

Contributions by Old Sailor-Poets to the Nautical Songs Inventory

By Charles Ipcar, PhD



Fore-castle Songs, drawn by Gordon Grant, from **Songs of American Sailormen**,
edited by Joanna C. Colcord, published by Bramhall House,
New York, NY, US, ©1938, p. 123

5/9/2025

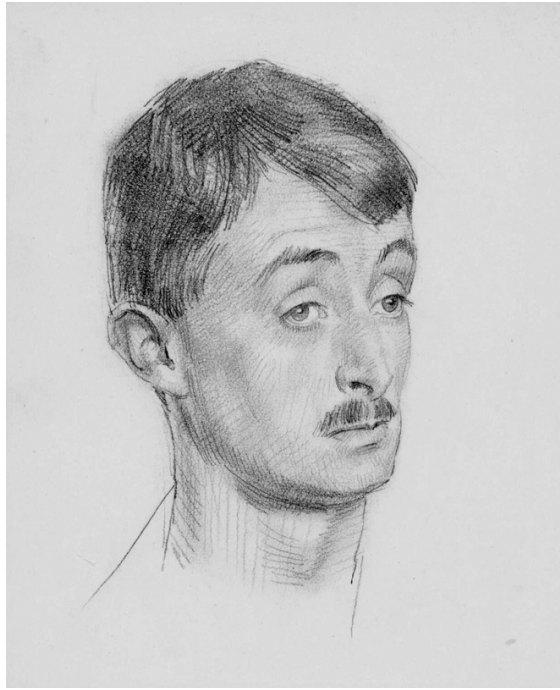
Contributions by Old Sailor-Poets to the Nautical Songs Inventory

The nautical music inventory is primarily made up of traditional work songs and ballads. Through the years well known singer-songwriters such as Gordon Bok, Tom Lewis, Cyril Tawney, and Bob Zentz have made major contributions to this inventory. In addition, other less well-known singer-songwriters have also increased our inventory and happily this process continues to this day. Also adding to our nautical music inventory, such non-sailor-poets as Cicely Fox Smith (1882 to 1954) have composed hundreds of nautical poems, more than a hundred of which have been successfully adapted for singing and have been recorded by our musical community from all around the world.

My present focus, the "old sailor-poets," forms a smaller group but it's my contention that their works deserve special attention and, when adapted for singing, can make a major contribution to our nautical music inventory. By "sailor-poets" I mean poets who have actually gone to sea as crewmembers on a commercial sailing or steam powered ship, or aboard a regular navy warship. And by "old," I mean those poets who primarily composed their poems from the 1890s to the 1920s, during the last decades of tall-ship sailing.

There are a dozen or so old sailor-poets that come to my mind, whose poems have been adapted for singing by our contemporary nautical singers. Most likely, the first one we all think of is John Masefield, British Poet Laureate (1930 to 1967), who shipped aboard a sailing ship as an apprentice officer in the 1890s. There are other less well-known sailor-poets such as Bill Adams, another apprentice officer who first set sail in 1897; Burt Franklin Jenness, who served as a US Navy surgeon in World War 1; and Hamish Maclaren, a British Royal Navy deck officer in World War 1 and serving afterwards in the 1920s. We are fortunate to have access to a wealth of writings from each of these poets.

For this symposium I have selected the above four old sailor-poets for further review. I'll provide a short biography for each, provide examples of their nautical poems, demonstrate how I and others have adapted their poems for singing, and provide reference to where one can find more information about their literary works and lives.



John Masfield drawn by Henry Lamb, 1909, from National Portrait Gallery, London, UK

John Masfield: A Short Biography

John Masfield is, no doubt, the best known of our four sailor-poets. Among his many other honors, he became British Poet Laureate in 1930 and continued in that role until his death in 1967. During his long life he published hundreds of poems, and dozens of books, both poetry and prose, and has been the subject of several excellent biographies.

In my review I will focus primarily on his nautical experience before he became a published poet. At the age of 13, Masfield was enrolled by his family as a cadet on the training ship HMS *Conway* where he learned the ropes, how to get along with his messmates, and listened with great interest to the yarns the adult professional sailors told the young cadets. Masfield described this experience in detail in his book **New Chum**.¹



Training Ship HMS *Conway*, from National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, UK

¹ **New Chum**, by John Masfield, Macmillan Co., New York, NY, ©1945

After his training in 1894, Masfield signed aboard the graceful 4-masted barque *Gilcruix* in Cardiff. At first his experience seemed to fulfill his romantic dreams and he got real satisfaction learning seamanship.² However, when the ship finally made the nitrate port in Iquique, Chile, Masfield fell gravely ill and was invalided ashore; there he stayed recuperating for several weeks until he could be shipped home by steamer. In 1895, after he recovered his health back home in England, Masfield's family had him shipped out to New York City to sign aboard as an apprentice again on the barque *Bidston Hill*. However, after reporting onboard, Masfield took one look at the ship and made up his mind to desert, in the hopes of pursuing a literary career.



Four-Masted Barque *Gilcruix*, circa 1900, from State Library, South Australia

For several months he was little more than a vagrant earning a bit of money here and there, finally landing a job (room and board) as an assistant bartender in the old Columbian Hotel in Greenwich Village.³ That might have been the end of his story except for his stroke of luck in meeting a young man at the bar who helped him to secure a paid job working at the huge Alexander Smith & Sons' carpet factory in Yonkers, New York, from 1896 to 1897,⁴ spending what little surplus wages he earned to purchase books which he eagerly consumed. When in 1897 he decided to return to England, he managed to secure a job as steward on a passenger steamer, working his passage home; by then he was fully committed to earning his living as a writer in London.⁵

² **John Masfield: A Life**, by Constance Babington Smith, Macmillan Co., New York, NY, ©1978, pp. 23-28

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 32-35

⁴ **In The Mill**, by John Masfield, Macmillan Co., New York, NY, ©1941

⁵ **John Masfield: A Life**, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 35-46

Success was no easy task for Masfield but after several dozen of his poems were published in such magazines as **The Outlook**, the **Tatler**, the **Speaker**, and the **Pall Mall Magazine**,⁶ he was able to get his first book of nautical poems published, **Salt-Water Ballads**, in 1902⁷. This book was followed by **A Sailor's Garland** in 1906⁸, an anthology that he edited which included the works of other nautical poets as well as traditional nautical work songs and ballads. He then had published several other non-nautical books of prose and verse, plays, and additional nautical books of poetry and prose. By the early 1920s he was an established writer. Masfield passed away on May 12, 1967. His life may best be summed up by another nautical writer Lieutenant Commander Melvin F. Talbot (S.C.), U. S. Navy, who ended his review of Masfield's works with this statement:⁹

John Masfield, the storyteller, the painter of pictures, the Laureate whose philosophy was slowly built up of boyhood impressions gained in the rough life of the forecastle, is, I believe, destined to be remembered as one of the great poets. To those of us who go down to the sea in ships he will always be a kind of spiritual companion. We shall see him often in our wanderings, sometimes in bright southern ports, sometimes along the dingy dock fronts, a frail, thoughtful man with questioning eyes, who moves among the sordid crowds of stranded seamen, sharing their misery but untouched by their brutality...We shall feel him near us in the quiet libraries of the world where patient scholars still seek an answer to the eternal mystery of life. And, at sea, in the long night watches, a lonely figure.

Selected Poems by John Masfield Adapted for Singing

"Sea Fever" is Masfield's best-known nautical poem that has been adapted for singing and I needn't provide any more details, other than mentioning that the musical setting most of us are familiar with was done by Andy Taylor in the 1970s. Here are four more poems that are much less well known. Note that the link provided for each poem will take you to my website where the poet's original words are included, as well as a MP3 sample (click on the button) of how I sing the adapted version.

