

# **Ships' Boys and Youth Culture in Eighteenth-Century Britain: The Navy Recruits of the London Marine Society**

**Roland Pietsch**

*Jim Hawkins, mousse et héros du roman de Robert L. Stevenson « L'île au trésor », est un personnage dont plusieurs d'entre nous aurons lu l'histoire dans notre jeunesse. Il est étonnant, cependant, qu'on ait fait si peu de recherches sur les vrais mousses du dix-huitième siècle. Fondé sur les archives de la London Marine Society, cet article tente de mettre au jour les origines et les motifs des garçons qui s'enrôlaient dans la Marine britannique au cours de la Guerre de sept ans contre la France. L'analyse suggère que le service en mer avait un double caractère pour les enfants des classes ouvrière et défavorisée : il leur fournissait une « demeure flottante », ce que n'arrivait pas à faire la communauté, et, en même temps, il semble qu'il offrait un moyen de s'enfuir pour les jeunes qui ne voulaient pas se conformer aux normes de la société. En recrutant ces derniers, mais aussi à cause de son environnement de travail, le marin acquérait plusieurs caractéristiques d'un modèle culturel pour la jeunesse.*

When thinking of ships' boys in the eighteenth century, the first that usually comes into one's mind is Jim Hawkins, the narrator in Robert L. Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. Yet, compared to such colourful stories of boys at sea in literature, historiography has little to offer on these juvenile sailors. Partly the lack of studies can be explained by the available source material: eighteenth-century records telling us about the boys aboard ships who were trained to become ordinary sailors are scarce. A rich exception is the records of the Marine Society, a society that made it its task to recruit and/or equip impoverished boys for the Royal Navy and later also for the merchant navy, and whose records are stored at the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, London. Following some initial remarks about youths serving in the eighteenth-century Royal Navy, this article will attempt to bring back to life the first generation of Marine Society boys, who joined the navy during the Seven Years' War, to ask who they were and why they went to sea. To aid the understanding of the boys' motives this article will in the second part try to interpret eighteenth-century deep-sea sailors from a youth cultural angle, drawing not solely upon the evidence from the Marine Society's records, but also from sailors' memoirs and historical studies of maritime culture.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the fourth chapter of the author's doctoral thesis on the Marine Society and its boy recruits, "Ships' Boys and Charity in the Mid-Eighteenth Century: The London Marine Society, 1756-1772," (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of London, 2003). For an overview of all the Marine Society's historical records see Roland Pietsch, "A Boyhood at Sea: The Records of the Marine Society at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich," *Genealogists' Magazine*, XXVII (March 2001), 3-8. The PhD thesis contains a database

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The Marine Society was founded in 1756, at the beginning of the Seven Years' War, by merchant and philanthropist Jonas Hanway and fellow London merchants, who were concerned about the British navy's acute manning problem at the time, and acknowledged that the profession of a sailor was generally best learned from the earliest age. Being guided by a mixture of military, political and philanthropic interests, they initially thought of the impoverished, deserted and unemployed youths of London as the navy's future sailors. Providing the Royal Navy with boys was of higher importance than one would initially think: within a few years the youths could be turned into able seamen, and thus they not only eased the navy's manning problem, but were also much better prepared for the service, since they had become accustomed to the sea service from a young age. The boys went on board as captains' or other officers' servants, but more than acting as personal servants (or as servants in some business on land) their actual function is better described as trainee sailors. A servant had to be at least thirteen years old, or eleven if he was the officer's son. In peacetime most servant positions were occupied by sons of officers and better-off families, who were aiming at an officer's career.<sup>2</sup> In times of war, however, the number of servant positions increased greatly, thus providing more opportunities for a higher number of boys from humbler backgrounds to be enlisted and trained as ordinary sailors.<sup>3</sup> The navy regulations allowed a captain four servants for every hundred men of the complement; while lieutenants, masters, pursers, surgeons, chaplains, and cooks were allowed one if the complement was at least sixty and otherwise none; boatswains, gunners, and carpenters could take two servants for a complement of a hundred or more, and one servant for a complement of sixty to a hundred; and an admiral, depending on his rank, had ten to sixteen servants due.<sup>4</sup> For each of their servants the officers received the pay of an ordinary seaman, while being only obliged to spend a fifth of this wage on the boy for clothing and other necessities. This was how the navy hoped to raise its future sailors, that is by giving each individual officer a financial incentive to take one or more boys with him to sea - the servants were, in the words of the Admiralty, the navy's "nursery" for seamen.<sup>5</sup> Following the navy's servant quotas between 5 and 10 per cent of the crew of an eighteenth-century warship should have been servants. But the actual percentage of boys on board would have been even higher, for we have to expect that there were also boys on board who were mustered as men (either as a preferential treatment, or simply because no servant position was available), as well as the occasional underaged sons of officers not kept on the muster lists. This might to a degree explain the astonishment of the Spanish sailors of the gold galleon *Nuestra Senora de Covadonga*, captured on Anson's famous voyage around the world in 1743, who, when coming on board the *Centurion* as prisoners and seeing her crew for the first time from close-up, cried out with anger that they had been beaten by a handful of boys.<sup>6</sup>

of all the Society's boy recruits who enlisted during the Seven Years' War and who are recorded in the Society's original registers (National Maritime Museum [NMM], MSY/H/1&2). This database is the main source for this article's statistical analysis of the boys' ages, stature, backgrounds etc.; a copy of the database is deposited at the NMM, but any researcher wishing to make use of the data is welcome to contact the author for a personal copy ([rolandpietsch@hotmail.com](mailto:rolandpietsch@hotmail.com)).

