The politics of mutiny: The Pompée at Spithead and beyond, 1797

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Abstract
This is a micro-study of the most radical ship in the Spithead mutiny of 1797, the Pompée, which experienced another mutiny soon after the Spithead confrontation was settled. The court martial papers of this singular event reveal a politically divided crew, which leads one to reconsider the dynamics of mutiny in this tumultuous year. I argue against the conventional interpretation of inside-outside influences, of pre-political seamen infiltrated by radical forces and also against reductive binaries such as mutiny versus subversion. While stressing the seamen’s own capacity for collective action and their exposure to the political currents of the 1790s, I suggest the Pompée’s experience illustrates the volatility of maritime protest in a rapidly changing environment in which Britain dug deep into its population, maritime and non-maritime, national and international, to man its fleets.

Keywords
French Revolutionary War, mutiny, popular protest, Royal Navy

The naval mutinies of 1797, at Spithead, Plymouth, Yarmouth and the Nore, have always featured prominently in the history of Britain’s war with Revolutionary France. Breaking out after four years of armed conflict, at a time when Britain was very vulnerable to invasion, the mutinies have prompted speculation about the political sympathies of the seamen and the extent to which they were driven by reformist or revolutionary demands. Although legislation had been introduced suppressing democratic societies in 1795, many have recognized that domestic scarcity and disgruntlement with the war...
could have triggered what even the conservative historian Arthur Bryant called a ‘knock-out blow to England’.1

Conventionally, historians have located the epicentre of disaffection at the Nore, but it is worthwhile considering the dimensions of discontent at Spithead, where many of the seamen’s demands were met. Here, I consider the state of play on HMS Pompée, one of the more radical vessels at this station, whose delegates were very active in rallying support for the second phase of the mutiny on 7 May.2 Some members of its crew even organized another mutiny soon after the Spithead agreement was resolved. A disaffected minority attempted to force shipmates to commit themselves to agitating for the removal of the Pitt ministry and an immediate peace with France, and even threatened, on a cruise off Ushant, to take the former French ship back to Brest. Two seamen were executed for their part in this mutiny and two others were pardoned at the last minute in what was a carefully staged court martial on the Royal Sovereign in Portsmouth, to which many on land and sea attended. The trial was well publicized in the London and provincial newspapers, and coincided with the trial of the President of the Nore mutiny, Richard Parker. Some newspapers linked the two to establish claims that the two mutinies were inundated with radicals who wanted to exploit these events to push political, non-maritime agendas.3

The Pompée story thus raises some central themes in the historiography of the great mutinies. How radical or subversive were they? To what extent were they driven by outside forces? The classic narrative of Conrad Gill depicted the seamen as ‘unimaginative’, credulous men who were manipulated by ‘unknown disturbers of the peace’, some of whom he presumed to be men recruited under the 1795 Quota Act or, alternatively, members of the clandestine revolutionary movement of United Irishmen.4 The social historians of the 1960s and 1970s amplified Gill’s line of argument by suggesting that indeed radicals, and even insurrectionaries, infiltrated the fleet.5 But others have doubted that the United Irishmen entered the navy in such numbers as to really transform the dynamics of the mutinies. In the case of one key player at Spithead, Valentine Joyce, who was depicted as a Belfast radical who may even have administered the oath of United Irishmen, it has been shown that he really hailed from Jersey.6 He was, in fact, a seaman who had worked his way up to the rank of quartermaster’s mate, not the seditious club member he was made out to be. That characterisation spoke to the paranoia of the Admiralty and politicians, who looked for sedition-mongers everywhere.

1. Arthur Bryant, The Years of Endurance, 1793–1802 (London, 1942), 185.
2. Conrad Gill, The Naval Mutinies of 1797 (Manchester, 1913), 56–7, 94.
3. London Packet, 14–16 June 1797.
4. Gill, Naval Mutinies of 1797, 86–93, 312, 316–22.
5. E. P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (London, 1968), 162, 183–5, 203, 527; Roger Wells, Insurrection: The British Experience, 1795–1803 (Gloucester, 1983), 79–109; Jonathan Neale, The Cutlass & The Lash: Mutiny and Discipline in Nelson’s Navy (London and Sydney, 1985), 60–2, 133–46, 165–9.
6. Ann Veronica Coats, ‘The Delegates: A Radical Tradition’, in Ann Veronica Coats and Philip MacDougall, eds., The Naval Mutinies of 1797: Unity and Perseverance (Woodbridge, 2011), 57–8. See also her entry in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.
Although some historians continue to cast the mutinies as part of a revolutionary Atlantic, the revisionist interpretation now stresses the seamen’s own capacity for collective action and, in the Spithead mutiny at least, real solidarity of purpose.\(^7\) Yet, in discounting the subversive forces in the fleet, some historians unwittingly endorse the idea of the seamen as part of an enclave culture, with its own customary way of doing things, divorced from the political milieu of the mainland.\(^8\) This adheres to a venerable tradition in naval historiography that sees the ship as a world apart, a wooden world, which, in its most roseate version, creates a rough-and-ready paternalism in its hierarchies of command that echoes those of the landed gentry. I want to argue here that however true that might have been for the earlier part of the century it was not true of the 1790s, when the demand for men was so severe that the navy had to recruit very widely among the population of Britain and Ireland to man its fleet. The difficulties of local recruiting are even evident in the trajectory of Richard Parker, the President of the Nore delegates. The second son of an Exeter baker, he was begrudgingly allowed to go to sea by his parents and, having attained the rank of midshipmen, he raised over 100 men from the Exeter area at the outset of the war, hoping they would be allowed to join him on HMS Sphinx under a Devonshire patron. But the rapidity and scale of the mobilization in 1795 scuttled these plans, and propelled Parker himself into a war machine that was not particularly interested in his maritime expertise.\(^9\) Parker found the rapidly expanding navy an alienating experience. Its grand scale meant diversity, in political orientation as much as region and ethnicity, which meant that the fleet was willy-nilly subject to the political pressures of the day. Although social historians like E.P. Thompson and Roger Wells have been characterised as ‘conspiracy theorists’, a description that comes with the assumption that sinister forces account for the trouble in the navy, they did recognize the political context in which the 1797 mutiny took place. Thompson cited John Binns’ tour of the Medway towns and the welcoming reception he received from democratic societies and dockworkers who had refused to sign an address in favour of Pitt’s Gagging Acts of 1795. He speculated that ‘these visits to the dockyards may be one of the threads which link the Jacobins to the naval mutineers at Spithead and the Nore in 1797’.\(^10\) Wells, who likely exaggerated the infiltration of United Irishmen in the fleet, was certainly attentive to the possibility that seamen were influenced by the

\(^7.\) Niklas Frykman ‘Connections between Mutinies in European Navies’, International Review of Social History, 58 (2013), 87–107; Niklas Frykman, ‘The Mutiny on the Hermione: Warfare, Revolution and Treason in the Royal Navy’, Journal of Social History, 44 (2010), 159–87; Coats and MacDougall, Naval Mutinies of 1797.

\(^8.\) Most evident in Bryant, Years of Endurance, 184–97, but also found in N. A. M. Rodger, ‘Mutiny or subversion? Spithead and the Nore’, in Thomas Bartlett et al., eds., 1798: A Bicentenary Perspective (Dublin, 2003), 549–64, and N. A. M. Rodger, The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain, 1649–1815 (New York and London, 2005), 444–53.

\(^9.\) J. S. Corbett, ed., The Private Papers of George, Second Earl Spencer, 1794–1801, 2 vols. (London 1913–14), II, 162–73.

\(^10.\) For Thompson and Wells as ‘conspiracy theorists’, see Christopher Doorne, ‘A Floating Republic? Conspiracy Theory and the Nore Mutiny of 1797’, in Coats and MacDougall, Naval Mutinies of 1797, 179–93; Thompson, Making of the English Working Class, 162; Wells, Insurrection, 95, 99–102.
mass petitions for peace that were proceeding apace across the country and were promoted by Portsmouth’s own Corresponding Society. Neither of these historians argued that radicals and Irish revolutionaries caused the mutinies, despite the claims of their critics, but they did suggest that radical coteries influenced their course and nature. That does not make them ‘conspiracy theorists’, but it does advance the claim that the mutinies were more than material issues over provisions and pay. Indeed, both saw the mutinies as politically volatile events that might have shaken Britain’s ruling order.\textsuperscript{11}

In the Spithead mutiny, a formidable collective action involving over 10,000 men in total, the key issue was maintaining a fixity of purpose that would not be subject to political deviations or open disagreements. It was at particular junctures, in escalating confrontations, that dissident voices might surface. In the case of the Spithead mutiny, these were principally post-settlement flurries of discontent. In the case of the Nore, an anchorage off Sheerness dockyard, at the junction of the Thames and the Medway, at what was essentially a depot for new recruits and a rendezvous for the North Sea fleet and ships coming in and out of Chatham, disaffection was extremely difficult to control. Hence a wider array of responses arose once it became clear that the government would not move beyond the terms offered the seamen of Spithead.

