division on privateers split the proceeds equally between the King, owners, captain, officers, and crew.¹⁶ While profits were always haphazard, and there are no recorded HBC captures, the potential for additional income did exist for an enterprising master.

Private trade, a risky practice for HBC employees due to the company's fierce opposition, was the final source of profits for a captain. Despite incessant efforts to eradicate it, the practice continued. In 1744, when Joseph Robson journeyed to Hudson's Bay on a vessel commanded by George Spurrell, he noted that "the eskimo for several days came off to us in great numbers, and gave us, in exchange for whatever we thought fit to offer them, whalebone, sea-horse teeth, seal skins, furs and even the apparel they had on." When Robson asked if truck with the natives was permitted, Spurrell replied "that they were not permitted to send a boat ashore in the straits upon any account," so while such exchanges violated the spirit of company decrees, they observed the letter of the directives.¹⁸ Company employees caught dealing in skins or furs faced severe penalties, including summary dismissal, wage forfeiture and contraband seizure.¹⁹ The company's monopoly, however, only specifically proscribed skins and furs. The only other admonishment concerning private trade was a directive that all factor, servant and agent dealings were to be for the company's benefit only.²⁰ Private trade, if carried on in such items as whalebone or sea-horse teeth, and even minerals like silver and copper, which were native to the area and within the Amerindian arsenal for the fur trade, probably would have avoided company

If a company employee successfully conducted private trade, sizeable returns were possible. Small and easily-transported items like combs, knives, spoons and tobacco brought 100 percent return on investment. Portable items like beads and shoes could return 300 percent, and fire steels could fetch 400 percent or more.²² Moreover, private trade could be conducted more simply by bringing alcohol and trading it to company employees at the posts. It was this last sort of private trade which cost Captain Coats his job in 1751.²³

HBC captains not only could have engaged in quasi-legal private trade on their own but also might have acted as intermediaries for other company employees. As early as the 1680s, a chief factor for the company noted in his report to the governor and committee that:

indeed most or all of them [company employees] have got private trade more, or less, which I can not possibly come to the knowledge of, they being so great with the masters and the ships company, that I am no more looked upon at that time than a cipher, especially when they are in their drink, so that if I command them about their business presently they will hit me in the teeth of their times being out, and that they will go home, the

master and seamen seeing this and finding that it is best fishing in moody waters, do as I fear more further these dissensions then by any means hinder them.²⁴

It is obvious that any company employee conducting private trade had to have a source of trade goods, and that source had to be able to transport the goods from Europe and back. The only transport available to HBC employees was the company vessel and its crew. Therefore, while it is certain that many HBC captains carried on their own private trade with the natives, it is also quite possible that the masters were acting as middlemen for factory employees in an even more lucrative private trade.

Although no final assessments about the earning potential of an HBC captain are possible because they successfully concealed their private trading profits, and because records on primage and privateering are lacking, the extant records do provide some insights. Between 1726 and 1736, the three masters each made ten voyages. For each voyage year, the captain was paid seventy-two pounds, or £720 over the ten years. Each also received a generous sixty pound gratuity for a successful voyage, which made another £600 over the ten years (£560 for Captain Coats). Finally, some crew members' wages, for whatever reason, went to the captain: Coats made £31 12s 10d; Middleton earned £38 1s 2d; and Spurrell garnered £92 16s 4d.

The bottom line for each captain during this eleven-year period thus was as follows: William Coats made £1311 12s 10d; Christopher Middleton earned £1358 1s 2d; and George Spurrell garnered £1412 16s 4d. In each case, these amounts would have been augmented further through any private trade, primage, or privateering the master was able, or willing, to undertake. Additionally, the captains' room and board came at company expense five months a year. The £132 each captain earned from his wages and gratuities would have placed him on par with the highest paid clergymen, lawyers, and military officers of their day.²⁵ While such an income would not have made them gentlemen, it did allow them to own several homes in England, possess the right to vote, and be considered respectable men of independent means within their community. All this for just five months' work.

The three captains in this study came to ironic and disparate ends. In 1751, the HBC's London Committee determined that William Coats "had abused his position in a systematic and cynical way" to conduct illicit trade. Coats was dismissed in November 1751, and died under suspicious circumstances the next January.²⁶ Christopher Middleton left company employ in 1741 to take a commission in the Royal Navy. This commission was specifically offered to induce Middleton to search for a Northwest Passage; Arthur Dobbs, Middleton's backer, roundly criticized his efforts in failing to find it. Dobbs and Middleton would exchange pamphlet barbs for several years over the conduct of Middleton's expedition, an exchange that led to an Admiralty tribunal that eventually sided with Middleton. By that time, however, enough damage had been done to Middleton's name so that when the War of Austrian Succession ended in 1748, he was placed on the navy's half-pay list, where he remained for the rest of his life. When Middleton died in 1770, his will

indicated that he had lived in "straitened circumstances during his enforced retirement [but] at least he did not die a pauper."²⁷ George Spurrell, on whose vessel Joseph Robson witnessed a lively private trade in 1744, "was one of the few HBC captains of the period who seems not to have been suspected of private trade by his superiors." In 1756, Spurrell was elected to the governing committee of the company, and the next year he acquired £2500 of company stock. Spurrell transferred this stock to his son Joseph when he retired from company service in 1765. When George Spurrell died in October 1770, he left Joseph, by now also a captain in company service, as his sole executor.²⁸

NOTES

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1. E.E. Rich (ed.), *Minutes of the Hudson Bay Company, 1679-1684* (2 vols., Toronto, 1945), I, 228.

