CHAPTER 1

A Sailor in the Family
Watery Genealogy and the Maritime Memoir

> Eminent people, whose autobiographies are in great demand, have not necessarily experienced greater adventures than the average 'Nobody'.
>
> Bertrand L. Twinn, 'The Adventures of a Nobody in the Navy of Yesteryear, 1903 to 1919'

Introduction: 'A Family History for a Floating World'

Water ran a steady course through nineteenth-century family histories. A medium that established bonds and continuities between generations through the vocation of seafaring, it also served to disperse and fragment families through processes of migration, maritime labour, and loss at sea. This chapter addresses representations of what it meant to have a sailor in the family, and how 'watery' family stories flowed and circulated through autobiography and other cultural narratives. In doing so it raises historical questions about the ways in which maritime labour and seafaring life affected British working-class family households in this period, while also exploring how the oceanic world shaped the stories told about selfhood and family relations. Gaston Bachelard thought of memories as being 'motionless', made all the more sound and secure by being 'fixed in space'; but maritime memoirs advance stories of lives that were relentlessly restless, shifting, and mobile.[1] Thus as a counterpart to the more familiar, landlocked tales of rootedness and linear progression that marked nineteenth-century narratives of genealogy – symbolised by the rooted, patriarchal family tree branching out to represent the succession of generations – this chapter charts stories of self and family imprinted by mobility, separation, gaps, dispersal, drift, risk, vanishings, and improbable returns. Central to my argument in this chapter is the claim that the written forms that give expression to the modern maritime family of the nineteenth century convey this unsettled and restless social

structure even while authors reached for 'plots' and narrative paradigms that could provide symbolic resolution to a life course framed by poverty and dislocation.

My analysis draws primarily on a corpus of published and unpublished memoirs by writers born in the period 1790–1901. While a number of these might straightforwardly be classified as autobiographies written by sailors, I use the broad term 'maritime memoir' to encompass a wide spread of life writing, including texts by authors who were not themselves mariners, but for whom seafaring defined the family unit and life course. Many of these maritime memoirs can thus be located within that wider tradition of British working-class autobiography, of the kind identified by Burnett, Vincent, and Mayall in their *Critical Bibliography*. As noted in the Introduction to this book, despite a substantial number of working-class memoirs by and about seafarers, sailors have occupied a peripheral position within analyses of industrial proletarian life. As Humphries emphasises: 'Historians have overlooked the lure of the sea to the boys of the industrial revolution, yet it ebbs and flows through the autobiographies, affecting the most unlikely lads as well as seducing those made vulnerable by geography and ancestry.'[2] Counteracting this omission, my chapter situates maritime memoirs within the broader, well-traced practice of working-class self-narrative, drawing out the ways in which maritime stories add to an understanding of this established tradition of life writing. Despite various attempts to identify and define the conventions of the genre, as Regenia Gagnier has noted, there is 'no "typical" Victorian working-class life or autobiography; rather the forms of autobiography were as multifarious as the British laboring classes themselves'.[3] Maritime memoirs only serve to underscore the fallacy of broadbrush attempts to categorise working-class lives and life stories.[4] In reports which include descriptions of far-flung global travels, outlandish experiences at sea, or the multicultural and multilingual workplace of the ship, it is clear even at the level of content, that these maritime memoirs exceed standard accounts of characteristic working-class life (with their presumed emphasis on localism, steady vocation, family and breadwinning, and political engagement).[5] The construct of the nuclear family of Victorian industrial society, including its gendered rituals and division of labour, certainly looked very different from the perspective of maritime-centred life stories. Seafaring, after all, took male breadwinners beyond the physical vicinity of the nineteenth-century home for sustained periods, often necessitated women's entry into wage-earning work in their partners' absence, disrupted quotidian rhythms of work and family centred on the male breadwinning wage, and called into question even further

the so-called separate spheres of work and home as sailors spent months or years in the work-home of the ship.[6]

This chapter therefore examines how different versions of self and family were established in the context of maritime labour, including '[a]lternative visions and strategies of kinship, of co-operation or community which developed outside the functional family'.[7] It further shows how stories of selfhood, family, and kinship, framed by the labour of the sea, were articulated through first-person accounts that drew on and recast a set of received cultural and literary models. My examination of maritime memoirs draws attention to some of the collective features of this body of life stories, while remaining alert to the texts' idiosyncrasies and rich internal differences. The analysis is therefore concerned at a methodological level with individual voice (the distinctive feature of autobiography per se) as well as how particular voices function as part of a broader, collective heteroglot weave. Its methodology is aligned to Cohen's approach in her analysis of fiction, characterised as a way of 'reading for patterns that recur – be they poetic patterns or figures of thought and motif'.[8] Using a seafaring metaphor, Cohen adds: 'Rather than the coherence of a single text, the aim is to define the horizon of possibilities that shape an individual text's construction and the range of variations within this horizon as well.' Using another apt analogy for the subject of this particular chapter, Cohen describes how her method seeks out not identicality but a 'family resemblance' among texts, a technique which demands '[consulting] "the neighbors": genres or other bodies of writing or the arts at the edges of the poetics the work of reading is starting to reveal'.[9]

My own collective reading of autobiographies reveals that the life story, like the fairy tale, has what Vladimir Propp identifies as a 'two-fold quality': 'its amazing multiformity, picturesqueness, and color, and on the other hand, its no less striking uniformity, its repetition'.[10] I am mindful that such an aggregated reading of multiple autobiographies runs the risk of providing merely an 'inventory of experience', thereby flattening the idiosyncrasy of individual life stories, and their written forms, into representative patterns.[11] It is to ward against this that I insist on attending to the literary qualities of these autobiographies – including aspects of voice, narrative structure and intertextuality – so that the texts are not merely mined for their socio-historical content (as fruitful as that may be) nor simply assumed to adhere to 'realist' representative models of proletarian life.

Working-class life writing is sometimes referred to as 'ordinary' writing, but even making allowances for the usefulness of that generic shorthand, there was in truth nothing very ordinary about the details of lived

experience recounted by nineteenth-century sailors and their families. Indeed, while working-class autobiographers looking back to Victorian and Edwardian childhoods commonly prefaced their published works with modest apologies for the plain circumstances of their lives and the limited interest it might hold for readers, that formula is notably absent from maritime memoirs. Sailors who penned their reminiscences often explicitly considered their lives interesting and unusual and thus worth recording. The global reach and adventurous episodes of these life trajectories are apparent in the textual references to names of ships, seas, countries, port cities, lodging-places, and drinking holes from Vigo to Valparaíso. Although most sailors travelled globally in brutal conditions and as exploited workers, their narratives contain suggestive accounts of mobility, opportunity, risk, and self-reflexivity about the anomalous nature of their experiences that demand further examination. Indeed, as I explore in this chapter, a number of autobiographers produced bold and vivid stories of self, creatively deploying literary models to account for the dynamic and unsettling imbrications of water and family life. Other writers expressed more doubt about their ability to fit lived experience to any received form. In exploring her own genealogy, while shedding light on the democratic and revealing practice of family history more broadly, Alison Light has discussed the challenges and creative opportunities of attempting to locate her ancestors' saltwater pasts. Tracing a lineage of servants, sailors, and watermen who 'had long been on the move' in a nineteenth-century world characterised as 'one of motion', she asks: 'Can there be a family history for a floating world?'[12] This chapter responds to that question, as it delves into first-person accounts of seafaring families for whom oceanic labour and travel determined the life course.

Fathers: 'The Sea Was in Their Blood'

Questions of family and labour have been seen as forming the spine of nineteenth-century working-class autobiography, and these topics are often intertwined within the opening pages of the life story. Describing how the male working-class memoirist elided descriptions of family membership with an account of the family as economic unit, for example, Vincent notes: 'Almost as soon as he was aware of his father he would be aware of his trade and usually of how that trade was practised.'[13] Bar a few exceptions, in which autobiographers insisted on the uniqueness of their strange proclivity for seafaring, many maritime memoirs adhere to this convention by mapping out a watery genealogy from the beginning of the

account. There was an especially strong sense of 'occupational continuity' between boys who went to sea and the fact of their fathers having been sailors themselves.[14] As with other trades, sons were either encouraged to follow the family profession, making use of the father's networks and contacts, or professed themselves to be drawn to this role because of a desire to follow in the footsteps of the father. But it was not just a maritime vocation that could be transmitted down family lines. In some autobiographies, the family myth surrounding a 'sailor in the family' was also passed on, intertwining with (and sometimes contradicting) a broader set of cultural mythologies about the nature of the seafarer.[15] These stories were part of the romantic lore surrounding seafaring, but in the context of the family unit, they had other roles to play: they generated family myths; they served as a form of narrative capital to be passed on through generations; they could plug gaps in the family history and even conceal unpalatable truths.

The 'autobiographical letter' of W.H.R., a former 'pauper boy' of the workhouse, risen to the position of schoolmaster, was presented as evidence to parliament in 1874, and voiced the vocational continuity that characterised so many autobiographical accounts. 'My father was a thorough sailor,' declared the writer, 'he had been a sailor from his boyhood up, I have heard him say, and he used always to tell me I should be a sailor when I was old enough.' Accordingly, the author of the letter had acquired the family nickname of 'Boatswain', although it seemed to have been used primarily to induce him to join his family in bouts of communal heavy drinking from a young age.[16] Likewise, the memoir of the trade unionist Walter Citrine (born 1887 in Liverpool) traced his watery descent in an autobiography whose title nodded towards a central relationship underpinning hegemonic Victorian ideology: *Men and Work*. 'The sea was in their blood', Citrine commented, making explicit the link between consanguinity and maritime labour, as he reflected on how his father had gone to sea aged 11, following in the steps of his own father and brothers.[17] Tom Diaper (born 1867) named after his father, also gestured towards the salt water running through the patriarchal line: 'We come of a long line of fishermen, sailors, and, in early days, noted smugglers inside the Isle of Wight.'[18] And the trade union leader and politician Joseph Havelock Wilson (born 1858), who served in the merchant marine for eighteen years, was explicit in describing his paternal inheritance in terms of a consanguineous tie with the sea: 'These are from my first memories, romantic memories, for I believe that, from my earliest days, the blood of my forefathers, all men of the sea, tingled at the very thought of salt water and ships, which were to me in those days such very mysterious and wonderful things.'[19] Havelock

Wilson was unusual, however, in also attributing his 'desire and enthusiasm for the sea' to his grandmother, a captain's wife and 'very efficient sailor and navigator … practically chief mate' of her husband's ship; her sea stories, he noted, helped to 'form the lines' of his career.[20]

The mythologisation of a seafaring father also framed the life story of future Labour MP Jack Lawson (born in 1881).[21] Like other men living in the port town of Whitehaven, where coal was mined to power steam vessels, Lawson's father was employed in the binary role of 'sailor-miner'. Described as a 'full-blooded product' of his environment, Lawson senior went to sea when pit work was slack, and moonlighted as a miner while serving by day in the Naval reserves.[22] In the eyes of his son, he was a 'colourful', shape-shifting character: 'I see him now coming home black from the pit; now returning from sea in the sailor's garb with bags of oranges, a parrot, or a monkey.' Lawson senior was illiterate, but a man of words who told stories of the sea. His son saw with fascination how his body bore the imprint of other worlds and experiences: he had 'tattooed on his breast a ship in full sail, and on his right arm, the saviour hanging on the cross'.[23] He defied conventional representations of Victorian masculinity and fatherhood, as signalled by the baby's-eye-view of his father that opens the memoir:

> On a spring morning in 1883 a man of some thirty years climbed the steep road that leads from the centuries-old town of Whitehaven to Kells, a village standing on the heights close to St. Bees Head. Of average height, with fair hair which hung below his cap in curls, the gold wire earrings he wore and the suggestions of a roll in his walk marked him as a sailor. A closer look at his wrists would have confirmed this impression, for they were much tattooed in sailor fashion. Clogs were on his feet, and he was dressed in corduroy trousers and rough jacket. Active and well knit, with sharp, intelligent features, he was obviously one of the workers, one of the millions.
>
> … He would have to climb that hill daily after a long day of killing work in the mine, and he was doing this for his children. All this I learned long after, for I was then little more than a year old, and I lay in his arms looking up at the white clouds and the setting of blue and at great sweeps of buttercups and daisies in fields of thick green grass. Arrived at the top of the road, or brow, I could see the shimmering, glistening waters of the sea on one hand and mountains on the other.[24]

As Julie-Marie Strange has pointed out, this is an affecting portrait of a nurturing nineteenth-century father and working man, defined by masculine strength as he cradled his infant son in his arms.[25] Indeed, Lawson esteemed his father precisely for 'the older man's multiple masculine qualities: as a brave young sailor, family breadwinner, political and social

commentator and as a hulking mass of corporeal manliness'.[26] The father's experience as a sailor shaped his outlook and stories, bringing the sense of a wider world into the locality of a pit-mining community at the water's edge: 'As a child I heard [his stories] so often that Valparaiso, and other distant places, seemed just round the corner. … Insistent on truth and honesty, his world travels gave him a contempt for the small tittle tattle of the narrower village life.'[27] Eventually giving up the seafaring life for the 'duty' of fatherhood, his father was, in Lawson's eyes, cultured, experienced and worldly-wise.[28]

Lawson's portrait of his father is positive and compelling; but the romantic myth of the sailor in the family is undermined in many other autobiographical accounts (a feature explored in greater depth in Chapter 4 of this book). For it was not always the case that sons looked back to their father's seafaring life as a source of pride and connection. In contrast to Lawson's paternal portrait, Liverpool-born Pat O'Mara (born 1901) saw his father as a dissolute and violent man, who flitted between waterside jobs that included the roles of both sailor and crimp.[29] For O'Mara, patrilineality was a heavy burden to bear in a culture that placed value on the status of the father: 'The subject of conversation was almost invariably our fathers. Mothers were insignificant – it was the daddy that counted. Could he swim? Could he fight? Was he big? What was his history and background?'[30] Seeking to evade his father's toxic reputation within Liverpool where he engaged primarily in the 'sailor-baiting' of foreign seamen, O'Mara would find out to his misfortune that even the vast ocean could be a disarmingly small place.[31] Having boarded a ship as a deckhand to escape his 'slummy' origins, on reaching Cienfuegos Pat O'Mara would discover to his dismay that the captain of his ship had known, and in fact been robbed by, O'Mara senior on a previous journey. Apologising to the captain for the sins of his own father, O'Mara was told simply: 'That's all right, me lad, only don't grow up and be the bloke he is.'[32]

Memoirs often mythologised the relationship between seafaring forefathers and sons, but the reality of maritime succession was far from straightforward or linear. After all, going to sea involved to varying degrees a deracination from the *terra firma* of family, homestead, routine, and locality. Unlike the apprenticeship model, by which a son might follow his father's trade within the community and through local and kinship networks, deep water seafaring ultimately required a departure from place and the possibility of crossing national borders.[33] Maritime writers therefore confronted a paradox: they were constructing narratives based on following in the wake of their seafaring family members, but some of them

maintained that tradition by leaving home and assimilating to a floating world of provisional, homosocial networks of friends and co-workers. Thus, though these autobiographies highlight continuity and a sense of seafaring destiny, maritime life entailed dispersal, gaps, disappearance, and inconsistencies that destabilised and unsettled stories of smooth paternal transmission. Such was the case for Robert Collyer (born 1823), whose parents were both orphaned and had been respectively raised in Poor Law institutions after their fathers had died at sea. Drawing on the dominant metaphor linking family genealogy to natural growth, he noted: 'So we have no family tree to speak of, only this low bush.'[34] For Jack Lawson, the loss of forefathers at sea was marked in the inscription of the front page of the family Bible, on which were listed the names of family members since 1731. Sailors and whalers all, the family's maritime heritage was encapsulated by the solemn phrase, 'Drowned at sea.'[35] While for Henry Ralph Harvey, the project of completing his memoirs for his 'dear children' while away at sea was a way of ensuring a kind of narrative succession in face of potential maritime disaster.[36]

The precarity of families dependent on the wage of a breadwinner at sea is also highlighted in the autobiographical record. Setting aside the emotional implications of an absent family member, from a purely economic point of view, as Emma Griffin puts it, 'families needed fathers', for they were generally the chief earners within family units and commanded higher wages than working women.[37] The temporary absence or loss of the father redounded on families, altering their shape and composition. One account, given by a 'Journeyman Baker' (born 1806) as part of a series of 'Prize Autobiographies of Working Men' featured in the periodical *The Commonwealth*, described how the author's father, a joiner by trade, had been tempted by the offer of higher wages to sail from Kirkcaldy to the island of Heligoland in the North Sea. The ship sank along the way, and while all the crew survived and landed at the island, his father lost all his tools and clothes in the accident. The writer concluded that this 'misfortune, and his dram-drinking propensity, was, I believe, the occasion of preventing him from remitting money for the support of the family for nearly twelve months'.[38] The result of the disappearance of the *paterfamilias* over the course of a year was to disperse the family unit: the eldest sister went into domestic service, one brother was consigned to live with an uncle, and another engaged to herd cows, while the writer's mother got by on a small income earned from spinning. W.H.R., mentioned earlier, also recalled the equally ambiguous circumstances of his father's disappearance at sea: 'I know that my father talked of going to the West Indies, and I

heard afterwards that he went to Jamaica, and there died. I also heard years afterwards that he deserted us. Which is right to this day I don't know.'[39] His mother and younger brother died soon after his father's disappearance and, left with his ailing grandmother and two uncles away at sea, he was despatched to the workhouse. Family dispersal was also the consequence of loss at sea for Charles Haill, born in 1842 on the coast of Essex, the son of a coastguard and one of nine siblings. Household resources were already scarce due to the father's low wage and became critical when Haill's father died suddenly on board the coastguard watch vessel in 1857. The unexplained death of his father at sea, when Haill was 15,

> plunged the whole family into a state of grief, and on our own resources as to what should be best to do for our future livelihood. There were four girls at home who had to go away to service, and my sorrowing mother removing to Gravesend, in Kent, there to remain with my eldest sister, who had been married to a navy man some years previously. My eldest brother was also married, and the two remaining brothers were at sea, one of them never returned, having been drowned by shipwreck in the Black Sea; thus my happy home was broken up forever.[40]

Haill remained working on a coastal trading vessel, although his position was an unhappy one:

> I did not have a very easy life for the master was hard and my master and men were at times some of the worst and often treated me with cruelty, and I but a small boy launching out into the wide, wide world, tears would often flow when thinking of my happy home and its love and kindness there.[41]

Some autobiographers acknowledged the burden a death or unexplained disappearance at sea placed upon their mothers, whom circumstances made into household heads and breadwinners (Figure 1.1). The Chartist leader William Lovett (born 1800) was raised in one such female-centred household following a death at sea. His father, a small trading vessel captain, died on his last voyage home before the birth of his son. Like David Copperfield, Lovett thus found himself a 'posthumous child'; yet unlike Copperfield, who felt 'indefinable compassion' for his father lying in the churchyard and excluded from the family's homely scene, Lovett's account records no such emotional attachment.[42] He stated simply: '[My father] was, however, unhappily drowned in his last voyage home before I was born, so I can say nothing further respecting him.' From an early age Lovett had a heightened awareness of the labour undertaken by his mother who was 'thus thrown entirely on her own resources', and who managed to bring up her young son by means of 'labouring industriously in the

Figure 1.1 Mother and child watch a ship on the River Wear, c. 1880. Photo credit: Sunderland Antiquarian Society.

usual avocations of a fishing town', including selling fish at the market in Penzance.[43] Lovett's mother would eventually enter into a second marriage – that route to economic survival for many widowed spouses – this time to 'a man with whom my grandmother and myself could not be comfortable'.[44] Lovett therefore set up a small house separately with his grandmother, subsiding on his small wages as an apprentice ropemaker and his grandmother's seasonal work in the fishing trade. In similar fashion, the geologist and writer Hugh Miller (born 1802), whose account is taken up more fully later in this chapter, took note of the material and emotional shock on his mother of his father's loss at sea. For the son, the paternal death meant that he was dependent on the 'sedulously plied but indifferently remunerated labours of his only surviving parent', who struggled to earn money through her needlework, making shrouds and winding sheets (while his sister, aged 3, was taken in by two maternal uncles).[45] And in his unpublished account, David Roberts (born in 1870) recounted the effect of the loss of his father, a master mariner working in the packet trade off the coast of Bangor. While Roberts's mother

maintained the family's livelihood through sewing and washing – the son proudly noted that she was among the first to own a sewing machine in 1870s Bangor – she also had to ward off the zealous philanthropy of a local wealthy family who attempted to adopt Roberts's younger sister. The offer was firmly declined, and Roberts's mother eventually remarried a 'respectable' master mariner who appears to have provided the family with care and economic security.[46]

The threat of the workhouse loomed large for the precarious maritime family. The Poplar-bred and future Labour MP, William Steadman (born 1851), narrowly avoided the ignominy of indoor relief after his father, a shipwright forced to take a job as a carpenter in the Navy following unemployment after the Crimean War, stopped paying remittance money to the family. He recalled how 'cruelly hard' his mother had to work to keep the family afloat by supplementing the pound a month allotted to her from her husband's wage. Eschewing one kind of memoir's usual tones of paternal reverence, he was adamant that he owed his 'determination of character' to his mother.[47] William Parrish, born in an attic room in Bromley by Bow in London in conditions of 'extreme poverty' in 1898, was less fortunate. An infant when his sailor-father died from a disease contracted at sea, his mother was left on her own to bring up four boys 'in circumstances almost beyond endurance', and turned to drink in her 'grief and anguish'. For the next ten years, Parrish lived in a series of children's homes, including the Poplar Training School in Essex where he experienced a regime of discipline 'bordering on torture'.[48]

The death of a breadwinner always produces a gap in the family narrative, and the loss of a parent in childhood or early adolescence is hardly a rarity in the records of working-class autobiography. But this breach in the family story could be especially profound and lingering for the maritime family given that a drowned body might not be recovered, nor the full details of the fatal incident find their way into any firm record. Thus, frequently in family memoirs, the record of deaths at sea could be shrouded in mystery and ambiguity. Water dissolved the linearity of family stories through a series of loose ends at both the point of departure and arrival that issued in secrecy and compensatory forms of myth-making. In his autobiography, for example, the wood sculptor Thomas Wilkinson Wallis (born 1821) recalled his grandfather, a captain of a merchant vessel who, in 1786 'it was alleged, drowned in his cabin, while looking over his papers'.[49] Yet Wallis's elderly aunt would later reveal that his grandfather had not, in fact, drowned but was murdered by the crew who 'rifled the cabin, and then ran the vessel ashore on the Lincolnshire coast'.[50] At some point, the story

had been revised, and no actual body had ever washed up to contradict it. The emotional shock of sudden loss at sea is also recorded in the account given by a female memoirist, Christian Watt (born 1833), whose family was involved in the Aberdeen fishing trade. She recalled the demise of four brothers on a passenger ship and a screw steamer respectively, in terms that conveyed misery. '[N]othing can describe the sore heart', she wrote; after news was received of this family tragedy, 'the bottom of our world fell out'.[51] But it was the death of her 13-year-old son Peter which seems by her own admission to have led to her entrance into the Aberdeen Royal Asylum. In her life story, written on foolscap sheets of paper, she described how it was the thought of her son's watery grave that had been a particular source of torment: 'That was the start of the breakdown of my mental health, for I am sufficiently conversant with drowning to know that no drowned person is found floating, and this cost me many a sleepless night.'[52]