<sup>2</sup> There were, however, in times of peace apprenticeships with warrant officers available to boys from less privileged backgrounds. Michael Lewis, *A Social History of the Navy, 1793-1815* (London, 1960), 88.

Only at the end of the eighteenth century, in 1794, did the navy start to differentiate between the boys and introduced three separate classes of boys for the ships' musters.

<sup>3</sup> *Regulations and Instructions Relating to His Majesty's Service at Sea* (1757, 9<sup>th</sup> ed.), 151-152.

<sup>4</sup> See for example The National Archives, (formerly the Public Record Office) London, Admiralty Records, ADM 2/81, 30 August 1758.

<sup>5</sup> Anecdote in Glyn Williams, *The Prize of all the Oceans* (HarperCollins, 1999), 168.

Who were those real-life Jim Hawkineses then? The Marine Society's records provide us with more than a keyhole to look at those juvenile seafarers. Between 1756 and 1762 alone, the Society equipped over 4,500 boys for the navy, thus probably the great majority of boys that served during the Seven Years' War; and these boys shall serve as the basis for our investigation. We begin our search right at the Society's office, pictured in the illustration (page 14). At the table we see the members of the Marine Society debating; in the foreground are the boys, leaving their concerned mothers behind, being examined, and then dressed with the Marine Society's clothes. Who was the typical boy that we would encounter in this office? If we want to give him a name at the start of our investigation it would have to be John. Almost every fourth boy appearing at the office was called John.<sup>7</sup> In most cases this John was a mere fourteen years old - the Society's official minimum age, although in practice many younger boys were accepted. John would appear in rather filthy clothes. Few of John's comrades would have fitted Herman Melville's ideal of the "the handsome sailor" Billy Budd, for the smallpox had left its marks on many of the young faces - so much that the Marine Society used the boys' smallpox-scars as a way of identifying them.<sup>8</sup> What we would find most astonishing about John's appearance is his height: He was tiny. On average John would be merely around four feet five inches short. The table puts the boys' mean/median height in relation to their age:

Age:	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
Height:	4ft 3in	4'4"	4'6"	4' 7"	4' 9"	4'10"	4'11"	5'

For most of the time the Marine Society tried to enforce a minimum height of four feet three inches, which explains why the younger recruits average around that height. A thirteen-year old London child of today, in comparison, would be on average ten inches taller than the Marine Society boy John - which led Roderick Floud, Kenneth Wachter and Annabel Gregory, in their study *Height, Health and History* (1990), to the statement that if any of the Marine Society boys would enter a doctor's surgery of today, he would, in consideration of his growth rate, be sent immediately to a hospital as a sufferer from under-nutrition or child abuse.<sup>9</sup>

More than half of the boys we would meet at the Society's office had no father, and a fifth even had no adult at all taking care of them - the Society's philanthropic vision of the navy as the surrogate family for deserted boys seems to have met a positive response throughout the country. If a boy had a father, his profession usually placed him among the labouring classes, such as weavers, tailors, or shoemakers. However, there is a great variety

<sup>7</sup> Together with William, Thomas and James, John made up more than half of the boys. There was little variety in the names, and the fact that fifty percent carried their father's name suggests that there was not to be any greater variety in the future.

<sup>8</sup> See NMM. MSY/H/3. One Henry Rowning (NMM, MSY/H/3, no. 43), just fourteen years old, bore upon his return from sea service in 1763 an even more significant identification: he had his name written on his right arm. If this was some sort of tattoo, then it is remarkable, as the question in how far tattooing had disappeared in European culture after the Middle Ages, and only re-emerged in the late eighteenth century with Cook's explorations of the Pacific, is currently debated in academia. See Jane Caplan (ed.), *Written on the Body* (London, 2000), xv-xx, and Prof. Nicholas Thomas in discussion with the author (02/2003).

<sup>9</sup> R. Floud, K. Wachter, & A. Gregory, *Height, Health and History* (Cambridge, 1990), 166, 176, 197. Another remarkable comparison from Floud, Gregory and Wachter's study is that while a fourteen-year old Marine Society boy measured on average four feet five inches, an upper class fourteen-year old at the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst at the same time would reach five feet one inch on average. Thus the upper-class boys were literally looking down on the Marine Society boys (although the latter would catch up a little bit by having their growth spurt later and by continuing to grow for longer).



The Marine Society's office, by J.B. Cipriani, from Jonas Hanway, *Three Letters on the Subject of the Marine Society* (1758).

of occupational titles, and it is difficult to draw conclusions about the economic circumstances of the boys' families solely based on the recorded professions.<sup>10</sup> The most frequently recorded profession is that of a *labourer*, yet one suspects that in particular the description *labourer* was often just an occupational title concealing temporary or permanent unemployment. Next to orphans and fatherless children, the sons of sailors were another group the Society particularly targeted, yet surprisingly we find not that many sailors among the boys' fathers.<sup>11</sup> Thus probably the majority of the boys who served in the navy during the Seven Years' War had no direct family connection to seafaring, which is remarkable, as sea service in the eighteenth century is generally regarded as having been largely self-recruiting, with sailors usually coming from seafaring families and communities.