In the most general terms, the political mobilizers of the eighteenth century were dearth and war. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, during a period of good harvests, the state could endorse the export of grain. By the 1790s, it had to import about 5–10 per cent of its needs to meet the expanding population and the increasing number of market dependent consumers. According to John Bohstedt, they rose by nearly 80 per cent between 1750 and 1800 as industrial areas intensified and the urban population grew.\textsuperscript{12} In a country where the moral economy operated with full force, legally until 1772 and ethically rather later, there were escalating waves of food riots when resources were scarce. There were about 50 in 1740–1741, over 100 in 1756–1757, over 130 in 1766 and over 180 in 1795–1796, when imports of wheat and flour were severely reduced. The bad years of 1794–1795 and 1795–1796 did not quite reach crises of subsistence, but they came close, and protests were more politicised. There was aggressive price-fixing, co-ordinated blockages in areas like Cornwall, and seditious rhymes. The Gloucestershire magistrate and penitentiary enthusiast, Sir George Onesiphorous Paul, complained that ‘the Cry of a Want of Bread…forms a body of Insurgents & amongst these are mixed a Number of Seditious Persons whose Business it is to excite’ them to ‘Mischief and make them Deaf to Reason’. In London, John Gale Jones politicised dearth by highlighting the fact that the king encouraged the engrossing of farms. The capital soon saw handbills of a ‘seditious tendency’ littering the streets, and in October 1795, crowds surrounded the King’s coach on its way to parliament shouting "No War! Down with Pitt! Give us Bread!" As Roger Wells rightly points out, the

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Thompson, \textit{Making of the English Working Class}, 183–4; Wells, \textit{Insurrection}, 91–104.
\item John Bohstedt, \textit{The Politics of Provisions: Food Riots, Moral Economy and Market Transition in England, c.1550–1850} (Farnham, 2010), 167–91.
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impact of the 1795–1796 scarcity upon families, and the failure of prices to fall to pre-1795 levels in 1797, inevitably influenced the seamen’s demand for a rise in wages that had not increased in over a century.\textsuperscript{13}

If the market became a more intrusive force in people’s lives, so, too, was the state. Wars were no longer limited engagements of \textit{ancien regimes}. They demanded more manpower as time went on. Probably one in seven or eight adult males between the ages of 16 and 50 were under arms during the American War and one in five or six in the French.\textsuperscript{14} Wars broadened horizons, alerted people to the social discriminations of recruitment, and dislocated lives. Militiamen found themselves forced to march beyond their \textit{pays} to police food rioters with whom they had a lot of sympathy. The punishments they had to endure for missing parade were positively draconian: in the Royal Berkshire regiment routinely 100 lashes.\textsuperscript{15} Seamen found themselves continually in the spotlight of press gangs. Rendezvous had been established in many ports at the outset of the Seven Years War as London and the Downs failed to impress enough men. They became a regular feature by the American War, and by the French Revolutionary wars the Admiralty had moved inland to tap new sources of recruitment through the Quota Acts. Naval recruitment rose sixfold over the course of 75 years, faster than population supply, and by 1797 bore around 120,000 men and mustered just under 115,000. Even allowing for a spurt in population growth in the last decades of the century, this huge number could not be met by the merchant marine alone, even if the statutory regulations concerning the manning of British and colonial ships were relaxed. The detailed survey of Captain Rotheram on the \textit{Bellerophon}, or ‘Billy Ruffian’ as it was colloquially called, which explored in detail the social background of 387 crew members in 1805, revealed that less than half [45 per cent] had actually been in the merchant marine at some point in their lives, mainly in the West Indian and coal trades; a measure, I would suggest, of the remarkable diversity of crews in the Revolutionary wars and the very different worlds from which they were recruited.\textsuperscript{16} Twenty had worked in dockyard occupations, and 11 were fishermen, pilots or watermen; fair game for the press gangs whose mandate was to impress seamen, seafaring men and ‘such persons whose Occupations and Callings are to work in vessels and Boats upon rivers’. Not that the navy was reliant on these men alone. Poor harvests and wartime dislocations saw a surge of volunteer landsmen into the navy. Thirty-one per cent of the \textit{Bellerophon}’s crew fell within that category: weavers, agricultural labourers, shoemakers, a wide range of occupations in fact, including hatters, tailors, butchers,
ironmongers and even one lawyer. Dearth forced them to enter in droves. Ross Dancy’s sample of over 17,000 seamen on three stations between 1793 and 1798, Portsmouth included, reveal over a quarter were landsmen, some of them Quota men because of the larger bounties. At Chatham Quota men constituted as many as 47 per cent of all men recruited in 1795; a freak influx no doubt, but it was still at 20 per cent in 1796, which perhaps explains the visibility of Quota men in the Nore mutiny. In Portsmouth, they were rather less conspicuous, nine per cent in 1795 and 12 per cent in 1797.\(^{17}\) Impressment was still needed to bring in a decent portion of able seamen and riverside artisans. Its obtrusive presence can be gauged by the number of affrays recorded in the newspapers and Admiralty records: 160 in the Seven Years War; nearly 190 in the American War; over 270 in the decade 1793–1805, with a high incidence of confrontation in the opening year of mobilization and a considerable number of fatalities. In one in four encounters someone was seriously wounded or killed. Impressment affrays vied with food riots as the major disturbances of the century and were certainly deadlier.\(^{18}\)

Wartime participation has often been seen as a force for nationalism. If it was, it was nation-building with a bite. Impressment forced families on the parish. Imperial wars in torrid zones destroyed soldiers and seamen. In the 1790s, the fatality rate in occupied St Domingue topped 70 per cent among the soldiers, most succumbing to yellow fever. These privates did not have the liberty of deciding where they could go, unlike the officers, 30 per cent of whom failed to appear when assigned duties in the Leeward Islands.\(^{19}\) What gave particular pungency to this state of affairs was the rapidly advancing frontier in political literacy. The 1790s saw artisans demanding their political rights; it witnessed the massive mobilization and merger of the United Irishmen and Defenders in Ireland, an increasingly important recruiting ground for the armed forces.\(^{20}\) In Tyneside, bitter confrontations with the press gang were punctuated with radical rhetoric; at South Shields, a liberty pole was erected in the market place to the shock of shipowners. And sixpenny editions of Paine’s Rights of Man abounded.\(^{21}\) Paine’s denunciation of the British constitution, and audacious support of the French, fortified democratic rhetoric and the imperatives of reform. Popular democratic societies emerged in over 30 towns throughout England and Scotland, as well as in Belfast, Dublin and Cork. In Norwich, there were no less than 42 clubs discussing Paine’s ideas, not to mention those that spread into

\(^{17}\) J. Ross Dancy, The Myth of the Press Gang (Woodbridge, 2015), 45.
\(^{18}\) Nicholas Rogers, The Press Gang: Naval Impressment and its Opponents in Georgian Britain (London, 2007), 37–58; revised figures for impressment affrays can be found in Google docs, https://docs.google.com/#D81A02. See also Nicholas Rogers, ‘British Impressment and its Discontents’, International Journal of Maritime History, 30 (2018), 52–73.
\(^{19}\) Michael Duffy, ‘The British Army and the Caribbean Expeditions of the War against Revolutionary France, 1793–1801’, Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research, 62/250 (1984), 71.
\(^{20}\) Nancy J. Curtin, ‘The Transformation of the Society of United Irishmen into a Mass-Based Revolutionary Organisation, 1794–6’, Irish Historical Studies, 24/96 (1985), 463–92.
\(^{21}\) Nicholas Rogers, ‘Burning Tom Paine: Loyalism and Counter-Revolution in Britain, 1792–1793’, Histoire sociale/Social History, 32/64 (1999), 165–6.
the countryside. In the Durham coalfield, the rector of Walsingham woefully remarked that the ‘cheapness of Mr Paine’s books has put it in the power of the poorest man to purchase them … many [are] now in circulation amongst such people who with great industry communicate those dangerous yet fascinating opinions of equality amongst their companions’. The circulation figures of Paine’s Rights of Man speak for themselves: over 250,000 copies of parts 1 and 2 by 1793, with translations in Welsh and Gaelic. No wonder loyalist clubs tried to stem the intoxication of radical ideas with studied festivals of Paine’s burnt effigy, designed, at the very least, to take the sting out of hunger.

The French War began in the context of unprecedented politicisation and quickly demanded unprecedented recruitment. This was bound to pose problems for the navy. Captains could no longer rely on seamen from their own pays or county. They could not utilise the customary social networks that undergirded the naval paternalism of the past. They were confronted with socially heterogeneous crews of different political persuasions and backgrounds, many of whom had little experience at sea. Samuel Leech characterised a ship of the line in terms that approximated to a factory: ‘a set of human machinery in which every man is a wheel, a band or a crank, all moving with wonderful regularity and precision’. The challenge for a captain was to facilitate the smooth running of the ship by utilizing a critical core of able seamen, petty officers and artisans. One chronic problem was a shortage of skilled labour as the naval expanded its fleets and operations, with the result there was a considerable turnover of men as the Admiralty tried to juggle its workforce; at Portsmouth, the mooring of the Channel Fleet, it was as high as 53 per cent. On the Pompée, a third-rate man of war that usually mustered 580 or 590 men, and had an official complement of 690, over 900 men were registered in the muster books over a five-month period. This constituted a turnover of 55 per cent, which meant the crew was a revolving door of diverse people, some of whom certainly had to be worked into shape if the ship was to be battle-ready. That predicament inevitably involved some coercion. The larger naval crews of the 1790s were already subjected to close regulation to begin with, divided into divisions, invigilated by petty officers who were more attentive to watch duty and lower deck roistering. But the social heterogeneity of crews meant a ratcheting up of discipline. The anger this precipitated emerges in the complaints voiced by the Channel fleet about the irregular beatings by officers, particularly midshipmen, who were often accused of administering punishments on their own initiative and not those of the captain. On HMS Proserpine, stationed at Sheerness, there were complaints of two to four dozen lashings for very minor offences and...