Accounting for the peculiarities of loss at sea could lead memoirists to reach for descriptions that lay beyond the boundaries of the working-class autobiography's typical realist modes. This is the case in the memoir of the autodidact, stonemason-geologist and self-professed 'sailor's son', Hugh Miller. Raised in Cromarty, a small herring-curing town on the north coast of Scotland in 1802, Miller was born into a family of seafarers and craftsmen. In the opening chapter of his memoir addressed to fellow 'working men', Miller began what he called the 'story of my education' through a description of his father, a sailor who served as cabin boy as a child and became master of a sloop; he was, Miller notes, 'descended from a long line of seafaring men, – skilful and adventurous sailors'.[53] Like other memoirists surveyed in this chapter, the family story was constituted by a mythology of maritime loss. Miller's great-uncle had sailed round the world in the eighteenth century before he 'mysteriously disappeared, and was never more heard of', while another of his father's uncles 'perished at sea in a storm'. Miller's grandfather also disappeared at sea, apparently knocked off his vessel by the boom of a ship on a kelp voyage around Peterhead and, presumed drowned, 'never rose again'; the 'hereditary fate' would be sealed when Miller's father died at sea in 1807.[54] As Miller's contemporary biographer acknowledges, this line of drowned, missing forefathers effectively left no terrestrial trace: 'For more than a hundred years before the birth of Hugh Miller, not one of his paternal ancestors had been laid in the churchyard of Cromarty.'[55]

The loss of Miller's father at sea meant that his life and exploits swiftly became the stuff of family legend. In the son's memoir, Miller senior is cast as an apocryphal figure who had taught himself to read 'in long Indian and

Chinese voyages'; 'broad-shouldered, deep-chested, strong-limbed', he amply conformed to the archetype of the manly sailor.[56] Miller's memoir tells of his father's oceanic exploits, fighting in the British Navy, floating on a capsized boat while sharks swarmed around, and other 'fragmentary recollections … most readily seized on by the imagination of a child', including, in an incident befitting the most outlandish plots of Victorian adventure fiction, sparring with a tiger in a boat on the Ganges.[57] 'Many of my other recollections of this manly sailor are equally fragmentary in their character,' Miller admitted, 'but there is a distinct bit of picture in them all, that strongly impressed the boyish fancy.'[58] Thus he recalled the 'vivid recollections of the joy which used to light up the household on my father's arrival' and his 'golden memories, too, of splendid toys he used to bring home with him'.[59] Educated at a dame school, Miller became a voracious reader, partly through the perusal of his father's miscellaneous collection of books of 'adventures and voyages, both real and fictitious', including adventure fiction (*Robinson Crusoe*, *Philip Quarll*), travel writing (Captain Cook's *Voyages*) and Gothic novels (*The Mysteries of Udolpho*). He described it as a 'melancholy little library to which I had fallen heir', since it was a fragmented and incomplete collection, defined by loss, as 'most of the missing volumes had been with the master aboard his vessel when he perished'.[60] Miller's father had literally gone down with his stories.

Acquiring his father's partial library, Miller also took on the legacy of 'real and fictitious stories' in writing his own memoir, drawing on a plethora of narrative modes as he documented his life. As a reader of Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries*, Miller reached into the Gothic repertoire when attempting to account for the night of his father's loss at sea, though the tale is also influenced by his mother's stories of 'fairies, witches, dreams, presentiments, ghosts',[61] as well as the local lore of the Cromarty fishing community which 'was preoccupied with death, whether caused by rising tides, shifting winds, or divine or devilish intervention'.[62] Recalling the night of the 'fatal tempest', at what he deemed to be the time of his father's death, Miller described a domestic scene in the 'grey haze' of a strange twilight, as he sat next to his mother by the fire, 'plying the cheerful needle' as she sewed winding-sheets and shrouds for the dead. At just that moment, in his recollection, he caught sight of a 'dissevered hand and arm stretched towards me [bearing] a livid and sodden appearance' – an apparent premonition of his father's watery death.[63] The trope of the dismembered, drowned body recurs in a later passage in which Miller recalled a scene from his adolescence. On a trip with a male friend to explore the coastal Doocot caves, he recounted how the two had become cut off from

the mainland by the rising tide. In a scene of marked Gothic and homoerotic resonance, Miller described the two friends taking refuge in each other's arms at nightfall within the shelter of the deep-sea caves. In this makeshift shelter, Miller's mind was drawn back to the body of a drowned sailor found nearby on the beach a month previously. His description of the corpse is detailed and visceral:

> The hands and feet, miserably contracted, and corrugated into deep folds at every joint, yet swollen to twice their proper size, had been bleached as white as pieces of alumed sheep-skin; and where the head should have been, there existed only a sad mass of rubbish. I had examined the body, as young people are apt to do, a great deal too curiously for my peace; and, though I had never done the poor nameless seaman any harm, I could not have suffered more from him during that melancholy night, had I been his murderer. Sleeping or waking, he was continually before me. Every time I dropped into a doze, he would come stalking up the beach from the spot where he had lain, with his stiff white fingers, that stuck out like eagle's toes, and his pale, broken pulp of a head, and attempt striking me; and then I would awaken with a start, cling to my companion, and remember that the drowned sailor had lain festering among the identical bunches of sea-weed that still rotted on the beach not a stone-cast away. The near neighbourhood of a score of living bandits would have inspired less horror than the recollection of that one dead seaman.[64]

This graphic description of the rotting corpse of the drowned seaman, whose body has undergone a grotesque sea-change, is in marked contrast to the silent blankness of his father's disappearance at sea (indeed, as a boy he had kept a futile lookout for any glimpse of the white sails of his father's ship). Like the sodden corporeality of the 'dissevered hand' that appeared before him on the night of his father's death, Miller's description of the sailor's sea-ravaged body stands as an evocation in embodied form of that primal loss. Hamlet-like, he feels not only fear and revulsion at the apparition, but a deep sense of guilt ('had I been his murderer'), and an irrational sense that he might be stalked by the vengeful ghost of his father.

The Sailor's Return

Some father-sailors did come back from the sea, but their return did not always ensure a smooth resumption of family life, nor did it put an end to the silences and secrecy that ran through maritime family lines. Indeed, the complicated reality, documented in autobiographies, flew in the face of popular cultural depictions of sailors' returns, many of which depended on neat binaries of departure and homecoming.

Figure 1.2 Joseph Clark, 'A young sailor has returned to his aged parents after running away to sea'. Engraving by Lumb Stocks after Joseph Clark (c. 1880s). Credit: Wellcome Collection, Public Domain Mark.

On material artefacts ranging from painting to pottery to sailors' own scrimshaw art, the cyclical promise of the sailor's return to his sweetheart and homestead – often literally bearing bags of money – was given a familiar visual form (Figure 1.2).[65] In literature, too, motifs of miraculous returns from the sea provided narrative forms of deferred gratification. As Matthew P.M. Kerr has shown, works by Captain Marryat, the most prolific of British sea novelists in the first half of the nineteenth century, often depended on '[s]cenes of resurrection', in which seafaring characters 'are presumed dead but are then restored to life'.[66] The motif of the fortuitous return from a presumed watery death, as Kerr argues, provided readers with 'pleasure and reassurance in repetitive forms – the sea story as something like a nursery rhyme or fairy tale'.[67] Nor was that motif exclusive to nautical fiction; land-based Victorian novels also profited from plots that hinged on sailors making an unexpected return, from the re-emergence of Walter Gay in Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son* (1846–1848), Charley Kinraid in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863),

to the return of Susan Henchard's de facto husband, Richard Newson, in Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886).

The revolving life of the global sailor, written into balladry and imprinted on Staffordshire pottery, clearly could not do justice to what were often the difficult, messy realities of sailors' returns to the homestead. Maritime memoirs by and about working sailors tell a variety of complex stories that resist the cyclicity and closure offered by paradigmatic depictions of the sailor's return. And as already noted, it is in these personal accounts that we sense the profound ramifications of maritime labour on the domestic household and the lives of working-class women. Paintings of fishermen's wives and sailors' sweethearts engaged in gazing wistfully out at horizons belied the sheer industrious labour that women 'left behind' were required to perform in order to keep households running and children fed.[68] For in reality, as recorded in the memoirs, when seafaring fathers returned successfully to the homestead, they were often disoriented, frustrated, or else physically disabled by their time at sea. Physical impairment could have a profound effect on the family, recalibrating economic and symbolic power within the household.[69] Thus Will Crooks, the third of seven children living in a one-roomed house at Poplar Dock in the 1850s, recalled the disastrous effects of his father's injury as a ship's stoker. He had lost his arm while oiling machinery as his ship was docked in the Thames and the accident imprinted itself on his son: 'My very earliest recollections are associated with mother dressing father's arm day after day. I was only three years old at the time, but I know that all our privations dated from the day of this accident to my father, because he was forced to give up his work.'[70] The only work his father could get with his disability was the 'odd job as watchman', while Crooks's mother would 'toil with the needle far into the night and often all night long' making oil-skin coats for mariners, while also assuming the role of 'family tailor' and 'family cobbler' in order to keep her seven children clothed and booted.[71] Their efforts were in vain: when the out-relief subsidy ran out, the entire family entered the workhouse.

