CHAPTER 2

# *Logbooks*
## *Life Writing at Sea*

> It is a strange thing that in sea voyages, where there is nothing to be seen, but sky and sea, men should make diaries.
>
> Francis Bacon, 'Of Travel' [1625]

> It's entered on the ship's log, and that's the truest book as a man can write.
>
> Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*

### Introduction: Captain MacWhirr's Letters

Joseph Conrad's novella *Typhoon* (1902) is a tale of misadventure at sea, as a steamer ship, the *Nan-Shan*, is caught in a devastating squall en route to the Chinese seaport of Fuzhou. Yet though the story centres on material and physical action – from the typhoon itself to the feats the crew perform to save the ship – it also offers a meditation on the production of writing. Indeed, while treating a tempest at sea it is concerned with letters, logkeeping, reading, and textual communication, gesturing towards one of Conrad's primary concerns in his fictions: the rendering of experience into narrative form.

Three characters are engaged in writing to familiars both before and after the passing of the typhoon. The first is the story's chief protagonist, the uncharismatic and literal-minded Captain MacWhirr, who is presented as a pedestrian chronicler of his foreign travels. Throughout the course of his career as an unlikely mariner, this son of a Belfast grocer dutifully kept up his correspondences with home:

> MacWhirr's visits to his home were necessarily rare, and in the course of years he despatched other letters to his parents, informing them of his successive promotions and of his movements upon the vast earth. In these missives could be found sentences like this: 'The heat here is very great.' Or: 'On Christmas day at 4 P. M. we fell in with some icebergs.' The old people ultimately became acquainted with a good many names of ships, and

> with the names of the skippers who commanded them – with the names of Scots and English shipowners – with the names of seas, oceans, straits, promontories – with outlandish names of lumber-ports, of rice-ports, of cotton-ports – with the names of islands – with the name of their son's young woman. She was called Lucy. It did not suggest itself to him to mention whether he thought the name pretty. And then they died.[1]

After the death of his parents, Thomas MacWhirr redirects his letter-writing energies to his wife and children residing at their suburban home. Deviating from the caricature of the wife pining for news of her husband at sea, Mrs MacWhirr is simply bored by his factual and platitudinous letters. Puncturing the myth of the heartsore sailor's wife, the story's narrator notes that the 'only secret of her life was her abject terror of the time when her husband would come home to stay for good'. The children also have little sentimental attachment to their father. It is left to the Captain's steward on the *Nan-Shan* to take an interest in MacWhirr's regular 'home letters', which he is in the habit of surreptitiously reading as he cleans out the chart room; they interest him 'much more than they possibly could the woman for whose eye they were intended'.[2] Solomon Rout, the ship's engineer, finds a more appreciative audience for his seafaring news in a wife who 'relished his style greatly', and read out loud interesting passages to her deaf mother-in-law, 'prefacing each extract by the warning shout, "Solomon says!"'.[3] The third letter-writer detailed on the *Nan-Shan* is the first mate Jukes who, 'unmarried, and unengaged, was in the habit of opening his heart after another fashion to an old chum and former shipmate' in the form of long, descriptive letters that detailed the ship's various characters and goings-on.[4] When not engaged in writing letters to his friend, Jukes devotes his attention to the ship's log in the chart-room, carefully choosing his words to account for the ship's progress: 'He copied neatly out of the rough-book the number of miles, the course of the ship, and in the column for "wind" scrawled the word "calm" from top to bottom of the eight hours since noon.' Yet Jukes is frustrated at how the ship's rolling stymies the practice of writing: 'The heavy inkstand would slide away in a manner that suggested perverse intelligence in dodging the pen. Having written in the large space under the head of "Remarks" "Heat very oppressive," he stuck the end of the penholder in his teeth, pipe fashion, and mopped his face carefully.'[5]

The typhoon itself will eventually put paid to these forms of rote writings: its devastation upends MacWhirr's chart room such that 'the orderly arrangements of his privacy' are left in disarray.[6] The implements of literacy – MacWhirr's books, desk contents, including rulers, pencils, and

inkstand – are thrown to the floor by the force of the storm. Afterwards, when the chart room has been restored to order, MacWhirr takes up his letter writing once again. But the captain's near-death experience in a tropical cyclone is still insufficient to captivate Mrs MacWhirr in the suburbs. Again, it is the steward and fellow sailor – rather than the wife – who are gripped by the bare facts of the account:

> The steward found in the letter he wrote, in a tidy chart-room, passages of such absorbing interest that twice he was nearly caught in the act. But Mrs. MacWhirr, in the drawing-room of the forty-pound house, stifled a yawn – perhaps out of self-respect – for she was alone.
>
> She reclined in a plush-bottomed and gilt hammock-chair near a tiled fireplace, with Japanese fans on the mantel and a glow of coals in the grate. Lifting her hands, she glanced wearily here and there into the many pages. It was not her fault they were so prosy, so completely uninteresting – from 'My darling wife' at the beginning, to 'Your loving husband' at the end. She couldn't be really expected to understand all these ship affairs. She was glad, of course, to hear from him, but she had never asked herself why, precisely.[7]

Mr Rout the engineer also writes to his wife after surviving the onslaught, although he 'wrote just a word or two of the typhoon'. Jukes, on the other hand, provides a 'really animated and very full' account to his close friend in the Western Ocean trade, and, carrying the narrative of *Typhoon* through to the end, he articulates the unexpected heroism of the stolid MacWhirr.[8]

Conrad's story is about forms of communication – and the failure of communication – between the homosocial world of the sea and families on land. It locates the islanded world of the vessel at sea within a network of epistolary, material, and textual relations – including letters, logbooks, and newspaper accounts – that add layers and complexity to the dominant form of storytelling associated with the seafarer, namely the sailor's yarn. In doing so, *Typhoon* also provides a meditation on communities of reading and writing within a watery context, and unsettles the assumption that these were transparent or necessarily dependable.

This chapter builds on motifs from Conrad's story – the practice and meaning of writing at sea, the maintenance of domestic and personal relations in a shipboard setting – through an examination of a particular form of life writing developed at sea: the personal logbook. In addressing the logbook as a social and cultural text – an oceanic counterpart to the terrestrial Victorian diary – it seeks to go beyond Conrad's portrayal of the limits of writing in maritime conditions and the stunted domestic relations depicted within his tale. My chapter situates the logbooks

within the swathe of prolific and distinctly strange and uncategorisable writing that ordinary sailors produced at sea and its entanglement within broader cultural practices of literacy.[9] However, it departs from the emphasis in previous scholarship on sailor writing in relation to practices of shipboard labour and experience, and explores instead how logbooks – which I also refer to as sea journals or maritime diaries – can be conceptualised as texts that have the potential to reveal important aspects of self, family, kinship, and emotional lives.[10] My aim in the sections that follow is to explore the sea diary as a form of life writing in its fullest sense, and to evaluate it within a wider cultural and social context.[11] Read in this way, the personal logbook provides not just a niche account of seafaring life, but a telling form of ordinary writing; it reveals the sailor as a social and relational self, conveying in complex ways the individual's account of self, work, and family attachments through the mariner's famous 'plain style'.[12]

## The Diary and the Logbook

As shown in Chapter 1, watery crossings had a bearing on the development of life stories and the telling of narratives of self and family. Mary K. Bercaw Edwards, for example, contends that sailors are 'difficult to research because their peripatetic lives left scattered records that are often hard to trace',[13] while Blum notes that '[n]autical spaces are inherently resistant to inscription and other forms of demarcation'.[14] Yet despite the material constraints that limited the production of writing at sea (sailors often had minimal leisure time, suffered from a lack of private space, and were suspended in a watery environment which inhibited paper-and-ink-based activities), the scholarship shows that sailors were a far more literate body of workers than has been previously supposed. They engaged in varied forms of reading and writing, in letters, travel journals, diaries, and the composition of creative forms including poetry and stories.[15] Beyond the seafarer's published retrospective memoir, then, ephemeral forms of maritime writing are precisely the kinds of 'fugitive documentary sources' that offer the possibility of a layered and coordinated account of global seafaring life.[16] Indeed, as Martyn Lyons observes more broadly of the acceleration of 'ordinary' writing by proletarian authors throughout the nineteenth century: 'The problem is not that ordinary writings are scarce and ephemeral: rather there is such an abundance of ordinary writing that the historian hardly knows where to begin.'[17] It should be noted, however, that despite Lyons's claim, first-person accounts by people of colour

remain a problematic absence from British archival records, including archives of maritime history.[18]