22. Thompson, Making of the English Working Class, 93–118, 130–1; British Library (hereafter BL), London, UK, Add. Ms. 16,927, ff. 45–61.
23. On the proletarian nature of European warships in this era, British included, see Nyklas Frykman, ‘Seamen on Late Eighteenth-century European Warships’, International Review of Social History, 54 (2009), 67–93.
24. Samuel Leech, Thirty Years from Home, or a Voice from the Lower Deck (Boston, 1843), 22.
25. Brian Lavery, ‘Lower Deck Life in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars’, in Coats and MacDougall, Naval Mutinies of 1797, 194–208.
26. Kathrin Orth, ‘Voices from the Lower Deck: Petitions on the Conduct of Naval Officers during the 1797 Mutinies’, in Coats and MacDougall, Naval Mutinies of 1797, 102–3.
without any formal inquiry. The first lieutenant was also accused of ‘calling People aft, obliging them to strip their Jacketts, even their Shirts & most cruelly beat[ing them] with a rope, by a Boatswain’s mate and stoppage of Grog for a week or a fortnight or as long as they think fit’. 27

Yet, on the *Pompée*, Captain James Vashon does not appear to have been that tough a disciplinarian. In the seven months before the mutiny, he ordered the flogging of 25 seamen and two marines for drunkenness, theft, fighting, neglect of duty and ill-treating a sentry.28 Three seamen were also whipped for ‘mutinous expressions’ or ‘mutinous behaviour’, potentially more serious charges on a par with theft. None of these offences ever resulted in more than 24 strokes of the cat o’ nine tails. In total, Vashon’s bosun administered an average of 13.8 lashes at the grate and whipped under 5 per cent of his crew. Among those who received the lash was the future delegate of the ship, James Melvin, then a quartermaster’s mate, who was whipped for drunkenness during a cruise off the Scilly Isles. Two seamen crop up twice: George Mullins received 12 lashes for drunkenness and ‘neglect of duty’ and another 12 for abusing the sentry; John Geary for mutinous expressions and theft, but not severely.

By the standards of the day, Captain Vashon did not treat his crew in a vindictive manner. There were few captains who were conspicuously more lenient, although Cuthbert Collingwood may have been one.29 Jeffrey Glasco’s figures for the logs of 68 ships in the Channel and North Sea Fleet in the five years prior to the mutiny reveal an average of 15.2 lashes for every flogging. In 71 per cent of all cases, no more than 12 lashes were administered whereas the comparable figure was 81 on the *Pompée*, 76 per cent if one includes two floggings of unspecified volume.30 So Vashon’s disciplinary regime was unexceptional, and judging by the court martial proceedings of June 1797, he commanded considerable respect among a broad section of his crew. Even one of the principal mutineers, James Callaway, admitted that Vashon ‘was more like a Father than a Captain’.31 The only enigma is why the *Pompée* crew evicted three lieutenants and a sergeant of the marines in May 1797. Was it because they were on the take? Was it because the officers encouraged and approved of the informal beatings used to whip newcomers into shape? These so-called ‘startings’, inflicted by the boatswains and their mates with rope-ends or canes, were never recorded in the logbooks, but we know they were a longstanding grievance among seamen. William Robertson, aka Jack Nastyface, thought they could be ‘carried to a great extent of

27. The National Archives (hereafter TNA), Kew, London, UK, 1/5125, petitions 1793–97.
28. TNA, ADM 51/1174, logbook of the *Pompée*, 1 July 1796–30 June 1797.
29. TNA, ADM 51/90 part 1, logbook of *HMS Barfleur*, 15 January 1794–12 July 1794. Collingwood flogged only seven men in this six-month period for an average of seven lashes per flogging.
30. Jeffrey D. Glasco, ‘“We are a Neglected Set”: Masculinity, Mutiny and Revolution in the Royal Navy of 1797’ (Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Arizona, 2001), 264–5; TNA, ADM 51/1174, logbook of the *Pompée*, 1796–7.
31. TNA, ADM 1/5339, court martial of the *Pompée*, 20–23 June 1797. Some 510 seamen signed a petition commending Vashon’s command, June 1797; see BL, Add MS 35,197, f. 216, Bridport papers.
torture’ and that ‘men’s backs have often been so bad … that they have not been able to bear their jackets on for several days’. Sailors disliked the arbitrary character of starting, which must have been deployed frequently in large men-of-war where seafaring experience was limited. In November 1794, Jeremiah Squirrel, the yeoman of the sheets aboard the *Thetis* in Halifax harbour, Nova Scotia, got himself into serious trouble for refusing to ‘thrash the people up’ to the main deck, telling the bosun ‘he would call them up, but would beat no man’. For his defiant attitude he was court-martialled and subjected to a severe flogging.33

If captains and their officers had to meet the challenge of a diverse, inexperienced body of men and considerable turnover, the crew had to build some esprit de corps if it was to address outstanding grievances. Unanimity was the only way its voice was heard, especially if seamen resolved to withhold their labour, strike the sails, petition aggressively, all of which could be regarded as mutiny. In the years prior to the Spithead confrontation, some ships had successfully negotiated ‘mutinies’. On the *Eurydice* seamen resented Lieutenant Colville’s efforts to have them scrub the deck at all hours and beat them when they were lethargic, and one of them, the Irishman Bryant McDonagh, complained in an anonymous letter to the Admiralty. The Admiralty sent two captains to enquire into the matter, but no-one was prepared to confirm Colville’s ill-treatment when he was actually present. Colville was consequently exonerated, but he was angry enough to try to ferret out the author of the letter. McDonagh was subsequently court-martialled, but no-one incriminated him. The purser’s steward could not confirm it was McDonagh’s handwriting. The captain of the forecastle, William Colly, said the hand was likely that of a deserter. And so on. The crew stood firm and McDonagh was acquitted.34

Confrontations like this were high-risk enterprises. On the *Bellerephon*, marines had resented the fact that they were called upon to clean the decks, which was essentially sailor’s work. Consequently, they wrote to the commandant on shore requesting a transfer. He demanded an inquiry and one John Cook broke down under questioning and incriminated nine other marines near his berth. Cook was quickly shuffled off the ship and the others court martialled ‘for attempting to make a mutiny’ on the orders of the new captain of the ship, Lord Cranstoun. In the course of the trial, the captain of the marines confessed that he had fallen out with the first lieutenant, who then displaced his anger on the men. He said the marines had fought bravely in a recent engagement with the French and recommended mercy. The court agreed and consequently declined to punish the men, even though their letter impugned the reputation of the captain, Lord Cranstoun, who ran a tighter ship than his predecessor, the popular Sir Thomas Pasley. Here court-martial diplomacy saved the marines’ skins.35

32. Oliver Warner, ed., [William Robinson], *Jack Nastyface: Memoirs of an English Seaman* (Annapolis MD, 1973), 147–8. On starting, see also Brian Lavery, ‘Lower Deck Life’, 206–8, and Jonathan Neale, ‘The Influence of 1797 upon the *Nereide* Mutiny of 1809’, in Coats and MacDougall, *Naval Mutinies of 1797*, 264–79.

33. TNA, ADM 12/22/467, 24 November 1794.

34. Neale, *The Cutlass & The Lash*, 45–7.

35. Neale, *The Cutlass & The Lash*, 43–4.
This was not always the case. In December 1794, the crew of the *Culloden* went on strike. They remained below decks, allowed waverers to climb the hatchway, and submitted a letter to the Admiralty claiming the ship was unseaworthy, a not-so-subtle reference to the fact that Captain Thomas Troubridge had run the ship aground at St Helens a month before. Troubridge looked to be incompetent, and the sailors were no doubt keen to have him removed, but they were more adamant about removing first lieutenant Whittier who had used them ‘indifferently’, believing them to be a ‘set of Cowardly Rascals’. The crew’s letter was written in respectful terms, highlighted its participation in the Howe’s victory off Ushant on 1 June 1794, and was clearly an opening gambit for some negotiation. Only it was signed by a ‘delegate’, which probably ruffled feathers among their lordships because in the context of 1794 and the government’s campaign against leading members of the London Corresponding Society, it had clear radical connotations. The problem was that the Admiralty was not really interested in making concessions, having just allowed the transfer of a captain and lieutenant from the *Windsor Castle*. The navy tried to cordon off the ship from others, but eventually sent in Captain Thomas Packenham to sweet talk the mutineers into surrender. The mutineers threatened to blow up the vessel, having secured the magazine, but they eventually surrendered once the Admiralty agreed to refit the ship, believing Packenham would use his influence to secure them a pardon. Packenham did no such thing, and in a show trial of a court martial four of the 10 accused were hanged. It was a decision that overshadowed the great Spithead mutiny.