⁶ Ibid., p. 67

⁷ **Salt-Water Ballads**, by John Masfield, Grant Richards, London, England, ©1902

⁸ **A Sailor's Garland**, edited by John Masfield, Macmillan Co., New York, NY, US, ©1906

⁹ Lieutenant Commander Melvin F. Talbot (S.C.), U. S. Navy, **Proceedings**, US Naval Institute, Vol. 59/10/368, October 1933

"A Pier-Head Chorus" by John Masfield (<https://www.charlieipcar.com/lyrics/pierhead.htm>)


Based on a poem by John Masfield, ©1912

Adapted for singing by Charles Ipcar, ©2007

Tune: after gospel song *Little Black Train*


A Pier-Head Chorus

C F C




Now I'll be chew-ing salt horse an' bit-ing flint - y bread,

F C F




Danc - ing with the stars up - on the fo' - c'le head; Hark - ening to the bow-

C F



- wash an' the welt - er of the tread - of a thou-sand tons of clip-per run-ning


C



free.


C F C F C

Chorus:




For the tug has got the tow - rope, she'll lead us to the

F C F




Downs, Her pad-dles churn the riv-er wrack to mud-dy greens an' browns; But I have swapped the

C F



riv-er - wrack and all the filth of towns For the roll - ing, surg - ing, comb-ers of the

C F G C



sea. For the roll - ing, surg - ing, comb-ers of the sea.

For we'll sheet her tops'ls home, glide on down the Bay,
The sea-line blue with billows, the land-line blurred an' grey;
The bow-wash will be piling high an' thrashing into spray,
As the clipper's forefoot tramples down the swell. (CHO)

She'll log a giddy seventeen an' rattle out the reel,
The weight of all the run-out line will be a thing to feel,
As the 'bacca-chewing shellback shambles aft to take the wheel,
An' the seasick little middy strikes the bell. (CHO)

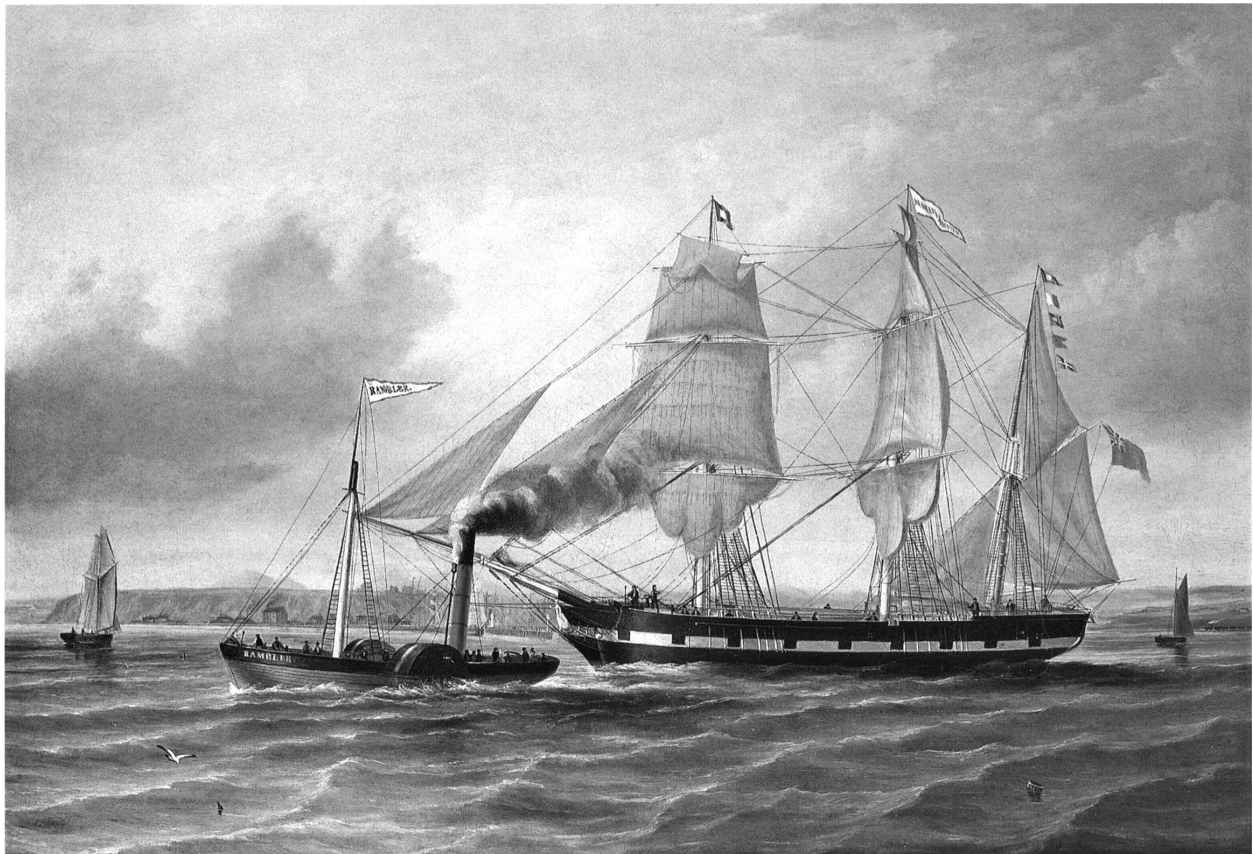
Notes:

From **Salt-Water Poems and Ballads**, John Masefield, Macmillan Co., New York, NY, US,
©1912, p. 51.

A fine setting-out song based on a poem which I've adapted for singing using a tune inspired by the 19th century gospel song *Little Black Train*; I've used one of the verses for a chorus.

"River wrack" refers to floating seaweed.

"Rattle out the reel" is a reference to how the speed of a 19th century sailing ship was determined by use of the knotted log-line and reel.



Sidewheel Tugboat *Rambler* Towing Barque in Early 19th Century, source unknown

"Hell's Pavement" by John Masfield (<https://www.charlieipcar.com/lyrics/hellpave.htm>)

Based on a poem by John Masfield, ©1912

Adapted for singing by Charles Ipcar, ©2004

Tune: by Charles Ipcar, ©2004

Hell's Pavement

C G C

"Now, when I'm dis-charged at Liv-er - pool____ an' draws me bit o' pay,____ "I'll

F G C G

nev-er, nev-er go to sea no more; I'll court a pre - ty lit - tle lass____ an'

C F G C G7

have a wed-din' day,____ An' set-tle down some qui-et place a - shore; I'll nev-er go to sea a - gain____ a-

C G7 C D G G7

tempt - in' Dav - y Jones, Hearn-en-ing to them cruel sharks a - hung-er-in' for me bones;____ I'll

C F C F G C G C F G7 C

run a blush-in' dair-y - farm____ or go a crack-in' stones,____ Or buy an' keep a lit-tle li-quer - store."

C Chorus: G G7 C G7 C

Oh, I'll nev-er go____ to sea a - gain____ to plow the o - cean deep,____ No

D G G7 C G

more I'll hear____ "All hands a-loft" to rob me of me sleep; I'll set-tle nine-ty miles from shore, no

C F G7 C

more the pier head leap,____ I'll nev-er, nev-er, go to sea no more!

Then, they towed her into Liverpool, we made the hooker fast,
And the copper-bound official paid the crew (*paid the crew!*),
So I drew me money, but me money didn't last,
For I went and painted Lime Street blue (*so blue!*), –
It was rum for Poll, an' rum for Nan, an' gin for Jolly Jack;
I shipped a week later in the clothes upon me back;
And I had to pinch a little straw, I had to beg a sack,
To sleep on, when me watch was through. (CHO)

Notes:

From **Salt-Water Poems and Ballads**, John Masefield, published by Macmillan Co., New York, NY, US, ©1912, p. 25.

Based on a poem that I've adapted for singing but this time in the British Music Hall style, adding a chorus in the process. Here we have a different take on the sailor's pledge never to go to sea again, only to be shipped out "...a week later in the clothes upon me back." Stan Hugill used this poem to preface his book **Sailortown**, E. P. Dutton & Co., New York, NY, US, ©1967, p. xv.