Over the past few decades, the categories of life writing, beyond the standard retrospective memoir surveyed in Chapter 1, have expanded to encompass more varied modes, including the broader sphere of 'ordinary writing' evoked by Lyons. In life writing studies, the widening of the field has seen scholarly attention gravitate towards more marginal, esoteric, and fragmented forms of first-person writing. The expansion and democratisation of the corpus has thus opened up new lines of historical and literary enquiry, revising the social composition of individuals taken to be 'life writers', and allowing for a rethinking of the means by which life writing was historically produced and circulated, as well as how it functioned and was received.[19] Earlier debates in the field that centred on questions of autobiography's inherent individualism, egotism, or indeed masculinism, seem increasingly redundant in the context of this radical expansion. Indeed, as Laura Marcus succinctly notes, it is 'striking how value systems shift when the focus of attention moves away from an established literary corpus'.[20] Likewise, longstanding (at times dogged) attempts to develop a precise nomenclature for specific subsets of autobiographical practice are questionable in light of the ordinary hybridity and intertextuality of so much of this writing. As Valerie Sanders puts it in the context of Victorian autobiography, debates 'about the impure form of life writing no longer seem important in the face of a realization that its very heterogeneity is what makes nineteenth-century life writing so vibrant'.[21] In a similar vein, Sharon Marcus argues: 'The autobiographical requirement of a unified individual life story was irrelevant for Victorian life writing, a hybrid genre that freely combined multiple narrators and sources, and incorporated long extracts from a subject's diaries, correspondence, and private papers alongside testimonials from friends and family members.'[22] Indeed, the recognition of documents including petitions, diaries, letters, journals, and even account books as forms of 'ordinary' life writing has provided not just a voluminous source of socio-historical evidence, but has also led to the development of innovative strategies suited to the reading and interpretation of this heterogeneous, vernacular material.[23] To insist on life writing as a varied, multimodular, and intertextual form is therefore not a postmodern turn, but a historical return that only requires the researcher to look beyond the canon of standard published autobiographies (an important, but particular, strand of the wider form).

Despite these innovations and expansions in auto/biography studies, the significance of sailors' life writing has largely remained beyond critical

discussion. In line with what I have argued is a broader marginalisation of the maritime within working-class studies, attention to sailors' amateur writings has mainly been the prerogative of maritime historians and these texts continue to be excluded from more mainstream literary histories of ordinary writing 'from below'. Yet common sailors' writings at sea are perfectly suited to a reassessment in light of current priorities in the area of life writing studies, and they have much to add to this burgeoning academic field, particularly with regard to the shift towards the consideration of new categories, including diverse historical masculinities, the embodied nature of autobiographical writing, ecocriticism, and the non-human.

Within maritime literary and cultural history, the turn to vernacular forms of writing produced by so-called ordinary sailors can contribute to the development of histories from below, as sources that have the potential to furnish access to what one critic calls 'the seamen on their own terms'.[24] Thus attention to the more ephemeral and often haphazard archival materials of personal writing enables consideration of the lived experience and writing of a broader social group of seafarers, rather than simply those who published either travel journals or retrospective memoirs by dint of the literacy that went with their status or rank.[25]

Ordinary life writing produced by sailors at sea exemplifies a form of self-narrative that is varied and complex. As artefacts, sailors' personal journals and letters are fungible and signifying documents: fragile, sea-stained, smudged with fingerprints, there is in fact nothing very ordinary at all about the historical survival of paper-and-ink objects borne across oceans, and their material endurance often tells a story in itself. As forms of writing, they defy precise categorisation. Found in archives, these are documents that alternate between travelogues, account books, ship's logs, notebooks, diaries, sketchbooks, letters, and other mixed modes; heterogeneous and shape-shifting, they are ephemeral forms that can merge into complex documents of self. Some sailors' personal journals resemble scrapbooks or self-made almanacs, replete with pasted-in or transcribed letters, illustrations, accounts, musical notation, shorthand practice, lists, poems, and doodles. Even an author's handwriting – the apparent marker of individuality – is liable to shift and change within the same pages of a notebook, often influenced by the cramped conditions, limited light, or the movement of a ship. Some journals start out in the manner of formal navigational logbook entries, before seamlessly morphing into the more informal style of the personal diary. Others present as first-person accounts in which the writerly gaze is more commonly fixed outwards on the environment or the ship itself, rather than inwards on the self

(sometimes even eschewing the first-person pronoun 'I' altogether); the ship's progress, rather than any Puritan ideas of self-progress, are at stake in these instances. Stylistically, there is a distinctive maritime realism to diary writing forged at sea, in which water, objects, tools, ships, coasts, and the observation of whales and flying fish ostensibly attract the focus of the writer's gaze. For as Steve Mentz notes, 'sailors share a private language that entwines human bodies with nonhuman tools'. As 'political mythmakers', he continues, their tools are accordingly 'sailcloth, rope and hulls – along with stories, shanties, cant terms and many forms of writing'.[26]

Such ordinary journaling, offering seafaring men of the ordinary class the means and opportunity of writing, developed within a specific maritime context. After the 1850 Mercantile Marine Act, official ships' logs were kept on all merchant voyages, generally by a senior member of the crew, and provided daily documentation of the vessel's particulars, including its speed, position, encounters with other ships along the route, work performed during 'watches', and notable incidents that occurred on board.[27] These detailed logbooks had a practical purpose, as valuable instructional aids for future navigators, and served as crucial documentary evidence in case of any future insurance claim. Indeed, as Conrad's Captain MacWhirr acknowledges as he anticipates the interruption of the ship's progress due to the advancing typhoon: 'If the weather delays me – very well. There's [the] log-book to talk straight about the weather.'[28] Additionally, ship's apprentices were often instructed in keeping their own unofficial log as part of their navigational training. Some sailors completed this amateur log, while also maintaining their own separate personal journal; other sailors blended the more official logbook style and personal diary form into one. One sailor's memoir suggests that regular journal keeping had another functional benefit: it could be used as evidence of labour performed and wages owed.[29]

The fusion of the logbook and the personal diary gave material embodiment to a pre-existing, historical entanglement of the two forms. As Robert A. Fothergill has noted, diary writing developed from a set of multiple 'pre-diary habits' which included both travel journals and 'regular-entry books', of which the logbook was one example.[30] The terrestrial diary went on to flourish over the course of the nineteenth century, during which there was a 'rapid expansion of the scope, popularity and visibility of the form'.[31] In this regard, as Martin Hewitt argues, the 'industrialisation of time created wide demand for desk and pocket diaries to record meetings arranged and transactions conducted. … By mid-century the diary operated increasingly in public spaces, in the periodical press, lecture stands,

and the court room.'[32] Yet despite general growth in the practice, diary writing has not tended to be seen as a typical form of working-class writing and there are few examples of proletarian diaries in archive collections. According to Burnett,

> it has been supposed that the lives of ordinary men and women were too dull and of insufficient importance to merit recording, or that they had too little time or energy left after a long working day for literary exertions. The last may well account for the relative scarcity of regularly kept, day-by-day diaries of working people, though intermittent journals, and autobiographies written over a period of years … are common enough.[33]

Yet if the factory or mine, both of which have strictly regulated temporal regimes and long work days, was unconducive to writing, the anomalous setting of the work-home of the ship provided conditions that were more enabling for working men to log their daily experiences. The assumption that diaries were a middle-class, white-collar form in the nineteenth century is therefore undermined by the evidence of personal logs kept on board ship by sailors and other seafaring labourers (such as carpenters and other specialised crew).[34]

There were many reasons why working seafarers might turn to compose sea journals or diary entries for the first time as they moved into the oceanic sphere. If the official ship's log served as the maritime equivalent of a 'black box', recording the vessel's coordinates and significant events, sailors may have considered their own personal journals as a small archive of the self within which to conserve memories or notes. In some cases it is clear that the very fact of voyaging itself – entailing a departure from home and ordinary routines and the prospect of new sights and experiences – stimulated seafarers to keep a written record for posterity or for interested family members. As already noted, sailors were manual labourers who had exceptional opportunities to write because of the unique work-home environment of the ship. In this sense it was precisely their physical mobility as travelling workers that enabled and prompted them to engage in rituals of writing at sea. Writing, after all, was something to do on long voyages, while also offering a modicum of private activity within the semi-public floating society of the seaborne vessel.