Two years and four months after the *Culloden* court martial, the Spithead fleet went on strike. In February 1797, the fleet sent three or four petitions to retired Admiral William Howe, who was convalescing at Bath with gout. This overture was a little irregular, since Howe was no longer in command of the Channel Fleet, but seven of the 16 ships of the line had served with him at the battle of Ushant, and there was no doubt sailors in the other ships that had done so as well. Howe refused to respond to the petitions because they were anonymous, and eventually passed them on to the Admiralty, who ignored them. More petitions were sent to the Admiralty in early March and were tardily passed on for comments to Lord Bridport, who was the current commander in chief of the fleet. These moved beyond the original demand for an increase in pay to address fuller and better provisions on ship and ashore. But the Admiralty again dithered in their response and when no overtures were made to the seamen once they returned from cruising the Channel, they decided to strike. So when Bridport ordered the fleet to weigh anchor on 16 April, believing he might thereby forestall a mutiny, the seamen declined to sail. Through a body of delegates, two from each ship, they opened negotiations with the authorities, sending copies of their petitions to opposition politicians like Charles James Fox.

Taking this step was a bold venture. The sheer heterogeneity of crews could pose problems for unity, especially when royal bounties and subsidies from local authorities allotted £6 to able seamen, while Quota men routinely received £20–30 and sometimes as

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36. Neale, *The Cutlass & The Lash*, 68–72, 77–82, 91–4, 95–108.
37. Gill, *Naval Mutinies*, 3–15, 20–2; Coats, ‘Spithead Mutiny: Introduction’, in Coats and MacDougall, *Naval Mutinies of 1797*, 27.
38. Gill, *Naval Mutinies*, 20.
much as £50. Such asymmetrical offers struck at hierarchies of skill. Why reward a man who was likely to be a waister, that is a man performing menial duties, with four or five times the bounty of a topman? Would a seaman of foreign extraction necessarily identify with royal navy grievances over pay, especially when he was unlikely to have family in Britain? In the case of the Culloden, it only took a few dissenters to undermine the success of a strike. So how would this play out among crews of differing political understandings, for while some seamen were keenly aware of the major political issues of the day, others were less so? Around 40 per cent were illiterate, judging from the muster rolls of Bristol merchantmen – the regular targets of the press gang. The inability to read did not necessarily inhibit political action, but it might have slowed the reception of new political ideas and solidarities, especially when seamen were asked to break the customary chain of command in a war and forfeit the trust of officers they respected. This seems to have been the case on HMS Garland, when an unusually high percentage of illiterate seamen initially refused to take oaths of lower-deck solidarity without the permission of the captain. And if illiteracy could prove an impediment to collective action, how would a fleet mutiny unravel among seamen of different nationalities and prospects? On HMS Pompée, the great majority of seamen were single, English born, with the Celtic fringe constituting about 20 per cent of the crew, which was noticeably less than average. A further four per cent hailed from outside the British Isles, including 10 Americans, four from German principalities, three Norwegians and two Spaniards, one from Barcelona. The Pompée also had at least two blackjacks on board in 1797–1798. One was Jacob Tucker from Alexandria, a tall man at 5 feet 9.5 inches, with long black hair; the other was a mixed-race seaman from Dominica, 22-year-old James Brazia, who was described as ‘tawney’.

To what extent were minority seamen in sympathy with the strikers? Did they simply see the British navy as another job? Would they imbibe the growing sense of pride and citizenship that sailors evinced as the navy’s indispensability became clearer? And how would the mutineers rein in political dissidents, seamen who might want to push the agenda in more radical directions?

39. Emsley, British Society, 53; Clive Emsley, North Riding Naval Recruits: The Quota Acts and the Quota Men 1795–97 (Northallerton, 1978).
40. James Dugan, The Great Mutiny (New York, 1965), 71; TNA, ADM 1/5125, petitions, 1793–97; two-thirds of the deferential petitioners on board HMS Garland could not sign their name. On merchant seamen, see Bristol Archives, SMV/9/3/1/9 & 10, and 45933/8; and Sheila Lambert, ed., House of Commons Sessional Papers of the Eighteenth Century, 175 vols. (Wilmington DE, 1975), LXIX, 175, 184.
41. Jeffrey Glasco’s figures for 10 ships of the line during the mutiny (3,460 men) reveal a third of recruits were from Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Glasco, ‘We are a Neglected Set’, Table 1, 86. The number of foreigners was four per cent, similar to that on the Pompée.
42. TNA, ADM 36/12482, Muster Book of Pompée, March–June 1797; TNA, ADM 1/2630, V25, 13 May 1798.
43. Nyklas Frykman tends to assume that proletarianization and diversity led inevitably to mutiny, whereas it may, in fact, inhibit it. See his ‘Seamen on Late Eighteenth-Century Warships’, in Marcel van der Linden and Karl Heinz Roth, eds. Beyond Marx. Theorising the Global Relations of the Twenty-First Century (Leiden, 2013), 67–93.
In the month before the mutiny, the London Corresponding Society [LCS] urged its correspondents to set up meetings in every town to plan a remonstrance to the Crown calling for peace and the removal of ministers who had ‘lost the confidence of the nation’. In Bristol, the local Corresponding Society was also pushing a radical agenda, even though it laboured under considerable loyal harassment; and in Portsmouth, where the Channel Fleet was based, another Corresponding Society was actively agitating for change, sheltered this time by a sympathetic corporation. It is fanciful to believe such political aspirations had not penetrated the fleet. Even the Victorian doyen of naval history, Sir William Clowes, accepted that fact. As the evidence of HMS Inspector revealed, even before the Nore mutiny, sailors were imbibing the radicalism of Tyne and Tees, where there had been massive protests against naval impressment. Radical rhetoric also coloured the seamen’s petitions and denunciations. Mutineers declared they ‘did not want to be treated like the dregs of London streets, nor the Footballs, Shuttlecocks and Merry Andrews of a set of Tyrants who claim from us … their Honours, Titles and Fortunes’. They demanded ‘their Liberty, their Invaluable Privileedge more particularly inherit [inherent] to an Englishman – the Pride and Boast of Brittains – the Natural Rights of all’. Richard Forester of HMS Monarch at Spithead thought himself a ‘Briton’; ‘He had spirit,’ he said, ‘and he had read Magna Carta and the History of England … he was as good Flesh and Blood as They [the officers] were.’ These declarations reveal a robust libertarianism with radical resonances – the ‘natural rights of all’ – and a demand for equality that would not brook deference to social rank. In the context of the Royal Navy, they were dangerously subversive.

Still, the Spithead mutineers were pragmatic men. They voiced demands that were uncontroversial. No-one could really object to a pay rise, the first in over 140 years, when dearth stalked the land and a pay increase had already been offered to the army. Nor could the authorities reasonably object to full wages and care for the wounded, especially as that number reached 800 in the first notable engagement of the war, the so-called ‘Glorious First of June’. Or to allowing marines the same allowances as seamen. Demanding a full ration of provisions and fresh vegetables in port was hardly contentious, although it struck at the customary perquisites of the purser, who was entitled to two ounces in every pound. Perhaps the Admiralty recognized, in the

44. Wells, Insurrection, 95–6; Thompson, Making of the English Working Class, 142–3, 146; Steve Poole and Nicholas Rogers, Bristol from Below (Woodbridge, 2017), 285–9; A Geddes, ‘Portsmouth during the Great French Wars, 1770–1800’, Portsmouth Papers, 9 (Portsmouth, 1970), 17, cited by Wells, Insurrection, 95.
45. Sir William Clowes, History of the Royal Navy, 6 vols (London, 1897–1903), IV, 167–81. ‘It would almost seem as if the state of unrest among the seamen was rather of the nature of an epidemic, the germs of which were afloat in the air of the age, than the result of more obvious causes.’
46. Philip MacDougall, ‘Mutiny and the North Sea Squadron’, in Coats and MacDougall, Naval Mutinies of 1797, 250–1; Anne Hawkins and Helen Watt, “‘Now is Our Time, the Ship is Our Own, Huzza for the Red Flag’: Mutiny on the Inspector, 1797”, Mariner’s Mirror, 93 (2007), 156–79; Neale, Cutlass and the Lash, 65; Nicholas Rogers, The Press Gang, 106–7.
47. TNA, ADM 1/5125, Petitions, 1793–7; TNA, ADM 1/727, C370, no. 4; TNA, ADM 1/5345, Court Martial, 9 April 1798.
light of wartime shortages, that objections to this request would license black market- 

eering. Raising pensions was more controversial, but the Spithead men proposed to 

offset the cost by doubling the contribution of the merchant marine to the Chatham 