"Hooker" was sailor's slang for any old ship.

"Blue" was sailor's slang for squandering money during a spree ashore.



Sailors Ashore Drinking in Pub, from **L'Illustration**, 1843, J.J. Dubochet, Paris, France

Based on a poem by John Masfield, ©1912
Adapted for singing by Charles Ipcar, ©2009
Tune: after traditional *Johnnie o' Breadisley*

Mother Carey

Chord symbols: D min, F, C, D min, F, D min, C, F, C, D min, D min7, D min, C, F, C, F, C, D min, C, D min, C, D min, F, C, D min, F/C, C, A min, C, D min.

Lyrics:
Now Moth-er Car ey, She's the moth-er o' witch-es An' all them sort o' rips; She's a
fine gal to look at but the hitch is - She's a sight too fond of
ships; She's a sight too fond of ships; Now she
lives on an ice - berg to the nor - red, With her flash - man Dav - y Jones, An' she
combs the weeds — up - on her for - red With pore drowned sail - ors' - bones, With
pore drowned sail - lers' bones.

She's the mother o' wrecks, an' the mother
O' all big winds as blows;
She's up to some deviltry or other
When it rains, or sleets, or snows, (REF)
As the big winds blow you can hear her call,
"I wants a young man fine –
A brassbounder, beefy-ribbed and all,
So me an' my mate kin dine," (REF)

She's a hungry old rip an' she's cruel
To sailormen like we,
Mariners are her chosen gruel
Down beneath the sea, (REF)
She's got the blood o' them she's lured
An' the bones of many a wreck;
She's got barnacles a-growin' on her,
An' shark teeth round her neck, (REF)

Now you know I've ne'er had no schoolin'
Nor read no books like you,
But it just ain't healthy to be foolin'
With that there gristly crew, (REF)
So you may be smart an' you thinks you're lairy,
But if you're to make old bones,
Steer clear, I says, o' Mother Carey,
An' that there Davy Jones, (REF)

Notes:

From **Salt-Water Poems and Ballads**, by John Masefield, Macmillan Co., New York, NY, US, ©1912, pp. 46-47, "as told me by the bo'sun."

I've sometimes wondered about Davy Jones's consort Mother Carey and owe a debt of thanks to Masefield for fleshing her out. My tune is inspired by the traditional Scottish ballad *Johnny Cox/Johnnie o' Breadisley*.

A "brassbounder" is a nickname for an apprentice officer on the old commercial tall-ships in the late 19th century.



Mother Carey collage by Charlie Ipcar based primarily on artwork by Joseph Noel Paton from **The Rime of the Ancient Mariner**, 1863, and other graphics

"A Night at Dago Tom's" (https://www.charlieipcar.com/lyrics/night_dagotom.htm)

Based on a poem by John Masefield
Adapted for singing by Andy Kenna as recorded on **Salt Water Ballads**, Liverpool Fore bitter, ©2002,
with minor word changes by Charles Ipcar

A Night at Dago Tom's



Now yes - ter - day, I think it was, while cruis - in' down the street, I
met with Bill. - "Hul - lo," says he, "let's give the gals a treat!" Red ban -
dan - nas round our necks, our shrouds new rat - tled down, We
nabbed a cou - ple of Sant - y Cruz, and steered for Sail - or Town - We
steered for Sail - or Town, me boys, we steered for Sail - or Town, We
nabbed a cou - ple of San - ty Cruz, and steered for Sail - or Town.

We scooted south with a press of sail till we fetched to a caboose,
The "Sailor's Rest" at Dago Tom's, 'longside "Paddy's Goose" –
Red curtains in the winders, white sand upon the floor,
And an old blind fiddler liltin' a tune of "Lowlands, No More" –
"Lowlands, No More," me boys, "Lowlands, No More,"
And an old blind fiddler liltin' a tune of "Lowlands, No More."

He played the "Shaking of the Sheets" and the couples did advance,
Bowling, stamping, curtsying, in the figures of the dance –
The whole room shook and shivered; it struck beholders dumb,
And afterwards we sang sweet songs and drank Jamaikey rum –
We drank Jamaikey rum, me boys, we drank Jamaikey rum.
And afterwards we sang sweet songs and drank Jamaikey rum.

And many the merry yarn we spun of many the merry spree,
Aboard our ships with all royals set, a-sailing on the sea,
Yarns of the flying *Spindrift*, her as had the clipper-bow, —
"There ain't no ships," says Bill to me, "like that there hooker now" –
"Like that there hooker now," me boys, "like that there hooker now,"
"There ain't no ships," says Bill to me, "like that there hooker now."

When the old blind fiddler struck up the tune "Pipe the Watch Below,"
The skew-eyed landlord dowsed the glim and bade us "stamp 'n' go" –
So we linked arms, did Bill and I, and staggered down the street,
Until we found two doxies, aye, to lay beneath the sheets –
To lay beneath the sheets, me boys, to lay beneath the sheets,
Until we found two doxies, aye, to lay beneath the sheets.

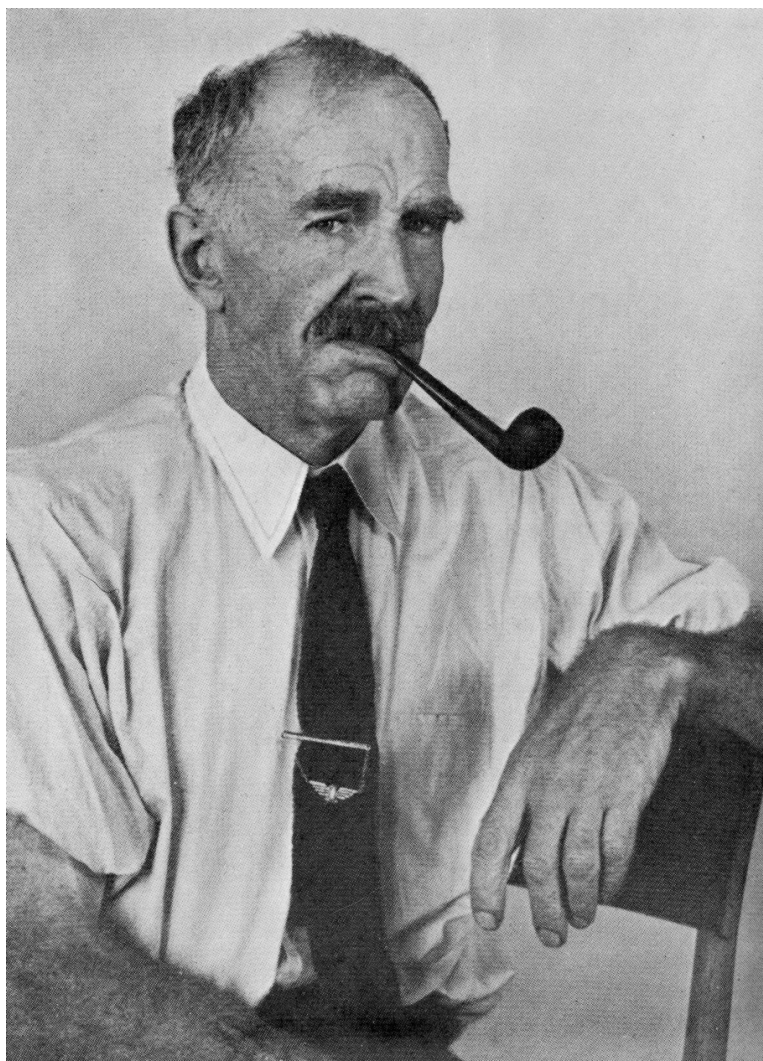
Notes:

This poem is from **Salt-Water Poems and Ballads**, Macmillan Co., New York, NY, US, ©1912, pp. 38-39, and was adapted for singing by Andy Kenna (UK), **Liverpool Forebitter**, ©2002, used with permission; it is a vivid description of a sailor's spree ashore. Andy deserves special credit for the tune and for replacing Masfield's discrete last line with more robust phrasing.