2. *Ibid.*, I, 230.

3. For the frequency of private trade, see Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil And the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750* (Cambridge, 1987), 130; Ralph Davis, *The Rise of the English Shipping Industry in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (London, 1962); Richard B. Morris, *Government and Labor in Early America* (New York, 1946), 238; and C. Ernest Fayle, *A Short History of the World's Shipping Industry* (London, 1933), 71 and 96-97.

4. Provincial Archives of Manitoba (PAM), Hudson's Bay Company Archives (HBCA), HBC 2/1-3. All future references to company records are to the same source. This is not to imply that records are lacking about the remuneration of HBC masters, but rather that complete lists of both masters' and seamans' pay, including who actually received the monies, are lacking. Data on pay rates for all HBC seafarers are readily available in the HBCA.

5. Throughout its first century, the HBC seems to have been able to retain the services of masters for extended periods.

6. Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, 121.

7. PAM, HBCA, HBC 2/3.

8. He eventually received twenty pounds instead of the normal sixty after he was cleared of any responsibility in the loss of the vessel. *Ibid.*

9. Since company records are imprecise on this point, it is unclear who did the work, if they were paid and, if so, how much. Still, someone loaded and unloaded company vessels, and everywhere else whoever did the work received payment for it.

10. Davis, *Rise of the English Shipping Industry*, 146-147.

11. *Ibid.*

12. See appendix.

13. The term "servant" can cause confusion because the HBC referred to all its employees in this way. But at sea the term was reserved either for seafarers still learning their trade or for apprentices. Since this particular usage came from documents prepared by HBC masters, I believe the nautical interpretation is correct.

14. Beyond these twenty-four men, two sailors each had a year's wages paid to their attorneys.

15. E.E. Rich (ed.), *James Isham's Observations On Hudson's Bay, 1743* (Toronto, 1949), 244.

16. Carl Swanson, *Predators And Prizes: American Privateering and Imperial Warfare*,

1739-1748 (Columbia, SC, 1991), 212; and N.A.M. Rodger, *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of The Georgian Navy* (Annapolis, 1986), 138.

17. Joseph Robson, *An Account of Six Years Residence in Hudson's Bay From 1733 to 1736 and 1744 to 1747* (New York, 1965), 19. Seahorse teeth are walrus tusks.

18. *Ibid.*, 20.

19. A. Ray and D. Freeman, "Give Us Good Measure:" *An Economic Analysis of Relations Between the Indians and the Hudson's Bay Company before 1763* (Toronto, 1978), 119.

20. E.E. Rich (ed.), *Charters, Statutes Orders In Council Relating to the Hudson's Bay Company* (Glasgow, 1931), 14.

21. For mineral use by natives, see J.S.H. Brown, *et al. (eds.), The Fur Trade Revisited* (East Lansing, MI, 1994), 179.

22. Ray and Freeman, "Give Us Good Measure," table 28, 267-270.

23. Glyndwr Williams, "Coats, William," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography (DCB)* (Toronto, 1974), III, 127.

24. Rich (ed.), *Minutes*, I, 244.

25. Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727-1783* (Oxford, 1989), 64.

26. Williams, "Coats," 127-128. While it is suspected that he committed suicide, this was never proven.

27. Glyndwr Williams, "Middleton, Christopher," *DCB*, III, 446-450.

28. Glyndwr Williams, "Spurrell, George," *DCB*, III, 598-599.

Appendix
Wages Paid to Captains by Sailors and Crew

Year	Seafarer	Wages	Position	Receiver
1727	Jos. Isbester	7.3.0	Servant	C. Middleton
"	Ja. Turnbull	6.0.4	Able	G. Spurrell
1730	Jn. Austin	5.7.6	Boy	G. Spurrell
	Th. Gregory	9.8.10	Carpenter	C. Middleton
	Wm. King	7.2.7	Cook	C. Middleton
	R. Raisbeck	6.15.0	Boy	W. Coats
1732	D. Allen	4.2.6	Able	G. Spurrell
	Jer. Coppage	4.3.5	Able	Attorney
	H. Moody	5.19.6	Able	G. Spurrell
1733	Th. Elderton	4.18.8	Boy	G. Spurrell
	Edw. Haynes	6.15.0	Able	W. Coats
	N. Warden	7.8.0	Able	G. Spurrell
1734	Jn. Beech	9.19.6	Able	Wife
	Kor. Janer	9.6.0	Able	G. Spurrell
"	Jn. Pinder	9.9.0	Able	G. Spurrell
"	Wm. Steal	5.11.4	Boy	C. Middleton
	Ja. Wood	5.16.8	Boy	G. Spurrell
1735	Jn. Doughty	10.18.6	Able	G. Spurrell
	Mar. Fowler	7.0.11	Able	C. Middleton
	Jn. Hunt	7.12.0	Able	G. Spurrell
"	Th. Middleton	5.13.4	Boy	C. Middleton
	Th. Mitchell	11.1.8	Able	G. Spurrell
	Sa Mawhood	4.16.0	Boy	G. Spurrell
	Na Spear	7.13.7	Able	Attorney
1736	Robt. Crow	9.12.0	Second Mate	W. Coats
	Geo. Flatt	4.6.5	Able	W. Coats
"	Th. Lourell	4.6.5	Able	W. Coats

Note: Wages are given in pounds, shillings and pence

Source: Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Hudson's Bay Archives, HBC 2/1-3.