Chest. Other demands pushed the envelope: shore leave, better shares of prize 

money, the removal of unpopular officers. But all in all, the demands that surfaced 

in March and April 1797 were eminently negotiable, and they were couched in respect-

ful terms. Sailors denied they were disloyal. They simply demanded that their contribu-

tion to ‘the wooden walls of England’ be recognized, both in the American War and 

this one. We ‘do not boost of our good services’ the seamen’s petition to the 

Admiralty ran, ‘for any purpose other than of putting you and the Nation in mind of 

the respect due to us’. 48

The problem was the Admiralty did not think the seamen’s demands were respectfully 

solicited. They were impertinent, if not outrageous, because of the manner in which they 

were advanced. Captain Collingwood believed the seamen were extorting demands from 

the Admiralty; their grievances should have been framed as favours not rights. 49 The 

whole fleet had gone on strike at a time when Britain feared an invasion from a combined 

Dutch and French fleet. More to the point, the seamen had usurped the authority of the 

officers and had opted to negotiate directly with the Admiralty and Parliament. And 

they had fashioned a form of delegatory democracy to negotiate their demands and 

keep their own men in line, for during the conflict a committee of delegates regulated 

ship-to-ship visiting. The seamen also encouraged sober deliberation by prohibiting 

fresh supplies of liquor from the shore and sought to insulate the fleet from outside in-

fluences by refusing to allow private letters reach land, although women were allowed on 

board if they agreed to stay for the duration of the strike. 50 Every seaman had to swear 

an oath to stand fast with his brothers; in the language of the rules found on the 

Queen Charlotte, ‘to take an Oath of Fidelity not onely to themselves but to the Fleet in 

General’. 51 Those that erred and broke the rules were punished. And people were. One 

woman was ducked for trying to bring spirits on board. So, too, was a seaman on the 

Pompée, who was punished with 12 lashes of the cat and ducked three times in the 

water. And a sergeant of marines who refused to take the oath, who was eventually 

put ashore. 52 It was an unprecedented exercise of self-government. One writer thought 

the mutiny ‘more dangerous in its tendency than anything of the kind that ever occurred 

in this, or perhaps any other country’. 53

Historians have sometimes tried to play down the novelty of the 1797 mutiny by 

noting that most of the forms and actions taken by the seamen had precedents. 54

48. D. Bonner Smith, ‘The Naval Mutinies of 1797’, Mariner’s Mirror, 22 (1936), 73.
49. Edward Hughes, ed., The Private Correspondence of Admiral Lord Collingwood (London, 

1957), 82–3.
50. Hampshire Chronicle, 29 April 1797.
51. Ann Veronica Coats, ‘The 1797 Mutinies in the Channel Fleet’, in Coats and MacDougall, 

Naval Mutinies of 1797, 131.
52. Norfolk Chronicle, 29 April 1797.
53. Sussex Weekly Advertiser, 19 June 1797.
54. Ann Veronica Coats, ‘The Delegates: A Radical Tradition’, 41–9.
Oath-taking was a familiar tactic of eighteenth-century unions or ‘combinations’ because striking could easily be construed as a criminal conspiracy. Red flags were the signal of going into action in the navy, although they were used by Liverpool sailors in their 1775 strike as a symbol of defiance. Delegates had been deployed in the London seamen’s strike of 1768 and in the Tyneside strike of 1792 to ensure that all ships struck their sails; they organised roving watches to ensure unanimity. Even so, it is worth pointing out that these actions were part of a wider repertoire of protest that involved collective bargaining by riot and heady confrontations with the authorities, precisely the sorts of violence, verbal and physical, that the mutineers wished to avoid in the spring of 1797. Sailors taunted the authorities in 1768 with shouts of ‘No Wilkes! No King!’ for example. After 1795, such cries could easily be considered seditious if not treasonable.

Consequently, one cannot agree with the older judgment of David Hannay that the mutinies at Spithead differed only from ‘innumerable other mutinies’ because they were ‘general not in method or aim’. Organisation mattered. The 33 delegates of the mutiny were more of the LCS variety, committee men who fashioned rules and discussed strategy. They were educated, experienced, skilled seamen who had served their ships for two to four years. They included an array of petty officers, midshipmen, quartermasters, quarter gunners and their mates, yeomen of the sheets, and 13 able seamen. Although their rules insisted that striking seamen obey the orders of the officers on pain of punishment, the officers were only nominally in charge. As long as the delegates commanded the allegiance of the lower deck, they ran the vessel. And they symbolically enforced their authority by reeving ropes on the yardarm and invading officer space. As the strike progressed seamen ventured onto the quarterdeck, a sanctum of officer authority to which members of the lower deck were normally only invited. When delegates needed to discuss strategy, they normally convened in the captain’s cabin of the Queen Charlotte. Contemporaries understood the implications. As the pro-peace liberal Morning Chronicle exclaimed as the strike moved to its conclusion. ‘Representative Government actually established on board the British fleet, and a Commissioner of Admiralty gone to treat with a Convention of Delegates is an aera in the annals of our Navy which no man who madly gave his suffrage for the present War of Disorganization ever expected to see. Good God, what a spectacle for England!’

Good God, indeed. It was exactly the spectacle the Admiralty had wished to avoid. When the seamen made their first pitch for a rise in wages, the Admiralty came back with a smaller raise, 4s a month to able seamen, 3s to ordinary seamen and 2s to landsmen. Their Lordships tried to stand by this offer and sweeten it by telling the strikers that a pardon beckoned, but at the same time they also threatened to enforce the articles of war if the seamen refused. When this carrot-and-stick strategy failed, the Admiralty caved in

55. E. P. Thompson, ‘The Patricians and the Plebs’, in E. P. Thompson, Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Political Culture (London, 1991), 76–8.
56. David Hannay, Naval Courts Martial (Cambridge, 1914), 136.
57. Coats, ‘The Delegates: A Radical Tradition’, 41, 44.
58. See Callum Easton, ‘Counter-Theatre during the 1797 Fleet Mutinies’, International Review of Social History, 64 (2019), 389–411.
59. Morning Chronicle, 22 April 1797.
on the pay, accepted the proposals regarding sick pay, pensions and provisions, but held off on pensions, sick leave and prize money. It ramped up its concessions by ordering the seamen to return immediately to their duty under pain of losing their smart money, pensions and eligibility for Greenwich Hospital. The Spithead delegates were not intimidated by this threat and effort to divide the fleet. They said they would only accept the terms if they were guaranteed a royal pardon, not one that simply came from the Admiralty, well remembering what happened on the Culloden. Valentine Joyce and John Morrice of the Royal George were adamant on this point, to the chagrin and rage of Admiral Sir Alan Gardner. He seized one of the delegates by the collar and called the strikers a ‘damned, blackguard, mutinous set who deserved hanging’, every fifth one of them.

Gardner’s outburst only stiffened the resolve of the delegates. They declared that ‘until An Act of Parliament is passed and His Majesty’s gracious pardon is granted, the Fleet will not lift an anchor. This is our total and final answer’. In an open rebuke to Gardner and Howe, they said this was the second time a seeming friend among the admirals had failed them. They were now convinced ‘we have nothing to depend upon but our own vigorous exertions to obtain redress of grievances’.

The Admiralty were apoplectic and so too were many politicians. They were more interested in restoring discipline than making concessions, although Pitt was beginning to realize he would have to honour the Admiralty’s offer and secure a royal pardon for the seamen if he wanted to avoid a serious breach in Britain’s wooden walls and a vulnerable south coast. Many heartedly hoped that the sailors’ resolve would dissolve as the majority of the fleet moved down to St Helens, and by early May some sailors were reverting to threat and bluster. Samuel Nelson, a former watchmaker on the Mars, confided to the surgeon’s mate that disaffection was so high that some were ‘determined to take the ship into Brest’. Whether there was any truth to this rumour, the ship’s company set up a trial by jury and cashiered him. He was accused of ‘betraying the confidence entrusted him by his shipmates’ and ‘breaking the oath of fidelity’ and sentenced to 24 lashes of the cat o’ nine tails and a term in irons. At this point, the crew of the Pompée strove to prop up resolve by insisting ‘our oath of fidelity is broke if we do not remain unshaken’d until the whole is sanctioned by an act of Parliament’. It went on, ‘now brothers, steady friends of the Pompees … whatever may be your proposals, we one and all will never deviate from being determined to sink or swim’.

By 5 May, the delegates were beginning to wonder whether the government would honour the agreement. Two days earlier, the Duke of Clarence, the third son of George III, rose in the Lords to declare that the country should not capitulate to the seamen because their actions involved ‘fundamental rules of discipline’. It was a characteristically impolitic speech and it served to augment fears that the government might renege on the agreement. And so when it was rumoured that the Brest fleet was ready to sail and Lord Bridport ordered the ships at St Helens to weigh anchor, the Channel fleet again refused to move. Delegates circulated the news, the Pompée leading the

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60. Gill, Naval Mutinies, 37.
61. Gill, Naval Mutinies, 50; TNA, ADM 1/1022, A39.
62. Gill, Naval Mutinies, 56.
way. At the Queen Charlotte, Captain Lock tried to send the Pompée delegates away, but retracted: ‘All authority,’ he declared, ‘is taken away from me.’