Like soldiers, separated from the family for long periods of time, some returning sailors found it hard to assimilate themselves to a family by necessity centred on mothers and extended kin, while long stretches at sea meant that fathers could appear as strangers to children who viewed their sudden intrusion into the household with suspicion or hostility.[72] An example of the complex emotions aligned to the seafaring father's return can be found in the early nineteenth-century autobiographical essay by the satirist and editor William Gifford. Gifford grew up in poverty, his father returning from sea when the boy was seven, having fought at the

Siege of Havana in 1762, bringing home to his wife only a 'trifling sum' of money despite his receipt of prize money and wages.[73] Gifford was stark and unforgiving in his assessment of his father, who adjusted to land-life by becoming a glazier and housepainter, and eventually died of alcoholism before the age of 40: 'The town's-people thought him a shrewd and sensible man, and regretted his death. As for me, I never greatly loved him; I had not grown up with him; and he was too prone to repulse my little advances to familiarity, with coldness, or anger.'[74] Christopher Thomson (born in Hull in 1799) was also estranged from his absent father, a shipwright and carpenter. Between the ages of 6 and 9 Thomson had been left in the care of his grandparents while his mother joined her husband at sea, and the return of his father to the homestead displaced the young boy's own sense of belonging:

> In the year 1810 my father returned to Hull, being tired of salt water cruizing, biscuit, and junk. I thought him a strange austere being; his manners were at first terrifying to me. From the demoralization of war, and isolation from all society, except those hardened, and trained to legal murder, and to laugh at danger, his bluff form contrasted strangely with the soft smile and the fondling manner of my grandfather. I shrunk from my father's embrace, and on every occasion ran back to my granny's cottage, and felt that there was my rightful home.[75]

Thomson later set out to sea as a carpenter's mate, although he found it hard to follow in his father's footsteps, happily admitting that he was a 'bad sailor', easily shocked by his fellow shipmates' rough habits and language, before making the decision to turn away from what he calls the 'watery choice'.[76]

In a number of cases it was the unexpectedness of the sailor's return that created its own disruptive narrative. For as much as the sea was responsible for the disappearance of family members, it had a strange habit of abruptly returning them too. In Citrine's autobiographical account, the arrival of his ship-rigger father, thought to have drowned, failed to conform to the narrative of the providential return. Citrine describes how difficult it was for a young boy to come to terms with being in sudden close proximity to an individual who was himself ill-adapted to the rhythms of terrestrial domestic life after a long time at sea. He recalled his father in this period as a 'big, powerful man of six feet or thereabouts and strong as a horse, always ready to fight – a word and a blow was his rule – with a clear intelligence and a masterful personality'.[77] In contrast to Lawson's father's display of exotic tattoos, Citrine senior's body brandished the injuries of a physically dangerous seafaring life:

> He had met with several serious accidents which had left their mark on him. He had his left hand badly crushed when releasing a rope from the tug docking a vessel at Birkenhead, and he lost two fingers and much of the use of his left hand as a result. His right knee had been badly knocked about in another accident.[78]

A fearsome heavy drinker, home life for the Citrines became threatening and violent. Yet his father's hardiness saw him survive most of his family members; Citrine recalled with ambivalence that he 'died at the age of eighty-five of heart failure, while out walking. He had not achieved his foremost wish, which was to die and be buried at sea.'[79] The Chartist autobiographer John James Bezer, also recalled a life rendered intolerable after the return of his father, who retired from the sea to set up a barbershop in the Spitalfields home. In Bezer's words, the older man was a 'drunkard, a great spendthrift, an awful reprobate' whose return, quite simply, meant that '[h]ome was often like a hell'. Yet like Citrine, Bezer viewed his father as both bully and victim, one who bore the wounds of naval service, including the loss of an eye and scars of flogging across his back. The son's shrewd account noted that the damage was more than skin deep, having 'left their marks on his soul' and 'unmanned him'. Yet while the loss of an eye entitled the father to a small naval pension, the family would not benefit from even this compensation. Indeed, Bezer recalled that the 'Quarter days' on which he was paid were to be dreaded, for instead of 'little extra comforts', mother and son could expect 'extra big thumps, for the drink maddened him'. Bezer senior was finally admitted to Greenwich Hospital as a 'man-o'-wars man', leaving wife and son to get by on outdoor parish relief.[80]

The dislocations of time and space effected by the father's absence from the home for extended periods register in autobiographical accounts by sons, as they grappled to narrate a family story that had, in fact, unravelled in unpredictable ways. This was the case for Edward Humphries, born in Totnes, Devon in 1889. In his unpublished memoir, he refers to a happy childhood with foster parents who kept a greengrocer's shop in Exeter.[81] But a rupture in his understanding of self and family was to ensue when, at the age of 9, Humphries was informed by his foster parents that the woman he knew as his Aunt Rhoda was in fact his mother, while his Uncle Edwin was his father, an officer in the Royal Marines.[82] It was Edwin's imminent arrival from sea that prompted the hasty decision to tell the boy the story of his origins and raised the question as to whether he wished to stay with his foster parents or return to his mother. Deciding to live with his newly revealed biological parents, the reunion would prove to be far from smooth. His father, back from the sea, turned out to be an ill-tempered and violent

man, beating him for minor infractions on occasion with a 'bull's pizzle'.[83] The curious circumstances of this particular father–son bond resulted in a deeply ambivalent relationship in which Humphries claimed to admire his father's seafaring skills ('My father, like most sailors and marines, was very useful with his hands, especially in the manipulation of rope, string, or marlin spike') while registering deep discomfort at his memory.[84] Like so many autobiographers, Humphries allowed his contradictory feelings towards his father to emerge through the course of his self-narrative:

> On the whole I think my father had some affection for me; this is borne out by the fact that when I was in his good books he called me 'Billy Plum'. Things went well for me as Billy Plum but when, for some reason, probably a misdemeanour on my part, I ceased to deserve that endearing name, I became a nuisance and had to use all my wits to avoid his anger.[85]

The beatings he received at the hands of his father diminished over time, partly because of the naval man's ill health that culminated in a debilitating stroke. By the time Humphries was 11, his father was a 'helpless invalid, scarcely able to speak or move any of his limbs'. His eventual death was recorded in the memoir in suitably ambivalent terms: 'I can recall no feeling of real sorrow at his death but rather a feeling of thankfulness that he would suffer no more and one of relief for myself and my mother.'[86] Yet while the memoir is notable for its frankness in its depiction of the father–son relationship, the silences in the text are also resonant, reflecting the unresolved questions that must have animated Humphries's own life: Why and when was he given up to his foster parents? And what prompted his parents to finally reclaim him after the father's return from sea?

Writing sons sometimes tried to convey as best they could their fathers' own sense of estrangement and disorientation on returning from the sea. In an unusual reversal, the memoirist Jim Uglow (born 1906), whose father served as chief carpenter in the Dardanelles during the First World War, recalled how his return when Uglow was 11 led to the disappearance of his mother:

> When my father came home after two years at sea, he found a three months old baby in a pram, a pile of debts and three very neglected children. After a succession of violent scenes my mother left with her paramour and the baby and just disappeared from our lives. … Dad installed a housekeeper and try to make a real home for us but his heart was not in it and he proceeded to drink himself to death.[87]

The succession of housekeepers who entered the house, he surmised in retrospect, were probably prostitutes that his father had met in the local pub

and used as temporary caregivers for his children, 'to tide things over for a month or two'.[88] By the age of 14, as if to fulfil his own patrilineal narrative fate, Uglow chose to escape his chaotic family life, and determined to 'run away to sea'.[89] Seafaring, which had been the cause of Uglow's family breakdown, paradoxically offered a means of escape and resolution in the writer's account of self – a recurring paradigm explored throughout the remainder of this chapter.

Sons: Ocean Waifs

From the mid-Victorian period through to the turn of the century, approximately one third of the English population experienced the death of a parent by the age of 15, while just under a tenth could expect to lose both.[90] The category of 'orphanhood' was frequently invoked to refer to this state of affairs, though as Laura Peters observes, the term 'orphan' could be used of 'one who was deprived of only one parent', and in a sense of the word deriving from the fifteenth century it denoted more broadly an individual 'bereft of protection, advantages, benefits, or happiness, previously enjoyed'.[91] In literature too, as has been widely observed, Victorian orphans were common – a stock narrative type and a figure that 'has possibly shaped collective and individual psychic life more profoundly than any other'.[92] Yet as Tamara S. Wagner has shown, the orphan was also a supremely versatile and flexible feature of Victorian literature, reworked and redeployed for different purposes across the period.[93] What I term the figure of the 'ocean waif' – both real and fictional – provided its own peculiar variation of this archetype.

Given the dangers faced by their fathers, the child of a seafarer could easily fall into this ambiguous category of *orphan* or *waif*, and the fate of the 'water-baby' drew attention across the century.[94] As part of a widespread expansion of government and charitable institutions, a number of orphanages specifically catering for the maritime child were established across the course of the nineteenth century, including the London's Merchant Seamen's Orphanage (1827), the Sailors' Orphan Girls' Home (1829), the Hull Seamen's General Orphanage (1865), and the Royal Liverpool Seamen's Orphan Institution (RLSOI) (1868) built in Newsham Park off the still existing Orphan Drive.[95] In public discourse, sailors' orphans occupied a relatively privileged position in the symbolic hierarchy of the infantile dispossessed. After all, they were 'legitimate' objects of charity, in the sense of being defined specifically in relation to their fathers' occupation, and presented as the innocent casualties of the merchant and naval

trade that undergirded Britain's economic and military strength. In fundraising appeals for these charitable institutions, reformers conjured scenes of destitution – sometimes labelled a form of domestic 'shipwreck' – resulting from disaster at sea. In his influential plea in 1873 for the reform of seafarers' working conditions, for example, Samuel Plimsoll (inventor of the Plimsoll line) issued a bleak report of home life for the families of widowed sailors' wives.[96] 'Come with me a few minutes, and I'll show you', Plimsoll urged, as he conducted a tour of the stricken interiors of families who had experienced the death of a sailor often due to unscrupulously overloaded ships.[97] This virtual house-visitation device was also adopted by another writer who pleaded for the care of maritime orphans, Drummond Anderson, chaplain of the RLSOI, who wrote a series of narrative vignettes for the Liverpool *Porcupine* newspaper. In these texts, the predicament of maritime families living in poverty, or dispersed as a result of death at sea, was expressed in melodramatic set-pieces of domestic interiors:

> S. was an able seaman, and sailed sixteen years out of the port of Liverpool. About a year ago he was obliged to remain on shore, his health failing him. A shipmaster with whom he had sailed five years, and who at that time was in command of an Atlantic steamer, gave him a voyage as a supernumerary in his ship, in the hope that change of air and better diet would help to bring him round. And he was wonderfully better till he returned to English waters. They reached the coast in foggy weather, and the delicate sailor became very ill, sank with strange rapidity, and died on the pierhead as they were conveying him from the river to a cab. His poor wife just saw him alive, no more. She has three children, and is in service in Everton receiving 4s. a week wages. Out of this she has to provide for her own respectable appearance. One of the boys was admitted the other day to the Bluecoat School. The youngest, quite a child, is taken and maintained by a sister. The third (on whose behalf this application is made) is entirely supported by another sister, whose husband is mate of a sailing-ship. This is a real industrious and charitable woman. She has, without making anything of it, brought up the orphan child of another sister, now beginning his career as a telegraph messenger.[98]

As such reports indicate, despite the common classification of the Victorian orphan as a *tabular rasa* or 'blank child', the sea orphan was often enmeshed within family networks, and frequently possessed at least one parent (since even a father's absence at sea could be deemed to bestow the state of 'orphanage' upon a child).[99] Referring to the charitable institution attached to the church of St Agatha's in Portsmouth, for example, Father Robert Dolling commented that 'most of our children were orphans, or practically so, because their fathers were sailors'.[100] Furthermore, a number of the children entering dedicated orphanages were admitted by widowed

mothers, some of them seeking temporary assistance for a select number of children (while other siblings remained at home).[101]

Autobiographical accounts reinforce the layered entanglements of the sea orphan's family story. One such example is the unpublished memoir by George Lloyd. Born in 1865 in Pembroke Dock in Wales, Lloyd was the son of a shipwright whose family lived in conditions of destitution due to the father's insecure employment. In his fluent, handwritten memoir, written in later life, and notwithstanding minimal formal education, Lloyd conveyed the devastating effect of his mother's death after giving birth to her seventh child, and his father's consequent abandonment of the family as he opportunistically set sail:

> My father was terribly depressed at the loss of Mother and work getting slack he was nearly demented. Then one day, down the docks looking for work, a ship was going out minus a carpenter, so Father jumped aboard. She was bound for the West Indies. We children waited up all night. But no Father returned. We were all crying. Mother was gone now, Dad had also gone. And eventually the Poor Law Authorities stepped in and took us all off to Ely Schools.[102]

Lloyd spent six weeks in the Ely Industrial Schools for pauper children, before he was bound to a collier from the nearby Mountain Ash pit. After working at a series of short-term jobs, Lloyd was taken in as an apprentice by a Welsh-speaking mining family who informally fostered him. They bought him new clothes, sent him to chapel and gave him a new name: 'Georgie Brawd' – a personal rebranding that he retained for the rest of his life.[103] Like many ocean waifs, Lloyd was not the proverbial 'blank child': he had a living parent – who eventually wrote to announce that he had completed his overseas voyage and intended to retrieve him. Arriving at the 'poor authorities' in Cardiff, Lloyd's father was promptly arrested for deserting his children, although not before the authorities had claimed the money he owed for the safekeeping of his children in his absence. After spending a month in jail in Cardiff, Lloyd senior attempted to take George to London with his siblings, but the son expressed loyalty to his Welsh adoptive family, who had taken him in and given him work as a miner:

> I refused point blank to go as I knew when I was well off. [My foster parents] never said a word to me one way or the other, but they were overjoyed at my refusal to leave them. I never saw father or any of my brothers or sisters for some good time after that.[104]

Employing a phrase that resonates in so many maritime memoirs, Lloyd described how he 'craved to get out in the world', eventually joining the

Marines as 'a means of getting out and seeing the world'.[105] His account is full of the messy realities of maritime orphanhood as well as its apparent paradoxes; for Lloyd, by his own account, the sea constituted both one of the causes of his entrance into an institutional home and state of orphanhood, as well as his means out of it.

