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**Radical Resistance? The Opposition to the  
Impressment of British Seamen into the  
Royal Navy, 1770-1779**

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## **Abbreviations**

ADM – Records of the Admiralty

COL – City of London

LMA - London Metropolitan Archives

NPG – National Portrait Gallery

PC – Privy Council



J. Gillray, *The Liberty of the Subject* (1779)<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> London, NPG-D1228 [<http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw60985/The-liberty-of-the-subject?set=164%3BJames+Gillray+etchings+%281777-89%29&search=ap&rNo=3>][02/03/2016]

## Introduction.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> November 1776 a naval press-gang commanded by Lieutenant Tait seized John Tubbs from a Thames barge near Gravesend.<sup>2</sup> The gang's 'impressment' of Tubbs was pursuant to an Admiralty warrant which permitted the seizure of 'sea-faring men, and persons whose occupations and callings were to work in vessel and boats upon rivers', so that the Royal Navy could sufficiently man itself for the American Revolutionary War.<sup>3</sup> However, Tubbs was one of thirty-two watermen serving on the Lord Mayor of London's barge, and produced to Tait a certificate of protection stating; 'all persons, empowered to impress men into his Majesty's service, are desired to take notice, for that by such admission [Tubbs] is exempted from being impressed.'<sup>4</sup> The gang's violation of this protection prompted opposition politicians in the City of London to apply for a writ of *habeas corpus* in the Court of King's Bench.<sup>5</sup> Although Lord Chief Justice Mansfield acquitted Tubbs from personally serving, his final comments represented a significant endorsement of naval impressment.<sup>6</sup> He stated that, 'the practice is deduced from that trite maxim of the constitutional law of England; the private mischief had better be submitted to, than that public detriment and inconvenience should ensue.'<sup>7</sup>

British naval impressment was a manning process existing from Elizabethan times until 1835. The British people were not subject to other forms of military conscription

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<sup>2</sup> J.A. Woods, 'The City of London and Impressment 1777-8', *Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society*, (1956) p.113

<sup>3</sup> H. Cowper, 'Rex versus John Tubbs', *Reports of the Cases Adjudged in the Court of King's Bench*, no.2 (London, 1800), p.512

<sup>4</sup> London, LMA, COL/SJ/27/114

<sup>5</sup> Woods, 'London and Impressment', p.114

<sup>6</sup> N. Poser, *Lord Mansfield: Justice in the Age of Reason* (Montreal, 2015) p.212

<sup>7</sup> Cowper, 'Tubbs', p.517-8

in the eighteenth-century, but due to the extraordinary manning needs of the Royal Navy the immediate seizure of seafarers aged 18-55 was common practice.<sup>8</sup> By the War of Austrian Succession in the 1740s Britain had developed into a serious fiscal-military state, built on a Navy of almost 60,000.<sup>9</sup> To maintain oceanic superiority and accommodate for the inadequacies of volunteers, the Admiralty established the Impress Service during the Seven Years War, with regulating captains and press-gangs becoming permanent fixtures of Atlantic society.<sup>10</sup> By the American War of Independence, the Service had headquarters in almost fifty British ports, employed over 1000 officers, and had raised 116,000 of the 230,000 men who served during the conflict.<sup>11</sup> Despite long-standing antipathy towards naval impressment, the issue only reached the highest levels of British politics during the 1770s. Thus, this decade will assume the chronology for this thesis.

The topic of impressment was largely neglected in the decades following J.R. Hutchinson's original 1914 work, which affirmed much of the dark folklore relating to the supposedly brutal and discriminatory press-gangs.<sup>12</sup> When the subject was revised in the 1970s, scholarly focus was limited to the military and administrative parameters of the manning process, as part of broader naval histories. These works generally served to conclude that the scale of naval impressment had been embellished, and that it was actually an uncontroversial feature of eighteenth-century

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<sup>8</sup> D. Brunsmann, *The Evil Necessity: British Naval Impressment in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Charlottesville, Virginia, 2013) p.7. (Please note a brief experiment with army impressment 1778-79)

<sup>9</sup> J.R. Dancy, *The Myth of the Press Gang: Volunteers, Impressment and the Naval Manpower Problem in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Suffolk, 2015) p.19

<sup>10</sup> Dancy, *Myth*, p.20

<sup>11</sup> N. Rogers, *The Press Gang: Naval Impressment and its opponents in Georgian Britain*, (London, 2007) p.7

<sup>12</sup> J.R. Hutchinson, *The Press-Gang; Afloat and Ashore* (London, 1914) p.313

life.<sup>13</sup> Notably, N.A.M Rodger labelled it a ‘hum-drum affair calling for little if any violence’, pointing out that gangs were usually outnumbered in maritime communities.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, Christopher Lloyd asserted that aside from the ‘frothy talk’ of some ‘hypocritical politicians’, its use was broadly accepted.<sup>15</sup> Recently, J.R. Dancy has refined the quantitative understanding of impressment, with a 1793-1801 database of seamen based on muster books from Portsmouth, Chatham and Plymouth. Whereas others had estimated that around 50% of naval sailors had been impressed, Dancy’s estimates put the figure at only 16%, and as such he labelled the influence of the Press-gang a ‘myth’.<sup>16</sup>

Whilst these studies ensured that the scale of impressment has not been statistically inflated, some recent scholarship has sought a further reaching analysis, moving beyond an administrative focus to explore impressment’s wider social implications. Denver Brunsman and Nicholas Rogers are alone in providing studies focused solely on eighteenth-century naval impressment, and whilst both accept the revisionist recalculation of impressment’s reach, they argue that the process was still a significant grievance of Atlantic communities. Rogers is particularly keen to highlight this revisionist oversight, claiming that questions of ‘who actually opposed impressments, and in what manner, are not... systematically addressed, at least over the long term’.<sup>17</sup> His work identifies 602 anti-impressment affrays in the period 1738–1805, the second

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<sup>13</sup> N.A.M Rodger, *The Wooden World: Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (London, 1986) & C. Lloyd, *The British Seaman: A Social Survey, 1200-1860* (London, 1968)

<sup>14</sup> Rodger, *Anatomy*, p.174

<sup>15</sup> Lloyd, *Seamen*, p.151

<sup>16</sup> Dancy, *Myth*, p.14

<sup>17</sup> Rogers, *Press Gang*, p.3



most common form of collective violence.<sup>18</sup> Whilst Rogers provides extensive evidence of the wider ‘trends, patterns and dynamics’ of the century’s anti-impressment activity, his analysis often lacks detailed insight into the impetuses behind such action.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, Brunsman’s *The Evil Necessity* attempts to establish a complete study of impressment on an ambitious transatlantic scale. However, the large bulk of his work focuses on the American experience of impressment, and its contribution in starting the War of 1812. He justifies the lack of British-based research by arguing that, ‘nowhere were the risks of impressment more evident than in Britain’s West India and North American colonies’.<sup>20</sup>

Whilst Rogers and Brunsman have contributed to an understanding of who opposed naval impressment, and how they did so, this work’s primary emphasis will be on *why* British citizens opposed impressment. More specifically, it will attempt to reconcile the study of anti-impressment action within the context of the mounting radical ideologies and popular politics of 1770s Britain. The issue of impressment ignited judgment across the social spectrum during George III’s reign, with discontentment bolstered by emerging Wilkite radicalism and a growing collectiveness amongst sailors.<sup>21</sup> Such resistance came during a difficult decade for the authorities, who were already distracted by the controversial 1770-1 Falklands crisis, and then the American War of Independence.<sup>22</sup> However, despite this maelstrom of discontent, the legality of impressment survived the decade unscathed. On March 11<sup>th</sup> 1777, MP Temple