At Spithead, however, where a few vessels had remained because of unresolved differences between officers and crews, Vice-Admiral Sir John Colpoys was more intransigent. He refused to allow the delegates on board his flagship and had the marines level their guns upon them. The crew of the London, which had been ordered below, disliked the decision and tried to rush the hatchway, only to be fired at by Lieutenant Peter Bover on Colpoys’ orders. Mayhem ensued, and once the marines sided with the seamen, Bover, Captain Griffith and Admiral Colpoys found themselves prisoners of the lower deck. Bover was nearly hanged by the yardarm, but the surgeon intervened, and the delegates, particularly Valentine Joyce, persuaded the crew to send the three men to St. Helens to be court martialed.

The London affray threatened to rupture the negotiations between the striking seamen and the government. Colpoys claimed he had acted under orders, specifically new ones issued on 1 May, which encouraged officers to crack down on mutiny. Although the Admiralty later insisted that these rules were intended for the post-settlement sailing, the timing was wretched, and many seamen saw the rules as a provocation, an underhand attempt to root out seditious mutineers who were undermining the good intentions of the others, signalling a willingness to abandon the agreement. To further complicate matters, three of the four seamen wounded in the London hatchway had died, and some of their shipmates were baying for blood. In the confusion of the early days of the mutiny, it was not altogether clear what was happening, at least to the news reporters on the shore, who feared that Colpoys, and perhaps his fellow officers on board the London, might be executed. Some newspapers were relieved to learn that Admiral Colpoys had been put ashore in the custody of the civil power. What the press did not disclose is that Colpoys’ fate had been deliberated upon by a fleet tribunal at St Helen’s, who decided, by 12 votes to five, that this should happen, largely it seems owing to the oratory of John Fleming, a new London delegate, who urged moderation in dealing with the officers, and pleaded with his brother seamen to stick by their original demands and not deviate from them. The news that the government had finally conceded to the sailors’ demands certainly helped. In a very tense situation cool heads prevailed, although ships that had raised complaints against officers did use the moment to dispatch the most unpopular to the shore; in effect, pushing

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63. Gill, Naval Mutinies, 58–66; David W. London, ‘What really happened on board HMS London?’ in Coats and MacDougall, Naval Mutinies of 1797, 61–78.
64. London Chronicle, 9–11 May 1797; Oracle, 10 May 1797.
65. G. E. Manwaring and Bonamy Dobrée, The Floating Republic (London, 1935), 81–94. This is one of the few accounts that mentions that the sailors judged Colpoys, although the authors omit the division: 12 in favour of mercy, five in favour of death. Their account exaggerates the deferential nature of the seamen, even in this stressful situation. The London Evening Post, 9–11 May 1797, stated that Colpoys and Captain Griffith of the London threw themselves on the mercy of the tribunal.
beyond the bargain with the Admiralty to accommodate a lingering grievance that had been there from the beginning. Over 100 officers were removed from their vessels, about half of who were tossed permanently from the Channel fleet, Colpoys included. Three lieutenants on the Pompée were sent packing, along with one from the marines. The Admiralty had to give way to these demands, and ultimately it was the seamen who emerged with honour. They set aside a portion of their prize money to give the dead seamen a decent funeral at Kingston churchyard. Each coffin bore a Union Jack before it at half mast, attended by six women in white. Fifty shipmates of the London followed, accompanied by a similar number of women in black. The procession was orderly and the crowd that watched it through Portsea was described as ‘immense’. The coroner’s jury may have thought the deaths ‘justifiable homicide’ but one suspects the crowd, and certainly the seamen, thought differently.

Admiral Howe was brought in to conclude the agreement and the papers reported that the mutiny ended with much parade to the refrains of ‘God Save the King’ and ‘Rule Britannia’. The navy was back on course, or so the newspapers thought, and so, too, did the London magistrate brought down to Portsmouth to make discreet enquiries as to the state of the fleet, Aaron Graham of Hatton Garden. He found no evidence of direct collusion between the fleet and radical societies, but there are strong reasons to doubt his conclusions since he was unable to get any help from the local authorities, who were Whiggish in orientation. The fact that he had been a client of John Reeves, the architect of the loyalist societies that had sprouted around the country a few years earlier, could not have helped. Graham was likely seen as something of an agent provocateur, ready to corner gullible seamen. Unable to flush out an agitator, and Graham had set his sights on Valentine Joyce and James Melvin of the Pompée, he concluded ‘there was not a man in the fleet whose attachment to the king need be doubted’. Yet, in the same breath, he admitted that seditious handbills had been distributed to the fleet and at the time of the London episode, he had been taken aback by the seamen who sported red cockades and ribbons declaring ‘Success to the Eight United Roses’, a reference to one rebellious squadron anchored at St Helen’s.

Graham’s contradictory messages betrayed his own anxieties that he had a grip on the situation, but it also signalled that the unanimity of the Spithead fleet was wearing thin. When Admiral Howe asked that the red flags be hauled down to conclude the mutiny, two vessels, the Duke and the Mars, stubbornly refused to do so. Their companies eventually

66. Dugan suggests the mutineers drew up a blacklist of 75 officers, although Admiral Howe, brought in as a mediator, bargained them down to about 50. Dugan, Great Mutiny, 166. For ejections from the Pompée, see Christopher John Doorne, ‘Mutiny and Sedition in the Home Commands of the British Navy, 1793–1803’, (Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of London, 1998), 162.

67. Hampshire Chronicle, 13 May 1797; Dugan, Great Mutiny, 144.

68. Manwaring and Dobrée, Floating Republic, 114–7.

69. This is not noted in accounts of Graham’s activities.

70. Dugan, Great Mutiny, 161–5; Wells, Insurrection, 92–6; Doorne, ‘A Floating Republic?’ in Coats and MacDougall, Naval Mutinies of 1797, 181–2. Dugan’s remains the best account.
agreed, but as the visiting delegates from the Nore reported, some dissatisfaction with the settlement remained. Radicals ashore certainly tried to take advantage of this situation. Throughout the crisis, the striking seamen at Spithead had published petitions or explanations of their collective action and at the end they published *An Address to the Nation* vindicating their ‘second’ mutiny in the face of Admiralty perfidy and parliamentary lethargy. They repudiated the notion that they were influenced by French Jacobinism or republicanism, as some parliamentary detractors claimed, and the accusation that they were trying to undermine the safety of the country. ‘Dignified we are, for the service rendered to our country on every occasion, when we had to dispute with the enemy the empire of the main.’ Here the word ‘dignity’ could well carry the connotation imparted to it by the radical orator, John Thelwall, connoting a resolve to stand as citizens, to pursue principled actions in an ‘age of supineness’.71 Sailors had demanded a just recompense for their services and had done so with an ‘openness of heart and frankness of mind … characteristic of a British seaman’. The pamphlet stressed manly patriotism and plain dealing, delivered in a style of communicative rationalism that had become popular with the writings of Tom Paine and the proceedings of the democratic debating societies.

The *Address* from the ‘Loyal and Humane Tars’ of the *Queen Charlotte*, in effect from the delegates for the whole fleet, was published in the *Courier* on 19 May 1797. But when printed separately, it was linked to a parliamentary reform meeting under the chairmanship of Sir Francis Burdett at the Crown and Anchor Tavern in London.72 This meeting called for ‘a speedy peace and alliance with the French Republic’, a ‘full, fair and free Representation of the People’, an end to Pitt’s war ministry, and ended by thanking the London Corresponding Society for its ‘unworned efforts in the cause of Parliamentary Reform’. Appended to the *Address* by printer Benjamin Crosby, the publisher of William Godwin’s *Caleb Williams* (1794) and *Thomas Paine Vindicated* (1796), some people were clearly trying to situate the sailors’ demands within a broader radical context. They were hoping to capitalize on the continuing disaffection in the fleet.

Disaffection surfaced on the *Pompée* at the beginning of June, some two weeks after sailing. According to the evidence submitted at the court martial a few weeks later, several seamen opened discussions on the prospect of a seaman’s petition for peace on the first watch of 1 June. Prominent among them was Thomas Ashley, a 20-year-old landsman from London, who had been on the *Pompée* about 20 months previously, and prior to that on the *Royal William*. He may well have been recruited under the Quota Act of 1795. Certainly, some newspapers thought so.73 He confessed to be a committed democrat who ‘had traced History & could not discover any Good Quality’ in George III. Earlier he had informed his shipmates that he had received letters from his

71. Frank Mabee, ‘The Spithead Mutiny and Urban Radicalism in the 1790s’, *Romanticism*, 13 (2007), 138; B. Sprague Allen, ‘William Godwin’s Influence upon John Thelwall’, *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 37/4 (1922), 667.
72. *An Address to the Nation by the Seamen at St Helen’s, likewise The Proceedings at the Meeting of the Friends to Parliamentary Reform* (London, 1797).
73. *Reading Mercury*, 26 June 1797; TNA, ADM 1/5339, Court Martial of Guthrie, Ashley and others of the Pompée, 20–21 June 1797.
friends in London ‘informing him of the State of Public Matters’ and learned that ‘upwards of Sixty Thousand People in London had Petition[ed] for Peace’. This may have been an exaggeration, but it was well known that the London liverymen had passed instructions to its MPs advocating peace and an end to the Pitt ministry. Since that had failed, peace ‘could only be brought about by Sailors’. Thomas Walker [or Waller], a 22-year-old able seaman from Bingley in Yorkshire, concurred: ‘We were the people to do it if we liked for Towns and Parishes throughout England had petitioned for it and they could not get it, and if the seamen stood out, they were the people that could get it.’