Deriving from the format of the ship's official log, and seamlessly expanded to include personal musings on the passage of time, thoughts, moods and emotions, memories, as well as a repository for family letters, the sea journal bore a Janus-faced quality as the writer looked outwards to the ship's destination and backwards towards home. For this reason,

the sea diary's dual purpose often makes for odd segues and incongruities in the written prose, and results in passages in which technical details of labour, observations of the weather, trivial and emotional reflections, coalesce into a strange form of maritime social realism. Ship's carpenter William Thomas, for example, combined details of work and musings on domestic matters as he logged his entry on 22 June 1872 on a journey from Liverpool to Quebec:

> 6 a.m. pumped ship with the mill made a boat hoot staff for the timber Swinger put the sling hoop on the top gallant yard and the yard harm hoops, a Man broke his legg & his big toe down in the hold today went ashore and bought a pair of shoes and a pincushing for [Harriet] and one for Kitty and a bucket for Maggie & Polly.[35]

The logbook was thus the exemplary form of a sailor's life at sea, in which work, rest, private life, social relations aboard ship, and thoughts of home intermingled at the level of the diurnal entry.

In my attempt to sift out personal and familial details among the tangle of maritime paraphernalia and terminology within these private logbooks, I am reading somewhat against the grain of scholarship that has considered this writing primarily as a historical record of labour. Shifting away from the texts' surface technical detail, I am interested in the logbook as a revealing form of self-narrative, in line with developments within life writing studies that have helped to broaden the way in which more prosaic documents of self can be read. I therefore transpose Hewitt's approach to the Victorian *terrestrial* diary as 'text, artefact and practice' to the oceanic logbook, in order to draw out the significance of that multifaceted perspective in the context of writing made at sea.[36] As Hewitt notes, it is primarily the pioneering work of feminist scholarship that has reclaimed the 'ordinary' diary as a rich expression of life writing.[37] One principle of this feminist work has been to read the diary on its own terms, a practice that involves an innovative and creative re-evaluation of the categories of the personal, ordinary, everyday, and lived experience. These methods of reading what are often fragmented forms by marginalised women nevertheless offer tools that can be more broadly applied. Indeed, as Hewitt goes on to conclude, the challenge is 'to recognise the complex cultural, symbolic, and textual operations of the diary, and to place it at the heart of discussions of life writing, with respect not just to the feminine or domestic life, but also to the masculine and public life'.[38]

Other scholarship has emphasised the need to read common diaries on their own terms, paying attention to their particular rhetoric and stylistic devices. Joe Moran, for example, suggests that it is precisely the oddness

and singularity of diary writing that offers the reader a key to its interpretation, adding that private diaries, as 'inherently opaque texts', are a valuable resource 'despite or even because of the interpretative challenges they present'.[39] This insight is applied by Jennifer Sinor in her forensic reading of her female ancestor's multi-volumed diaries, which detailed Annie Ray's life as a housewife in the Dakotas in the late nineteenth century. Sinor suggests that so-called ordinary diaries by people who were not professional writers, or who wrote in spite of limited skills of literacy or education, can serve to turn our attention away from the content of the writing – whether it is coherent, valuable, literary, or readable – towards a recognition of the diary as a signifying practice. Having noted the lack of a framework existing 'for valuing that which is useful, ordinary, and plain', Sinor asks,

> And if, indeed, we do *value* the used, the useful, the ordinary, and the everyday, do we know how to *evaluate* it? I question just how far we have come in reading the many ordinary things that surround us. For while I would agree that we have learned to honour that which is typically ignored … all too often we continue to read these texts through very conventional lenses.[40]

Sinor's conclusion has broader implications for viewing diary writing as a democratic form: 'How different – how simplistic – our understanding of Annie would be if we only relied on writing made by others rather than Annie's own production.'[41] Furthermore, there is an implicit politics to the valuation and respect accorded to vernacular writing; as Sinor puts it, '[h]ow we view ordinary writing, is, of course, largely a matter of how we view ordinary writers'.[42]

The logbook, like the diary, is an exemplum of this type of rote, repetitive 'ordinary' writing. As previously noted, the purpose of the official ship's log was plainly fixed on the movement of a vessel across a specific set of coordinates. And in their own informal logs, sailors' emphasis on details of the ship's coordinates and shipboard labour often confirms them to be workers with an eye for detail and a fascination with nautical technology. Some writers were very clear that their personal logs might constitute a form of useful knowledge. Journal-keeper Edward Beck, for example, wrote confidently that his diary would allow him to 'acquire a pretty good knowledge of one quarter of the globe at least'.[43] And certainly the depth of knowledge contained in personal logs reveals itself in entries filled with active verbs, gerunds, technical jargon, and objects, where the plural first-person pronoun often dominates over the standard 'I' of the diary entry. Making no apology for the repetition of the content, logbook writers insisted on the meaning and value of documenting repetitive activities: they clearly deemed repetitive work to

be literally noteworthy. 'Today nothing worth noticing has occurred', wrote one sailor dutifully, in an emblematically paradoxical phrase.[44] In this sense, these male-authored journals resemble another unique document of labour – that of the Victorian maidservant Hannah Cullwick, whose diary was famously filled with her logging of domestic labour and accounts of repetitive tasks. That Cullwick's writing 'stubbornly [insisted] on the visible economic and social value of her labor power', as Anne McClintock has put it, is an argument that can also be applied to these seafaring journal-keepers.[45] Indeed, many writers used the diaries to detail precisely the dirt and sweat of their work. 'My general appearance looks as if I had been thoroughly baked in a tar barrel', one seafarer engaged in blacking the ship's rigging wrote in the pages of his journal.[46] Others compared seaboard work with domestic work, thereby highlighting the disruption of traditional gender roles that took effect within the 'separate sphere' of the floating ship. In his memoir, Frank Bullen referred to the labour performed on ship as 'housemaid's work'; John Brown noted how 'besides being his own cook, a sailor is also his own laundress'; and Britten remarked that he was praised on ships as a 'maid of all work'.[47] In his sea diaries, Beck described his duties as cabin boy on his first voyage at sea in terms that are reminiscent of domestic labour:

> My morning's work used to commence in harbour by scrubbing the floor with sand and a small square stone about the size of a quarto volume, then mopping and getting it quite dry. After which, the polishing the said mahogany and stove occupied me till breakfast time, which I set into and had ready by 8 o'clock. When it was over, I washed and put away the tea things, made the pudding for the cabin, gave the cook it, the meat and vegetables, swept up the floor, then worked with the men till time to get dinner, on which … the washing and cleaning [of] the different utensils took me within an hour of tea.[48]