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<sup>18</sup> Rogers, *Press Gang*, p.39

<sup>19</sup> Rogers, *Press Gang*, p.37

<sup>20</sup> Brunsman, *Evil Necessity*, p.241

<sup>21</sup> N. Rogers, *Crowds, Culture and Politics in Georgian Britain*, (Oxford, 1998), p.102

<sup>22</sup> J. Sainsbury, *Disaffected Patriots: London Supporters of Revolutionary America* (Kingston, 1987) p.114

Luttrell' manning reform bill was conclusively defeated in the Commons by 108 'noes' to 54 'ayes'.<sup>23</sup> This continued backing is made more galling by the fact that slavery was restricted three times before impressment was ever ended, despite many equating the two.<sup>24</sup>

The attention of the following research will focus less on the extent to which opposition to impressment existed, but rather on what its nature can reveal about the participants' social mentalities and political motivations. This will echo the focus of Gustave Le Bon, whose preoccupation concerning popular protests was with 'mental states rather than physical phenomena'.<sup>25</sup> The work will consist of two chapters, exploring both popular and official anti-impressment activity. The first will focus on the resistance of the seafaring population, whom impressment directly affected. Marcus Rediker has called for the recognition of a 'coherent and effective maritime radicalism' amongst eighteenth-century sailors, who he argues exhibited values of 'collectivism, anti-authoritarianism, and egalitarianism'.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, in his analysis of American anti-impressment riots, Christopher Magra has contended that sailors were at the vanguard of resisting British authority, demonstrating 'radical collective actions' and 'political consciousness' as they helped bring about the American Revolution.<sup>27</sup> This study will apply similar lines of enquiry within a British context,

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<sup>23</sup> J. Brooke, 'Luttrell, Hon. Temple Simon (1738-1803)' [<http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1754-1790/member/luttrell-hon-temple-simon-1738-1803>][02/02/2016]

<sup>24</sup> Brunnsman, *Evil Necessity*, p.7. (Britain limited domestic slavery in 1772, ended participation in the slave trade in 1807, before final emancipation in 1833.)

<sup>25</sup> G. Rudé, *The Crowd in History, 1730-1848* (New York, 1966) p.3

<sup>26</sup> N. Frykmana, C. Andersona, L. Heerma van Vossa & M. Rediker, *Mutiny and Maritime Radicalism in the Age of Revolution; An Introduction* (Cambridge, 2013) pp.5-6

<sup>27</sup> C. Magra, 'Anti-Impressment Riots and the Origins of the Age of Revolution', *International Review of Social History*, Vol.58 (2013) p.131

testing the extent to which sailors acted against impressment on account of a collective sense of political injustice.

In the second chapter, the anti-impressment work of middle-class radicals and reformers will be analysed. In 1978, E.P. Thompson asserted that for ‘the first seven decades of the [eighteenth] century we can find no industrial or professional middle class which exercised an effective curb upon the operations of predatory oligarchic power’, consequently placing the inception of real political radicalism in the early 1790s.<sup>28</sup> However, Charles Butler’s 1777 pamphlet in defence of naval impressment is testament to the seriousness with which Britain’s authorities viewed the challenges to impressment. The tract consisted of 63 pages, with lengthy contributions from both Prime Minister Lord North and First Lord Admiralty Sandwich, suggesting that such an authoritative response had been required to counter mounting criticism.<sup>29</sup> Ultimately, this chapter’s research will critique the sincerity, incentives and organisation of the 1770s middle-class anti-impressment cause, whilst revealing the reasons it failed to curtail naval impressment.

Delving into the agency of eighteenth-century seafarers proves a problematic task; sailors were typically uneducated, illiterate and had little time to record their experiences anyhow.<sup>30</sup> Thus, our understanding of maritime activity is overwhelmingly confined to contemporary reporting, via pamphlet literature and the forty-odd newspapers in circulation by the 1770s.<sup>31</sup> Understandably, these need to be

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<sup>28</sup> E.P. Thompson, ‘Eighteenth Century English Society; Class struggle without class?’, *Social History*, 3:2 (1978) p.143

<sup>29</sup> C. Butler, *An Essay on the Legality of Impressing Seamen*, (London, 1777)

<sup>30</sup> J. Brewer, *Party Ideology and popular politics at the accession of George III* (Cambridge, 1976) p.141

<sup>31</sup> Brewer, *Party Ideology*, p.143

treated in accordance with the writer's incentives, with the obvious potential for biased coverage. Unfortunately, the limited number of sailor accounts of impressment necessitates assuming such sources were somewhat archetypal. By contrast, there is a wealth of material revealing the opinions of the educated ranks, namely those of contemporary MPs, theorists, correspondents and judicial members. Much of this is accessible through the Records of the Admiralty, which also include the highly useful letters of Admiralty Solicitor Samuel Seddon.<sup>32</sup> Sources of a legal nature are also prominent in this work, with the High Court of Admiralty Papers containing details of the libel, allegations and sentences of impressment cases. However, the Admiralty's influence over which suits came to court must be brought into consideration. It is hoped this multi-archival approach will compensate for such source deficiencies.

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<sup>32</sup> London, TNA, 'Solicitors Letters', ADM 1/3680

## Chapter 1 – Maritime Radicalism?

**‘How can it be expected that a man should fight for the liberty of others whilst he himself feels the pangs of slavery?’<sup>33</sup>**

This chapter will test the extent to which Magra’s hypothesis – ‘for maritime laborers, resisting impressment was a public, radical commentary on the legitimacy of British authority that was deeply rooted in...political ideas’- can be applied within a British context.<sup>34</sup> Did the impressment resistance of 1770s maritime labourers amount to a collective radical front?

### The Plight of the Sailor

The grievances of eighteenth-century naval sailors are well covered by modern historians, with extensive examples of the laborious work, rampant disease and abusive discipline which darkened naval voyages.<sup>35</sup> Impressment undoubtedly compounded the miseries of the common sailor. Firstly, from an economic standpoint, it inhibited a sailor’s potential earnings, for whilst eighteenth-century naval wages remained steady at around 24 shillings per month, merchant shipping wages increased in wartime to compete with the demand for sailor services. Sailors in this industry could expect to earn around 55 shillings per month by the 1770s.<sup>36</sup> Secondly, the sudden impressment into the Navy could deprive seamen from family

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<sup>33</sup> J. Oglethorpe, *The Sailors Advocate* (London, 1728) p.72

<sup>34</sup> Magra, ‘Anti-Impressment Riots’, p.141

<sup>35</sup> M. Lewis, *A Social History of the Navy 1793-1815* (London, 1960) pp.402-425 & M. Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750*, (New York, 1987) pp.92-5

<sup>36</sup> Magra, ‘Anti-Impressment Riots’, p.137

and employment contacts for years on end, with many taken by offshore pressing tenders as they returned to Britain's coast.<sup>37</sup> Such a turnaround was painful to both the sailor and his family, who were often left without their primary earner. One Sussex newspaper highlighted such suffering in November 1776, relaying a scene in which local lightermen had been 'dragged out of their craft like dogs... leaving their families in great distress'.<sup>38</sup>