William Guthrie, the coxswain of the barge, made the same point to Joseph Smith, a 34-year-old landsman from Ullenhope in Leicestershire. He described the King as a ‘Bad Man’ who had no intentions of making peace, and he was convinced ‘the great Men at the Head of Affairs’ would be the ‘ruin of the Nation’. In some accounts, he appeared a little sceptical that a seamen’s petition would succeed, but he believed ‘the Nation at large would be very indebted to the seamen’ for trying.

According to one source, and it would be consonant with the radical desire for peace, Guthrie is said to have declared off Ushant, ‘there live our friends [the French], not our enemies’.

Within a day, crew members were called down to the berth of John Davis, the yeoman of the sheets, to take an oath to agitate for peace when the fleet returned to Spithead or Plymouth from its cruise. The material evidence of this oath was never found, but it purportedly talked of standing ‘true till death in promoting the cause of Freedom with Equity while any probability of furthering its Progress remained’. James Callaway, an able seaman from Lambeth, aged 40, was responsible for administering the oath, but he encountered considerable opposition. If the Pompées were mobilizing for a peace petition, why the oath? And was this oath about peace or something more? Some seamen understood that political moves such as these had to be conducted in secrecy, especially in the light of the Admiralty’s order of 1 May to crack down on further mutinies, but ‘Freedom with Equity’ seemed to promise more than peace. Indeed, the phrase ‘freedom and equity’ [it was rarely ‘with’] had a libertarian-radical pedigree, appearing in Major John Cartwright’s democratic Take Your Choice (1774), William Godwin’s republican Enquiry concerning Political Justice (1793), and a poem by William Cowper entitled Heroism, written during the American War, in which the volcanic eruptions of Mount Aetna are compared to the royal ‘mischiefs’ of George III, prompting the author to wish for ‘some heav’n protected isle, Where peace and equity and freedom smile’. Ashley interpreted the phrase to mean ‘strict justice’. Callaway fudged the

74. Morning Chronicle, 8 May 1797.
75. TNA, ADM 1/5339.
76. TNA, ADM 1/5339; see also Wells, Insurrection, 95–6.
77. TNA, ADM 1/5339. The Reading Mercury, 26 June 1797, singled out Guthrie’s Francophile gesture, as does Nyklas Frykman, ‘Mutiny on the Hermione’, 171, and ‘Seaman on Late Eighteenth-Century Warships’, 93.
78. William Cowper, Poems, (London, 1782), 361, republished in Poems, 2 vols. (Dublin, 1792), I, 240; William Godwin, An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, 2 vols. (London, 1793) I, 11; John Cartwright, Take Your Choice! Representation and Respect (London, 1774), 29.
issue, insisting only that the oath was a strategy to keep the crew focused on a peace initiative. He told Joseph Smith he believed it was a means of maintaining ‘a strict regularity of observing good order among them’. It would ‘prevent any disturbance or anything that had a tendency to … a mutinous disposition’.

Some like John Broghan, a 22-year-old ordinary seaman from Ireland, took the oath on that account, believing its objective was simply peace. He swore he would ‘hang every bugger that would not sign to it’. But not everybody was convinced or susceptible to intimidation. William Hutchinson told Thomas Walker ‘he would be hanged for it’.79 John Mountain, the former captain of the foretop who had been promoted to gunner, declared ‘it was a very wrong piece of business’. John Bower, the boatswain’s mate, wondered just how the mutineers proposed to put the demand for peace into effect. He thought this agitation would only embolden the French to attack. Isaac Stewart, another bosun’s mate, also wanted more details of what was intended and declared his mess would oppose it. Even so, the mutineers pressed on. Martin Welch, an able seaman from Ross in Ireland, disclosed that the mutineers handed him a book ‘which appeared to be a prayer book and I would not take it, and said I would suffer myself to be shot before I would hurt my parents at home and the nation by so doing’. John Bower, the quartermaster from Perth asked Callaway ‘if he had no regard for his King and Country and if he had no wife and family or any relations in England that he wished well’. Callaway retorted ‘he did have a wife and family in London and if it was not for that he said he did not care a damn for the Country’.

Tempers frayed around Davis’s berth. Some seamen seem to have signed simply out of loyalty to their mess mates. Others refused outright, believing the seamen had secured decent concessions from the Admiralty and it was impolitic and unpatriotic to ask for more. Callaway and the other principal mutineers found the going so tough that they pretended they had more signatures than they actually did. To complicate matters, the mutineers soon discovered James Addison, an able seaman from Burton on Trent, had begun collecting signatures for a counter-petition. This document argued that while peace was a perfectly desirable long-term objective, now was not the time to press for it. Further contention would in fact, delay peace, not advance it. Those that signed this petition included the two delegates, William Potts and James Melvin; their substitutes, John Mountain and George Nichols; the purser’s steward, Peter Dallimore; the leader of the middle watch, 36-year-old Robert Ogle from Newcastle; two gunner’s mates, John Dower and Thomas Flaherty; and Sergeants Sweet, Simpson and Cryer, and Corporal Costello from the marines. In effect it featured some of the key players in the crew, mustering 61 signatures.80

Those who signed the oath committing them to agitate for peace and by implication reform and a change of ministers, numbered 83.81 Some had very probably signed under duress, while others did so simply out of sheer loyalty to their mess mates.

79. TNA, ADM 1/5339.
80. BL, Add Ms. 35.197, ff. 218–9.
81. BL, Add Ms. 35.197, f.221. Michael Bowen suggested 86 at the court martial, TNA, ADM 1/5339. Ashley understood that a petition to the crown for peace would be accompanied by a change of ministers.
Michael Bowen, a 22-year-old able seaman from Dublin who messed with Guthrie, was induced by other activists to sign up. He recalled that Thomas Ashley ‘came into the berth and got me by the Jacket and said, oh my good fellow, you were a good fellow before and won’t go against us now. I told him no – I could not go against the ship’s company – if they were agreeable, I should go with them – without doubt I could not go against them. Callaway tried to tell him the majority were in favour and that few had said no, and on that he took the book and kissed it.’

John Livingstone, a 30-year old able seaman from Edinburgh, thought he was signing for ‘Liberty when the Ship came in’, that is, liberty to go shore, a grievance that had been voiced two months’ earlier at Spithead. A few at the court martial pleaded ignorance as to what they had signed. Among them was Richard Westcott, a 17-year-old ordinary seaman from Bideford, and John James, a 24-year-old able seaman from Sheepwash in Devon, who bewilderingly thought the binding oath had ‘something about Peace in it’. Indeed, Captain Vashon believed the mutineers made most headway among the youngest and inexperienced of the crew, although this might have been a face-saving explanation on his part. So while the mutineers outnumbered the definitive naysayers, we cannot be certain of the actual disposition of the crew. Later, once the mutiny had collapsed, more than 500 pledged allegiance to the captain and the ‘present happy government and constitution’, although Vashon suspected there were still disaffected seamen at large.

James Vashon arrested 14 or 15 seamen on evening of 5 June, having first been informed of their ‘mutinous and treasonable designs’ the previous day. They were transferred to the Medusa and the Minotaur and sent to Plymouth and Portsmouth to await trial. In the end, the Admiralty decided to try six: Callaway, Guthrie, Ashley, Davis, Broghan and a 30-year-old ordinary seaman from Galway named Robert Johnson, a quiet, reflective man who had taken down the signatures of those sworn in and was thought to have produced the oath and masterminded the operation. The Admiralty wanted a show trial. Earl Spencer, the first Lord of the Admiralty impatiently wrote to Bridport on 10 June hoping that ‘the Pompee will soon arrive and that we may have an opportunity of making a severe Example of the ill-disposed of her Crew’. To make that ‘severe Example’ the Admiralty brought in Sir Thomas Packenham, purportedly a captain with ‘humane’ views, but the one who betrayed the seamen on the Culloden.

Packenham opened the court martial aboard the Royal William at Portsmouth on 20 June. It was a full house, so full in fact that the beams of the vessel had to be reinforced to accommodate the curious crowd. What emerged from the trial was that the mutineers

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82. TNA, ADM 1/5339. Details of origin come from the Muster Book, ADM 36/12482.
83. BL, Add. Ms. 35, 197 ff. 219, 221.
84. The logbook suggests 15, the letter to Admiral Bridport, 14. Newspaper accounts suggested 13. TNA, ADM 51/1174, 5 June 1797; BL, Add. Ms. 35,197, ff. 205-7; Whitehall Evening Post, 13–15 June 1797; Morning Herald, 15 June 1797.
85. London Chronicle, 22–24 June 1797. The oath was purportedly found in Johnson’s pocket. Ashley testified at the trial that Johnson had given him a paper with the oath on it. TNA, ADM 1/5339.
86. BL, Add Ms. 35,197, f. 213.
87. London Chronicle, 22–24 June 1797.
had been disheartened by the reception they were receiving and considered abandoning the whole enterprise. According to Donald McDonald, one of the older Scots on board, Callaway admitted as such on 4 June, although he seems to have given out mixed messages. In contrast to this diffidence, the prosecution talked of the coercion of seamen and dark conspiracy. Some mentioned a blacklist of those who refused to sign, or a ‘dead list’. Captain Vashon claimed the meetings below decks had been ominously clandestine, conspiracy by candlelight. The papers picked up on this. The *Whitehall Evening Post* talked of the ‘diabolical intent’ of the mutineers; ‘a black and mysterious business’, echoed the *London Chronicle*, even though much of the discussion about the petition had taken place during watches on the main deck and at the poop.  