The writers' steadfast, fastidious record of rote, mundane tasks points to their own sense of the value of their labour – in a manner reminiscent of Cullwick – and gave visible form to the technical, focussed, and repetitive work of the sea. In their abbreviated and punctuated form, the diary entries reflect and validate the observation made by John Bryant: 'Work at sea is hard, focused, intense, perilous, immediate.'[49]

Bar notable exceptions (detailed in a later section of this chapter) the majority of the journal-writers detail the voyages in a prose style that is methodical and empirical, with a focus on actions, environment, and material objects. In line with Captain MacWhirr's plain style in *Typhoon*, the general tenor is one of sober commitment to work and industriousness,

far removed from the caricature of the pleasure-seeking sailor on shore; indeed ship's boy Alexander Whitehead's uniquely exuberant diary, detailing his escapades at sea in the companion of his close friend – further distinguished by the fact that it was originally written in Northumbrian dialect – proves the exception rather than the rule.[50] Most journals centre on repetitive and so-called ordinary events, or what Sinor calls 'documents of dailiness': weather variations, the work performed, and cherished moments of leisure.[51] They are minimalist rather than expansive, and when metaphorical language seeps into the writing, the same phrases, words, and expressions recur across individual texts: the weather is *squally* or there is a *dead calm*, waves are *like mountains*, the sea appears *like glass*. As Cohen points out, there may have been practical reasons for the directness of nautical writing and the avoidance of metaphor:

> Plain style was the language of work at sea, and here, as in other aspects of work at sea, efficiency and economy were paramount. The observations recorded in the ship's log and carried over into retrospective voyage narratives, conveyed the maximum of accurate, precise information with the minimum effort and space.[52]

The use of allusive language or an unusual expression in the ship's environment could lead to misinterpretation and therefore the possibility of risk in the context of seafaring work. As Greg Dening puts it: 'Precision, economy, definitional correspondence to coordinated actions were the mark of a seaman's language [and] sacramental to his sailor's skills and his control over his dangerous environment.'[53]

It is the weather, above all, that frames so many of the entries in the personal journals. Weather, of course, was of the utmost importance to life at sea, affecting sailors' daily conditions and comfort, and, crucially, particularly in the age of sail, the duration of the voyage. Thus while diary pronouncements on the weather might be deemed clichéd, they reflected an essential aspect of the oceanic environment. Along with such details of heat or wetness, sensations of tiredness, pain, hunger, thirst, seasickness, illness, and the pleasure of food were repeatedly logged by sailor-writers. Indeed, sea logs more broadly exemplify the critical insight that journals and diaries are intensely embodied texts and that 'daily lives are experienced corporeally, as a series of pleasures or discomforts in the present moment'.[54] Life writing criticism that generalises about the Victorian male autobiographer as detached from or unconcerned with the body, and motivated by more cerebral pursuits, overlooks the evidence contained in sea diaries.

What might appear on the surface as an impersonal or formulaic form of writing should also be seen in the round for what it was: a steady, confident – even ambitious – act of documentation and authorship. It is hard to ascertain whether the sailor-writers themselves looked upon the practice of journaling with pride, modesty, sufferance, or indifference. Yet this lack of self-reflexivity in the journals about the act of writing is striking and important in itself. It can be attributed in part precisely to the fact that sailor-writers were adapting the pre-existing model of logbook writing at sea. That official practice – sometimes undertaken informally by apprentice sailors – provided working men with an occasion for writing from which they may otherwise have been excluded. Indeed, the notable lack of self-consciousness in the diaries stands in marked contrast to what critics have deemed to be a ritual expression of humility, often in the form of a pseudo-apology for writing, that features in the prefatory sections of many published, retrospective working-class autobiographies.[55] Sailors, by contrast, apologised to no one for writing: no journal-writer in the archives I have consulted felt compelled to confess that they wrote at the instigation of 'friends' in the manner of so many of the early working-class autobiographers who published by means of patronage and editorial support. The evidence of sea journals suggests that sailors simply took to entering logs or keeping journals on the first day of their voyage, and maintained them in rote or creative fashion after that. As Raymond Williams remarks:

> Writing is hard enough and it usually only gets done at all if there is a form, whether people are aware of it or not. Not a model to be followed slavishly but the problem of writing depends on available forms which at least at some level can be taken for granted so that you're not, in the process of writing, actually having to invent forms.[56]

In this regard, the pre-existing model of the logbook may have provided ordinary working seafarers with a sanctioned model for writing at sea, as well as a prototype that was flexible enough to be moulded to the individual writer's needs. Oceanic labour, in other words, generated new writers and forms of writing.

In addition to the standard ship's log, sailors may also have been familiar with the logbook style as it was rendered through fictional accounts of sea voyages (examples of which are given later in this chapter). Across both sides of the Atlantic, as noted in Chapter 1, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* was a perennial favourite novel, including among working-class readers.[57] The popularity of the 'first English novel' has been attributed in part to

precisely the 'plain style' that characterises the passages in which Crusoe keeps his island journal – indeed, many of the popular and truncated versions of the novel (especially in formats aimed at a juvenile audience) focussed specifically on the accessible and visually-pleasing diary sequences in which Crusoe erects his island dwelling from the salvaged wreck in mechanical detail. As the essayist Charles Lamb commented of the novel in 1822:

> There is all the minute detail of a log-book in it. Dates are painfully pressed upon the memory. Facts are repeated over and over in varying phrases, till you cannot chuse but believe them. It is like reading evidence in a court of Justice. … His style is every where beautiful, but plain and homely.[58]

Going on to draw a suggestive line between sailors and female servants (for whom he thought the novel would provide 'capital kitchen-reading') he remarked: '*Robinson Crusoe* is delightful to all ranks and classes; but it is easy to see, that it is written in a phraseology peculiarly adapted to the lower conditions of readers. Hence, it is an especial favourite with seafaring men, poor boys, servant-maids, &c.'[59]

Clearly, it was also the opportunity of travel – of 'seeing the world', in the well-worn phrase – that prompted individuals, who might otherwise not have had the opportunity, to write.[60] Although it is difficult to ascertain (since maritime archives generally contain journals only relating to a sea voyage), it is likely that most amateur sailor-writers only kept journals while on ships and did not continue to write when back on land. William Cecil Barker, for example, ended his journal with a firm signal that the sea chapter of his life was cordoned off through his writing: 'So here ends my sea life, which began on the 5th Oct. 1856 and ended 30th April 1878.'[61] Some continued to write when they stopped in port but flexibly shifted the style as they moved from land to sea, and back again. Beck, for instance, signalled this conscious switch in form as he remarked: 'And now, having introduced myself as afloat, I shall drop a connected narrating manner and resort to scraps.'[62] 13-year-old apprentice George Haram's logbook-diary visibly changed on the page as he moved from ship to shore; at sea he entered his notes within the pre-formatted leaves of the logbook, but when he docked in Valparaíso Bay on the coast of Chile, he used a more discursive style, traversing the imprinted columns of the book with its redundant headings 'Courses', 'Winds', 'Leeway', and 'Transactions'.[63] A rare outlier in this respect is the journal of master mariner John Williamson. On board the *Rialto*, Williamson wrote passionate journal entries directed towards his absent wife, full of expressions of physical longing and a

desire to be reunited. On his eventual return to London, he continued to keep his journal, recording his more humdrum London life as a manager or dockmaster within the same bound volume as his earlier sea diary – although he never quite shook off the habit of prefacing entries with a note on the weather.[64]

Sometimes the form and content of the journal altered as the journey progressed, tilting, shifting, and assuming new shapes and formations, like stacked boxes of cargo in the ship's hold. John Dand, a shipyard worker who had taken a job as carpenter on a barque headed for Chile in 1858, was on his first journey at sea and had clearly set off with every intention of keeping a dutiful logbook. Early on he remarked on his good relations with the captain of the ship (with whom he evidently had a pre-existing local acquaintance) and noted the progress he was making in navigational instruction under his tutelage. Yet a few months later, the logbook had turned into a document of illicit activity, as Dand became embroiled in what appears to have been the practice of contraband smuggling in the port of Valparaíso at the instigation of his captain-mentor. Unexpectedly, the carpenter's account becomes more akin to R.L. Stevenson's late maritime fictions than Crusoe's more sober enterprises. Having initially hoped that the journey would turn him into a 'first-rate navigator', Dand abandoned any such pretensions and was forthright about his main concerns.[65] Indeed, by 19 July, Dand's journal entry stated plainly: 'During this day I have done nothing but smuggle things on shore.'[66] He proceeded to log each industrious act of petty bootlegging with fastidious attention to detail. His frankness might be explained by the fact that the log was a way of confessing to his illicit activity, or it may have been a useful way of adding up the amount of money he had made from smuggling; or perhaps he had simply tired of dutifully logging the same details regarding the weather and shipboard work and sought variation in his own narrative entries.