One thing all of the Society's boys were meant to have in common was that they went to sea voluntarily. However, right from the beginning the Society's scheme was also regarded as a measure for policing impoverished and unruly youths, and one has to question how voluntarily some of them really appeared at the Marine Society's office. Evidence of delinquent and troublesome boys appearing at the Marine Society's office creeps up repeatedly in the records.<sup>12</sup> Magistrate John Fielding, half-brother of novelist Henry Fielding and one of the most important figures in the Society's early days, for example, had helped in setting up the scheme out of concern for the numerous boys brought before him for petty crimes. Fielding had complained that he had to send them to houses of correction, where they would only be further corrupted, while they could be so much more useful as future sailors in the navy.<sup>13</sup> Worse, Fielding claimed that "for want of a seasonable relief, carts full of these unhappy wretches have ended their days in the vigour of their youth, at the dreadful tree."<sup>14</sup>

Ideally, all boys in their teens and early twenties should have been busily employed in an apprenticeship - being housed, fed, educated and supervised by a master - or working as servants in some business. In a city like London without a permanent police force, society relied heavily on the masters to police the teenaged population. For boys in the care of the parish the apprenticeship was even compulsory, and the parish had to pay the apprenticeship fee.<sup>15</sup> The deficits and abuses of the apprenticeship system, however, which resulted in so many boys ending up in the streets and without any supervision, have been described in numerous studies, such as M. Dorothy George's *London Life in the Eighteenth Century* (1925). Some boys did not find any apprenticeship, as neither parents nor parish were willing or able to pay a fee for them, others were driven out of their service into unemployment by

<sup>10</sup> Some occupational titles suggest that certainly not all fathers were struggling financially. Dianne Payne (for the Marine Society's boys in the years 1770 to 1780) argues in her forthcoming doctoral thesis (University of Hertfordshire, UK) that the majority of them were not as desperate and impoverished as the Society's publications suggest, and that the Society's pamphlets exaggerated the boys' social misery for marketing reasons.

Those who had fathers serving in the navy went in many cases to their father's ship, a practice that is known to have been common among officers' sons and which - with regards to educating, protecting and disciplining the boys - was presumably welcomed by the Navy.

<sup>12</sup> See for example Michael Lewis, *A Social History of the Navy, 1793-1815* (1960), 59, 80-82. For a revised view see N. A. M. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain, 1649-1815* (2004), 313.

<sup>13</sup> See NMM, MSY/H/1, nos. 803,804,805,808; MSY/H/2, no. 2891; MSY/A/1, 9 March 1757, 17 March 1757, 16 March 1758, & 13 September 1759; also Society's rules in Jonas Hanway, *Three Letters on the Subject of the Marine Society: Letter III* (1758), 40-41; Hanway, *A Letter from a Member of the Marine Society* (1757, 3rd. ed.), 8; and *The Bye-Laws and Regulations of the Marine Society* (1772), 13.

<sup>14</sup> *Public Advertiser*, 16 December 1754.

<sup>15</sup> John Fielding, *An Account of the Receipts and Disbursements Relating to Sir John Fielding's Plan, for the Preserving of Distressed Boys, by Sending them to Sea* (1769), 2-5.

<sup>16</sup> See 27 Henry VIII, c. 12 (1530/1); 1 Edward VI, c. 3 (1547); 3 & 4 Edward VI, c. 16 (1549-50); 5 Elizabeth I, c. 4 (1562); 39 Elizabeth I, c. 3 (1597-8); 43 Elizabeth I, c. 2, s. v (1601); 21 James I, c. 28, s. I, par. 33 (1623); 3 Charles I, c. 4, s. 22 (1627); and 8 & 9 William III, c. 30, s. v (1697).

a master who maltreated them, or whose business struggled so much that he was unable to take proper care of the boy. And then there was the behaviour of the boy himself, the young man's "restless, roving and perpetually uneasy" mind as Fielding called it,<sup>17</sup> which often led to a termination of an apprenticeship. Sending the unwanted apprentice to sea was not a new phenomenon - the failed apprentice turned seaman had already reached "anti-hero-status" through William Hogarth's "Idle Apprentice in the series of prints entitled *Industry and Idleness* (1747), shown on the opposite page."<sup>18</sup>

The Marine Society now offered an institutionalised version of this - a way out for any master, parent, parish overseer or magistrate, who had a youth at hand, for whom he could not or did not want to provide. Naturally, there was the danger that the boys' own inclinations were disregarded. When, during its first year of operation, the Marine Society was confronted with a number of complaints by the navy about boys deserting or being ill-disciplined,<sup>19</sup> the Society started an advertising campaign reminding parish overseers, parents and masters not to disregard the boys' personal liberty and to send only those who really wanted to go to sea. Such attempts to ensure that the boys enlisted out of their own free will were certainly well meant. However, ultimately they were undermined by the poor laws, apprenticeship laws, and the laws against vagabonds and rogues, which all ignored the personal liberty of pauper children. Since the beginning of the eighteenth century local authorities had the power to order parish children into a compulsory maritime apprenticeship, and even though being a servant in the Royal Navy was not an apprenticeship, one can easily imagine that some parish officials felt they were still acting lawfully.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the masters of parish apprentices had received the right to turn their boys over into a maritime apprenticeship given the approval of justices of the peace,<sup>21</sup> and they too might have assumed that the navy would count as such. This could explain why some of the Marine Society's boys still clung on to the claim that they were apprentices when joining their captain or officer, while their former master had already cancelled their indentures.<sup>2</sup> Next to this apprenticeship legislation, laws against vagabonds could make it legal to send anyone considered idle, dissolute, a rogue, vagabond or beggar, regardless if man or boy, forcibly to the Royal Navy.<sup>23</sup>

Partly the Marine Society also had itself to blame for receiving unwilling boys, since its own publications were often selling the undertaking as a crime prevention program that took care of troublesome and potentially dangerous youths, so that many may have perceived the Society as a kind of penal institution for juvenile delinquents. Ultimately, one can also presume that even many members of the Society would have regarded a certain amount of pressure as helpful, particularly when dealing with troublesome or destitute youths. Hanway wrote that it was up to the judges and lawyers to decide how far the laws regarding young

<sup>17</sup> John Fielding, *Newgate Magazine*, vol. II (1766), 783.