According to Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh, the shared experiences of maritime hardships helped the formation of a 'proto-proletariat' sailor class, who possessed an 'independent revolutionary spirit that informed their actions ocean-wide'.<sup>39</sup> Certainly, from the 1760s the nation's sailors played a more prominent part in crowd actions, as they rallied to protest the conditions of their livelihoods. In 1762, a strike in the Port of Liverpool was successful in raising merchant shipping pay to 40s per month.<sup>40</sup> During the London Strike of 1768 such insurrection peaked further, with sailors unrigging their ship sails, again over wage disputes. Furthermore, in August 1775, Liverpoolian sailors opened cannon-fire on the City Exchange, after local merchants had employed a militia to arrest the leaders of a peaceful industrial strike.<sup>41</sup> These incidences carried a hint of prevailing radical anti-authoritarianism; during the 1768 strike sailors were heard shouting 'No Wilkes? No King!', whilst the 1775 protesters marched under a red flag.<sup>42</sup> The implications of these incidences were

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<sup>37</sup> Rogers, *Press Gang*, p.12

<sup>38</sup> 'News', *Sussex Weekly Advertiser*, 26 Nov. 1776.

<sup>39</sup> P. Linebaugh & M. Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*. (Boston, 2000) p.220

<sup>40</sup> J. Stevenson, *Popular Disturbances in England, 1700-1832* (London, 1992) p.155

<sup>41</sup> Stevenson, *Popular Disturbances*, pp.156-7

<sup>42</sup> Linebaugh & Rediker, *Many-Headed Hydra*, p.221 & Rogers, *Crowds*, p.103

noted by contemporary commentators, with John Almon labelling the sailors a ‘many headed monster which everyone should oppose’ in 1770.<sup>43</sup>

Despite the appropriation of radical symbolism, at their core these protests were of an industrial nature, with wage earners protesting their working conditions.<sup>44</sup> Meanwhile, it could be maintained that as well as the economic grievances, naval impressment had the potential to ignite considerable social and political objections amongst the sailors. In his 1772 pamphlet *The Rights of the Sailors Vindicated*, the writer Nauticus imagined a sailor decrying why ‘I, who am as free-born as yourself should devote my life and liberty for so trifling a consideration, purely that such wretches as you may enjoy your possessions in safety’.<sup>45</sup> Nauticus is projecting a sense of class tension and radical consciousness upon the sailor, but the extent to which maritime anti-impressment actions actually demonstrated any such beliefs is questionable.

### Resisting the Press Gang

The decade’s popular anti-impressment incidences are clustered during periods of military mobilisation. The first phase occurred during the Falklands Crisis of 1700-01, when the nation begin preparations for potential conflict with Spain, with the Admiralty first writing to the King on 22nd October 1770 to propose ‘five hundred able Watermen be impressed and disposed of’.<sup>46</sup> The second cluster took place during the very real American Revolutionary War, with naval mobilisation occurring chiefly

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<sup>43</sup> J. Almon, *The Political Register and Impartial Review of New Books*, (1770) p.239

<sup>44</sup> G. Rudé, *Wilkes and Liberty*, (Oxford, 1962) p.104

<sup>45</sup> Nauticus, *The Rights of the Sailors Vindicated* (London, 1772) p.50

<sup>46</sup> London, TNA, ‘Letter to the King’, PC 1/15/63

from 1776-1778.<sup>47</sup> The Admiralty was forced to undergo a 'hot press' in October 1776; such was the urgency of this press that the Sussex gang of Captain James Alms raised 213 men in December alone.<sup>48</sup>

Popular resistance to impressment was characteristically reactive in nature, as seafarers desperately countered the operations of the press-gangs. An important early occasion happened near the Nore in March 1771, after 160 maritime labourers had been pressed and shipped out to join the HMS *Conquistador*. Ship Captain Falkingham reported how 75 of these pressed men had subsequently 'risen against the crew' of the transportation tenders, before making their escape to shore.<sup>49</sup> Other sources expose the lengths sailors were prepared to go in countering press-gangs, with the use of weapons often mentioned. In March 1777 Admiralty Solicitor Seddon wrote to inform Mr. William Harrison, a surgeon of Sunderland, that the Admiralty was aware of his recent delinquency; 'you have lately encouraged a Ship's Crew, to oppose the Press-Gangs in their Duty by offering two Brace of Pistols in the said Crew.'<sup>50</sup> Similarly, the letters of Seddon contain one sent from Captain Bover of Newcastle on 21<sup>st</sup> September 1778, 'giving an account of one Robert Hindmarsh a Harpooner, belonging to a Greenland Fishing Vessel, having encouraged a Mob to rescue a Seamen who was being impressed.'<sup>51</sup> On rare occasions, these confrontations

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<sup>47</sup> S. Conway, 'The Politics of British Military and Naval Mobilisation, 1775-83', *The English Historical Review*, Vol.112 (Oxford, 1997) p.1185

<sup>48</sup> Conway, 'Mobilisation', p.1186

<sup>49</sup> London, TNA, ADM 106/1197/239

<sup>50</sup> London, TNA, 'Correspondence relating to the Impress Service 1777-78', ADM 1/5117/9

<sup>51</sup> London, TNA, 'Solicitors Letters', ADM 1/3680



even proved fatal; one gang member was killed whilst pressing the crew of a Rochester collier in 1779.<sup>52</sup>

Local maritime residents would also frequently react to the press-gang's invasion of their neighbourhood, often intervening on behalf of pressed individuals. For example, in October 1770 the *Middlesex Journal* reported on an incident in which a 'posse of ladies' had rescued an 'intoxicated' man from a press gang.<sup>53</sup> Likewise, one newspaper noted an occasion in east London in April 1778, when some natives had 'followed the sailors [of a press-gang], drubbed them and brought back their companions in triumph'.<sup>54</sup> The story of James Blake, an apprentice pressed on Ludgate Hill in July 1777, further demonstrates the communal outrage impressment could stimulate. One witness recalled how Blake 'made great resistance and called out Murder which brought a Mob about them; that when they go to St. Paul's Churchyard the mob separated them from Blake so that they saw him no more.'<sup>55</sup> A letter from the Lieutenant John Lowe to the Admiralty Solicitor is also revealing, with Low recounting how whilst out with his press gang in London, three men had, 'laid hold of my collar, making use of scandalous language and endeavored to take me and my men into custody'.<sup>56</sup> He was forced to draw his sword, but 'did not use it', for the men ran off having failed to rescue the pressed man in Lowe's possession. It is likely the Lowe's account is benevolent concerning his own involvement, but the source still indicates the type of ferocious struggle common between press-gangs and local

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<sup>52</sup> *The Gentleman's Magazine*, (1779), p.213

<sup>53</sup> 'News', *Middlesex Journal*, 4–6 October 1770

<sup>54</sup> *Public Advertiser*, 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1778

<sup>55</sup> London, TNA, ADM, 1/3680/350, 12<sup>th</sup> July 1777

<sup>56</sup> London, TNA, ADM 1/3680/668, 19<sup>th</sup> August 1778

residents. As with the other cases presented, it seems the local's primary concern was rescuing the pressed individual, rather than making any serious political gesture by acting further against the officers. Typically, once the seamen had been rescued, or such a task proved impossible, the mob would disperse.