Old Shipmates on a Spree drawn by Charles Pear, from **Salt-Water Poems & Ballads**, p. 40

Bill Adams: A Short Biography



*Bill Adams, 1937, from **Ships & Memories**, p. 282*

Bill Adams was born in the small West Midlands village of Berkswell, England, in 1893, primarily raised by his Aunt Polly after his mother passed away and his father wandered off adventuring. Although his early childhood was spent in a rural agricultural environment, his urge to go to sea became increasingly compelling in his teenaged years until he finally convinced his skeptical Aunt to pay his apprentice fee to ship aboard the four-masted barque *Silberhorn* in 1897. Thus, in Liverpool one early morn Adams began the hard labor of learning the trade he had only dreamed of. He shared a small cabin with three other apprentices, two more experienced young men and one like himself a total greenhorn. But there was little bullying and once he demonstrated that he was quick to learn, his officers were quite pleased with him. After completing his third year, he was promoted to acting 3rd mate on his ship, only to fall ill after she reached San Francisco. His illness was ultimately diagnosed as asthma, most likely caused by inhaling the dust created from restowing a caustic cargo of coal and pig iron that went astray off Cape Horn while sailing from Tyne, England, to San Francisco. After a slow recovery on

shore, Adams never was able to return to sea but began a successful literary career writing short sea stories and nautical poems, which culminated in several long books based on his sea experience: his book of poetry **Wind in the Topsails** (1937) and his autobiography **Ships and Women** (1937). Adams married his childhood sweetheart, and they produced a lovely daughter who grew up listening to his wealth of sea stories. When asked if he missed the sea, Adams would respond as all real sailors do, "It was a dog's life, but it was a man's life!"¹⁰



Four-masted Barque *Silberhorn* docked in Wellington, New Zealand, circa 1892,
from State Library of South Australia

¹⁰ **Ships and Memories**, edited by Alex A. Hurst, Teredo Books Ltd, Sussex, UK, ©1975, p. 277

Selected Poems by Bill Adams Adapted for Singing

"Bound Away" (https://www.charlieipcar.com/lyrics/bound_away.htm)

Based on a poem by Bill Adams, ©1931
Adapted for singing by Charles Ipcar, ©2007
Tune: after traditional *Liverpool Packet*

Bound Away

Chorus: G C G C F C F

Bound a - way! (bound a - way!) Through the ice, sleet and snow, She's a Liv - er-pool

C G G7 C C F

pack-et, Oh, Lord, let 'er go! There's a three-skys'l yard-er with her hatch-es bat-tened

C F C G

down, The grey skies a - bove her, and the Mer - sey run-ning brown, She's

C F G C

an-chored in the riv-er, the tug's up a - head; The chant-ey-man's sing-ing would

F G G7

wak - en the dead (CHO)

Hear the windlass a-clanking as the mate shouts, "Heave away!
Heave a pawl an' lift 'er or there'll be hell to pay!"
"Lower Blue Peter!" The anchor's off the mud;
There's cheering, there's laughter, and the tide's at full flood. (CHO)

"Loose tops'ls!" he shouts; "Haul away, stamp an' go!"
And we haul away together in the rising sun's glow;
Her lofty spars shine through the smoke blowing past;
"Up aloft!" shouts the skipper, and we race up the masts. (CHO)

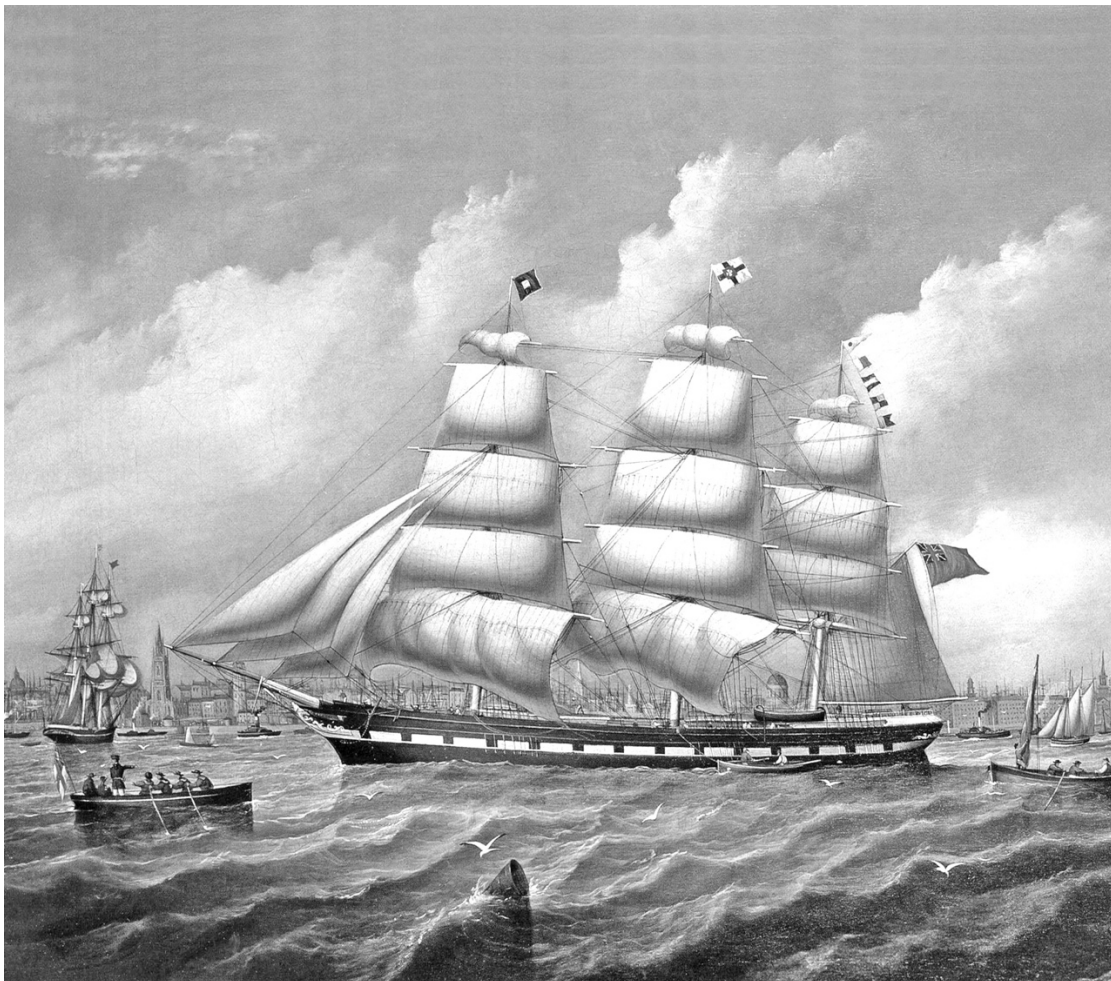
We're out on the footropes, we're casting loose sail;
The pilot shakes hands, clammers over the rail;
"Haul in the hawser!" Just see her sails draw;
Her white wake trails behind, she's running from shore! (CHO)

There's a three-skys'l-yarder with her hatches battened down;
The grey skies above her, and the Mersey running brown;
There's a three-skys'l-yarder, with her holds jammed full;
Hear the cheer from the pier for the pride o' Liverpool! (CHO)2X

Notes:

From **Wind in the Topsails**, by Bill Adams, George G. Harrap & Co., London, UK, ©1931, pp. 76-77.

I've adapted this poem for singing by using the traditional *Liverpool Packet* capstan shanty tune and incorporating its chorus. It is a joyful song that could have been belted out by the young apprentice lads on their first voyage, but certainly not by the regular crew members who would still be hung over from their last spree ashore. Adams was just such a "brass-bounder" when he shipped out of Liverpool in the late 1890s.