Water and Working-Class Individuation

As this chapter has shown, the maritime world had the capacity to disrupt linear forms of genealogical development and to fracture and disperse families. In fact, tropes of water have more generally been used to characterise working-class lives as being without direction and agency. For instance, the memoirist James Dawson Burn expressed his sense that life was like being a 'feather on the stream … continually whirled along from one eddy to another', while William Marcoft described how his orphaned mother and her siblings had been dispersed following the death of their parents like 'pieces of timber from a wreck on a troubled sea'.[106] 'I was nearly reduced to the water's edge', confesses one sailor-autobiographer, in figurative mode, as he reflected on the penury of his circumstances living in lodgings between berths at sea.[107] But against this dominant trope of dispersal, 'shipwreck' and rudderless progression, working-class memoirists like Lloyd also used their experiences of maritime travel, and the trope of crossing water, to tell stories of survival, agency, and individual will. This narrative feature is all the more marked given the fact that working-class life was often primarily defined by forms of financial, physical, and emotional reliance on and interdependence with others.[108] In their self-narratives, the determination to set sail was rhetorically deployed in the construction of stories of individuation and autonomy, a type of watery *Bildungsroman* for the working-class youth. These accounts combined the narrative impulse of the orphan tale, whereby a protagonist is actually or symbolically deprived of the authority of parents, with the formulae derived from the picaresque maritime adventure story – the latter framework accommodating with ease the euphemistic 'ups and downs' of the lower deck seafarer's life, including friendship and fights, bad crews and good captains, demotions, and lucky breaks.[109] Patrick Brantlinger has compared the *Bildungsroman* with its 'slow, complex evolution of the protagonist's identity' with such 'adventure-initiation stories [that], by contrast, jettison psychological complexity and maturation alike'.[110] Yet a number of working-class maritime autobiographers seamlessly fused these apparently contrasting forms as they narrated their life stories. The result

was the ocean waif narrative – a counterpart to the genre of popular urban waif stories, which chronicled the fortunes of Victorian street children.[111]

Henry Warren Kelly's ascent from London street urchin to New Zealand town mayor certainly appears to follow the trajectory of a Victorian novel. Born in 1861, as a total orphan and proverbial 'blank child', with no knowledge of his parentage, date of birth, or even name, his memoir charts an extraordinary tale of social mobility through seafaring.[112] It begins with a confident assertion of ignorance, laying the template for a story in which an identity is gradually acquired:

> I cannot tell, as writers of autobiography usually do, when and where I was born, nor anything of my parents, for the simple reason that I never knew Father or Mother, nor whether their name was Cholmondeley or plain Jones. I imagine I was born in London, but am entirely ignorant of the political and industrial life prevailing at that period.[113]

Like Dickens's Pip, Kelly named himself ('Harry'), and like Oliver Twist, he accrued to himself a surrogate street family in a London court, including a flower-girl who was a companion-sister, and an elderly flower button-hole maker ('Granny'). Escape from this life on the streets presented itself in the form of departure on a shipping vessel. Heading to Great Yarmouth to seek out employment, in the manner of the orphaned child of the fairy tale, he recalled: 'I was another Dick Whittington – without a cat!'[114] Aged 9 he boarded a fishing smack as 'chief cook, rope-boy and general rouse-about. … I had started my life on the ocean wave'.[115] By 13 he had begun his nautical ascent as an able seaman on board a large sailing ship bound for New York. In Kelly's memoir, labour at sea provided the means of achieving autonomy and social progression, as well as securing a sense of home. Contrary to familiar convention, it was shore-life, rather than life at sea, which caused him to feel most acutely his sense of unbelonging. Recalling one particular disembarkment in Southampton when his shipmates made their way to 'homes and friends', he felt his lack of attachments for, as he put it, '[b]y this time the world was my home'.[116]

One of the most prolific plebian maritime writers, the sea novelist Frank Bullen, born in 1857 and thus an exact contemporary of Joseph Conrad, anointed himself a 'sea-waif' in the title of one of several memoirs that recounted his trajectory from street child to 'sea-urchin'.[117] The son of a journeyman stonemason, Bullen spent most of his childhood living in the care of an aunt, a dressmaker, living in Paddington, both parents having disappeared, along with his elder sister. At 9 he was sent to work in

a laundry in Kensal New Town, where, performing the gruelling labour of turning the mangle and wringing-machine for long hours among 'coarse, shameless women', he likened himself to the fairy-tale (and orphaned) figure of Cinderella.[118] After living on the streets in London, and seeking the regularity of food and shelter, he boarded a steamer bound to Demerara as a cabin boy at the age of 12 to begin a global lower-deck sea career that lasted over a decade. He wrote of his 'utter loneliness and heart-hunger' as he set out for this new life;

> I could not help but feel that liberty lay before me, freedom from starvation and all the vicissitudes of an Arab life ashore, but the sea loomed before me as a vast desert, all unknown. … I was leaving no friends, I had no single tie, but neither had I any enthusiasm for the sea – only dread, only a sick feeling of doubt and terror.[119]

From his identity as a street child, belonging to 'the ignoble company of the unwanted', Bullen's autobiographies sketched out a narrative of survival and 'waifhood' at sea, punctuated by a series of makeshift homes, ranging from the quiet corner of a ship's cabin to the peaceful refuge of the Liverpool Sailors' Home library. Unlike the majority of autobiographers surveyed in this chapter, Bullen eventually profited from his lived experience of floating homelessness. Having retired from the sea in his mid-twenties, he went on to make a living from writing, spinning his experiences into a succession of autobiographies and sea stories.

The narrative of the ocean waif was a pliable and opportunistic form, amenable to the working sailor's self-narrative, even if the authors were not orphans in the strict sense of the term. For some memoirists framed setting out to sea as a type of figurative orphanhood, which, in their stories, freed them from the constraints of home and family relations.[120] As Deborah Epstein Nord argues in the context of Victorian autobiographies by middle-class writers, the rhetorical gesture of assumed orphanhood could thus involve the 'textual erasure of parents altogether. The absent or unknown parent could clear the way for the autobiographer's self-invention and allow him or her a kind of unfettered freedom to determine not just belief and vocation but social position as well.'[121] The decision to go to sea in maritime memoir could perform precisely this type of self-orphaning and individuation through departure and seafaring initiation, including the acquisition of friends, shipmates, mentors, and surrogate kin on board ship and within port cities.

For Allan K. Taylor (born 1890), the son of a widowed mother who was raised in a 'lonely slum garret' in the Gorbals area of Glasgow, seafaring represented a form of escape from the urban destitution he experienced as

the child of a widow who eked out a living by sewing mailbags by night and working in the mill by day. Tethered to a bed with a clothes line while his mother worked at the nearby mill, Taylor seems to have sought out watery pathways as a way of escaping the slummy industrial city. Drawn to the docks, Taylor styled himself as having an urban-amphibious nature from early on, developed through his habit of diving for the precious debris that fell off the ships:

> I could remain under water nearly as long as a seal, and many a time, before I was ten, I've crawled like a crab in the mud along the entire bottom of the Arbroath Dock, looking for coal, with my eyes wide open. When I went down nobody knew where I'd come up again …'[122]

By the age of 12 he had boarded a tramp steamer to a Baltic port as messroom steward, needing only to lie about his age and claim himself to be an orphan in order to satisfy the 'Gipsy blood [that] coursed through my arteries'.[123]

Ben Tillett, a trade unionist and future Member of Parliament, also drew on picaresque modes in his memoir. Born in a 'tiny house' near a Bristol coal pit in 1860, he was the son of a comb factory worker and the youngest of eight children, whose mother died when he was an infant due to what he straightforwardly called her 'mothering, the slavery of her devotion to her family, her endless services to others'.[124] Escaping a father who was 'absolutely at a loss in meeting his domestic responsibilities', and a series of unsympathetic stepmothers, Tillett joined his siblings in dispersing across the country to find work, eventually entering the Navy at the age of 13. He thought nothing of constructing his life as an adventure story: 'My life has not been conventional, and I can think of no good reason why I should endeavour to produce the pages of dull detail and pompous platitude that make such dreary reading for those who are interested only in the quick, pulsating realities of human life.'[125] Across chapters bearing titles echoing the tropes of nautical romance – 'Rebel and Runaway', 'Afloat and Ashore' – Tillett's story embraces the vicissitudes of the picaresque oceanpath. Casting himself as a 'puny little fellow – a circus boy … a tired penniless little tramp, and homeless little waif; as sailor, docker, agitator … President of the Trades Union Congress', he declared his life to be one 'full of event, struggle, success, and failure … I have sailed the seven seas and roamed the continents, obedient to the deepest impulses of my own nature. Life to me has been a great adventure.'[126]

In the self-orphaning mode, memoirists likened themselves to the protagonists of fairy tales, or the Biblical prodigal son, by defying their parents to set out to sea. Commenting on the storytelling proclivities of nineteenth-century French sailors and soldiers who used fairy-tale motifs

in their autobiographical accounts, David Hopkin argues that this narrative form was a means by which these writers 'made sense of their experiences, expressed their understanding to others and devised strategies to cope with the circumstances of their lives'.[127] Taking to sea could be presented as a challenge to parental authority, more often than not centred on the female figure of the mother, who, as Gilje argues, could be idealised in nineteenth-century sailors' discourse, as the representation of a romantic version of homestead, hearth, and kin.[128] This image reinforced the gendered matrix by which seafaring effected a quest for manliness and entry into a man's world, in apparent opposition to the sphere of home and femininity. In a structural sense, the mother's role in the autobiography thereby conforms to Propp's articulation of the 'initial situation' of the folk tale narrative, in which 'an interdiction is addressed to the hero'. This then leads directly to the hero's fulfilment of the 'violated interdiction' (indeed these functions are so closely aligned that Propp views them as a self-sufficient pair – the 'prohibition-violation').[129]