John Broghan was accused of ‘using mutinous and threatening speeches’ and the other five of forming a ‘mutinous association’. Broghan was one of nine men who had initially been earmarked for this offence and his threats at Davis’s berth made him an easy target. He was sentenced to a year’s solitary confinement in the Marshalsea prison. The other five were charged with a more serious offence that potentially carried the death penalty. Although the swearing in took place at Davis’s berth, the court decided that Davis was a gullible, if not entirely innocent, party. He had complained of the hubbub when he was trying to sleep, and while he was persuaded to take the oath, he said he only did it because Callaway told him it was for a peace petition when the ship returned to Spithead, and it would only go forward if the rest of the fleet endorsed it. Three seamen testified that Davis had signed reluctantly, and the leader of the middle watch Robert Ogle thought he did not really understand what he was doing. This testimony, and a statement from the boatswain, Mr. Ellison, that Davis had never voiced mutinous sentiments at the focsle, was enough to get him acquitted. He came across as an easily manipulable political neophyte, illiterate and credulous, a narrative that the Admiralty was prepared to endorse more generally, claiming many of the mutineers were deluded men. Newspapers endorsed this view, the *Northampton Mercury* asserting that half of the mutineers arrested by Vashon had been ‘drawn into the snare by a few designing villains, much connected with incendiaries on shore’. The other four mutineers on trial were a different matter. They appeared at the heart of the conspiracy and the court sentenced them all to death. Packenham continued to promote the narrative of regrettable delusion by recommending them all for mercy and he won some kudos for his alleged ‘humanity and universal philosophy’, but really this move facilitated the time-honoured strategy of combining judicial terror with mercy. Ashley was too loquacious in his radicalism to escape the noose, and Johnson seemed too sinister a character to merit mercy, despite the fact that some believed he was a modest religious man. The other two had some commendations on which they could draw. Callaway was said to have admitted that the *Pompée* was the best ship he had sailed on in 22 years’ service, and his equivocations about pursuing the petition in

88. *Whitehall Evening Post*, 15–17 June 1797; *London Chronicle*, 22–24 June 1797; TNA, ADM 1/5339.  
89. TNA, ADM 1/5339; *Evening Mail*, 19–21 June 1797.  
90. *Northampton Mercury*, 17 June 1797.  
91. *Star*, 27 June 1797.
the face of opposition registered that he was disposed to consider the feelings of the whole company. He had also advocated mercy for Admiral Colpoys after the London affair, and was said to detest ‘Bloodshed and Mischief’. Guthrie had even more going for him. He had been captain of the forecastle on the St Albans, and Captain Vashon thought highly enough of him to bring him over to the Pompée and promote him to coxswain of the barge. Vashon believed Guthrie was really well affected to ‘his King and Country’; he had simply been ‘led astray by designing Men’. The court martial proceedings, however, suggest that Guthrie feared his family would be destitute if the war continued, and this predicament disposed him to agitate for peace. Even so, Captain George Barker, formerly first lieutenant on the St Albans, endorsed Vashon’s judgment. ‘I thought him a remarkable good seamen,’ he averred, ‘very sober, quiet and attentive to his duty.’ The fact that he had once avoided a collision with HMS Incendiary while steering the Pompée into Portsmouth also helped his case. So, too, did the fact that on the last cruise he had rescued two seamen from drowning, one from the Pompée and the other from the Atlas.92

Nonetheless, the Admiralty wanted maximum publicity from the trial. The fate of the four men hung in the balance until the very last minute. They were all hooded at the yard arm when Ashley and Johnson were launched into eternity. Once Guthrie and Callaway’s hoods were removed, Vashon movingly read the king’s pardon to the reprieved men, whose sentences were commuted to imprisonment. Contrite before the execution, they broke down on hearing the news. The situation, wrote one correspondent, was ‘affecting beyond all description’. One provincial newspaper believed the executions and last-minute reprieves ‘will have a very fine effect on all who witnessed the scene’.93 Only the Oracle thought the mutiny merited more severity. It wondered why such violent men as Calloway and Guthrie had received pardons, but conceded that ‘every enormity at the late Mutinies’ was now ‘buried in oblivion’.94

After the trials and executions of the mutineers on the Pompée, disaffection did not disappear from the Channel Fleet. During the Irish rebellion of 1798, seamen affiliated with the United Irishmen attempted to seize British men of war and sail them to either France or Ireland to aid the cause. A marine tipped off the captain about the UI cell on the Caesar organised by Bartholomew Duff, and the ringleaders were either hanged or flogged around the fleet. The same happened on the Defiance, where 24 seamen and one marine swore to be true to the ‘Free and United Irishmen’, to take the ship to Brest, and ‘to hoist a green ensign with a harp on it, and afterwards kill and destroy the Protestants’: a commitment that combined Jacobin zeal with older Jacobite fervour and revealed the degree to which the UI movement was veering towards sectarianism.95 Savage floggings and executions did not entirely dispel this disaffection, which spread to other ships, and very possibly to the Pompée. In March 1799, four seamen from the Pompée were accused of taking the oath of the United Irishmen. According to the

92. All this evidence from the Court Martial proceedings, TNA, ADM 1/5339; details of sailors taken from the Muster Book of Pompée; TNA, ADM 36/12482.
93. General Evening Post, 29 June–1 July 1797; Northampton Mercury, 1 July 1797.
94. Oracle, 30 June 1797.
95. Dugan, Great Mutiny, 420–3; Whitehall Evening Post, 8–11 September, 27–30 October 1798; Sun, 29 September 1798; Lloyd’s Evening Post, 28 September–1 October 1798.
Admiralty Solicitor, Stephen Russell, Harry Hennessey, Jonathan Hogan and Jonathan Dorel were administered the oath by John Lynch, a waterman in Gosport.96 The inquiry proved inconclusive and no prosecution was launched, but once again the incident suggests the Admiralty had great difficulty insulating the navy from the political passions of the day, even after the British victories at Camperdown and the Nile.

Where does this history of the Pompée leave us? Tracking the politics of one man-of-war is not enough to offer a general thesis, but it certainly suggests we should be leery of formulas which posit loyal, apolitical seamen against political ‘outsiders’ be they radicals, Quota men, or Irish revolutionaries. These are misleading stereotypes and they lead to unhelpful binaries such as discontent versus disaffection. The political passions of the day swept through the fleets, although their impact ship by ship was more imponderable, dependent upon the popularity or unpopularity of leading officers, their disciplinary regimes, the particular disposition of leading members of the foretop and key skilled workers, the degree to which basic grievances over provisions and pay, shore leave and prizes, melded with larger political concerns. The huge turnover in the fleet meant the political dispositions of particular vessels could change quite rapidly, as they did on the Pompée, leaving open the question of how radical aspirations might take or evaporate in an escalating crisis. The way these aspirations might be negotiated also surfaces in the Nore mutiny, where the fractures were more visible as the crisis unfolded. The address by representatives of the Nore on 7 June 1797, is a heteroglossia of grievance, grounded in a demand for public respect for seamen who put their lives at risk ‘in the midst of tempests’ for the sake of their country, the first line of defence against the French. The sailors disavow disaffection and propound the ‘highest opinion of our beloved sovereign’, yet at the same time they highlight the contradictions of their service and their servitude, and remind their audience, controversially in these days of Black Lives Matter, that they ‘Labour under every disagreement and affliction which African slaves cannot endure’. They are free men bonded to the state, who do the dirty work for indifferent politicians and ‘tyrants who derive from us alone their honours, titles and fortunes’; a reference either to the naval officers who get all the glory, or more generally and radically, to the system of corruption and privilege that burdens the state, a major theme in Paine’s second volume of Rights of Man. The sailors receive a pittance for their services, and are deprived of hard-won arrears in pay, suffering officers ‘without the least tincture of humanity’, men who exercise ‘the most wanton acts of cruelty over those whom misfortunes or patriotic zeal have placed in their power’. The address contains a threat. Unless their grievances are addressed, the traffic of the Thames estuary will grind to a halt. It contains radical flourishes: ‘The Age of Reason is at Length arrived, we have been endeavouring to find ourselves men. We now find ourselves so.’97 The address is full of anger and frustration; it is loyal, populist, racist and radical at the same time. An intentional mix? To confound the politicians and throw them off guard? Or perhaps indicative of the swirling tensions within the fleet, as seamen tried to wrestle

96. TNA, ADM 1/3687, 23 March 1799. William Cayell of the Magnificent was also suspected of taking the oath.

97. TNA, ADM 1/5125, address by the representatives of the mutineers at the Nore, 7 June, 1797, cited in Christopher Doorne, ‘A Floating Republic’, 188–9.
concessions from the government and Admiralty at a critical juncture in the war, when
dearth stalked the land and Ireland was about to explode into rebellion.

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