<sup>18</sup> Hogarth depicted the idle apprentice's mother dressed as a widow, which means that like many of the Marine Society's boys the apprentice had lacked paternal support and supervision. For the idle apprentice as an anti-hero see Ronald Paulson, *Popular and Polite Art in the Age of Hogarth and Fielding* (1979), and *Emblem and Expression* (1975).

<sup>19</sup> For deserting boys see for example NMM, MSY/A/1, 31 March 1757, 14 April 1757, 19 May 1757, 30 June 1757, 15 September 1757, 22 December 1757, 13 July 1758, 14 & 21 September 1758, 26 February 1762, 05 August 1762; MSY/H/1, nos. 735-738; MSY/H/2, no. 3483.

<sup>20</sup> 2 & 3 Anne, c. 6, s. xvi (1703), and 4 & 5 Anne, c. 6, 19 (1705), building on 39 Elizabeth, c. 4 (1597-8); and 11 & 12 William III, c. 18 (1700). See also E.G. Thomas, "The Old Poor Law and Maritime Apprenticeship," *Mariner's Mirror*, LXIII (1977), 151-163, and Cheryl A. Fury, "Training and Education in the Elizabethan Maritime Community, 1585-1603," *Mariner's Mirror*, LXXXV (1999), 147-160.

<sup>21</sup> 2 & 3 Anne, c. 6, s. vi (1703).

<sup>22</sup> See for example NMM, MSY/A/1, 14 & 21 April 1757.

<sup>23</sup> 2 & 3 Anne, c. 6, s. xvi (1703).



Plate 5 of William Hogarth's series *Industry and Idleness* (1747): "The Idle 'Prentice turn'd away, and sent to sea - A Foolish Son is the Heaviness of his Mother."

vagabonds could be stretched, but he himself certainly felt, since it was plain that such destitute children often had no way to survive other than to steal, and since they were the breeding ground for the most dangerous criminals, that therefore "Happy might it be for this Nation" if the Society could be "a means to render our highways and our streets more secure; and by a gentle or compulsive means remove the wretched crouds [sic] who disturb the peace of civil society. For by thus checking them in the very dawns of their iniquity, Tyburn might be left a desert."<sup>24</sup> When at the end of the war the Society made plans for the disposal of the boys in the merchant navy, Hanway assured the public again that no compulsion would be applied, but also noted that "*persuasion* and encouragement will go a great way, and *necessity* still farther," and that "neither policy, nor humanity" would permit them to let any boy go that could be expected to end up as a vagabond.<sup>25</sup>

While we find sufficient evidence that some of the boys "volunteered" under a

Hanway, *Three Letters on the Subject of the Marine Society: Letter I* (1758), 6.

Hanway, *Two Letters: Letter IV* (1758), 34.

certain amount of pressure, we should not fail to see that there are also aspects that suggest that other boys were very keen on going to sea - even, or perhaps particularly, among those troublesome youths with the "restless and roving" minds of whom John Fielding complained. The Marine Society was, for example, accused of luring away boys from the country who were needed in the agricultural sector.<sup>26</sup> The best evidence for the sea service's attractiveness, however, is that next to deserters the major problem of the Marine Society was exactly the opposite: runaways, who enlisted without the consent or knowledge of their parents or apprenticeship masters.<sup>27</sup> "I took my mother at a time when I thought her a little pleasanter than ordinary, and told her that my thoughts were so entirely bent upon seeing the world, that I should never settle to anything with resolution enough to go through it, and my father had better give me his consent than force me to go without it; that I was now eighteen years old, which was too late to go apprentice to a trade, or clerk to an attorney; that I was sure, if I did, I should certainly run away from my master before my time was out, and go to sea." The youth, who thus threatened to go to sea against his father's will and to run away from his apprenticeship, was Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*,<sup>28</sup> and there were probably many eighteenth-century boys, like the cooper's apprentice John Nicol, author of *The Life and Adventures of John Nicol, Mariner*, whom Robinson Crusoe had made weary of their apprenticeship and eager to go to sea,<sup>29</sup> or who felt unsettled in their restrictive apprenticeship and saw the sea as an escape to freedom and adventure.<sup>30</sup> To counter the problems with runaways the Society had to go as far as advertising in all newspapers that parents or masters whose boys were missing should come to the Society's office and view the latest recruits, to check whether their boy was among them.<sup>31</sup> In May 1757, the Society ordered that for the future no boy would be accepted unless a clergyman, magistrate, churchwarden, overseer of the parish, or some other reputable person testified that the boy was not an apprentice.<sup>32</sup>

In view of the shortcomings of some apprenticeships, in particular the abuses of parish apprentices, it is not surprising that many of the boys preferred to go to sea rather than carrying on with their servitude. These abuses of apprentices, on the other hand, can also serve as another indicator for boys being forced into the navy, that is in cases where masters tried to encourage their apprentices to run away by (often physically) maltreating them, so that they could keep the apprenticeship fee without having to provide for the boy any longer.<sup>3</sup> The surgeon and master of Tobias Smollet's fictional hero *Roderick Random* (who intended to blame his maid's pregnancy on his disappeared apprentice) opted for a more subtle approach to make Roderick run away to the navy: "I am surprised, that a young fellow like you, discovers no inclination to push his fortune in the world.-By G-d, before I was of your age, I was broiling on the coast of Guinea.-Damme! what's to hinder you from profiting by the war (...) where you will certainly see a great deal of practice, and stand a good chance

<sup>26</sup> See Hanway, *Three Letters on the Subject of the Marine Society: Letter II* (1758), 7.