The "Scottish Prince" Leaving Liverpool, painted by Samuel Waters, circa 1866

"Sea Cook" (<https://www.charlieipcar.com/lyrics/seacock.htm>)

Based on a poem by Bill Adams, ©1931
Adapted for singing by Charles Ipcar, ©2007
Tune: Charles Ipcar, ©2007

Sea Cook

The musical score for "Sea Cook" is written in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. It consists of nine staves of music. The first eight staves contain the main verses, and the ninth staff is the chorus. Chords are indicated by letters (G, C, D, A, A7, D7, E min) above the notes. The lyrics are written below the notes, with some words hyphenated across lines. The score ends with a double bar line and a repeat sign.

Now there ain't no "Trades-man's En-trance" nailed up a - bove his door, Like you
sees on styl-ish hous-es on___ th stylish streets a - shore, So the but - cher an' the
bak - er an' the gro - cer - man can tell Where they'll find him when they wants him, an' there
sure ain't an - y bell; No fresh fruits an' veg' - ta - bles,___ no
bread, no cakes, no pies, For the spray is fly - in' o'er her an' she's sail - in' full an' bye!
Yes, she's plung-ing an' she's roll - ing,___ an' she's flood-ed___ fore an' aft, An' the
sea cook hums this dit - ty___ as he's work - ing___ at his craft.
GChorus:
An' it's haul a - way that salt pork, Bile up them yal - ler___
peas; It's be - yond com - pare,___ the bill of fare, Up - on the Sev-en Seas!

Now the sea cook's arms is hairy, an' his hands is strong an' brown,
 His bare chest is all covered wi' tattooing up an' down,
 Wi' flags, an' gals, an' anchors; now she's rollin' hard an' fast,
 An' the big hailstones is bouncin' high from ev'ry yard an' mast!
 Yes, she's leapin' like a wild thing; she's divin' through the seas.
 Salt pork is on the galley stove, an' a pot o' yaller peas;
 The bright an' shiny mess-kits they's rattlin' in a row,
 As the cook leans out his galley door an' yells "Now, let 'er go!" (CHO)

An' now the wind blows harder, as the gale begins its roar,
 He flings aside his apron, an' leaps from out his door;
 For the old sea cook's a sailor, an' there's canvas coming in,
 You can hear the chain sheets clattering an' kicking up a din!
 Yes, it's time for stowin' tops'ls; the old cook's at his place,
 With a downhaul in his fingers, an' a big grin on his face;
 Soon he'll serve out salt pork, an' that soup o' yaller peas;
 But now he leads a chorus cryin' challenge to the seas! (CHO)

Notes:

From **Wind in the Topsails**, edited by Bill Adams, George G. Harrap & Co., London, UK, ©1931, pp. 42-43.

Here, I've created a chorus in the process of adapting the poem for singing. I like the positive image of the old sailor who despite the fact he is now relegated to the role of "cook" can still help with the lines and lead a shanty when the going gets tough.



Halyard Shanty, drawn by Gordon Grant, from **Songs of American Sailormen**, by Joanna Colcord, Bramhall House, New York, NY, US, ©1938 p. 47

Burt Franklin Jenness: A Short Biography



*Burt Franklin Jenness, US Navy Surgeon, World War 1,
photographed by Fred Feldman of El Paso, Texas, circa 1918*

Burt Franklin Jenness was born in Pittsfield, NH, in 1876. After graduating from medical school at Dartmouth and the Naval Medical School, he served as an assistant surgeon in the US Navy from 1902 to 1914. When the United States entered World War 1, Jenness was reactivated from the reserves as a naval surgeon and served in the fleet from 1917 to 1919, reaching the rank of Lieutenant Commander. However, once he returned to civilian life, after the War, he left the sea for good and joined the College of Mines and Metallurgy in El Paso, Texas, as a faculty member and taught classes there until 1949, after which he served as director of Health Services at Texas Western College in El Paso until he retired in 1957. From 1917 to 1934 he had published several books of nautical poetry: **Service Rhymes** (1917), **Man-O'-War Rhymes** (1918), **Sea Lanes** (1921), and **Ocean Haunts** (1934). Jenness lived a long full life and passed away at the age of 95 in 1971.

Selected Poems by Burt Franklin Jenness Adapted for Singing¹¹

"A Ballad of the Old Navy" (https://www.charlieipcar.com/lyrics/old_navy.htm)

Based on a poem by Burt Franklin Jenness, ©1921

Adapted for singing by Charles Ipcar, ©2008

Tune: after traditional *Blow Ye Winds in the Morning*

A Ballad of the Old Navy

The musical score is written in 8/8 time on a single staff. It features a melody with various note values including quarter, eighth, and sixteenth notes, as well as rests. Chord symbols (C, F, G, G7) are placed above the staff at specific intervals. The lyrics are written below the staff, aligned with the notes. The score is divided into four lines of music, each with its own set of lyrics. The first line ends with a double bar line. The second line ends with a double bar line. The third line is labeled 'C Chorus:' and ends with a double bar line. The fourth line ends with a double bar line.

C F C G

The sea's a place for sail-or - men In fair or storm - y weath - er; _____

C F C G G7 C

'Round the world an' back a - gain - We're all good mates to - ge - ther. _____

C Chorus: F C G

So cheer up, me live - ly lads; In spite of storm - y weath - er; _____

C F C G G7 C

Cheer up, me live - ly lads, _____ Let's all get drunk to - ge - ther! _____

We went ashore last pay day night,
Bill Dykes the mate, and me;
We cruised about till we got tight;
'Twas all a glor-i-ous spree! (CHO)

We heaved an' hauled an' tacked an' beat,
An' shifted course some more,
Till we fetched up on Bleecker Street,
Then steered for South Street shore. (CHO)

An' we wuz riding even keel,
Consid'rin' where we'd been,
Till a pair of cops put up a deal
An' tried to run us in. (CHO)

So Bill, he sez: "'Turn To' has gone,
I think I heard 'er blow,"
An' he winked at me, and I wuz on,
An' then he sez: "Let's go!" (CHO)

¹¹ I need to thank Bob Zentz for drawing my attention to this sailor-poet.

So Bill, he took th' bigger one,
An' 'course I took th' other,
An' so help me, when th' job wuz done
Y'd think that they wuz brothers. (CHO)

Th' port side light o' one wuz red,
Th' starb'ard showin' green;
It's just dumb luck he wuzn't dead,
While his mate he lay careened. (CHO)

For I laid him out in th' mornin' watch.
With his own b'layin' pin;
Th' top of his head wuz an awful splotch
An' his jaw wuz busted in. (CHO)

Then Bill, he sez: "All's well below,"
An' he cast his weather eye
Around the street, an' sez: "Let's go,
An' leave them lubbers die." (CHO)

Two sailors rollin' down the dock,
A-makin' heavy weather,
A-hoisted in with tackle an' block,
Flung in the brig together! (CHO)

Notes:

From **Sea Lanes**, by Burt Franklin Jenness, The Cornhill Publishing Co., Boston, MA, US,
©1921, pp. 79-80.

This Navy drinking song provides a robust description of a spree ashore in the old South Street section of New York City. I've added a traditional chorus and done some minor rewording. The traditional tune *Blow Ye Winds in the Morning* fits it perfectly, as collected by Frederick Pease Harlow, **Chanteying aboard American Ships**, Mystic Seaport Museum, CT, ©2004, p. 130.