Whilst such scenes unquestionably distressed Admiralty employees, the extent to which they mounted a serious challenge to the political administration or existing social order is of doubt. As demonstrated, most incidences of struggle were undertaken with the aim of freeing pressed individuals, or intervening before impressment could occur. Rather than being pre-planned, these events were predominantly reactive, with the simple aim of disrupting press operations. This contrasts with occurrences of sailor industrial action. For example, before the 1768 strike, a 'great body of sailors' reportedly 5000-15,000 strong had marched to protest at Palace Yard on the 10<sup>th</sup> May.<sup>57</sup> They then presented a petition to the King which declared;

...since the conclusion of the War We Seamen have been slighted and our Wages reduced so low & Provisions so dear that we have been rendered incapable of procuring the common necessaries of Life for Ourselves & Familys, and to be plain with you if our Grievances is not speedily redressed there is Ships & Great Guns enough at deptford and Woolwich we will kick up such a Dust in the Pool as the Londoners never see before...<sup>58</sup>

By contrast, anti-impressment protest did not exist on nearly the same level of magnitude or organisation, with the sailor's demands never so formally presented. Maritime individuals acted out of a local duty to protect their local neighbours and friends, rather than in pursuit of some shared higher cause. Whilst industrial

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<sup>57</sup> *The Gentleman's Magazine* (1768) p.242

<sup>58</sup> Thompson, 'English Society', p.161

concerns united sailors through a common sense of exploitation, the threat of impressment could expose cracks in such unison, with sailors turning not just on the authorities, but also each other. As Press Captain Bover commented of Newcastle, it was common for sailors to ‘give a good guess at each others affairs’; informing on others to deflect unwanted attention. As a result, incidences in which informers were ‘unmercifully beat or rather nearly murdered’ were apparently common.<sup>59</sup> Similar snitching occurred in London; in July 1779 the sailor Tom Richardson responded to an admiralty reward offering three guineas per seamen informed on, giving up the whereabouts of several seamen hiding in Middlesex, ‘where they were not formerly known’.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, some maritime communities actively encouraged impressment when it suited them. On the 4th October 1778 Captain Worth pressed the Liverpool sailor George Wood, ‘at the request of the neighbourhood where he lived, being a common disturber of the peace’.<sup>61</sup> Such examples seem to demonstrate that when the threat of impressment reared up, the supposed class-conscious understanding between seafarers often went missing.

It might be reasoned that there was a significant practical explanation for the lack of massed anti-impressment activity; collective gatherings of maritime individuals in the public arena proved a goldmine for the press-gang. For example, on March 17<sup>th</sup> 1778 the Admiralty took advantage of large crowds gathered across the country for St

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<sup>59</sup> London, TNA, ADM 1/1497, 20 Sept. 1777

<sup>60</sup> London, LMA, ‘Middlesex Sessions Papers’, L/RV/23

<sup>61</sup> London, TNA, ADM 1/1498, as quoted by Rogers, *Crowds*, p.115

Patrick's Day, pressing over a thousand individuals in a single day.<sup>62</sup> Sailors fearing the threat of impressment might have felt it wise to avoid similar situations.

### Evasion and Preservation

The more customary response of sailors facing impressment was non-violent evasion, rather than active resistance. When one looks at the agency of the common sailor, personal subsistence was of the upmost priority, rather than any grander concepts concerning constitutional right. The simplest means of opposing impressment was basic avoidance. For example, on 20th October 1770, the *Middlesex Journal* published a letter from one 'G.W.' of St Albans, which described how hundreds of maritime labourers were pouring northwards through the area to escape the 'warm press'.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, in a 1777 letter from the gentleman Martin Hawke to Lieutenant Robert Tomlinson, it is described how 'at the village of Towton... and the neighboring villages, the locals quit their work and hid themselves for fear of a press gang... they were dispersed like a covey of partridges.'<sup>64</sup> Such activity would fall into George Rudé's category of 'escape or panic crowds', rather than that of the 'aggressive mob'.<sup>65</sup>

Other sailors were more cunning in their elusion tactics. An Admiralty Solicitor letter dated 10<sup>th</sup> September 1778 describes how the sailor Johnathan Kelly was arrested as a press-gang 'were carrying him to the Tender'. Kelly was said to have been an

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<sup>62</sup> *London Evening Post*, 14-17<sup>th</sup> March 1778

<sup>63</sup> 'Letters', *Middlesex Journal*, 18th-20<sup>th</sup> October, 1770

<sup>64</sup> M. Hawke, 'Letter to Robert Tomlinson, 5<sup>th</sup> February 1777', in J. Bullocke, (ed.), *The Tomlinson Papers, Selected from the Correspondence and Pamphlets of Captain Robert Tomlinson, R.N. and Vice-Admiral Nicolas Tomlinson*, (London, 1935) p.86.

<sup>65</sup> Rudé, *The Crowd*, p.4

innkeeper, and was arrested for debts of £20.5, but as the Solicitor wrote ‘it is highly probable that the arrest was intended merely to get Kelly from the Press-Gang’.<sup>66</sup> His sighing suggests this was not an uncommon excuse. The tactic was clearly familiar to Captain Napier of Kent, who reported that ‘every Man who is impressed would cause his friends to rear up debts against him and procure the judges warrant for taking him ashore’.<sup>67</sup> The Admiralty Records even report of Newcastle mariners enlisting into the local militia in December 1776, to avoid possible naval service.<sup>68</sup> For seafaring folk self-preservation was of primary importance, with these non-violent means of resistance often particularly effective.

Other examples of personal safeguarding also somewhat contradict the notion of an eighteenth-century sailor unity, with seafarers forgoing such bonds in order to protect their own circumstances. For example, in late 1770 one newspaper reported on an impressment episode aboard a merchant ship near Deptford, when ‘one of the crew gave the lieutenant very ill language’. As a result, the lieutenant offered the crew freedom from impressment in exchange for the one offender, whom was subsequently given up ‘on the spot’.<sup>69</sup> It was also known for sailors to try joining the press-gang as a means of protection. For example, though William Spavens was pressed in 1755, he went on to serve in press-gangs across England and Ireland during the 1770s.<sup>70</sup> Likewise, a letter of Lieutenant Shewer dated 10<sup>th</sup> October 1776 reveals the similar actions of John Beynon. Shewer comments that Beynon had

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<sup>66</sup> London, TNA, ‘Solicitors Letters’, ADM 1/3680, 10<sup>th</sup> September 1778

<sup>67</sup> London, TNA, ADM. 1/2220, 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1777

<sup>68</sup> London, TNA, ADM. 1/1497, 23 December 1776. As quoted by Rogers, *Crowds*, p.107

<sup>69</sup> ‘Postscript’, *Middlesex Journal*, 1<sup>st</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> Dec. 1770

<sup>70</sup> W. Spavens, *The Seaman’s Narrative*, (Louth, 1796) p.34-6

written him a letter ‘requesting me to get his discharge from the Charming Nancy, and enter him as one of my gang, my not complying therewith he Deserted two days later.’<sup>71</sup> One can see how certain individuals were willing to bypass their moral judgement of impressment, if it might secure their own affairs.