<sup>27</sup> Runaways were a problem right from the start, first mentioned in NMM, MSY/A/1, 23 September 1756.

<sup>28</sup> Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719, 1975), 7.

<sup>29</sup> John Nicol (Gordon Grant), *The Life and Adventures of John Nicol, Mariner* (1822, 1937), 36.

<sup>30</sup> See, as just one example of many, the case of William Barton, a twelve-year old runaway apprentice, in John Fielding's *Newgate Magazine: Vol. II* (1765-6), 784.

<sup>31</sup> See for example *Gentleman's Magazine*, April 1757, 150; also Hanway, *Letter from a Member of the Marine Society* (1757, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.), 13.

<sup>32</sup> NMM, MSY/A/1, 5 May 1757, also 16 June 1757, and 8 December 1757.

<sup>33</sup> See for example the case of the boy William Newton in M. D. George, *London Life in the Eighteenth Century* (1925, 1965), 420-421; and the Marine Society being aware of the problem in NMM, MSY/A/1, 3 May 1759, and Hanway, *Three Letters on the Subject of the Marine Society: Letter II* (1758), 12.



of getting prize money."<sup>34</sup> His master's attempt was promising, for the lure of financial gain and adventure must have appealed to many youths, including many of the Marine Society's boys.

The prospect of gaining prize money, to which the boys were as entitled as a landsman, could mean a large step out of misery for a friendless orphan. Furthermore, as servants in the navy, and in view of the shortage of sailors, they could expect to be rated as fully paid seamen soon after turning eighteen. Following the careers of a sample of the boys who enlisted during the Seven Years' War shows that most of them were rated as *ordinary seamen* between the age of seventeen and nineteen, and as *able seamen* between eighteen and twenty-one, without regard to their actual length of service.<sup>35</sup> Thus, by turning seventeen to twenty-one year-olds into wage earning adults the navy differed very positively from the long binding ages the boys were facing in apprenticeships on land, which, for the children of the parish poor, lasted at least until the age of twenty-four.<sup>36</sup> Even in the merchant navy many youngsters chose to start their careers as servants and not apprentices, according to Peter Earle, seeing that as servants they learned through practical life nearly as much of the profession as an apprentice did in his long servitude.<sup>37</sup> In commercial shipping the boys would not have been confronted with naval rule and war, yet one aspect that might have made the navy the more desirable option was that the workload for a naval servant was probably less than what a youth would have had to expect when working on a small commercial vessel and for a master who tried to get the most out of his cheap labourer.

In comparison to the bleak economic prospects of some trades on land to which parish boys were apprenticed, seafarers were in times of war very much in need and promised better employment opportunities. For all the parish boys sent to the Marine Society by the committee member and MP Charles Gray from Colchester, for example, being sent away from their hometown for an apprenticeship was in any way a likely scenario. Normally, they faced the prospect of being apprenticed to a weaver, bound until the age of twenty-four, misused as cheap labour, and with meagre employment opportunities afterwards in trades that were swamped with pauper apprentices, or being placed in a maritime apprenticeship, being given no pay at all, not even any clothing (only on completion of their service).<sup>38</sup> To such boys the Marine Society and the navy, offering a free set of clothing and bedding, a yearly allowance of forty shillings, and the prospect of becoming a wage earner soon after turning eighteen, must have looked very attractive, at least to those that did not fear the dangers of war. Thus it would also be no contradiction if boys who had troubles with authority volunteered for the navy (the very same institution to which other boys were sent exactly because it was expected that the navy would put them under a stricter discipline). The navy appeared to offer a quicker route to independence for a parish boy than any

<sup>34</sup> Tobias Smollett, *The Adventures of Roderick Random* (1748; Oxford, 1999), 30.

<sup>35</sup> See Pietsch (PhD thesis, 2003), chapter V.4. It is remarkable that thus age seems to have been more important than seafaring experience in determining who was to be rated - remarkable because the navy regulations say nothing about age but require a minimum of three years of seafaring experience for an *able seaman* (*Regulations and Instructions Relating to His Majesty's Service at Sea* [1757, 9<sup>th</sup> ed.], 29-30). Many of the Society's older boys, however, were already rated *able seamen* in their first year and without having been *ordinary seamen* before. Cheryl A. Fury (1999), 150, suggests that also in the Elizabethan merchant navy older apprentices often served shorter terms.

<sup>36</sup> This must have delighted not only the boys but also philanthropists like Jonas Hanway, who considered the long apprenticeships, and the prolonged stage of dependence, as a source of many evils. After the war Hanway became active in a campaign to lower the binding ages from twenty-four to twenty-one, which he finally achieved with the so-called Hanway-Act in 1767.

<sup>37</sup> Peter Earle, *Sailors: English Merchant Seamen, 1650-1775* (1998), 24.