Spinning a Yarn, aboard the steam frigate USS *Hartford*, circa 1880s,
from Library of Congress

"Sea Traders" (https://www.charlieipcar.com/lyrics/sea_traders.htm)

Based on a poem by Burt Franklin Jenness, ©1934

Adapted for singing by Charlie Ipcar, ©2007

Tune: after traditional *Home with the Girls in the Morning*

Sea Traders

Chorus:

The musical score for the chorus of "Sea Traders" is written on six staves of music. The key signature has one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 4/4. The melody is simple and repetitive, with lyrics written below the notes. Chord symbols (D min, F, C) are placed above the staff to indicate the harmonic structure. The lyrics are: "Now we're rol - lin' down to Ri - o, Bue-nos Air - es or the Straits - That's the way we trad-ed from Fu - eg - o to the States! Now we're rol - lin' down to Ri-o, Bue-nos Air-es or the Straits - That's the way we trad-ed from Fu - e - o to the States! Roll - in' down to Ri-o on this rot-ten sail-in' tramp; Tak-in' wat-er for'-r'd and now our bunks are damp; Buck-in' like a bron-co since we left the Keys; List - in' like a ket - tle as she ships the quart - er seas. (CHO)"

D min F C D min C D min

Now we're rol - lin' down to Ri - o, Bue-nos Air - es or the Straits -

F C D min C D min C D min C

That's the way we trad-ed from Fu - eg - o to the States! Now we're rol - lin' down to

D min C D min C D min C D min C D min

Ri-o, Bue-nos Air-es or the Straits - That's the way we trad-ed from Fu - e - o to the States!

D min C D min C D min C

Roll - in' down to Ri-o on this rot-ten sail-in' tramp; Tak-in' wat-er for'-r'd and

G D min F D min C D min C

now our bunks are damp; Buck-in' like a bron-co since we left the Keys;

D min C G D min F D min

List - in' like a ket - tle as she ships the quart - er seas. (CHO)

Loaded to the gunnels, plowin' four knots an hour,
Steadied with her stays'l but swayin' like a flower;
Half a crew o' Cubans, with a pair o' Swedish mates,
That's the way we traded from Fuego to the States. (CHO)

Callin' at Jamaica for a scuttle-butt o' rum;
Carousin' at fiestas till we've spent our shippin' sum;
Stricken with the fever from the islands where it grew;
Fightin' for the rations with this lazy, drunken crew. (CHO)

Reelin' round the Indies, makin' port or makin' sail;
Beatin' up to windward in a ragin' tropic gale;
Losin' our deck cargo, shiftin' coal or shiftin' crates –
That's the way we traded from Fuego to the States. (CHO)

Notes:

From **Ocean Haunts**, edited by Burt Franklin Jenness, Empire Publishing Co., New York, NY, US, ©1934, p. 45.

This is a song old sailors would appreciate if they'd been running back and forth from the Florida Keys to Rio de Janeiro and points south to Terra del Fuego. In adapting the poem for singing, I've made use of the traditional contradance tune *Home with the Girls in the Morning*; I've also added a chorus and done some minor rewording.



Old Barque, painted by Anton Otto Fischer, from **Anton Otto Fisher Marine Artist**, Mill Hill Press, Nantucket, MA, US, ©1984, p. 218

Based on a poem by Burt Franklin Jenness, ©1921

Adapted for singing by Charles Ipcar, ©2007

Tune: Charles Ipcar, ©2007

Bumboats

The musical score for 'Bumboats' is written in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. It consists of eight staves of music, each with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The melody is written on a single treble clef staff. Chords are indicated by letters (G, C, D, D7) above the staff. The lyrics are written below the staff, with some words underlined. The score is as follows:

Now I've had a whirl at games of chance From Bom - bay 'round to
Cork, I've seen the ways of high fi - nance In cut - throat old New
York; I know the way a bar - gain's made In Con - ti - nent - al marts, Where
craft - y mer - chants ply their trade And prac - tice cun - ning arts; But
when I call them back to mind, I make a sol - emn vow There's
on - ly one of all their kind Could sell me some - thing now; There's
on - ly one that ev - er can Bring plea - sant thoughts to me - And
that's the lit - tle bum - boat - man, Who pad - dles out to sea; With his:

4 *Chorus:* C G D D7 G

"Got-ta nice rip - a ba - nan, You buy da beeg orange? He sweet!

8 C G D D7 G

Got-ta ci-gar-ette; lik - a da fan? — You lik - a da fine — par - a - keet?"

Now as we watched them rowing out,
 At first they looked like specks,
 Just creeping down the bay,
 'Bout the time we'd swabbed the decks,
 They'd be hovering 'round like gulls –
 A-waiting the mess call hail,
 We'd break for mess, and in the lulls
 We'd gather 'long the rail;
 They'd shout: (CHO)

And on the wonders in each boat
 We'd feast our hungry eyes,
 As their little craft would float,
 We'd bargain for a prize;
 Coral, shells, and blow-fish dried,
 Fruit, and Guava jell,
 Nuts, and gum, and dried snake hide,
 Lace, and tortoise shell –
 And their: (CHO)

If there's reward for toil and strife,
 When comes the final test:
 For cheering up a sailor's life,
 The Bumboatman's the best;
 And when he gets to St. Peter's Gate,
 That realm beyond the sky,
 They'll wave him through with no delay
 When they hear his cry: (CHO)

Notes:

From **Sea Lanes**, edited by Burt Franklin Jenness, The Cornhill Publishing Co., Boston, MA, US, ©1921, pp. 53-55.

This is another fine poem by Jenness. It is the only poem that I've ever found which pays fitting tribute to those floating entrepreneurs who still service boats coming into ports all over the world, and, in this song, the West Indies. I've done quite a bit of rewording in this poem; the Calypso style chorus is in the original poem.

Based on a poem by Burt Franklin Jenness, ©1934

Adapted for singing by Charles Ipcar, ©2007

Tune: by Charles Ipcar, ©2007

Sea Dreams

C B \flat F C

Have you ev-er stood the mid-watch in the cav-ern of the night, With the sea wolves rac-ing

B \flat C B \flat F C

past you in a pack; The steel-y stars a - play-ing 'round the mast-head for a light, And the

B \flat C B \flat

buck-ing trades dis - posed to drive you back? Have you ev-er seen a sun-set on a

C B \flat C B \flat C

cop-per col-ored sea, The sky just like a pol-ish-ed com-pass bowl; Seen the night winds catch the

B \flat F C B \flat C

spin-drift from the waves and toss it free - Till to lee-ward you could see a sil-very shoal?

2 C Chorus: B \flat C B \flat C B \flat

Now the wind has shift-ed east - ward, the long green roll - ers call, And a brown-skinned gal

8 C B \flat F C

beck-ons there for me; The star-board watch is yarn-ing, and I'm long-ing for it all - For

15 B \flat C B \flat F C

an-y ship to take me back to sea; For an-y ship to take me back to sea.

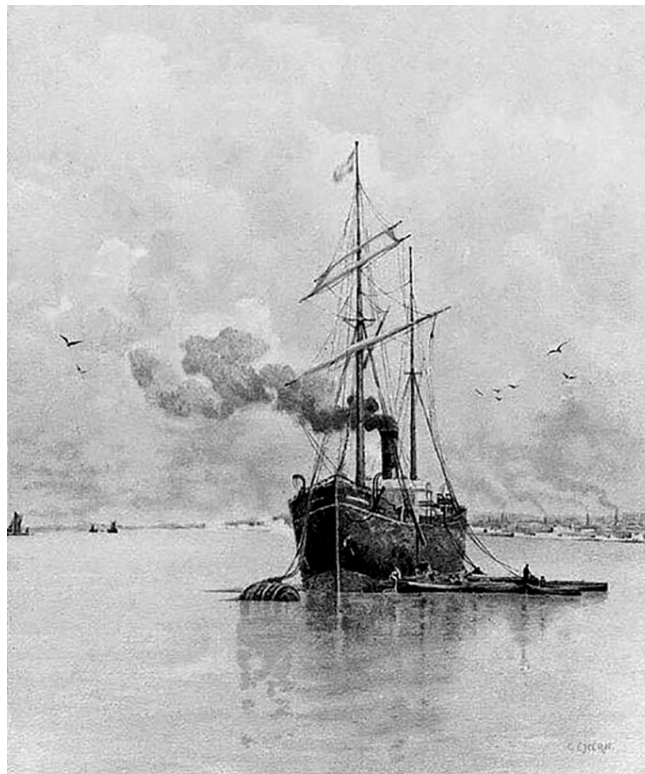
Have you ever rode at anchor while a full tropic moon,
Slowly rose above its jungle bed;
Dripping silver in the waters of a coral-fringed lagoon,
Till it hung there like a shining capstan head?
Have you heard the Roaring Forties, day and night about your ears,
And cursed your packet's ceaseless, sickening roll –
With the backstays all complaining and the groaning of the gears?
Then you'll understand the fretting in my soul. (CHO)

If you've cleared the reefs of Suva, and have sighted Sydney Head;
If you've raised the Sugar Loaf at break of dawn;
If you've made Corregidor, and have swung the sounding lead
In the channels of the world where you have gone;
If you've cruised with rowdy shipmates, heard them curse and brawl;
If you know the seas from Rio to Hong Kong;
If you've lazed about the waterfronts of every port of call –
Then you'll understand the burden of my song. (CHO)

Notes:

From **Ocean Haunts**, edited by Burt Franklin Jenness, Empire Publishing Co., New York, NY, US, ©1934, pp. 45-47.