### Sailor deference

It is noticeable that in the few existing accounts of sailors’ lives, most refrain from implicitly criticising the Impress service, instead accepting its inevitability. This is demonstrated by a 1771 letter sent to *The Court and City Magazine* by a ‘poor old peasant’, who tells of how he took the place of his pressed son.<sup>72</sup> Despite his predicament the peasant described the gang in good terms and accepted their duty, even commenting that as he left his family ‘the very press-gang could scarcely keep from tears’.<sup>73</sup> Although he goes on to describe the tragedies of his naval career, once made to ‘suffer 300 lashes’, he writes nothing against the system which had placed him there.<sup>74</sup> Another valuable account of an impressed sailor is provided by Chinese Philosopher Lien Chi-Altangi, who wrote of his experiences visiting London, and should prove an unbiased commentator owing to his neutral allegiance. Altangi recounted the story of a ‘poor fellow begging with a wooden leg’ he met in 1775, who described to him how he had been ‘reduced to his present situation’.<sup>75</sup> Despite the fact that the sailor had been cruelly treated by both the press-gang and his naval boatswain

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<sup>71</sup> London, TNA, ‘Correspondence re. Impressment’ ADM 1/5117/9, 10<sup>th</sup> October 1776

<sup>72</sup> *The Court and City Magazine*, Vol.2 (London, 1770-71) p.402

<sup>73</sup> *The Court and City Magazine*, Vol.2 (London, 1770-71) p.403

<sup>74</sup> *The Court and City Magazine*, Vol.2 (London, 1770-71) p.406

<sup>75</sup> O. Goldsmith (ed.), *The Citizen of the World: or, Letters from a Chinese Philosopher, residing in London, to his Friends in the East*, (Dublin, 1775) p.223

he says ill about neither, concluding ‘I have no enemy of this world that I know of, but the French’.<sup>76</sup> He even listed the advantages impressment had bought him, including the forty pounds wages, remarking that ‘under every beating the money was my comfort’.<sup>77</sup> Despite his maltreatment the sailor is said to have retained his patriotism, recounting how on his return from naval service he had been ‘glad to see Old England again, because I loved my country. O liberty, liberty, liberty! That is the property of every Englishman, and I will die in its defence’.<sup>78</sup> It is possible that Altangi has slightly embroidered these words to add colour to his story, but not to the extent that the sailor’s original outlook has been changed. These accounts demonstrate that British society was still in many senses a cultural hegemony, with the sailors still predominantly aligned to the authorities’ national vision, despite their own personal suffering.

When animosity was directed at Admiralty officials, it usually took the form of personal vendettas, rather than a criticism of the establishment as a whole. The shanty song of some Greenland whalers impressed in the late 1770s is demonstrative of this;

We’ll fight for our king against France and against Spain,  
 But I hope in short time sweet peace will be restored,  
 And the devil will have Neper though we’re in the hold  
 When peace is restored, to Leigh we will come,  
 To pay Neper and his men for what they have done.<sup>79</sup>

Whilst the seamen plan revenge on the press officer Captain Neper, they also patriotically promise to serve their country now they have been pressed. Indeed, anti-

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<sup>76</sup> Goldsmith, *Citizen*, p.228

<sup>77</sup> Goldsmith, *Citizen*, p.226

<sup>78</sup> Goldsmith, *Citizen*, p.225

<sup>79</sup> Brunsman, *Evil Necessity*, p.167

impressment activity of sailors rarely took the form of some higher political commentary, for their concerns seldom spread beyond their own local situations. Even during the Nore and Spithead naval mutinies of 1797, when sailors achieved their greatest political platform of the eighteenth-century, their only demand relating to impressment was that pressed individuals should receive advanced wages, something already granted under the 1758 Naval Act.<sup>80</sup>

### Conclusion

Overall, the anti-impressment resistance of 1770s British seafarers exhibited little in the way of radical potential. Unlike industrial rebellions, opposition to impressment was rarely principled or proactive, usually taking the form of self-serving circumvention. Impressment aroused resistance not because it violated concepts of class, but concepts of custom, such as when Press-gangs overstepped the boundaries of local practice during the 'hot presses' of 1770 and 1776. During times of peace, there is little evidence of similar responses.<sup>81</sup> The everyday incidences of impressment disruption were a nuisance to the authorities, but did little to challenge impressment on a higher legal basis. To do so required an education and certain financial resources; sailors had to rely on employers to initiate impressment suits, which usually cost around £20 (6 months wages for a common seaman).<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> N.A.M Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean; A Naval History of Britain 1649-1815*, (London, 2005) p.414

<sup>81</sup> Rogers, *Press Gang*, p.42

<sup>82</sup> Rogers, *Press Gang*, p.30



## Chapter 2 – Middling Opposition

**‘The very means which the Navy used to fill out its ranks – reminiscent as they are of the means of catching Africans for slavery – suggest that to be in the Navy was to be unfree.’<sup>83</sup>**

Although the enigmatic John Wilkes is historically associated with standing for middling society, in a May 1768 edition of *The North Briton* he promised to fight for society’s ‘low-liv’d’, who were ‘so cruelly harassed and oppressed’ by ‘State-Vultures’.<sup>84</sup> Thus from 1770, Wilkes and the City of London took on the issue of press warrants, having already made general warrants defunct in 1763.<sup>85</sup> The ever-expanding radical press and the collaboration of Granville Sharp and James Oglethorpe also bolstered the anti-impressment challenge.<sup>86</sup> This section will assess the radical credentials and motivations of this middle-class opposition, shining a light on the factors behind its failure.

### Written Wars

The issue of impressment had ignited intellectual discussion before the 1770s. In 1728, James Oglethorpe’s *The Sailors Advocate* had questioned ‘How come it then, that so very useful part of his Majesty’s subject as the Sailors are, should be prest into the Service, denied their liberty, and turned into slaves?’<sup>87</sup> The pamphlet prompted early debate, with even George II conceding he wished sailors ‘may be invited, rather than

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<sup>83</sup> Benjamin Franklin, as quoted by Brunsmann, *Evil Necessity*, p.243

<sup>84</sup> *The North Briton*, 21<sup>st</sup> May 1768

<sup>85</sup> M. Franklin, *Orientalist Jones: Sir William Jones, Poet, Lawyer, and Linguist, 1746-1794* (Oxford, 2012) p.132

<sup>86</sup> Woods, ‘London and Impressment’, p.112

<sup>87</sup> Oglethorpe, *Advocate*, p.22

compelled by force and violence, to enter into the service of their county'.<sup>88</sup> As the eighteenth-century passed, legislative restrictions on impressment were tightened, with 50,000 employees possessing protections by 1757.<sup>89</sup> Press-gangs were increasingly regulated; in 1743 the sailor Alexander Broadfoot was acquitted of murdering a press-gang member because the gang that had accosted him was not correctly commissioned.<sup>90</sup> Despite these checks upon the Impress Service, by the 1770s its numerical rate was stronger than ever.<sup>91</sup>

However, encouraged by the prevailing radical zeitgeist, several intellectuals and philanthropists began a bolstered assault on impressment. Granville Sharp, best known for his abolitionist work, joined the cause after witnessing the young boy James Ashton being pressed in 1771.<sup>92</sup> In February 1772 Sharp presided over the case of James Somerset, a slave who escaped his master having been brought to England. Sharp put a *habeus corpus* case before Lord Mansfield, who ruled in Somerset's favour, helping to effectively outlaw slavery within Britain. Somerset's story was significant in highlighting to the public the similarities between slavery and impressment, for shortly before the case on the 18<sup>th</sup> February he had been seized from a coffee-house by a Press-gang.<sup>93</sup> In establishing this reforming precedent Sharp's victory prompted an immediate backlash against impressment, with one newspaper equating impressment to Britain's own 'badge of slavery'.<sup>94</sup> Sharp was looked to as the driving