<sup>38</sup> See Ralph Davis, *The Rise of the English Shipping Industry in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Newton Abbot, 1962, 1972), 119.

apprenticeship on land could. Samuel Richardson, in his *Apprentice's Vade Mecum: or, Young Man's Pocket-Companion* (1734), a guide setting out rules of proper behaviour for apprentices, advised that for boys who cannot obey the rules laid out therein, going to sea was a much better career choice, and also: "a happy Relief to the honest Tradesman, to whom the Youth might otherwise be bound; a great Ease to his Relations, who would thereby spar'd the Mortification and Disappointment of a fruitless Tryal, and Time and Money lost to no Purpose, and a Benefit to the young Man, and perhaps to the Publick, which can be so well serv'd, in such a maritime Kingdom as this by such bold and daring Spirits, as would think themselves above being confin'd to the necessary Rules of an orderly Family."<sup>39</sup> Thus the restless boys' "bold and daring Spirits" and the interests of the Empire could profit from each other; the sea service could be the way-out for the authorities as well as for the troubled youth.

While adolescent aggressiveness - often fuelled by being neglected and (in case of orphans) even shunned by society - might have brought many Marine Society recruits into conflict with society on land, at sea and at war that very same character trait was expected of them; and being troublesome youths certainly did not rule out their being patriotic and xenophobic enough to go to war for their country. The Marine Society advertised that they were not only looking for unemployed youths but also for "Boys of a daring Temper whose genius leads them to try their fortune at Sea,"<sup>40</sup> "those who are of too volatile a disposition for their trade, or too bold to live on shore with sober masters,"<sup>41</sup> those "whose Heads are turned to War."<sup>42</sup> The earlier finding that many of the Society's recruits had been in trouble with their local authorities does not necessarily mean that these were also always the boys that had to be forced to volunteer.

One thing the navy, and deep-sea sailing in general, definitely offered compared to what, for example, a Colchester boy had to expect as a weaver's or a fisherman's apprentice, was what the modern youth would call "action," the deep sea as the epitome of adventure. When analysing this attraction of deep-sea sailing to young people it is important to try to take the viewpoint of an eighteenth-century boy stuck in poverty or a dull, arduous apprenticeship, and with no family connection to the sea service, and not from the viewpoint of an educated contemporary like Samuel Johnson, who called the lure of the sea a perversion of the imagination.<sup>43</sup> The tales of adventure, the travelling, and the test of manliness, all well represented in contemporary popular art such as the numerous pirate theatre plays, must have made an impression on youths. In view of the far-reaching restrictions of the youths' social lives by their apprenticeship masters, and the magistrates' attempts to suppress many forms of - what appears by today's western standards as rather innocent - juvenile entertainment,<sup>44</sup> the distant harbour towns and open sea could only appear more liberating. And then there was the public image of the sailors themselves, the behaviour and appearance many of them displayed when on land, which also figured extensively in contemporary popular art. Regardless of whether this image was an accurate representation of the average sailor or not, to many restless youths the drinking, singing, raucously partying and womanising sailor in the taverns, making the harbour district synonymous with the amusement district, was probably a better advertisement for the sea

<sup>39</sup> S. Richardson (presumably), *Apprentice's Vade Mecum* (1734), ed. by Augustan Reprint Society, nos. 169-170 (Los Angeles, 1975), 51-52.

<sup>40</sup> NMM, MSY/A/1, 8 January 1762.

<sup>41</sup> *The Bye-Laws and Regulations of the Marine Society* (1772), 41.

<sup>42</sup> Hanway, *A Letter from a Member of the Marine Society* (1757, 1<sup>st</sup> ed.), 29.

<sup>43</sup> James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791), quoted in Christopher Lloyd, *The British Seaman, 1200-1786* (1968, 1970), 209.

<sup>44</sup> See Pietsch (PhD thesis, 2003), chapter 1.3.

service than the Marine Society could ever come up with.

Surely, the sober mind, and boys that had grown up with seafaring fathers, also knew the sailor's other side, the hardship, danger and suffering. Yet a land-boy like William Spavens, who went to the sea during the Seven Years' War and produced one of the few preserved memoirs of the lower deck of the time, remembered how he looked at the sailors with envy, and never considered any of the perils and hardships they were exposed to: "I thought sailors must be happy men to have such opportunities of visiting foreign countries."<sup>45</sup> And mariner John Nicol even recollected that his "youthful mind could not separate the life of a sailor from dangers and storms, and I looked upon them as an interesting part of the adventures I panted after."<sup>46</sup> Many boys and young men with no family connection to seafarers would have perceived only the sailor ashore, who, dressed in his fancy shore-going clothes, enjoyed the time in between the voyages with the aid of his recently earned pay. Moreover, the boys probably identified only those as being sailors that lived up to the stereotypical image of a seaman.

Bold Jack, the sailor, here I come;  
Pray how d'ye like my nib,  
My trowsers wide, my trampers rum,  
My nab, and flowing jib?  
I sails the seas from end to end  
And leads a joyous life;  
In ev'ry mess I finds a friend,  
In ev'ry port a wife.<sup>47</sup>

If one accepts the notion that youth in the eighteenth century was not entirely different to today's youth,<sup>48</sup> that "teenagers" experienced similar emotions, then it might help to look at deep-sea sailors from a youth-cultural angle to show why the sailors' lifestyle could be so attractive to boys. Additionally this youth-behavioural approach can also provide an interpretation of the sailors' culture in general. Deep-sea sailing was a profession for young men, and for men who kept certain elements of "youthfulness." Various studies have shown that deep-sea sailing crews were very young, most being around the age of twenty-five and younger.<sup>49</sup> Many deep-sea sailors "settled down" in later years with shore-based occupations or working in the coastal trade. Roderick Random's master, in the quotation above, alleges that it was natural for "a young fellow" to try his fortunes at sea, as he himself

<sup>45</sup> William Spavens, *The Narrative of William Spavens* (Louth, 1796; London, 1998), 1.