While the logbook was by design a repetitive and bounded form, these examples of amateur logs and diaries show evidence of variation, individuality, and even creativity. Sailors who may have modelled their writing on the rote diurnal log form often went on to adapt that style through their inclusion of personal reflections, or, in the case of Williamson, by addressing the writing to a loved one. In this way, personal logbooks offered a flexible and makeshift mode of writing: indeed, they were an ideal form for sea journeys that could be both routine – comprised of watches, repetitive work, periods of intense boredom – and dramatically unpredictable.

## Family and Kinship across Oceans

Popular nineteenth-century representations of sailors suggested that a departure to sea entailed the severance of domestic ties as they entered the total institution, or 'heterotopia', of the ship.[67] The late Victorian tropes of a 'flight from domesticity', 'flight from marriage', or the figure of the 'black sheep, the misfit, and the desperado' bundled off to make something of himself in imperial territory, are persistent images.[68] But such accounts are inadequate in relation to the various ways in which many working sailors and seafarers undertook maritime work to maintain the security of the homestead. Personal logbooks contain evidence to suggest an alternative version of this dominant theory of masculinity in the context of working seafarers, for whom home and kinship-based attachments on shore, as well as the emotional succour of old friends, alongside mateships formed at sea, remained important even as they travelled the globe. Indeed, the evidence of a number of logbooks, taken together with personal letters, reveals the importance of domestic and familial life to maritime men.

The carpenter John Dand, for example, was thinking of family even as he set sail from Swansea to Caldero on 18 March 1858. On the first page of his 'Private Journal', he reflected on the occasion of his daughter's birthday as he described the steam tug towing the ship away from Swansea dock.[69] As Easter Sunday came round, he used the occasion to reflect on domestic pleasures:

> My third Sunday on the sea. I am thinking of England and the happy youngsters with their new clothes, and wondering if my dear little daughter has got a new frock, I think its fond mother would get it one, at least its father would if he had been at home.[70]

More sentimental visions of home came to him as the ship proceeded on its course: 'I am thinking today that my wife will probably be writing a letter to me, and my little prattling girl by her side singing out Da-Da, and wanting an envelope to write on.'[71] At times, Dand's entries resemble a type of unsent letter to his family in which he evokes the intimacy of shared domestic life: 'Capt B[arnes] and I have had a long chat about home and friends', he writes in one entry, adding 'we are wondering what you are all doing, and thinking about, no doubt you are all in your beds and most likely asleep as by you it will only want a few minutes till midnight'.[72] While reflecting nostalgically on what may well have been idealised and enhanced visions of home (nostalgia and necessary detachment from mundane familial routines may well have made the hearts of seafaring men fonder) sailor writings also make clear the economic purpose of their

journeys: not, primarily, to see the world, but to earn a living wage that would be generally paid out in 'allotments' to dependents over the course of the voyage.[73] Dand, like other sailor-diarists, reflected directly on this practice in his log: 'June 15th. As this is the 15th of the month, my monthly money will be due for the second time. I expect my wife will get it all right.'[74] Yet like other logbook keepers, he also used his diary to ruminate on the significant advantages of a life at sea, including the development of friendships with crew members. For example, he enjoyed the privileged instruction and care he received from the fatherly captain who gave him access to his library on board the ship and offered him a 'good treat of Fancy Biscuits' and a 'glass of grog'.[75] Despite his thoughts of family, Dand seemed satisfied with the novelty of temporary domestic life at sea after the first month. 'I will say the truth, I like it well,' he reflected: 'I live well, better I consider than at home. Always an abundance on the Cabin table and that of the best description. My work is light. I have plenty of rest.'[76]

Like diaries, the material artefact of the logbooks and journals, when examined closely, can reveal small, revealing evidence about their authors.[77] Indeed personal journals written at sea offer evidence of maritime relations that extended beyond the shipboard community. Paratextual elements, such as the flyleafs and back pages, can be especially revealing in this sense. For while a small number of diarists wrote in standard issue, preformatted logbooks, most simply adapted ordinary notebooks for the purpose, and personalised them in a variety of ways. Some practised their signatures in the flyleaves, made sketches, or listed the names (and nationality) of the crew, as well as those of friends and women, transcribed religious verses, or tried their hand at poetry. Sailors of all ranks seem to have been avid taxonomists, often using the front and back pages to draw up accounts, and to list items of clothing or places visited.[78] The logbook of seafarer Edward Blackie, who voyaged on the *Crofton Hall* as part of his apprenticeship between June and October 1884, for example, provides small, but revealing, details of his family circumstances. Public records show that Blackie was the son of a merchant captain who, five years before Edward set out to sea, had died aged 39 on a return voyage of the *Clan Ranald* steamer travelling from Rangoon in 1879 (the father's certificated 'Death Place' is listed simply as 'Merchant Marine, At Sea, Great Britain').[79] His widowed mother, Hannah Blackie, subsequently went into business as the owner of a shop on Lark Lane, Liverpool, while also working as a lodging-house keeper in a house on Upper Pitt Street (part of the city's sailortown area before it developed as the city's Chinatown).[80] The journal gives very little direct personal detail about the circumstances in which

Hannah, a single mother who became the family breadwinner, sent her son to sea. But her new employment is signalled in the small stamp on the flyleaf of Edward's notebook, which bears her name, address, and livelihood: 'Stationary, Newsagents, Fancy Goods and Servants' Registry'.[81] Blackie's entries in the diary from his mother's shop are among the more typical of the logbook examples, offering details of the weather and jobs performed on the ship, including keeping watch, scrubbing decks, receiving navigational instruction, skinning an albatross, and an account of a vicious row between crew members. He separated out personal thoughts and reflections in letters addressed to his mother in which he described the difficulty of the journey and his homesickness. The letters bear the stamp of entrenched mother–son relations, sustained as they were across oceans; Edward could be petulant about her lack of letters, and expressed concern that she had enough work (while not 'overworking' herself): 'I trust the shop is paying well now', he added, hinting at the financial difficulties that must have attended the single-parent household.[82]

As in the example of Edward Blackie, the text of 15-year-old apprentice sailor, Sidney Smith, also reveals family circumstances. Smith was the son of a Gosport pawnbroker and sailed on the *Whampoa*, from Liverpool to Calcutta and New York between 1865 and 1868. He dedicated his record to his family in an inscription on the flyleaf of the journal: 'Diary of the voyage to Calcutta kept by Sidney Smith. For his Father & Sisters' (his mother had died in 1859 and the journal's dedication to his family may indicate his sense of attachment to the remaining members of his family in the years following this bereavement). Smith used the journal to record the usual details of work and conditions aboard ship, but it also served as a place in which he reflected on his growing homesickness and utter disillusionment with life at sea (Figure 2.1). Thus he used the entry to respond to a family member:

> At eleven o'clock I was thinking of what you wrote to me in your letter and could just imagine you sitting in church thinking and praying for me. I shall be very glad when we get over this voyage as I shall be able to leave the sea. I hate it more and more every day to hear such bad language as I do on Sundays or any other day and not being able to go to church. The sea is a miserable life, there is no mistake about it.[83]

In November he confessed, 'I have felt very lonely today as there is no work going on and nothing to divert one's thoughts away. Wish I was at home.'[84] By 4 May 1868 he wholeheartedly denounced the common myths of maritime life:

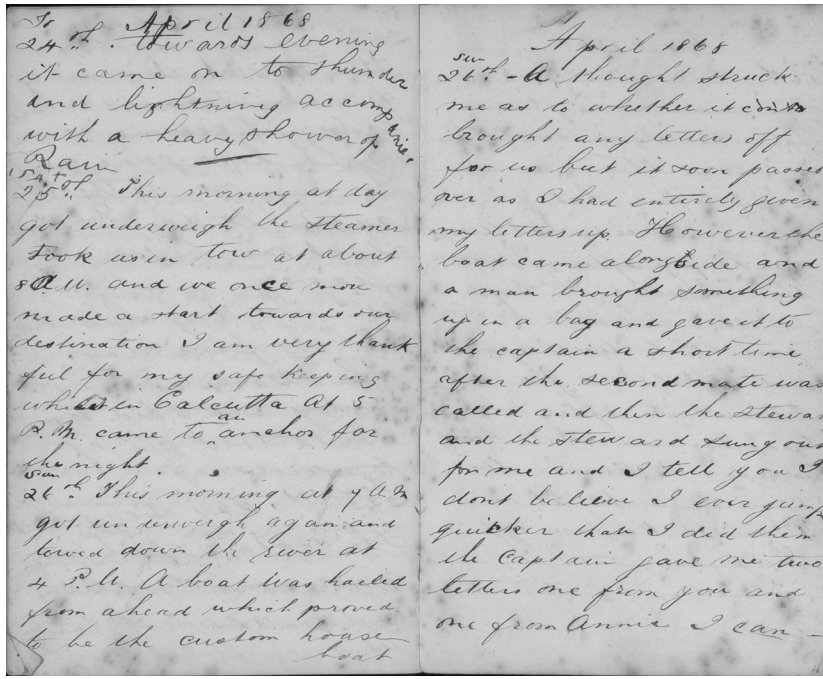

Figure 2.1 S9617-001 Journal of Sidney Smith on board the *Whampoa*, September 1867–April 1868. © National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London.

> I have been miserable all day today what with the … prickly heat that I have on me it is quite a torture. When sailors go to sea they think they shall see a great deal of the world but it is not so for when at sea they see nothing but sky and water … They do not know half so much of the world as people ashore.[85]

A few days later, tormented by the prickly heat and mosquito bites, he declared himself 'ready to jump overboard'.[86] It seems that Smith was eventually 'discharged from the *Whampoa* by mutual consent' in New York and did not work as a sailor again, taking up work as an apprentice ironmonger on his return.[87]

Homesickness also pervaded the pages of 22-year-old George Mansfield's sea journal, another ship's carpenter who had worked at the profession since the age of 14, and who wrote in a simple notebook inscribed with the female name 'Mary Jane Fry, January 1864' (the notebook appears to have been a present from a younger cousin).[88] On a hot Sunday, the day of relative rest even for sailors, Mansfield used the diary to note how he was 'engaged

today reading my letters & looking at likeness[es] & it seems as though I would give anything to see those dear old faces again'.[89] Like Smith, he was particularly melancholy on Sundays. In one such entry, he wrote:

> Today can not help thinking about home & its comforts & fancying myself seated round a comfortable fireside of a winters Sunday afternoon. Far different here cold & wet & deprived of almost every comfort. Still the thought of Home & the Hope of meeting again, cheers us up a little.[90]

He made approving note of the crew's attempts to replicate Christmas festivities on board ship, commenting in his log that '[a]lthough we are now 5280 miles away from Liverpool we have not forgot that its Christmas, we are enjoying our Holiday as best we can, we have a good Dinner of Soup & Boullion & Plum Pudding & a Plum Cake for Tea'.[91] Yet these efforts seem to have been but poor compensation, for Christmas on board ship only intensified his nostalgia for people left behind. Even the start of the new year rendered the carpenter mournfully philosophical:

> New Year's Day. Another era of our brief existence is began. … My mind could not help recalling back to former seasons of the kind – as I went on deck to keep the Midnight watch & was greeted by all with a Happy New Year – here out on Mighty Ocean 6100 miles away from home.[92]

With a repeated emphasis on the ship's mileage, Mansfield articulated his feelings of homesickness through the sailor's technical idiom.

As he traversed the world on the *Beagle* between 1831 and 1836, Charles Darwin reflected in his shipboard writing on the unusual temporalities experienced at sea.[93] But so-called ordinary writers also reflected on oceanic time; they were often insistent on the possibility of the regularity of time, as shown through their assiduous inscription of dates and details of the ship's latitude and longitude, while also perplexed by its strange permutations at sea. Dand was upfront about the fact that his precise documentation of daily activities were based on an inherent temporal discrepancy ('as I have commenced keeping a log I must mention here that the days work commences after Noon on the day previous to the date of it, for instance what occurs after Noon on a Monday is entered in the log book dated Tuesday and so on').[94] As a sailor who had literally travelled around the world, Barker mused on Captain Cook's insight that in doing so 'you have gained a day by going round the World in a Easterly direction, and the reverse will happen if you go in a Westerley direction'.[95] 17-year-old Sidney Smith also commented on the disorienting effects of sea-time in his journal: 'It is just 3 years ago that I came

on board this ship and yet it seems to me as if I had been on board all my lifetime.'[96] It is clear from subsequent transcriptions in edited versions of sea journals that the writers sometimes made errors in their presentation of calendrical dates, so that their reference to dates becomes a rhetorical rather than reliable device. Ordinary sailors therefore articulated what Blum nicely terms the 'weird temporalities of the sea', a feature that has been theorised by scholars of oceanic studies as the way in which 'familiar patterns of relationality (capital, national, planar, human) dissolve in the space and time of the sea'.[97]

Read for form rather than content, then, the maritime diary's characteristic repetition is instrumental and bound up with ideas of selfhood, for it served to connect the writer to social relations and networks that lay across oceans precisely in spite of those 'weird temporalities'. While many deployed the logbook to mark standard calendrical time, other seafarers used entries to mark religious days or other days of significance, including their own birthdays. This repetition could be personally meaningful; as Rita Felski notes, '[r]epetition, understood as ritual, provides a connection to ancestry and tradition; it situates the individual in an imagined community that spans historical time'.[98] The effects of this could nevertheless be odd, since the entries paradoxically register the writer's loneliness and sense of estrangement rather than any festive spirit. Sidney Smith, for example, marked Easter in rather desultory tones on board the *Whampoa*: '"Good Friday" but there is no cry of hot cross buns here.'[99] On January 1, another teenage sea diarist, steward Thomas Harrop, wrote to an unspecified readership: 'Happy New Year to you all. Dead Calm.'[100] Months later he noted his birthday with similar minimal cheer: 'August 27. My 15th Birthday. Passed a Whaler.'[101] One writer even thought to commemorate 'the Ships birthday a year old'.[102]

Writing clearly was an activity used to record time spent at sea.[103] Harrop, who worked on the barque *Thomas Wood* sailing from Liverpool to Madras, recorded the passing of days, like notches etched onto a prison wall:

> Nov 29
> Been at sea Sixty three days
>
> Dec 5
> Been at sea Seventy days
>
> Tuesday Dec 13
> Been at sea Seventy seven days

Sunday Dec 18
Caught Four Albatross and Five Cape Hens

Tuesday Dec 20
Been at sea Eighty four days[104]