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<sup>88</sup> W. Cobbett, *The Parliamentary History of England from the Earliest Period to 1803* (London, 1807) p.635

<sup>89</sup> Rodger, *Anatomy*, p.178

<sup>90</sup> M. Foster, *The Case of The King against Alexander Broadfoot*, (Oxford, 1758) p.1

<sup>91</sup> Rogers, *Press Gang*, p.7

<sup>92</sup> Woods, 'London and Impressment', p.112

<sup>93</sup> Woods, 'London and Impressment', p.113

<sup>94</sup> *London Evening Post*, 23-25<sup>th</sup> Jan. 1777

force of these causes, and in 1776 began a collaboration with Oglethorpe, helping him to republish *The Sailor's Advocate* with his own contributing preface.<sup>95</sup>

With the growing comparisons to slavery, impressment was peddled by pamphleteers as a significant threat to the 'liberty' of the Englishman; a catchword which had considerable ideological resonance during these years, appealing to the 'Wilkes and Liberty' facet of society.<sup>96</sup> For example, in 1771 the radical activist Junius described the act of pressing as the 'temporary invasion of the personal liberty of the subject'.<sup>97</sup> During the War of Independence such rhetoric played on the concerns of pro-American factions, who were critical of the unequal representation of British domains.<sup>98</sup> Many would have shared the outlook of Norfolk gentleman Dr. Syllas Neville, who lamented in his diary on June 7<sup>th</sup> 1776; 'if the Govt. succeeds in making slaves of America, Lord have mercy upon us here at home!'<sup>99</sup> Impressment was portrayed as evidence of this encroaching servitude already taking place on British shores; Thomas Green stating in 1777 that 'The love of liberty is a natural inherent passion in all men. To impress a man... would be an act which under the mildest appellation must be termed despotism and tyranny'.<sup>100</sup> The oppositional press also tapped into fears of potential tyranny, with one edition of the *London Evening Post* raising the issue of impressment's particular burden on sailors, and pointing out the dangers of admitting to 'any difference between the privileges of Englishmen in

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<sup>95</sup> J. Sweet, 'The British Sailors' Advocate: James Oglethorpe's First Philanthropic Venture', *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 91, No. 1 (2007), p.25

<sup>96</sup> Rudé, *Wilkes*, p.3

<sup>97</sup> J. Almon (ed.), *The Letters of Junius Complete*, (London, 1806) p.317

<sup>98</sup> Brewer, *Party Ideology*, p.211

<sup>99</sup> B. Cozens-Hardy (ed.), *The Diary of Syllas Neville, 1767-1788* (Oxford, 1950) p.245

<sup>100</sup> T. Green, *A Discourse on the Impressing of the Mariner; wherein Judge Foster's argument is considered and answered*, (London, 1777) p.7

common'.<sup>101</sup> Another common tactic of the press was to compare Britain's heralded constitution with those of their enemies on the continent. For example in 1770 the *Middlesex Journal* published a letter which commented;

Voltaire, in his comparison of the two Nations, has observed, that the only difference between a Frenchman and an Englishman is, that the former is a slave, and knows it; the latter one, and doth not know it. Our present tyrannical mode of impressing men, in a great measure verifies that observation.<sup>102</sup>

Such an unflattering comparison to this dearest of adversaries would have deflated those who celebrated Britain as the world's land of liberty.<sup>103</sup>

Unfortunately, such written attacks had their limitations, most prominent of which was a lack of practical alternatives to impressment. Thomas Green's pamphlet demonstrated a common tendency amongst radical tracts, which were often full of striking ideological rhetoric, but failed to fully grasp the detailed difficulties of the manning crisis. Green constantly stressed the point that if 'seamen make a voluntary tender of their service in proportion to the demand for them by Government, impressing is unnecessary', but this was clearly not the case.<sup>104</sup> In fact during the American War, the Royal Navy experienced an unprecedented 13% desertion rate, something which volunteers could not nearly compensate for.<sup>105</sup> Likewise, Oglethorpe's *Advocate* also failed to provide any 'immediate solution'.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> 'News', *London Evening Post*, 27-29th Nov. 1777

<sup>102</sup> 'Letters', *Middlesex Journal*, 18-20th Oct. 1770

<sup>103</sup> Brewer, *Party Ideology*, p.241

<sup>104</sup> Green, *Discourse*, p.8

<sup>105</sup> Dancy, *Myth*, p.23

<sup>106</sup> Sweet, 'Sailor's Advocate', p.14

### Action and inaction

Impressment opposition needed to extend beyond mere words, and some civic leaders did take more direct action against the press-gangs. This occurred predominantly within London, where radicals had gained a political foothold.<sup>107</sup> In 1771, John Wilkes reversed the Lord Mayor's prior backing of warrants, banishing gangs from operating within the City of London's jurisdiction when the case of the pressed man John Shine was brought before the Guildhall.<sup>108</sup> The incoming Lord Mayor Brass Cosby was encouraged by such action, promising to make the City an 'asylum to all seafaring men', but never achieving such.<sup>109</sup> In October 1776 Lord Mayor Sawbridge refused to endorse an Admiralty warrant, publically announcing that if a single press-gang member were to operate within the city he would 'commit the officer for a breach of the peace'. Unlike Cosby he made good on his promise, with four press-officers arrested on Lime Street on the 16<sup>th</sup> December.<sup>110</sup>

However, the geographical limitations of this action are worth considering. Outside the capital, challenges to impressment were largely absent during the American War. Even in Liverpool, a port which had demonstrated some pro-American sentiment, the common council was dominantly loyalist in stance.<sup>111</sup> In March 1777 it gave the incoming press-officer Captain James Worth the freedom of the borough, and within two years he had pressed over 780 individuals.<sup>112</sup> Whilst the London merchant classes

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<sup>107</sup> Rogers, *Press Gang*, p.21

<sup>108</sup> A. Cash, *John Wilkes; The Scandalous Father of Civil Liberty*, (New Haven, 2006) p.275

<sup>109</sup> Rogers, *Crowds*, p.104

<sup>110</sup> Rogers, *Crowds*, p.105

<sup>111</sup> Land, *The British Sailor*, p.43

<sup>112</sup> Rogers, *Press Gang*, p.68

were a bulwark of Wilkite support in the 1770s, their Liverpoolian counterparts became increasingly wary of the economic pitfalls of an insurrecting sailor workforce. After the 1775 riots, one had commented that ‘I could not help thinking we had Boston here and I fear this is only the beginning of our sorrows’.<sup>113</sup> Many began to co-operate with the press-gangs, offering up local vagabonds in exchange for their better workers. For example, in 1777 the merchant-taylor George Demptsen requested the exchange of the ‘honest and industrious’ John Brown for a substitute of his provision.<sup>114</sup>

Even within London, the commitment of leading radicals to the issue of impressment can be scrutinised. John Wilkes’ radical credentials have long been contested, with many arguing he was more concerned with his own popularity than any genuine reforming cause.<sup>115</sup> As John Sainsbury has highlighted, Wilkes was at times ‘selective and fitful in endorsing popular issues’, a point which fits with his fluctuating involvement in fighting impressment.<sup>116</sup> Wilkes first demonstrated this in September 1771, after a woman named Mary Jones had been arrested for stealing on Ludgate Hill. At her court case Jones protested that the impressment of her husband had left her young family in total impoverishment.<sup>117</sup> Despite their previous outcries against the injustices of impressment, the London Sheriffs Wilkes and Frederick Bull did nothing to help Jones during her ordeal, and she was subsequently executed.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> *Morning Chronicle*, 8<sup>th</sup> September 1775. As quoted by Linebaugh & Rediker ‘Many-Headed Hydra’, p.220

<sup>114</sup> London, LMA, ‘Correspondence re. Impressment’, COL.L/RV/23a/1.