<sup>46</sup> John Nicol, *The Life and Adventures of John Nicol, Mariner* (1822, 1937), 37.

<sup>47</sup> "Jack in his Element, a song by Charles Dibdin (1745-1814), in *The Sea-Songs of Charles Dibdin* (1852?), 96-97.

<sup>48</sup> See Pietsch (PhD thesis, 2003), chapter one. Some historians have argued that the concept of youth, as we know it today, is a product of the late eighteenth century and did not exist in pre-industrial Europe - the main works are by Philippe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood* (Paris, 1960; London, 1996), and John R. Gillis, *Youth and History* (1974). For an overview of how other historians followed the theory of youth being a product of the last two centuries see Roger Thompson, "Adolescent Culture in Colonial Massachusetts," *Journal of Family History*, IX (1984), 127-129. For case studies that suggest that adolescence/youth was not only present in the eighteenth century, but also in previous centuries see for example S.R. Smith, "The London Apprentices as Seventeenth Century Adolescents," *Past and Present*, L XI (1973), 149-161; N.Z. Davis, "The Reasons of Misrule: Youth Groups and Charivaris in Sixteenth-Century France," *Past and Present*, L (1971), 41-75; or A. Yarbrough, "Apprentices as Adolescents in Sixteenth-Century Bristol," *Journal of Social History*, XIII (1979), 67-82.

<sup>49</sup> See for example N.A.M. Rodger, *The Wooden World* (1986, 1988), 360-363; or Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea* (Cambridge, 1987, 1998), 299. Admittedly, the fact that older seamen could progress to petty-officer rank also kept the crew's age average low.

had done before settling down as a surgeon on land. Seamen were frequently described by contemporaries as being particularly boyish and immature in their behaviour and lifestyle. Various work-related factors might have promoted their "youthfulness," and expanded it into their thirties. Marriage, for example, one of the key moments in the transition from youth to adulthood in western Europe, was difficult to achieve for a sailor. Interestingly, Cindy McCreery has pointed out that while there were undoubtedly also many married sailors, popular art usually chose to portray the sailor as unmarried and thus open for any sexual adventure.<sup>50</sup>

Setting up his own permanent home, another key moment in the move from youth to adulthood in western Europe, was also difficult for a sailor. Generally, saving any money or investing it in anything more lasting was complicated, as the sailor needed a trustworthy place to deposit it. Taking it on the voyage yielded the danger that the possessions would go down when the ship had an accident, or would have to be left behind when the sailor wanted to desert. Also the threat of the press gang taking him with no chance to settle his affairs did not encourage more sound investments than the next bottle of rum. Like young apprentices, sailors sometimes had to be forced to work, and corporal punishment was common to discipline them; like any youth, they were housed and fed, and their movements were under strict control, and they lived like students in a close male-only community. Marcus Rediker, in his *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea* (1987), described eighteenth-century sailors as the harbinger of the free wage labourers of the industrialised world - in a way the first factory workers. Sailors did not, for example, own their means of production; they could change their employers and workplace at the end of each voyage, or they could simply run away during a voyage. This created perhaps a more unsettled, a more "youth-like" workforce than pre-industrial European society was used to.<sup>51</sup>

The sailors' "youthfulness" was supplemented and embraced by a general feeling of otherness among frequent deep-sea sailors, that presumably resulted to a large degree from having to spend long periods away from England and society on land, from visiting foreign cultures and working with foreigners, from having to live in a close group of males who together had to master dangerous situations, and perhaps also from absorbing young men who did not conform to society on land and went (or were sent) to sea to escape from it. Many seafarers felt the need to express this otherness, be it by bullying the landsmen on board, or by their behaviour or fashion when on land. Isaac Land has emphasised in his doctoral study of maritime culture that the peculiar behaviour of many sailors was not the natural result of their work environment alone, but also a conscious attempt to distinguish themselves and their group from society.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, even the most frequent deep-sea sailor would still spend large parts of the year in the harbour, or employed in trades near the coast and even on land, which is why any peculiar behaviour would have always also evolved out of the interaction with society on land. Various historians, such as Isaac Land, Cheryl Fury and Peter Burke, have therefore described the sailors' culture not as a specific maritime culture, but as a subculture, in the words of Burke: a culture that was "partly autonomous rather than wholly autonomous, distinct yet not completely severed from the rest of popular

<sup>50</sup> See McCreery, "True Blue and Black, Brown and Fair: Prints of British Sailors and their Women During the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars," *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, XXIII (2000), 146.

<sup>51</sup> In a more general view, one might argue that all types of wage labour in pre-industrial Europe was regarded as work specific to youths and bachelors (as done by Michael Mitterauer in *Sozialgeschichte der Jugend* [Frankfurt a. M., 1986], 131-133).

<sup>52</sup> See Land, *Domesticating the Maritime: Culture, Masculinity, and Empire in Britain, 1770-1820* (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Michigan, 1999), 225-248.

culture."<sup>53</sup> Isaac Land goes further and draws a parallel to those subculture models used by sociologists to describe youth cultures in twentieth-century Britain.

