



Trading in War: London's Maritime World in the Age of Cook and Nelson

by Margarete Lincoln.

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In *Trading in War*, naval historian Margarete Lincoln¹ (Goldsmiths, Univ. of London) examines the social, economic, and political aspects of the maritime communities in riverside parishes east of the Tower of London from the 1760s to 1802. Her particular concerns are national defence, industrial innovation, and commercial expansion. As compared with recent work on the Navy's extensive supply and trading networks,² Lincoln concentrates on human agency and social and cultural history. "There were other Londons—the West End, Westminster and Parliament—but all were touched by the significance of a part vital to the nation, backed by maritime institutions in the City, and the seething riverside parishes which provided the labour to keep it working" (258).

The opening chapters set the maritime communities in the context of an expansive seafaring, imperialist nation, before turning to such issues as criminal activity, the role of women, profit-making and wealth creation, and pleasure-seeking. There are solid chapters on the wars with Revolutionary France and the institutional reforms and building programs that shaped the physical and mental landscape of the London docklands. Specialist readers will appreciate the author's rigorous research and fine prose, and there is much else here that will interest general readers, especially the discussion of crime and punishment.

Lincoln begins with a geographical survey of communities like Deptford, Limehouse, and Rotherhithe on the banks of the Thames, with colorful details of landscape, inhabitants, and industry, as well as cultural and intellectual pursuits. The royal dockyard at Deptford was the largest industrial complex of the day, consuming vast resources and deploying numerous machines and workers. Naval supply drew on advanced scientific and industrial techniques and procedures, and nascent industrialization was apparent in dockyard organization and operations. The Navy was the senior service of the armed forces in the eighteenth century, and the text provides a sense of the bustling maritime districts' status as powerhouses of knowledge and expertise essential to national prosperity and social welfare.

London possessed a wide array of tradespeople, workshops, and factories. Consistent with the industrial development of the city, a subcontracting microeconomy flourished with a great range of occupations at work in victualing yards. By 1800,

1. Her previous work includes *Representing the Royal Navy: British Sea Power, 1750-1815* (NY: Routledge, 2003), *Naval Wives and Mistresses* (London: Nat'l Maritime Museum, 2007), *British Pirates and Society, 1680-1730* (2014; rpt. NY: Routledge, 2016).

2. E.g., Roger Knight and Martin Wilcox, *Sustaining the Fleet, 1793-1815: War, the British Navy, and the Contractor State* (Rochester, NY: Boydell Pr, 2010), and Janet W. Macdonald, *The British Navy's Victualling Board, 1793-1815: Management, Competence, and Incompetence* (id.).

London was ... the greatest manufacturing city in the Western world. It did not have the large factories that were sprouting up in northern towns but it boasted huge numbers of workshops of every kind. These often experimented with new procedures that were only later adopted in the provinces. Some commentators described London as a parasite, a centre of luxury and vice that sucked goods and people from other parts of the nation. But London drove the economy. Most imports of raw goods came into the Port of London. Most exports left it. (159)

The exigencies of war and burgeoning demand presented lucrative opportunities for entrepreneurship and social mobility based on commercial acumen, hard work, and business efficiency. And not only great military merchant-contractors made money, but also more humble traders like slops (clothes) sellers. Working at full capacity, maritime London led the massive effort to provision front-line forces during the American Revolution. Conflict, fear, and resentment were never far from the surface, especially given the disruptions caused by domestic billeting of troops and the threat of the pressgang.

Accounts of crime and punishment and the activities of smugglers, footpads, and highwaymen make for fascinating reading. The second half of the eighteenth century saw rampant theft in London's maritime districts, owing, at least in part, to the area's commercial and individual wealth. Rising property values at Deptford in 1770–92 attest to growing prosperity and rising population. Smuggling, the quintessential eighteenth-century crime, was stimulated by high customs duties and reduced by their removal. The people of the maritime communities were so directly affected in their daily lives by the government's imperial and foreign policies as to foster in them a high degree of political engagement.

Many women, including wives, mothers, businesswomen, landladies, mistresses, and prostitutes, depended on the naval economy of maritime communities. Lincoln focuses on Elizabeth Cook, wife of James Cook, to demonstrate the sacrifices made by the wives of seafarers fired by the prospect of adventure, discovery, and exploration. Most women lived hard lives of domestic drudgery, petty criminal activity, workhouse labor, and violent punishments. Their stories were "sometimes grim but often inspiring" (156).

