

Simon Smith - 'We Sail the Ocean Blue': British sailors, imperialism, identity, pride and patriotism c.1890 to 1939

Supervisors: Brad Beaven and Rob James

In terms of studies of British imperialism, the Royal Navy, and more particularly its sailors during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, has remained a neglected topic. Historical studies of the navy continue to be dominated by naval historians, who are primarily concerned with the technical and strategic aspects of the Royal Navy. In the past 10 years there has been a gradual intrusion upon this and a number of socio-cultural and gender historians have turned their attention in this direction. Therefore, this thesis continues this development and examines the relationship that the lower deck had with imperialism by examining the testimony of sailors through unpublished diaries held in museum collections. It charts the period chronologically and thematically through events of naval pageantry and war, which reveals the complexities of the sailor's character particularly around the concepts of imperialism, identity, pride and patriotism. By examining sailors as they experienced imperialism through both peace and war, it reveals that the Empire was a vital aspect of their lives and also their own identity. As a significant part of the imperial construct within British culture, sailors consequently viewed their experiences through an imperialistic prism. However, it reveals that sailors were not simply passive recipients of imperial inculcation and demonstrated a level of independence to this. Thus it is argued that their relationship with imperialism was part of a wider independent sailor culture, which competed with individual beliefs, differing loyalties, and could mean different things at different times.