Seldom have I read such striking nautical images as those by Jenness, as are amply illustrated in this poem. I used an Appalachian style tune in adapting this one for singing.



Sailing Auxiliary Tramp Steamer, Fine Art Works, C. E. Raphael Tuck & Sons,
from National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, UK

Based on a poem by Burt Franklin Jenness, ©1934

Adapted by Charlie Ipcar, ©2007

Tune: after *Song for Gale* by Larry Kaplan
and *Night Rider's Lament* by Michael Burton

Mid-Watches

Chorus:

C F C F

And you climbed the old bridge, looked in - to the night, And the wind and the

C F

spray stung — your face; — While the stars ov - er - head were all

C A min G G7 C

danc - ing and bright - - - And the ship plunged a - way in - to space. —

C G G7 C

Will you ev - er — for - get the mid - watch - es at sea? How you tumb - led out

G F C A min

sleep - y and dazed, — And though you man - euver - ed as still as could be - - - Re -

G G7 C F C

mem - ber the ruck - us you raised - As you bumped in - to ham - mocs, or stepped on a

9 F C F

mate Who was doz - ing a - way on — the deck? Then you hust - led up for - ward for

16 C A min G G7 C

fear you'd be late - - - Your pea - coat pulled snug 'round your neck. (CHO)

Will you ever forget the long tricks at the wheel;
All your thoughts and your plans and your fears?
The things you'd imagine – the dangers you'd feel –
With the creak and the groan of the gears;
How you'd wake with a snap from some dream of the shore,
As a comber loomed ahead ghostly pale,
Or you'd start at the crash and the thundering roar –
As a beam-sea swept over the rail? (CHO)

Instrumental

And didn't those hours seem lonelier, too,
When the moon and the stars went to bed,
And it seemed, sometimes, there was no one but you –
Sailing into that black hole ahead?

Notes:

From **Ocean Haunts**, edited by Burt Franklin Jenness, Empire Publishing Co., New York, NY, US, ©1934, p. 73.

I set this haunting poem to music in memory of an old merchant mariner and musician friend, Joe Theriault, who passed away in 2007, and sang it at his memorial service. However, I've found that I'm still singing this song and it has been well received wherever I play. The chorus tune is inspired by *Night Rider's Lament* by Michael Burton, ©1992, while the verse tune is from *Song for Gale* by Larry Kaplan, ©1988. In adapting the poem for singing I broke out four lines as a chorus and did some further editing.

"Trick" is sailor slang for a period of work shipboard.



Keeping Watch on a World War 1 Destroyer, from First World War.com, artist unknown

Hamish Maclaren: A Short Biography



British Royal Navy Sub-Lieutenant Hamish Maclaren, 1917, photographer unknown

According to his daughter Lucilla Maclaren Spillane,¹² Hamish Maclaren was born in Tain, Ross-shire, on March 7, 1901, a coastal town in the Scottish Highlands. At the age of thirteen he was sent away for a nautical education at Osborne for two years where he gained sea experience aboard the training ship HMS *Racer*. He then transferred to the Royal Naval College, Dartmouth, England, where he graduated in time to be assigned as an ensign on a World War 1 British supply ship. His first voyage was to Archangel in support of the White Russians who were opposing the Bolshevik takeover of Russia, and where he acquired a taste for vodka. After the War he was further trained as a gunnery officer and sent out to the Mediterranean for several years; his experience in Malta is described in one of his semi-autobiographical short stories.¹³ In 1922 the Royal Navy sent him to the University of Cambridge for further education, before posting him to the heavy cruiser HMS *Hawkins* on the China station. He later was transferred to

¹² Biography by Lucilla Maclaren Spillane, Scottish Poetry Library, 2010, and personal correspondence.

¹³ *Cockalorum*, Peter Davies, London, England, ©1936, pp. 84-95

the Yangtse River gunboat HMS *Widgeon* and began publishing poems and articles in such British periodicals as **The Spectator**, **The Blue Peter**, and **The Cornhill Magazine**. Maclaren mustered out of active service in Shanghai during the mid 1920s and spent some time as a mate on a Yangtse River tramp steamer before returning to England. Once back in England he continued to publish poems and short stories, a long novel titled **The Private Opinions of a British Bluejacket**, ©1929, and his folk opera **Sailor with Banjo**, ©1929/1930. In 1936 he published his semi-autobiographical book of short stories titled **Cockalorum**. "In 1939 he married Jean Dunn Tringham and they had one child, Lucilla Jean, who was born the following year."¹⁴ During World War 2 he was called up from the reserves, promoted to the rank of commander, and assigned to London to do naval intelligence work. After that War, Maclaren worked for several publishing houses but there is no evidence that he published any more of his own poetry or other literary works. According to his daughter Lucilla, "He spent his final years near Cambridge and died aged 86, on 25 July 1987, in Kidderminster, England."¹⁵ On his headstone were carved the final two lines of his last known published poem:¹⁶

Under the trees, and lulled by wind and sun,
Fain would I dream till all my days are done.

In reviewing my notes on Hamish Maclaren, I can only say that I have a lot of empathy for what happens to artistic people when they attempt to survive in a world which has little to do with their interests or dreams.



*Yangtse River gunboat HMS "Widgeon," circa 1920,
from World Naval Ships.com*

¹⁴ Biography, 2010, op. cit.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Selected Poems by Hamish Maclaren Adapted for Singing

"Yangtse River Shanty" (<https://www.charlieipcar.com/lyrics/yangtse.htm>)

Based on a poem by Commander Hamish Maclaren, ©1929 Maclaren Family Estate
Adapted for singing by Charles Ipcar and Barry Finn, ©1992/2007
Tune: after traditional *Tommy's Gone to Hilo/Congo River*

Yangtse River Shanty

Chorus:

A - way - ay, boys, a - way - o! Blow me down this

Yang - tse Riv - er; A - way, boys, lift and walk a - way!

My lo - tus la - dy, I'll see no more; A - way, boys, a - way - o!

Since I left her on the Chi-na shore, A - way, boys, lift and walk a - way!

When we first met, she was like a queen,
A-way, boys, a-way-o!
Prettiest gal I'd ever seen,
A-way, boys, lift and walk a-way! (CHO)

She'd flashing eyes and long black hair,
A-way, boys, a-way-o!
All I could do was stand and stare,
A-way, boys, lift and walk a-way!

I bought her silks and a golden comb,
A-way, boys, a-way-o!
Trouble's o'er now, the anchor's home,
A-way, boys, lift and walk a-way! (CHO)

I blowed my silver for to win her,
A-way, boys, a-way-o!
Now there's nothing left but donkey's dinner,
A-way, boys, lift and walk a-way!