Maritime fiction offered plenty of models of this prohibition-violation involving mothers and sons. For Masterman Ready, the hero of Frederick Marryat's eponymous nineteenth-century seafaring novel published in 1841, maternal reluctance towards seafaring propelled his desire for oceanic adventures: 'If my mother had not been always persuading me against going to sea, I really believe I might have stayed at home.'[130] Later in the century, W. Stephens Hayward's popular children's adventure novel, *Tom Holt's Log: A Tale of the Deep Sea* (1868) (described by the sailor-author R.L. Stevenson as the book most likely to launch the seafaring careers of young boys) offered a 'fantasy fulfilment [which] is both emphasised and warned against in the maternal voice at the beginning of the narrative'.[131] Perhaps drawing on these literary models, examples of the transgression of the mother's wishes abound in maritime memoirs. Thus John Bain's mother 'sacrificed her dearest wishes to my inclination', finally giving permission for her 14-year-old son to pursue his desire for a 'closer connection with the sea'.[132] While Pat O'Mara recollected his mother's 'crestfallen' reaction that he might go to sea: 'Was I going to break her heart after all she had endured for me?'[133] In a twist on the Dick Whittington knapsack, O'Mara proudly boarded a vessel bound for Cuba with a 'pillow-slip seabag' lovingly packed by his mother and sister.[134] Thomas Cooper, by contrast, was encouraged to take up the seafaring life aged 15 when neighbours suggested to his widowed mother that he was in danger of becoming a 'good-for-nothing, idle creature'.[135] When the sailors' 'coarse language, the cursing and swearing, and brutality' sent him straight home after a stint at

sea, to the 'weeping delight' of his mother, Cooper was forced to question his masculinity ('was I made of something more than flesh and blood that I could not go to sea?').[136]

As they shaped their foundational myths, the levels of subterfuge required to evade the parental interdiction against going to sea became a standard part of the sailor's self-narrative. Robert Hay (born 1789), for example, related how at 14 he developed a ruse that involved pretending to have overslept and waiting until his mother had left the house, before '[setting] out for Greenock to try my fortune at sea', while making sure he had not left 'the least clue by which they might trace my route'.[137] Alexander Howison revealed himself to be directly inspired by the 'story of Whittington and his cat becoming Lord Mayor of London', although he replaced the road with the sea: 'My drift now was again for the sea. To see foreign lands was my greatest wish.'[138] Undertaking his 'drift' meant 'keeping the whole business a secret from my parents', and in order to do so he relied on the 'donor' figure of a captain's wife who provided him with the necessary seaman's clothes.[139] Memoirist H.Y. Moffat also came up with an elaborate plan in order to set sail. Having decided on a sea career after catching sight of the H.M.S. *Pembroke* lying in port in Leith at the age of 12, Moffat realised that it would take 'much thought and manoeuvring' to secure his mother's assent. One evening, as his mother darned stockings by the fire, he claimed to have put his 'neat little plan' into operation, by tricking her into signing her name on a piece of paper which could then be slipped into a letter to the captain of the *Pembroke*.[140] Havelock Wilson's mother, a widow, longed to see her son settled in a terrestrial trade – preferably as a lithographic printer – yet was ultimately unable to intervene in her son's 'magnetic attraction [to] salt water and ships'.[141] There is a conventional, gendered fatalism in his profession that 'I knew that, sooner or later, the time would come when I would be irresistibly turned to following in the footsteps of my forefathers, but my protests and my arguments to my mother were quite useless.'[142]

Like the questing figure of the fairy tale or adventure story, these narratives promoted seafaring as affording independence and manliness, in contrast to the youthful (and implicitly feminine) tendencies of 'home'.[143] Christopher Thomson, for example, revelled in his return from a spate as a ship's carpenter by relating his adventures with 'self-importance' and appreciating his audience's 'decided opinion that that very sea voyage had made a man of me!'[144] This sea change was particularly marked as memoirists recounted their return to the homestead after crossing the water. After running away to sea from his Gorbals slum home at 12, Taylor claimed to

have been greeted with a warm welcome reminiscent of the prodigal son's return: 'Always after these rambles, when I returned, granny and mother killed the fatted calf instead of leathering hell out of me.'[145] For Hay, the return home after eight years of naval seafaring, took on an apocryphal quality, as he presented himself to his family as an acquaintance of 'Robert Hay', although his mother was quick to see through his disguise.

> Natural affection had begun to work on her from the moment she first saw me and it had, by the time I delivered the letter, risen to such a pitch that she could no longer restrain it. She threw the letter from her hand, forced me to a chair and exclaimed, while the tear of joy glistened in her eye.
>
> 'Ye are him, Sir. Ye are him.'[146]

The idea that a passage at sea might result in a wholesale transformation of identity is underlined when Hay detailed how his siblings 'examined me minutely from head to foot but could trace no resemblance to their absent brother and it was not till after I mentioned several circumstances that no one else could know anything about that they became really convinced'.[147]

A similar pattern occurs in the memoirs of sailor Anthony Enright (born 1816). He too described returning as a prodigal son, bearing extravagant gifts for his mother and sisters (though he acknowledged that '[sailor-like] I did not consider how comparatively useless such things would be to them and how much better it would have been to have given them the money instead').[148] Arriving home at dusk, his narrative rehearses a familiar story:

> I hurried to the house where my mother was living and the man who had accompanied me and who knew her, went in first. Calling her downstairs he said a friend of her son's had arrived and was waiting to see her. At the mention of her son she came quickly down without taking time to light a lamp and did not recognise her boy, now grown into a man. I, however, could restrain my feelings no longer, but throwing my arms around her neck I embraced my beloved mother with tears of joy, saying as I did so: 'I am your son. … it is your Anthony, your sailor boy come to see you.'[149]

Agnes Cowper, the daughter of a sea captain whose sons followed him in the profession, similarly recollected her brother's long-awaited return from sea in her memoir:

> It was on a Sunday afternoon in July when the door was opened, and mother, who was busily engaged in the kitchen, was seized and hugged by a tall young man whose clothing was literally in rags. He had walked back from the docks by devious routes which included a number of back entries in order to avoid the possibility of his being seen and recognised by anyone who knew him. His first action was a typical one; he held out his hand in which were his scanty earnings and said, 'Here's my money, Mother.'[150]

For others, there were no riches to hand over. David Johnston (born 1803) returned despairingly to his 'offended home' in a state of abject destitution after a series of sea voyages as cabin boy. 'Shoeless, and partially covered with rags, discharged as useless from my chosen field of action', he was forced to draw his canvas hat over his 'shamed face' to disguise himself on the road home. But 'self-condemned, like the prodigal son … incapable of estimating the power and elasticity of parental affection', he was soon welcomed back into the fold. Stretching out his hand to his mother in the guise of a beggar on the threshold of the home, he reverted to his 'true Eastlothian vernacular': '"Mither, dae ye nae ken yer ain son?" My father came instantly ben [inside], and Christ's beautiful parable was reenacted.'[151]

Not all returns were feted in the manner of Johnston and similar prodigal sons. Frank Smith (born 1872), the son of an austere and violent South London police constable, was educated at the Lambeth Ragged School and a local Board School, taking on a number of odd jobs by the age of 11 at the urging of his parents. He finally found his way to sea by joining his uncle's fishing fleet in Grimsby, which provided an outlet for what he calls a 'roving disposition', as well as an escape from his authoritarian and physically violent father and intense sibling rivalry with his elder brother.[152] Casting himself as a sentimental waif figure in his self-narrative, he recalls singing 'Poor Little Fisherboy for which I received the magnificent remuneration of 1 penny. Little did I think when I sang that song that it would fall to my lot to become one (eventually it was so).'[153] Smith's handwritten, unpublished memoir, rehearses many of the standard rites of passage associated with the genre – the seasickness, lucky escapes, the cruel and kind treatment meted out by various crew members – including a sense of homecoming as he took to water: 'My first impression of the sea was that I had found a friend at last (never still, restless, flowing, always on the move, striving for something that it could not attain …)'[154] His return to the family home in Kennington, however, as a stowaway on a ship, rapidly took on a nightmarish quality. Homesick, dressed in his shabby sea clothes, he returned from Hull to London as an 'outcast'. As he approached the family home, he had the instinctive feeling that 'everything was not alright'. Imagining perhaps that his mother or father had died, he knocked on the door of the house: 'I then stepped back into the road [and] looked up at the windows and I received the biggest shock of my life for the house was empty and written across the closed shutters was "This House to Let."'[155] Having been informed by a neighbour that the family had moved away, he eventually

located them living in another house, although his father refused to acknowledge his errant son. Rejected by his father, he entered the Marine Society for orphan boys, training on the *Warspite* ship that would send him back out into the merchant service and to a new set of kinship relations. Smith handwrote his memoir in 1921, dedicated to his 'dear wife & family' and 'written with love', it narrated a life story that took him from lower deck sailor, to bacon dryer and finally insurance agent.[156] But other family dynamics appear to have given an impetus to his account of the ocean waif's independence achieved away from a tumultuous early family life. 'I think father was beginning to find out that I could fight my own way in the world', he noted pointedly in his memoir after another bittersweet homecoming.[157]

Literary Confluences

Like all narratives, these tales of individuation through seafaring developed from pre-existing cultural models. Some writers in their autobiographies explicitly named the books that animated their childhood (although they were usually less self-reflexive about how these forms might have influenced the life story). Certainly the standard idea that sea stories lured young boys to become sailors is confirmed in accounts by working-class authors, even by those who grew up in impoverished circumstances and had limited access to a formal education.[158] Born in a Newcastle slum in 1856 to Irish migrant parents, for example, James Sexton professed to have absorbed the reading available to him dealing 'chiefly with the "romance" of the sea', adding that he 'hesitated as to whether I should become a pirate bold or a jolly Jack Tar', before stowing away on a vessel at the age of 12.[159] Likewise, the disabled seafaring autobiographer, Barnabas Britten (born 1880), who joined his father as steward and sailor on a fishing whelker on the North Sea, wrote about the 'boyish lore' that crossed with his experience of life at sea: 'Books of adventure, discovery, piracy, mutiny, slavery, smugglers, captains "Cook" and "Kidd", Red Indians, and Eskimos, wigwams and igloos. Good books, and not so good, swallowed up one after the other, like bees entering the hive.'[160]

Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), in particular, recurs as a founding text of the amateur sailor's quest for adventure and autonomy across the nineteenth century.[161] As a pseudo-autobiography, the text was doubly important for the maritime memoir. It provided a model based on ideas of *wanderlust*, survival against the odds, and the development of independence. And it rendered a formal template in which a story of self could

be composed through forms of reminiscence, journaling, and the twists and turns of the adventure story.[162] Indeed, as an early example of what became the wildly popular (and often formulaic) adventure story genre, Robinson's tale depended on a departure from home – in significant defiance of the authority of the father – and the acquisition of agency through seaborne travel. Thus for lower-deck naval sailor Robert Hay, the continuity of following his father into a career in loom-work was interrupted by surreptitious acts of reading: 'The thread of an interesting narrative, an ardent desire to know the ultimate fate of the personages whose concerns were related, hurried me onward.'[163] It was the 'history of Robinson Crusoe', above all, that captured his rebellious readerly gaze. 'I read it over and over with great avidity and delight', he reports; 'I rejoiced at his success, grieved at his misfortunes, and trembled when he was exposed to danger. … I often wished I had been his companion, and regretted that I was not following that line of life which would put me in the way of meeting similar adventures.'[164] Robert Lowery also claimed that his imagination had been piqued by reading extracts from *Robinson Crusoe*, though he professed to see through that famous tale's ideological lure: 'It is well for the sea-boy that a tincture of romance, recklessness and ignorance veils him from the hardships of his profession, or few would follow it. Those who go verging on manhood never like it and rarely make good mariners.'[165] For Walter White, who joined the ranks of the lower-deck navy as a boy, Defoe's descriptions led him to chafe against the limits of the provincial workplace:

> Like many an English boy who quits school and the playground for the counter or workshop, I did not find it at all easy to settle down, for I had devoured *Robinson Crusoe* and not a few books of travel and wild adventure, and thought ploughing the main and seeing foreign countries would suit me much better than learning how to sell locks and hinges, kettles and scythes.'[166]

Without even giving the autobiographer's customary details of parentage or place of birth, White presented himself from the start as a fairy-tale Dick Whittington figure taking a third-class train to the admiral's office in Portsmouth, bearing only a small trunk containing 'my little stock of clothing and sundries'.[167] In his telling, real life began as he stepped aboard the naval training-ship, the *Illustrious*.