If we count such groups as (youth) subcultures that show a conspicuous, intentional distinction from society's norms in dress, hairstyle, jewellery (also tattoos),<sup>54</sup> language, music, beliefs (a greater tendency towards superstition) and behaviour, then the behaviour of many sailors could fit into such a model. Further parallels can be drawn, such as the non-conformity being accompanied by conformity within the group, the loyalty to group members and rejection of outsiders, the "tribal" gathering for rituals and entertainment around the mainmast, the search for excitement, the understatement of danger and even death, and various provocative and hedonistic elements. Books, plays, music and songs, and the fact that sailors were in constant contact with seamen from other regions and countries provided the "mass media" for this eighteenth-century subculture. Sailor slogans such as "a Rowling Stone never gathers Moss," or the praise of a "Short life and Merry life,"<sup>55</sup> are even today expected from anyone wanting to qualify as a youth-cultural icon. Many other sailor maxims might have been unquotable, as sailors were generally acknowledged to be champions in swearing - again something attractive to rebellious young men for its anti-authoritarian tone. The sailor's language in general, as well as his (international) sign language and rituals, was as mysterious to the rest of society as the slang of modern youths is to their parents. The members of this "sailor-subculture" had kept many youthful desires, but unlike younger boys they possessed physical and sexual maturity, and the necessary ready money to fulfil these desires.<sup>56</sup> It is therefore easily imaginable that this sailor-subculture appeared attractive to boys and young men, and perhaps particularly to those youths with the "restless and roving mind," and those who saw themselves in conflict with society.

Of course, this subculture model has limits, and one has to be very careful not to fall victim of a later romanticization of seafarers and their iconisation in many subsequent epochs of youth culture. While some sailors would have fitted perfectly into it, for the mass of them it probably goes too far. However, it should be said that this model is also a great deal about the public's impression and a boy's imagination, and even the subculture models applied to twentieth-century youths emphasise that the core of a subculture is made up of only a few, while the majority of youths remain somewhere in the middle between conformity to society and sympathy with the subculture. The generations of young Hull fishermen, for example, were probably never driven to sea because the sailor was a youth-cultural icon, or because they wanted to escape from a depressing life on land into a life of adventure. Instead they went to sea simply because that was the livelihood of their fathers and their whole community; they knew the fisherman's reality, there was nothing glamorous about their choice of profession, it was just the only means of making a living - but then again, the sons of Hull fishermen were not the boys who appeared at the Marine Society's office.

<sup>53</sup> Cheryl A. Fury, *Tides in the Affairs of Men: The Social History of Elizabethan Seamen, 1580-1603* (Westport, 2002), 86-93; Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Aldershot, 1978, 1994), 43-46.

<sup>54</sup> According to Mitterauer (Frankfurt, 1986), 211, in modern youth cultures earrings often refer to the freedom of the corsair, while tattoos are used as an indefinite sign of belonging, as well as to emphasise masculinity and muscles. If eighteenth-century European society was indeed not very familiar with tattooing, then a proper Polynesian tattoo would have also been a reference to a different culture, or even a counter culture - perhaps William Bligh should have been alerted when young Fletcher Christian and several other men of the *Bounty* got their bodies tattooed during their stay at Otaheiti (Tahiti).

<sup>55</sup> Quotes from John Cremer's memoirs written in the 1760s, in *Ramblin 'Jack: The Journal of Captain John Cremer, 1700-1774*, transcribed by R. Reynell Bellamy (1936), 39, 194.

Incidentally, for twentieth-century teenage cultures it also appears common that the *avant-gardes* were already in their twenties.

It is to be doubted whether the boys turning up at the office were fully aware of the perils that awaited them at sea. The enemy, the obvious threat, was an almost insignificant danger, but sickness, diseases and shipwreck took the lives of far too many of the young seafarers. Trying to follow servant careers in the mid-eighteenth century is a difficult and often impossible task,<sup>57</sup> yet the small sample of boys that I was able to follow during the Seven Years' War for my doctoral thesis suggests that at least a third of them died, got shipwrecked or became unserviceable (and that without taking into consideration that many boys' careers could not be followed for much longer than one or two years). There is definitely a need for further studies. This article has shown that Marine Society boy John's initial motives for turning up at the Society's office still contain a large element of speculation and they too are in need of further research. Undoubtedly, very often John's poverty, the fact that so many of his comrades were orphans or fatherless and had no legal way of supporting themselves, but also occasionally John's undisciplined behaviour, had led adults or authorities to suggest he should visit the Marine Society. How voluntarily he then decided to go is debatable; the Society tried to ensure that he enlisted out of his own free will, but the attempt was undermined by the laws and practice of poor relief, which often ignored John's own wishes, and by the fact that most of John's comrades were very young, immature, and easily put under pressure. Nevertheless, there were many among his comrades who were willing to join the navy even without the permission of their parents or masters, and when one considers their alternative options in life on land one can easily imagine how the sea could appear as a materialisation of the escapist dreams in young John's head. Thus the navy, or deep-sea sailing, appears to have had a dual character for the children of the labouring classes and the poor: It could be a "floating workhouse" for youths for whom the community could not provide for, and in the same time it could appear as the escape-route for youths that did not want to conform to society's norms or a regular working life. By absorbing these youths, but also as a consequence of his work environment, the sailor acquired many features of a youth-cultural icon.

<sup>57</sup> For the problems when tracing servant careers in the navy's musters see Pietsch (Unpublished PhD thesis, 2003), chapter V I. Only when on 16 April 1794 an order-in-council replaced the quality of a servant with the ratings of 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup>-class boys, and introduced separate lists in the navy's musters for them, does it become easier to follow a boy's career.