<sup>115</sup> Brewer, *Party Ideology*, p.164

<sup>116</sup> J. Sainsbury, ‘John Wilkes, Debt, and Patriotism’, *The Journal of British Studies*, Vol.34 (April 1995) p.187

<sup>117</sup> Franklin, *Orientalist Jones*, p.135

<sup>118</sup> Rogers, *Press Gang*, p.1

Likewise, the radical newspapers gave the case no attention. Wilkes' commitment was also left wanting in 1776, when he was part of a City Committee appointed to advise on the case for John Tubbs, the aforementioned waterman impressed on the 4<sup>th</sup> November. Despite the committee meeting thrice weekly from the 22<sup>nd</sup> November to the 15<sup>th</sup> January, the register in the margins of the minute papers reveal Wilkes attended just once (Frederick Bull managed only twice).<sup>119</sup> Certainly, such men led busy lives, but the committee pertained to the most important anti-impressment case to date, and their lack of attendance prompts doubting questions.

The radical challenging of impressment was often compromised by the complications of high politics. For example, though the intellect Sir William Jones was known to deplore the legality of press-warrants, he was forced to temper such principle in the early 1770s. This was because at the time he was also seeking a Bengal judgeship from India House, where Lord High Admiral Sandwich held much voting power.<sup>120</sup> Even the radical City of London were not always united in their beliefs concerning impressment. During the hot press of 1776 the City aldermen Thomas Harley and Brackley Kennett actually backed the operations of press gangs within the city. Granville Sharp lamented their action, commenting in a letter to Oglethorpe that the two men should receive 'a fine of £500'.<sup>121</sup> Indeed, Sharp's patience for the impressment cause waned in the late-1770s, as he became distracted by the issue of

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<sup>119</sup> London, LMA, COL/SJ/27/114

<sup>120</sup> Franklin, *Orientalist Jones*, p.125

<sup>121</sup> London, LMA, 'Letter to James Oglethorpe' (15<sup>th</sup> December 1771), COL/AC/13/005/32

electoral reform. Disappointingly, he never completed his long-promised pamphlet against impressment.<sup>122</sup>

### Legal Challenges

The difficulties in challenging naval impressment stemmed not only from a lack of diligence, but also legal nous. Despite a number of impressment-related suits occurring during the decade, the actual constitutionality of the practice was never threatened. Radical City lawyers, notably John Glynn and John Dunning, ultimately agreed with the adage that ‘private interest must give way to public Safety’.<sup>123</sup> They advised the City not to challenge the actual constitutionality of the manning system, but rather focus on cases of wrongful impressment. Yet as the *Sussex Weekly Advertiser* complained of in June 1777, the fact that these lawyers were ‘always hanging on the privilege of exemption... is nothing at all to the public at large’.<sup>124</sup>

Details from the Tubbs case show how it suffered from such limitations, with City representatives discussing at length the historical cases when Watermen had been exempted, rather than the wider merits of press warrants.<sup>125</sup> As such, Lord Mansfield was also able to avoid matters over constitutionality. It is noticeable that throughout the case he seems to have specifically avoided the word ‘right’, whilst also never labelling impressment a ‘prerogative’ of the crown, but a ‘power’, or ‘practice’.<sup>126</sup> In his final ruling Mansfield stated that,

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<sup>122</sup> Woods, ‘London and Impressment’, p.120

<sup>123</sup> *Annual Register*, (1770) p.232

<sup>124</sup> *Sussex Weekly Advertiser*, 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1777, as quoted by Rogers, *Press Gang*, p.20

<sup>125</sup> Cowper, ‘Tubbs’, p.513

<sup>126</sup> Cowper, ‘Tubbs’, pp.512-22



The power of pressing is founded upon immemorial usage, allowed for ages; if it be so founded and allowed for ages, it can have no ground to stand upon, nor can it be vindicated or justified by any reason but the safety of the State.<sup>127</sup>

He essentially infers that impressment had never actually been authorised by any legal act, having ‘no ground to stand upon’, but the nature of the case did not call for investigations into such matters.<sup>128</sup> Furthermore, even when impressment was challenged by Temple Luttrell’s 1777 bill, as John Almon recalled his speech was almost entirely focused on listing the ‘various hardships the seamen were now subject to’, with little discussion concerning the natural rights of sailors.<sup>129</sup>

Ultimately, the radicals failed to capitalise on their window of opportunity. The authorities’ defence of impressment had been difficult to maintain during the opening years of the American war, with public support relatively lacking. However, when France entered the fray in February 1778, the conflict regained patriotic backing.<sup>130</sup> As the *Annual Register* commented, whilst in 1777 the dispute over impressment had been contested ‘very hotly for a time’, it ended ‘without any definitive decision’, so that by 1778 ‘the right of pressing seemed to grow in strength.’<sup>131</sup> As such, by the time of the John Millachip case (1778) and the *Rex versus John Borthwick* case (1779), the King’s Bench were able to relegate matters concerning the legality of impressment

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<sup>127</sup> Cowper, ‘Tubbs’, p.517

<sup>128</sup> J. Adams, *The Inadmissible Principles of the King of England’s Proclamation of October 16<sup>th</sup>, 1807 Considered* (Boston, 1809) p.19

<sup>129</sup> Brooke, ‘Luttrell’, [<http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1754-1790/member/luttrell-hon-temple-simon-1738-1803>]

<sup>130</sup> Brunsman, *Evil Necessity*, p.245

<sup>131</sup> *The Annual Register* (London, 1777) p.25

with little justification. As Judge Edward Willes surmised in the latter case, ‘there is no occasion for the court to consider such a question’.<sup>132</sup>

The fact that impressment reformers lacked a coherency of objectives did not help matters. Even Granville Sharp demonstrated a tendency to compromise on his aims; in a letter to London’s City Marshall in 1771 he questions why press-gangs didn’t take more care to ‘secure those idle wretches, against whom compulsion is justified’.<sup>133</sup> Similarly, in 1779 the radical *General Advertiser* issued support for the impressing of ‘dissolute and idle people’.<sup>134</sup> In endorsing the impressment of certain individuals, the radicals actually helped prop up the authorities’ own arguments. These were summarised succinctly in Charles Butler’s *An Essay on the Legality of Impressing Seamen* (1777). Whilst Butler admitted that the impressment process necessitated the ‘inequality of mankind’, he ultimately concluded that;

In the distribution of the duties of society, those which are the offensive and disagreeable public duties... must fall to the lot of that part of mankind which fills the lower ranks of life; that this mode of distribution, howsoever hard or unjust it may appear to the human eye, is necessarily incident to society in all its states.<sup>135</sup>

The opinion of Dr. Samuel Johnson, who had notoriously fought against slavery in Britain, echoed this outlook. After Granville Sharp had failed to enlist Johnson to the anti-impressment in May 1779 he wrote of Johnson’s reasoning; ‘He said [impressment] was a condition necessarily attending that way of life & when [seamen]