One former naval midshipman opined that it was *Robinson Crusoe* and the works of Captain Marryat that imbued in young people 'a very strong feeling [that] prevails in favour of a sea life'.[168] This is unsurprising in one sense, since Marryat's novels provided what has typically been viewed

as a form of escapist, juvenile fiction, anticipating the development of imperialist adventure writing that flourished after the 1870s.[169] But while Marryat's plots of adventures on the high seas are outlandish in one sense, they also served as a model of the watery *Bildungsroman*, featuring young, penniless orphans, or assumed orphans, for whom going to sea or taking to water, formed a vocational pathway to learning the ways of the world and thus forms of individuation. In Marryat's *Poor Jack* (1840), for example, familiar elements of the ocean waif story are given literary form. The father of the novel's young protagonist, Thomas Saunders, has an intermittent presence in the home due to his seafaring vocation, such that Thomas is raised by his mother, a fierce lodging-house keeper, who ekes out a subsistence in the waterside working-class community of Fisher's Alley in Greenwich. Thomas, however, is an orphan in spirit and narrative function rather than in reality. The possession of two living parents, with whom he maintains contact across the course of the narrative, does not prohibit him from acquiring the standard orphan's set of surrogate mentors and guardians – including a coast pilot, whom he calls 'father', and a kindly marine store owner known as Nanny, all of whom will aid him in his quest for independence and status. Neglected and abused by his mother, Thomas survives as a waterside urchin, earning money as a mudlark and integrating himself into the waterside community and thus acquiring the 'acknowledged, true, lawful, and legitimate [name] "Poor Jack of Greenwich"'.[170] Poor Jack's story is conventional in some ways, as he rises from a state of ragged semi-waifhood to self-sufficient seaman, progressing through 'industry and exertion, and the kindness of others', towards marriage, property, and finally, the title of Squire.[171] But, as Peck argues, the novel is revelatory in respect of not only its portrayal of waterside communities and families, but also for the manner in which the particularities of seafaring life and labour inform the novel's narrative shape (in ways reminiscent of the maritime memoir):

> The novel is also full of grotesque interpolated tales: tales of loss of life, of extreme conditions, of people going missing and losing their identities. This sense of the mysterious, of people straying outside the known and knowable world, is matched by the way in which *Poor Jack* is full of secrets: things that are undivulged; puzzles about what characters have been doing, especially if they have been away at sea; family connections that are kept concealed.[172]

Like *Poor Jack*, Marryat's later novel *Jacob Faithful* (1834) also places the orphan story within an unforgiving waterside framework, as young Jacob, born on a lighterman boat, loses both parents (one to drowning,

the other – pre-empting the fate of Dickens's Krook – to 'spontaneous combustion' within the cabin of a Thames lighter), from which point he develops networks of affiliate kin through picaresque adventures on the River Thames.[173] In both novels, the ocean waif moves across social networks both on shore and at sea, while also acquiring a mode of 'technical maturity', described by Cannon Schmitt as the 'learning and deployment of technical knowledge sedimented in a specialist lexicon': the craft of seafaring for Jack and lightermanship in the case of Jacob.[174]

Thus beyond the mechanics of the light adventure plot, Marryat's novels, from *Poor Jack* to the waterside world of *Jacob Faithful*, presented readers with orphan waifs who proved to be by turns vulnerable, strategically adaptable, technically minded, and enmeshed in fluid networks of kin on ships and within waterside communities. As Siobhan Carroll has argued, in this regard a number of Marryat's ordinary sailors defy typical images of patriotic Jack Tars, depicting instead the 'private thoughts and workings of Britain's maritime culture', including the working sailor conscious of their split amphibious identity, as well as the 'domestic alienation created by the communications gap between land and sea'.[175] The sea novel, described by Cohen as 'international in its poetics as well as its geography', thus provided a fitting paradigm and structural form for sailor-authors who, like fictional protagonists, were individuals who 'refuse to stay at home, if they even know where to locate it, and whose adventures unfold across the wide world'.[176] In his treatment of the American maritime writer James Fenimore Cooper, Gregory Vargo highlights this potential, noting how the novel of development often features a 'youth [who] departs the stultifying existence of his village or town'. Such scenes, in Vargo's reading, come to 'typify the "transcendental homelessness" Georg Lukács ascribes to the nineteenth-century novel, "the inadequacy that is due to the soul's being wider and larger than the destinies which life has to offer it"'.[177] As this analysis has shown, literature offered a set of cultural paradigms that could be employed by autobiographers as they narrated their stories of selfhood. But, conversely, it is important to add that working-class autobiographies have the unmined potential to throw new light on maritime fiction. For example, the depiction of apparently gratuitous and sensationalised spectacles of violence in maritime fiction by writers such as Marryat, takes on a different aspect when considered alongside descriptions of graphic brutality and the intensely embodied experience of life portrayed in the autobiographies.[178]

Whether it was reading *Robinson Crusoe* and Marryat, rather than economic imperatives, that influenced working-class boys to go to sea, the

emergent adventure story certainly shaped the tales they told in their memoirs. As Richard Phillips argues, in the adventure story the trajectory is as much temporal as it is spatial, and one can trace 'the hero's journey through the spaces of adventure as a journey through adolescence, a rite of passage from boyhood to manhood'.[179] Yet in arguing that in such fiction the 'privilege of adolescence gives the middle-class boy access to the geography of adolescence, the liminal space in which his rite of passage may take place', Phillips overlooks the influence of this literature on working-class writing and modes of autobiographical expression.[180] For as a number of memoirs show, those authors also claimed for themselves the narrative framework of the oceanic adventure story, as they told of the development from boyhood to a type of manliness achieved at sea through various rites of passage, and adapted its narrative form to their own life-writing.[181] Their life stories were fragmented and dispersed, through conditions of poverty and circumstance, but this did not preclude them from reaching for the narrative structures and forms that were accessible and made sense in terms of plotting their own lives. Indeed, as Jonathan Rose's study of working-class reading practices demonstrates, so-called bourgeois narrative models of vocation and development were not restricted to middle-class readers who saw their experiences reflected in these men of the world: they were also the structuring myths of working-class life.[182] In his memoir, for example, sailor's son Jack Lawson proudly declared that the pit-mining community considered his illiterate yarn-spinning father to have 'walked and talked, and looked like, one of Captain Marryat's characters'.[183] While Frederick Rogers, the son of a sailor-turned-dock labourer, born in Whitechapel in 1846, recalled that Marryat was his father's favourite author, for 'he described the sea life my father knew'.[184] The historical figure of Captain Marryat even briefly steps into the pages of one unpublished working-class autobiography. In Alexander Howison's handwritten, picaresque account of the 'ups and downs between the cradle and the grave' as a sailor, Howison recalled his oceanic encounter with the naval man (and soon-to-be celebrated novelist) when both served on H.M.S. *Newcastle* in the Anglo-American War of 1812.[185] Lieutenant Marryat evidently met with the memoirist's approval: 'He was a first-rate, rare, noble-souled fellow', Howison wrote, recalling the evening he shared with the men a 'small cask of rum … which he served out and made us all jolly for the night'.[186] As fact and fiction intersected prodigiously on the nineteenth-century high seas, it may even be that Howison himself is immortalised within the pages of one of Marryat's sea novels.

Fictive Kin: Extended and Invented Family

For a number of the memoirists surveyed here, the narrative of why they went to sea depended on a detachment (often temporary, sometimes permanent) from family and homes and the establishment of alternative forms of kin removed from terrestrial and consanguineous ties. Anthropologists and historians have used the term 'fictive kin' to denote formations that depart from the dominant (and recent) model of the nuclear family, to encompass families of choice, reconstituted families, and composite families, extending beyond the nuclear unit and ties of blood.[187] The term usefully invokes the sense of kinship forged through an improvised, makeshift, even 'made up' (or wilfully created) sense of family and social belonging.[188] As such, it is a useful term with which to explore the network of maritime relations surrounding the seafaring individual reliant on friends and mentors to survive a journey. Maritime memoirs provide an abundance of examples that highlight the porous and flexible boundaries of the working-class family to which cultural and literary historians have increasingly turned their attention.[189] In such critical work, tropes of fluidity and porosity have been used to characterise the shape and function of family formations among the poor in the nineteenth century, as for example in the discussion of the family's 'permeable borders and the flexibility to cope with various levels of crisis'.[190] This fluidity, which encompassed forms of 'fictive kin' in the sense of extended, blended, and adoptive families, was made real in the context of seafarers, who voyaged around the world in makeshift communities, and who sought out hospitality within the porous spaces of global port cities. Water, rather than blood, could be figured as the tie that binds in these accounts of fictive kin forged through maritime friendship, mateship, philanthropic and employment relations, as well as through practices of hospitality.[191]

The language of kinship was deployed in the description of boys and men taking to the sea: an individual might be described as 'married to the ocean', setting out to join the 'brotherhood of the sea' and its 'ocean-going brethren', or being 'bred to the water'. Memoirists sometimes recounted the care and attention they received from senior crew in familial terms,[192] while the finding of a surrogate father at sea formed a recurring trope in maritime fiction. Thus, as Peck argues, a dominant motif in Marryat's novels is that of the navy 'offering substitute fathers who are far better than any real father'; in *Frank Mildmay* (1829) in particular, the institution provides 'a family, for those who have no real family on shore'.[193] But this was not restricted to men: female fictive kin had an important role to play too.

Memoirs make reference to the quasi-maternal attentions of landladies in boarding-houses within port cities. The British-Jamaican nurse, hotelier, and autobiographer, Mary Seacole, for example, was warmly known as Aunty Seacole or Mother Seacole to her soldier- and sailor-lodgers.[194] In his memoir, Howison, homesick for his mother after a bout of illness, recalled the care and attention shown to him by his 'good guardian angel', a landlady who apparently saw in him a replacement for her own 'sailor boy'. He adds in a sentimental vein: 'Her heart warmed at once to me and with tears in her eyes, told me her son was then at sea and perhaps in sickness and distress far away from that mother who loved him so fondly.' The material result was that the landlady replaced his meagre bread and butter with a 'good dinner'.[195] It is clear too, from the evidence of the memoirs, that friendship was a crucial element in the support networks that sustained young sailors as they crossed oceans, enacting a form of kinship that offered a 'close network of sentimental and instrumental exchange'.[196] While instances of tactile care and intimacy between men are often foregrounded in these narratives, homoerotic attraction between 'friends' remains for the most part implicit.[197] Bullen, for example, who lamented his waif-life existence at sea, found some succour in the friendships he formed with shipmates, including an older Jamaican boy, who tended to him in his illness aboard ship, sharing his meals and instructing him in Christian teaching.[198] Those networks of homosocial affiliation and friendship, and their potential to slip into animosity, taking place across ships, sailors' homes, and on the 'beach', were later rendered in compelling fictional form in the *fin-de-siècle* literature of Robert Louis Stevenson and Joseph Conrad.