Harrop was less interested in giving a description of the ship's location than painstakingly marking out the time that had elapsed since departure. There is nothing dizzying or exciting in his particular form of oceanic time, which is rendered in the flat, rote tone of a dismal countdown. Home and the date of departure provide the diary's own implicit Greenwich Mean Time. Perhaps Harrop marked the days in this way precisely because of the disorienting effect of keeping track of the world at sea. On 22 July 1865, for example, he noted that the vessel had 'spoke' (exchanged signals and news) with the *Forest Flower* that had set out from St Helena, in the course of which he had obtained copies of three newspapers from that ship (*The Times*, *Morning Star*, and *Home News*), all of which carried news of 'Abe Lincoln's murder', an event that had taken place over three months before, on 14 April 1865.[105]

Domestic details could also incongruously slip into maritime writers' descriptions of foreign landscape and experiences. Indeed, some sailors seemed to have travelled to exotic locations across the globe, only to find that it reminded them of home – an observation that was perhaps more reflective of their state of homesickness than an accurate record of the environment. For example, when Beck first glimpsed Van Diemen's land from the ship he wrote in his diary that its 'appearance is as exactly like the coast of Scotland as can be, and forcibly reminded me of Caithnesshire'.[106] The sight of fishing boats from Cape Clear reminded Neil Smith of 'home and Other days',[107] and William Archer thought of the Cumbrian landscape – 'the water is as smooth as Bassenthwaite Lake' – as he sailed from Liverpool to Australia.[108] Disrupting the posited binary of the domestic and the exotic, the diary entries served to domesticate and familiarise the strange environment.

Beyond their content, the material existence and survival in archives of these logbooks, written by ordinary, undistinguished, and often very young seafarers, testify to the role of the personal journal in the maintenance of attachments to home. Like the terrestrial diary, the implied audience of the entries could be various and shifting; diarists alternatively addressed themselves, the journals, individual family members and even the ship itself.[109] To explore diaries within the context of shipboard life is thus to be constantly reminded of the fundamentally social aspect of life

writing, despite the genre's broader, longstanding association with individualism and atomism. The person who wrote sea logs, travel diaries, or scribbled notes in carefully preserved notebooks was embedded in social networks, even when marooned in oceanic space, away from the terrestrial coordinates of 'ordinary' life. Indeed, many sailors had the paradoxical sense on ships of being 'never alone … always isolated'.[110]

While the diary entries may have marked the transitory nature of diurnal, ordinary time, the journal, or logbook itself was clearly not intended to be merely ephemeral. Writers had preservation in mind as they set out to record the uneventful and eventful moments of a day, either for their own records, or to pass on to family members. Even those who railed against life at sea, and whose diaries are chronicles of homesickness and a general revulsion for oceanic society, sought to preserve their accounts. Beck was upfront about the legacy he envisaged for his journals: 'It affords me no small pleasure, thus to give to the different branches of the Beckean family some account of the days spent by one of its most wandering members.'[111] Even when authors make no such claim, the fact that families clearly preserved such scrappy notebooks – replete with repetitive details of work, squalls, low rations, and low spirits – suggests that they themselves recognised the common logbook as not at all ordinary, but rather as unique and interesting documents of survival.

The significance of the logbook as a family book is exemplified by the case of John Dand, the ship's carpenter who found himself drawn into a petty smuggling racket in Valparaíso. Occupying the top half of the first page of his personal logbook is a hand-drawn list of family names with a series of columns resembling a census record listing name, status, and dates of birth, marriage and death, while on the bottom half is a self-drawn navigational chart situating the ship's location and containing the usual log of remarks, thus aligning the record of the ship to that of the family. A note in the archive shows that parts of Dand's accompanying diary were filled in by hand in 1892 by Dand's son (presumably transcribed from other notebooks), providing a material trace of the way in which family members 'can be perceived as interlocutors or even coauthors whose interventions have textual substance and significance'.[112] These paratextual traces suggest that the logbook, in the manner of a household Bible, had been conserved and passed down as a family heirloom and 'emotional object [that] can tie different generations together through time'.[113] Indeed, the date of Dand's death has been assiduously filled in by a family member on the front page of his diary. In this way, the personal logbook was turned into a family book, in line with Sharon Marcus's broader comment on so-called private

writing, that 'far from being a repository of the most secret self, the diary was seen as a didactic legacy, one of the links in a family history's chain'.[114]

Families may have preserved the maritime logbooks as extraordinary objects not just because of the accounts they provided of global travel, but precisely because they were written life stories – an artefact linked to a cherished individual and, as such, an 'emotional object'.[115] In other words, to regard diary writing, even of the rote logbook variety, merely as 'ordinary' writing belies the feat of the accomplishment. As Moran notes in relation to what he calls the vernacular form of the common diary, 'while one should recognise that diary writing as a genre often privileges banality and routine over narrative incident, it is worth noting as well that diarists themselves are often unconventional or idiosyncratic. To write thousands of private diary entries over a long period is a rare and even contrarian act.'[116] Even if there was a precedent for writing at sea, for working seafarers to attempt to keep a written record was a significant undertaking given the conditions that militated against it: notebooks and writing implements had to be procured, and the book itself required careful safekeeping within the watery environment (in fact, sea diarists frequently complained about the effort to keep clothes and personal effects dry). Many sailors clearly struggled to physically put pen to paper on floating vessels with limited sources of light and space: one sailor was obliged to write his journal 'jammed up between a chest and my writing desk',[117] while a ship's carpenter commented that 'it is not easley wrighting when the Ship is rowling so'.[118] Sailors famously returned from trips bearing gifts and exotic objects obtained on their travels, but the sea diary itself could be viewed as a prize item in the sailor's haul of curios.

## Ordinary Writing: The Diary of a Carpenter at Sea

One sea diary encapsulates a number of the themes discussed here. It is not a lavishly illustrated journal, nor does it rank among the more fluent, erudite, or outwardly remarkable journals by seafarers found in maritime archives, or anthologised in collections.[119] Neil Smith was officially registered as 'carpenter', although his diaries show that, like other skilled seafarers, he was deployed as a Jack-of-all-trades on board the Greenock-registered barque *Cape Finisterre* in 1876–1877 (owned by Abram Lyle and Sons – of the Tate & Lyle partnership), and engaged not only in carpentry but other various makeshift jobs including what he called 'sailorising'. The *Finisterre* was taking coal from Cardiff to Java, where it picked up a Liverpool crew and transported cane sugar to San Francisco, before

returning home with wheat and borax. Smith had limited literacy skills, yet he assiduously kept a log of his two-year journey.

In both appearance and style, Smith's journal is apparently ordinary.[120] In short, repetitive entries that are plain in expression and often phonetic in spelling, Smith wrote about his work onboard ship, his devout Christianity, and his desperate longing to return home to his family. This was not Smith's first voyage, but it seems to have been especially difficult for him. Page after page is filled with expressions of dejection and loneliness, despite the presence of his fellow shipmates. His entries are largely preoccupied with how much he missed his wife Jane and their two sons, Angus, aged 2 in 1876 and baby Duncan (who had been born while Smith was at sea on a previous voyage). Like emigrant letters of this period, Smith's diary – despite its halting form and limited range of expressions – is, in Lyons's phrase, 'a writing of absence and desire'.[121] The ship had not even left port at Penarth in Cardiff before Smith logged his homesickness in the very first entry:

> Greenock May th10 – 1876
> Joined the Barque Cape Finisterre at Greenock … All went on well during the passage. I wear[i]ed very much wishing for home.[122]

Less than a week later, he used the diary to list his work duties alongside thoughts about his family and his feelings on board ship:

> Tuesday May th16
> Begun to take out Ballest [ballast] this morning. All going on well but not so well as if I was [at] home. I hope they ar all well. May God the give of all good Bless my dear Jane and Boys. I weary awful (p. 1).