Even in poverty there were social gradations, including class and status divisions between workhouses and almshouses. Lincoln makes good use of archaeological evidence of lifestyles, diet, personal space, and home comforts. Yet there was a degree of social cohesion, with cross-class participation in public events such as ship launches and spectacles celebrating imperial power and community loyalty. Maritime parishes also contained theaters, with musical and silent performances, though spoken-word drama was forbidden in non-licensed theaters. They were, nonetheless, venues of debating and political societies and an artisanal radicalism characteristic of the early French Revolution; they provided a forum for promoting the group identity of the maritime districts.

As the war against France progressed and led to extensive mobilizations, concerns arose that the spread of revolutionary doctrines would undermine the reliability of the nation's key workers. While noting economic and political reasons for the upsurge in radicalism, Lincoln is careful to balance it against the patriotic response of the 1790s. The excesses of the French Revolution, the invasion threat, and government propaganda all meant civilian loyalist doctrines reached a receptive audience, especially in light of longstanding antipathies toward foreigners. Yet, despite ultimate victory over French revolutionary doctrines, the Spithead and Nore mutinies in the dark days of 1797 helped shatter the popular image of the loyal, obedient Jack Tar.

Labor issues in the dockyards alarmed the government. Food riots and political demonstrations were frequent between 1790 and 1810. Militancy and strikes among sawyers, caulkers, and

shipwrights often degenerated into violence and required a military presence. Industrialization, fueled by mechanization and steam power, promoted radicalism and class-consciousness, and the articulate Deptford shipwright John Gast became an important figure in the trade union movement after 1815. Class strife in the dockyards was aggravated by the change from a custom-based to a regulated cash-based economy. Lincoln details the shift from customary, locally enforced price controls of the “moral economy” toward a wider application of market forces and deregulation under a new liberal economic order.

The French wars strained the capacities of the Port of London, despite the construction of new dockyards and port facilities. Overcrowding and delays in unloading ships led to theft of goods carelessly left on quaysides. The absence of a coordinating police authority exacerbated the problem. Antiquated infrastructure and lack of capacity represented financial losses to individual merchants and the government revenue. Those familiar aspects of “Old Corruption”—customary payments, fees, and perks for officials—were rife. Lincoln describes with great clarity the human, institutional, and administrative frailties that perpetuated these abuses.

The solution was to create new, larger docks under new governance, with a force of marine police to curb theft. New docks were built at Wapping and, more prominently, at the Isle of Dogs, where the West India Docks opened in 1802; these extended over twenty-eight acres and featured a permanent military guard to prevent theft. By such means, the authorities gained control over the dockland areas, transforming both the cultural and physical landscape. Lincoln criticizes (mildly) this “progress,” calling the high perimeter wall of the new West India Docks a “visible reminder of monopoly, corporate power and segregation” (243). Though such language suggests an overly Romantic view of “the world we have lost” variety of social history, the author does acknowledge the economic necessity of new infrastructure.

Mercantile prosperity continued unabated until the later nineteenth century, when the effects of the abolition of slavery and the emergence of foreign competition began to reduce the volume of colonial imports and profit margins. The West India Docks could not really fail, since the vessels of West Indian merchants were compelled to use them, ensuring buoyant share prices and generous dividends. Interestingly, abolitionists, including Quaker bankers, profited by investments in the docks, making them complicit in slavery.

The study concludes with an examination of the post-1815 landscape of demobilization, unemployment, and social and economic dislocation. With the dispersal of work to other dockyards and a long period of peace, London’s maritime communities began a long transformation from workplace-based communities to gentrified enclaves. The author might usefully have considered more closely the occupational status and socioeconomic role of various ethnic groups, since the collective term “maritime communities” tends to obscure the existence of micro-communities. That said, her biographical method, with frequent references to individuals and families in many contexts, is highly effective.³

Margarette Lincoln’s evocative account of London’s maritime communities features sophisticated analysis, fine writing, and an impressive control of relevant source materials. Readers of *Trading in War* will gain a real awareness of the contributions of London’s maritime communities to Great Britain’s national economy and naval power and heritage at a critical period in its history.

3. Occasionally, repeated references appear too far the original citation, forcing the reader to consult the index.