Henry Morton Stanley: From Workhouse to the World

The idea of 'fictive kin' can further be used to think about more explicit forms of creative embellishment that underlie specific accounts of self and affiliation in the maritime memoir. A prime example can be found in the orphan-to-self-made-individual story that underpins the unfinished, posthumous autobiography of the colonial explorer and journalist Henry Morton Stanley. Primarily remembered for his freshwater rather than saltwater travels, and in particular his discovery of fellow explorer David Livingstone, Stanley's life story hinged precisely on a narrative of maritime opportunism.

John Rowlands, as Stanley was originally named, had a fractured start in life. Illegitimate, he was abandoned by his mother to the care of his maternal grandfather and a set of dissolute uncles after the older man's death.

The Welsh-speaking young Stanley was temporarily looked after by a series of begrudging relatives, before being despatched to St Asaph Workhouse in 1847, where he lived between the ages of 6 and 15. According to his memoir, he would subsequently encounter his estranged mother and her two younger children at the very workhouse in which he had been placed, recalling how she looked at her estranged son with only a 'look of cool, critical scrutiny'.[199] Stanley eventually escaped the institution, settling for a period in Liverpool, where he relied on the uncertain hospitality of cousins and an aunt. Like a number of other working-class autobiographers traced in this chapter, his story provides a variation on the motif of the boy leaving the family to go to sea; in this smaller subset of tales, water provides a passage away from institutions, including orphanages and workhouses, that operated in loco parentis.[200] Nevertheless, Stanley also deployed fairy-tale tropes in order to cast himself in life as the 'little fatherless babe, and the orphaned child',[201] and 'a waif cast into the world'.[202] This narrative was perhaps more palatable to him, than the story of being overlooked by his mother in the humiliating confines of the workhouse.

Two turning points marked a change in his fortunes, and both centred on water. On his way to the port city of Liverpool after his escape from the workhouse, he recollected catching a prescient glimpse of the sea: 'When about half-way across the Dee estuary, I was astonished at seeing many great and grand ships sailing, under towers of bellying canvas, over the far-reaching sea, towards some world not our own.'[203] Later, seeking work in the dock areas of the city, Stanley serendipitously experienced his second epiphany at the water's edge. He described himself as dazzled by the intoxicating spectacle of the waterfront and the apparent attractions of the sailor's life (and indeed perhaps the sailors themselves):

> It was then, while in search of any honest work, that I came across the bold sailor-boys, young middies, gorgeous in brass buttons, whose jaunty air of hardihood took my admiration captive. In the windows of the marine slop-shops were exposed gaudy kerchiefs stamped with the figures of the Royal Princes in nautical costume, which ennobled the sailor's profession, though, strange to say, I had deemed it ignoble, hitherto. This elevation of it seduced me to enter the Docks, and to inspect more closely the vessels. It was then that I marvelled at their lines and size, and, read with feelings verging on awe the names 'Red Jacket,' 'Blue Jacket,' 'Chimborazo,' 'Pocahontas,' 'Sovereign of the Seas,' 'Williams Tapscott,' etc. There was romance in their very names.[204]

It is not just a vague or romantic predilection for the sea that engaged him in this scene. Stanley showed himself to be sensorially immersed in the

object-filled, commercial possibilities of a seafaring life, in which he can see, smell, hear, and almost taste the material riches of the global economy:

> The perfume of strange products hung about [the ships]. Out of their vast holds came coloured grain, bales of silks hooped with iron, hogsheads, barrels, boxes, and sacks, continuously, until the piles of them rose up as high as the shed-roof. … I began to feel interested in the loud turmoil of commerce. The running of the patent tackles was like music to me. I enjoyed the clang and boom of metal and wood on the granite floors, and it was grand to see the gathered freight from all parts of the world under English roofs.[205]

From this moment, the memoir undergoes a shift in gear, moving from the slow progress of the *Bildungsroman* to the active pace of the Victorian adventure story. Enlisting as a cabin boy on the American packet ship, the *Windermere*, although ending up serving as a deckhand, Stanley's new fortunes landed him in New Orleans, where he found an adoptive father (in the figure of a successful businessman and cotton-broker Henry Hope Stanley), acquired a new name, and gained a profession.[206] The fact that Stanley may have produced his own aspirational father – his biographer suggests that his real benefactor was James Speake, a more humble grocery store owner in New Orleans and Stanley's first employer – compounds the idea that Stanley was forging his own founding myth through a story of fictive kin. Having been stripped of his identity when he entered the workhouse as an illegitimate and abandoned child, the crossing of oceans enabled Stanley to shed his workhouse identity and the stamp of illegitimacy in order to forge a new, malleable character, symbolically assigning himself multiple names as he moved freely across a variety of spaces. Evidently the genre of memoir provided the possibility of this self-ascription of identity, but so too did a rich array of literary models featuring self-inventing protagonists.[207] As Paul Zweig argues, the initiation rites of the adventure story facilitate a narrative that establishes the narrator's autonomy and ability to fashion the self: 'Through it, the adventurer becomes a child of his own deeds, his own bravery. He becomes not only his own father – that represents the "Oedipal" side of the initiation – but also his own mother. He creates the pattern of the wholly freed, wholly male fate.'[208] And yet, as he continues to observe, this career of self-creation has to be constantly reinforced: 'If adventure is a form of initiation in the emperion of the masculine, then it is curiously imperfect, because it must be reaccomplished incessantly … The project of self-birth is keen and exciting, but unlike the original birth it cannot be done once and for all.'[209] The incomplete nature of the self-fashioning enterprise is apparent in Stanley's restless *Autobiography*. For example, one aspect of Stanley's

project of self-reinvention seems to have been motivated by a desire to gain his estranged mother's acceptance. When he returned in 1862 to his mother's village of Denbigh, via Liverpool, he described in a diary (later assimilated to his 'autobiography') the ignominy of a further rejection of the prodigal returning son. Proud despite his shabby appearance, Stanley knocked at his mother's door, 'buoyed up by a hope of being able to show what manliness I had acquired, not unwilling, perhaps, to magnify what I meant to *become*'. In a strange gendered reversal, he adds that 'like a bride arraying herself in her best for her lover, I had arranged my story to please one who would, at last, I hoped, prove an affectionate mother!'[210] Rebuffed once again by his mother, the foundling's 'wish-fulfillment of maternal return'[211] indelibly punctured, Stanley voyaged back across the Atlantic to the United States, and there 'threw himself, for a time, into the life of the sea' and the peripatetic work of a deckhand and assistant cook on merchant ships before enlisting in the US Navy.[212] Having previously deserted from the navy, he took the liberty of altering his identity once again by changing his age and stated colour of eyes and hair for the purposes of enlistment.

Water is the driving motif of Henry Morton Stanley's strange and shifting memoir. It is the element that offers the means of transformation and the promise of great expectations, and it features centrally in significant episodes: Stanley's glimpse of the ocean that promises an escape from his ignoble past; his transatlantic crossings that marked his vocational progress and difficult, intermittent alliances with his birth family; his adoptive father's quasi-baptism and naming of his son; Stanley's ablutions in a cleansing bath on the day of his adoption, to 'wash out the stains ugly poverty and misery had impressed upon my person since infancy' before stepping into his new clothes, character, name, and circle of fictive kin.[213] And water would, finally, prove to be a defining element in his story of self as an explorer of Central Africa and navigation of the inland river routes leading to the 'finding' of Livingstone, on the shores of Lake Tanganyika in 1871.[214]

Stanley was by turns a ship's log keeper, diarist, journalist, travel writer, and autobiographer, and an avid reader of adventure fiction; it is fitting then that his autobiography is a miscellany of genres and modes, and of truths, half-truths, and fabrications. Accusations of creative and fictive embellishment dogged Stanley's various autobiographical publications, including the *Autobiography*, which he abandoned before its completion.[215] Yet there is a consistent parallel between Stanley's proclivity for reinvention in his own life and his use of embellishment and artfulness in

his autobiographical account. As he noted cryptically, and yet with great suggestiveness in his *Autobiography*, 'granted that I know little of my real self, still, I am the best evidence for myself'.[216]

Conclusion: Forms of Maritime Memoir

Despite the fact that the sea has remained marginal to dominant accounts of proletarian life, working-class autobiographies evince the significant role that labouring families played in the maritime world. From the mid-nineteenth century on, spanning the age of sail through to the era of steam, seafaring offered a central working-class vocation whose effects had an impact on the material and emotional shape of households and families. And as has been shown in this chapter, the sea entered the terrain of working-class storytelling and writing too. For while oceans provided an important workplace, they also exerted a mythical and other-worldly influence on the ways in which families and individuals told stories about their lives. Cultural and literary images of the sea were interwoven into the forms of narratives that labouring people used as they accounted for stories of individuality and family. Indeed, the maritime world provided working-class autobiographers with a vast repertoire of stories against which to situate their stories of self, extending and challenging the conventional association of working-class life with tropes of parochialism, rootedness, and locality. While the idea of taking up a place in the world was a figure of speech in the *Bildungsroman* – based on the synecdoche of 'world' for terrestrial 'society' – for the sailor, the world really could be encountered through acts of seafaring labour.[217] This is not just a semantic quibble: maritime memoirs offer evidence of global movement, cultural encounters, and even forms of tourism, experienced by a proletarian workforce in ways that continue to be overlooked.

Maritime employment allowed for forms of continuity between generations, but the precarity and risk of seafaring took its toll on family lives, often in the form of rupture, dispersal, and disappearance. The form of autobiography, as noted in this chapter, was singularly well equipped to narrate these fragmented, disjointed and even uncertain sequences of events. For despite attempts to characterise autobiography as a mode of writing preoccupied with linearity, teleology, and narrative 'shape', life writing past and present has consistently proved itself to be a supremely flexible and adaptive form of expression for writers across the social scale. In that sense, this chapter has reinforced a point made by Steven King: for the poor of the nineteenth century who had the literacy skills to write

their own accounts, 'family was not just a locus and process, but also an unfolding story', one that could take account of how 'fluidity, circulation and sojourning shaped the very emotional and material architecture of ordinary families'.[218] Indeed what Alannah Tomkins calls working-class autobiography's 'inherently patchy, accidental, contingent aspects' deserve to be recognised and analysed as integral to its composition.[219] In this respect, Peter Brooks's description of the nineteenth-century novel applies equally well to what I deem to be its significant counterpart – the nineteenth-century autobiography – a genre that, even in its 'ordinary', self-published, or 'amateur' textual forms, also presents itself 'as a system of internal energies and tensions, compulsions, resistances, and desires'.[220]

In focusing on the narrative traits of working-class autobiography, specifically as they pertain to accounts of seafaring maritime life, what I have shown in this chapter is that these are subtle, heterogeneous, and varied texts that attempt to represent difficult, rich, and changing lives. Vincent shows in his analysis of the long history of working-class autobiography that authors of the 'ordinary' labouring class were not necessarily able to draw on single models for writing their life stories, instead making use of the 'deployment of multiple narratives of the self'.[221] As he writes: 'If the emerging genre of nineteenth-century working-class autobiography had a distinct dilemma it was not so much in the range of choices available for constructing a life, but rather in fitting the intractable data of their lives into any one narrative structure.' Perhaps, as Vincent argues, these autobiographical articulations drew on the makeshift economic survival strategies of the working family: 'Just as the family economies of the poor subsisted on a basis of make do and mend, so their autobiographies were a matter of improvisation and patchwork.'[222] If this is the case, then nowhere is this form of textual self-fashioning clearer than in the layered, resourceful, and imaginative maritime memoir.