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<sup>132</sup> S. Douglas, *Reports of Case argued and determined in the Court of King’s Bench in the Reign of George III* (Dublin, 1783) p.200

<sup>133</sup> London, LMA, ‘Letter to the City Marshall’, COL/AC/13/005/32

<sup>134</sup> *General Advertiser*, (13<sup>th</sup> May 1779)

<sup>135</sup> Butler, *Legality of Impressing*, p.13

entered into it they must take it with all the consequences - & knowing this it must be considered a voluntary service'.<sup>136</sup>

### National Necessity

Ultimately, middle-class culture was overwhelmingly enamored with the stereotype of the 'Jack Tar' sailors, the brave yet distinctly separate group of society of whom naval service was expected.<sup>137</sup> Edward Neville's *Plymouth in an Uproar; A Musical Farce* (1779) depicted as much, with the press-gang portrayed as a gallant enforcer of social peace, helping sailors who might otherwise 'divide their time between public houses' to 'live honestly'.<sup>138</sup> Another popular play was *The Press Gang; or, Love in Low-Life*, which ran for forty years and told the tale of the sailor True-blue and his lover Nancy. The story is sympathetic to Nancy's distress, who when True-blue is taken cries out 'Oh! Cruel, hard-hearted to press him / And force the fond swain from my arms!'.<sup>139</sup> However, True-blue willingly joins the Press-Gang, for as the Lieutenant describes 'Honour calls, he must obey / Love, to glory must give way / Triumphant, after all his trials / He shall return with Gallie spoils.'<sup>140</sup> The play finishes with a stirring chorus of 'Rule Britannia', cementing the nationalistic theme of the tale.<sup>141</sup>

Despite their more liberal agenda, it would be wrong to assume that radicals of the time were inherently anti-war. Many were prominent in aligning themselves to the national cause during the Falklands Crisis, with the Wilkite MP Isaac Barre criticising

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<sup>136</sup> As quoted by Woods, 'London and Impressment', p.123

<sup>137</sup> I. Land, *War, Nationalism, and the British Sailor, 1750-1850* (New York, 2009) p.30

<sup>138</sup> E. Neville, *Plymouth in an Uproar; A Musical Farce* (London, 1779) p.4

<sup>139</sup> H. Carey, *The Press-Gang; or, Love in Low-Life* (London, 1755) p.12

<sup>140</sup> Carey, *Low-Life*, p.13

<sup>141</sup> Carey, *Low-Life*, p.17

in Parliament, ‘those who are ready to faint at a little blood-shed when the honour and safety of a great nation is concerned.’<sup>142</sup> As such, pro-impresment commentators were able to portray radical principles as muddled and inconsistent; in 1771 Samuel Johnson highlighted how, ‘those who desired to force their sovereign into war, endeavored at the same time to disable him from action’.<sup>143</sup>

When talk of impresment focused on military needs, many radicals fell into line. In 1771 Junius admitted that in times of national need ‘the community has a right to command as well as purchase the service of its members’.<sup>144</sup> Likewise in *The Sailor’s Advocate*, Oglethorpe made clear that despite his disgust at the manning process, his main concern remained for Empire;

It is not the timber nor the iron of the ships of war which gives the dominion of the seas, but the sailors who man them, that are the strength of the nation; it is their skill and courage on which the safety of the ships themselves depends and should they be destroyed... what then must become of the Royal Navy is too evident.<sup>145</sup>

Even the abolitionist Reverend John Newton, who had been impressed in 1744, fitted within this culture of acceptance. In a 1773 letter to Lieutenant Robert Tomlinson, who made various attempts to find an alternative to impresment, Newton wrote the following;

To be sure impressing is a hardship – I remember I thought so when I was impressed in the year ’44... I would have destroyed the ship to have regained my liberty... The Navy is a considerable bulwark of our liberty; it is a pity the sailors should themselves be subject to what most of them dread no less than they would slavery... But it is long

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<sup>142</sup> N. Hudson, *A Political Biography of Samuel Johnson* (London, 2013) p.153

<sup>143</sup> Hudson, *Johnson*, p.154

<sup>144</sup> Almon, *Letters of Junius*, p.317

<sup>145</sup> Oglethorpe, *Advocate*, p.74

established custom, and other ways of manning the Fleet with speed and certainty are clogged with great difficulties.<sup>146</sup>

Newton was known for his encouragement of William Wilberforce's abolition work, but in this letter he seems to be discouraging Tomlinson in his reforming efforts, despite his own personal experience of impressment.<sup>147</sup>

### Conclusion

The task of disassociating the Royal Navy from prevailing notions of liberty and equality proved beyond radicals and reformers in the 1770s. The period 1776-1778 represented a window of opportunity to challenge press-warrants, yet the radicals' determination and strategic coherency were found wanting. Naval impressment was but one concern in a sea of reforming ambition, with parliamentary reform, universal suffrage and press freedoms also filling the radical agenda.<sup>148</sup> Exacerbated by continued failures, the attention of anti-impressment reformers waned as the decade passed. The wider 'Wilkes and Liberty' movement was essentially a 'defensive struggle' to defend the 'traditional rights of Englishmen against seemingly new oppressions'.<sup>149</sup> Regrettably, naval impressment fell less into this category, for it was also rendered a traditional right of the authorities.

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<sup>146</sup> J. Newton, 'Letter to Robert Tomlinson', in Bullocke, (ed.), *Tomlinson Papers* p.33

<sup>147</sup> D. Hindmarsh, 'John Newton, 1621-1678',  
[<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/20062?docPos=3>][12/03/2016]

<sup>148</sup> Woods, 'Impressment and London', p.120

<sup>149</sup> H. Kaye (ed.), *The Face of the Crowd; Studies of Revolution, Ideology and Popular Protest* (London, 1988) p.21

## **Epilogue.**

As asserted in the introduction, historians of naval impressment have tended to tackle the subject from an administrative standpoint. Those few who have delved into impressment's wider repercussions have tended to aim for temporal and geographical breadth, providing a wide coverage of eighteenth-century oppositional examples. By focusing on 1770s Britain, this thesis has been more particular in timescale, allowing for a detailed revision of the socio-political influences behind anti-impressment activity.

This work set out with three objectives relating to 1770s anti-impressment opposition; to explore the radical potential of affected seafarers, to investigate the sincerity and organisation of the middle-class cause, and to analyse the reasons why impressment survived this period. The research has led to the following conclusions. Unlike prevailing industrial concerns, naval impressment did not induce in seafarers much in the way of collective principled response. Personal liberty remained of more importance than grander concepts of political right. Furthermore, the sincerity of middle-class commitment can also be scrutinised. When pushed, even the staunchest of critics often compromised on their principles, with related legal challenges suffering as such. In conclusion it is reasoned that despite the growth of rudimentary radical protest in the 1770s, a hegemony of deference still existed when it came to military concerns.

This work has had certain limitations due to space constraints. With the benefits of more, a critical comparison of 1770 anti-impressment resistance with that of the 1830s, when naval impressment was finally abandoned, might provide an interesting

angle. Though this work briefly discussed some popular culture, further research into the theatre, literature and other popular forms relating to impressment would also add to the field. Nevertheless, it is hoped that this thesis has helped to more accurately pinpoint the chronology of British radicalism, whilst also contributing to a wider understanding of social mentalities and political agency during this age of riot and revolution.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Stevenson, *Popular Disturbances*, p.22

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