We're homeward bound, Cookie's in the galley,
A-way, boys, a-way-o!
Farewell, Young Moon, of the Yangtse Valley,
A-way, boys, lift and walk a-way! (CHO)

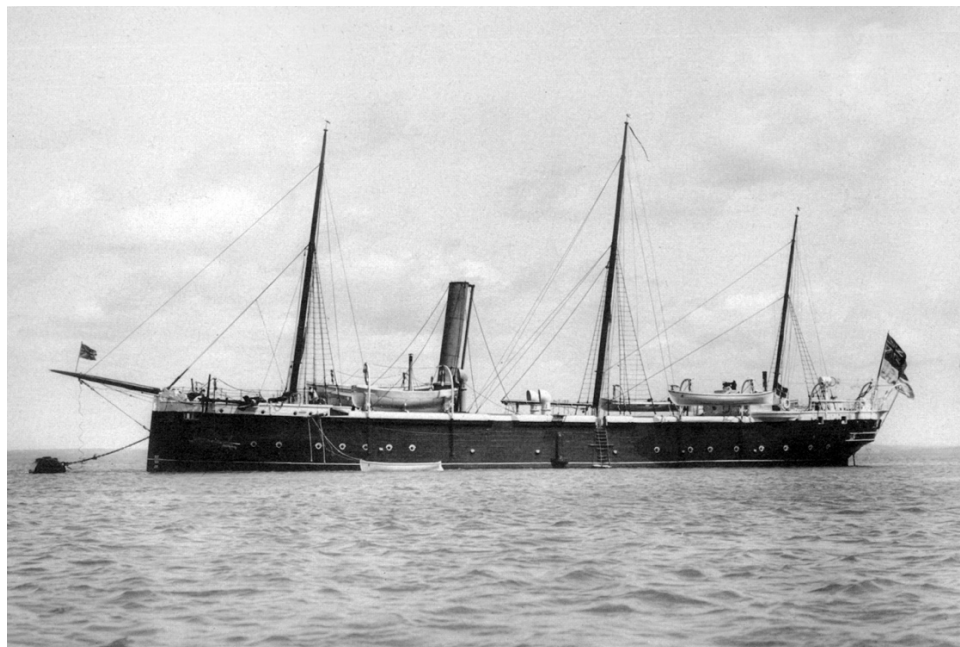
Notes:

From **Sailor with Banjo**, by Hamish Maclaren, Macmillan Co., New York, NY, US, ©1930, p. 15; used with the permission of the Estate of Hamish Maclaren.

Maclaren described his book **Sailor with Banjo** as an "entertainment in rhyme and song." The book has two parts, what I would describe as a folk opera and a set of unrelated nautical and non-nautical poems. For this poem I've extensively revised the lyrics, and my good friend Barry Finn revised my musical arrangement to more like a working shanty; the original tune by Maclaren was not published and is unavailable. I've made use of the traditional shanty tunes *Tommy's Gone to Hilo* in the verse and *Congo River* in the chorus. This is another outward bound/lost love song, this time from the China Shore. As Maclaren commented on this song:¹⁷

"Strictly speaking, this type of song – from the shanty model – is, I suppose, now quite out of date; but personally, I like to think that it has some life in it yet, and may note, in support of this whim, that I have myself helped to weigh anchor by hand, tramping round the capstan to music."

Maclaren's capstan experience might have been aboard his training ship the old gunboat HMS *Racer*. I'd like to think that Maclaren would be pleasantly surprised at how much "life" there still is in his old song; it's probably the best known of the poems I've adapted for singing.



Training Ship HMS "Racer," circa 1884, from Battleships-Cruisers Website, UK

¹⁷ **Sailor with Banjo**, Macmillan Co., New York, NY, US, 1930, p. 79

Based on a poem by Commander Hamish Maclaren, ©1929

Adapted for singing by Charles Ipcar, ©1999

Tune: after traditional *Blow the Candle Out*

The Rodent Mariners (Song of the Brown Sea Rat)

D min C D min F C D min C
 We are the ro-dent ma-ri-ners, As no-bod-y needs be told, For there's
 D min C D min F C D min C D min
 no mis-tak-ing our nau-ti-cal airs, Our roll-ing eyes so bold; There's
 C D min F D min F C
 nev-er a ship leaves Eng-lish ground, From Liv-er-pool Docks to Ply-mouth Sound, For
 D min C D min F D min C D min
 'Fris-co Bay or Bom-bay bound, But we have free run of her hold!

We march aboard in companies,
 All in the dead of night,
 Over the hawsers from the quays
 In the shadow of the watch lamplight;
Each roving rat his ship will choose,
From nose to nose we pass the news,
Of cargoes, destinations, crews,
And none can us affright. (2X)

Refrain:

C D min F D min F C
 Each rov-ing rat his ship will choose, From nose to nose we pass the news of
 D min C D min D min C D min
 car-goes, des-tin-a-tions, crews, and none can us af-fright.

We'll live like kings once we set sail,
Each vessel leaving land,
A wandering larder which entails
A feast for every hand;
Maize, apples, salmon, barley, rice,
Nutmegs, olives, South Sea spice,
Meats and India merchandise,
And all at our command!

We know the ports of all the world
All warehouses, all quays,
All islets, coral-ringed and pearled,
The Blue Hesperides;
*And men may search until they die,
And men may blow great fleets sky-high –
But rats alone will hold for aye
The Freedom of the Seas! (2X)*

Notes:

From **Sailor with Banjo**, by Hamish Maclaren, Macmillan Co., New York, NY, US, ©1930, pp. 23-25; used with the permission of the Estate of Hamish Maclaren.

This song is based on a poem originally titled *Song of the Brown Sea Rat* that I've adapted for singing using the traditional tune *Blow the Candle Out*; sadly, I've dropped Maclaren's charming rat-chirping chorus in favor of more traditional refrains. One can readily visualize these bold sea rats as they describe their lives on the rolling seas. Maclaren's daughter Lucilla fondly remembered her father reciting this poem to her before she fell asleep.¹⁸



The Rodent Mariners, drawn by Charlie Ipcar, ©2014

¹⁸ Personal communications with Lucilla Maclaren Spillane

In Conclusion

It is my firm belief that each of the four sailor-poets briefly presented above deserves more attention from our nautical music community, and that some of their poems make a major contribution to our nautical music inventory. It is also my hope that the results of my research may inspire others to adapt more of their poems for singing, and to search for additional neglected sailor-poets and bring their works to our attention.



Sailors Singing in Fo'c's'le, painted by Anton Otto Fischer,
from *Fo'c's'le Days*, by Anton Otto Fischer,
Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, NY, US, ©1947, p. 43

Bibliography of Selected Old Sailor-Poets

Bill Adams (1879-1953):

Wind in the Topsails, George G. Harrap & Co., London, England, ©1931

Ships and Women, Little Brown & Co., Boston, MA, US, ©1937

Ships and Memories, edited by Alex A. Hurst, Teredo Books Ltd., Brighton, UK, 1975

Burt Franklin Jenness (1876-1971)

Service Rhymes, Press of El Paso Printing Co., El Paso, TX, US, ©1917

Man o' War Rhymes, The Cornhill Publishing Co., Boston, MA, US, ©1918

Sea Lanes, The Cornhill Publishing Co., Boston, MA, US, ©1921

Ocean Haunts, Empire Publishing Co., New York, NY, US, ©1934

Spindrift and Sagebrush, The Naylor Co., San Antonio, TX, US, ©1960

Hamish Maclaren (1901-1987)

Sailor with Banjo, Macmillan Co., New York, NY, US, ©1929/1930

Cockalorum, Peter Davies, London, England, ©1936

John Masefield (1878-1967)

Salt-Water Poems, Grant Richards, London, England, ©1902

A Sailor's Garland, Macmillan Co., New York, NY, US, ©1906

Salt-Water Poems and Ballads, Macmillan Co., New York, NY, US, ©1914

The Story of a Round House and Other Poems, Macmillan Co., New York, NY, US, ©1912/1922

In The Mill, Macmillan Co., New York, NY, US, ©1941

New Chum, Macmillan Co., New York, NY, US, ©1945

John Masefield: a life, by Constance Babington Smith, Macmillan Co., New York, NY, US ©1978