Smith's diary reveals that he was not the only soul on the *Finisterre* to suffer loneliness, and he had found solidarity with an 'old mate' on the ship. Despite Smith's observation that this friend was not 'the [pleasantest] sort of a man', the co-workers appear to have found solace in each other's company: 'I could put up with him. He is an old man and has a wife and familey at home so it is very hard to be cast away so far from home and it is very slack times here' (p. 39).

The diary enabled Smith to summon visions of his home and to take comfort in recalling its familiar domestic, communal, and seasonal rhythms. For example, on 15 June he remarked, 'I cant get dear wee Angus out of my mind today. I think of his littel talk' (p. 6). In his diary he wrote that he sensed 'the long nights ar coming on at home now and my Jane will be weaving. I wish I was at home with her' (p. 20). Smith thought not just of his wife and 'wee Pates' (children) but also ruminated on his

friends and the community's local routines ('I hope there is a good fishing at home. And plentie of work in Greenock') (p. 8). In this way, Smith used his diary to reassure himself of the routines of loved ones as they operated in the parallel sphere of his Scottish home. As the hot sun beat down on him off the coast of Java, he imagined snow falling in Greenock.

Smith's rote rendering of daily tasks and his regular marking of time also performed another important function: together they laid bare the economic underpinning of the carpenter's voyage. Put simply, the entries served to remind him of the money that would be paid out to his family in his absence. In one log of the diary, he commented 'this will be a great night in Greenock. All hands get paied this after noon and tomorrow' (p. 8), adding later, 'This is my Jane pay day, 7 month since I left hir. This is the last this year' (p. 25). As Smith ruefully put it, being 'tossed about on the Ocean' (p. 8), was a means to an end; he was there as the family breadwinner, and the nature of the work entailed his separation from the family he endeavoured to support.[123] Thus while the diary entries themselves are repetitive, sometimes to the point of apparent banality, the significance of the labour they recorded was anything but: by Smith's own reckoning, and reflected in his dogged form of accounts, his work was indispensable. Indeed, as Sinor comments in relation to diary-writing more broadly, '[m]anufacturing and documenting [the diarist's] own usefulness is both a material and rhetorical act. Materially one of the diary's most important tasks is to serve as a repository for moments of activities that could easily pass unnamed but are instead seized and named through the diary's technology.'[124]

From the start of the journey, Smith was preoccupied with questions of time and space as the *Finisterre* ploughed its course to what indeed seemed to be the end of the earth. On 3 June 1876 he reflected: 'Time is passing day after day and week after week and we ar moving along towards a [foreign] land and much shurer we ar moving along towards the end of our days and littel we think of how we spent them (p. 4)'. But reflections on the significance of time were not just existential for sailors like Smith. As Benjamin Franklin famously proclaimed, time was money, particularly on merchant ships in the context of a commercial trade that depended on the swift conveyance of goods between ports.[125] However, the tempo of private life, for the heartsick carpenter, moved with painful slowness. Thus on 9 June 1876 he wrote, 'My first Month is up to day. I have felt it very long but if I am well and all things going well this voage [voyage] will soon Pass and I will get home to my dear home and Wife and Familey and Freands' (p. 5). By March of the following year, he

noted: 'Time is flying fast but this slow coatch of a ship is not going very fast. It is wearisom to look at hir going through the watter' (p. 33). After he had despatched a letter homeward, he pondered on the fact that it would be over a month until it reached Greenock. Far away from home, he relied on memories and personal anniversaries to anchor his thoughts. Thus as the ship passed the Cape Agulhas, he realised that the last time he was there was when his youngest child Duncan was born, and on another occasion he remembered the anniversary of his happy wedding day. Like other diarists, the comfort of logging meaningful dates served ironically to highlight the gulf between his routines on the trying voyage and the comfort of quotidian life at home. On 31 October, his Scottishness meant that he felt an acute lack of Halloween festivity among the multinational crew ('I used to enjoy that night at home but know one nous [no one knows] about it here' (p. 22)). Similarly, he had cause to note on 2 January 1877: 'New yearsday is over and no word about it here, the work going on as usual. One can scarce beleave that it was Newyear at all' (p. 27). As time passed, he reflected on the changes at home that might have taken place in his absence. Wistfully, he mused: 'I expect Angus [will] have lots of talk now if he is in the highlands. He will be larning to speeck Galic and Duncan will soon be walking. I hope they ar well. May God keep them and Bless them' (p. 10). Indeed, he appears to have used the diary as a means of offering up prayers for the safety of his family in a ritualistic form of incantation.

But this repetitive form of magical thinking was to fail when Neil Smith finally received a letter in the port of San Francisco from his wife informing him of the 'sorrowful nuse [news] of the death of my dear wee Angus' (p. 36). The time lag involved in Smith's reception of this news adds another level of poignancy. For while Smith recorded having obtained his wife's letter on the 22 April 1877, census records show that 2-year-old Angus had died of the croup months earlier on 6 December 1876, a date on which – according to the evidence of Smith's own diary – the ship was passing along the Bali Straits and the only incident of note was that the captain had caught a shark.[126]

The day after he received news of the death of his son, Smith continued his regular chronicle of work, although he made note of his low spirits in his diary: 'A very dul day to me. I wrot a letter to my dear Jane' (p. 36). Subsequent entries continued in the journal's characteristic 'plain style', although there is marked poignancy in the way that Smith adjusted his regular prayerful wishes for his family's safety by using singular rather than plural form to refer to his remaining child ('I hope my dear Jane and Child

ar well' (p. 37)). The apparent comfort Smith took in marking occasions of personal significance continued in the logbook, although they took on an added resonance as he commemorated dates associated with his son. Thus on 10 June he noted: 'This was the Birth day of our Beloved Angus. But he has gon to Rest among the Redeamed and May the Lord Change our harts to him that at our deaths we may be with him in Heaven' (p. 39). Even given the relative brevity of Smith's usual entries, it is possible to sense a palpable shift in tone in the continuation of the diary. By July 1876, Smith seems to have grown tired of logging his work as the ship sailed homeward; the entries are increasingly short, until he resorted to the briefest of expressions: 'Nothing new', 'The same', 'Do' [ditto] (p. 42). It is with some relief that he appears to have penned the last entry: 'I beleave we ar going to dock tonight … so I suppose that will be the last of the Cape Finisterre' (p. 48).

Memoirs have been described as 'the autobiography of survival',[127] but the sea journal provides a more literal inscription of that epithet. That life writing is inherently bound up with an author's sense of mortality has become a commonplace in studies of the genre, but the proposition takes on a vivid concreteness in maritime journaling in which risk to life was ever present.[128] It is in this context that the sometimes trying monotony of the sea diary's repetition takes on added significance. The often formulaic, repetitive entries, whose content could be said to lack in variety or colour, were nonetheless meaningful at the level of form: at its simplest level, those entries signified that the journey was continuing according to plan and that the writer had survived. Indeed, the narrative potential of the logbook as a signifier of life writing (that is, a text produced by an author who is literally alive to write it) was not lost on writers of fiction. As Blum notes, in relation to Edgar Allan Poe's fictionalisation of a sea diary in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838), 'the existence of the material sea narrative seems to promise the survival of the sailor'.[129] This also lends profundity to certain formulaic expressions that can be found in a diary, such as that of Neil Smith. For when, amid the misery and homesickness, Smith noted 'All things going on well', the phrase signified that the ship was afloat and on course to its destination, and that he was still alive to earn the money on which his family depended. As Horatio Clare comments in his contemporary account of a voyage in a commercial container ship, the 'history of professional seafaring is a story of man's attempts to minimise exceptional circumstances, in the environment most likely to produce them'.[130] Against all the uncertainties of the precarious watery journey, including its indefinite duration, the logs performed endless diurnal acts of successful completion.

Public records show that Neil and Jane Smith were reunited in Greenock and went on to have four more children – one of whom was named Neil after his father, while the other bore the name of the family's first son, Angus, who had died during the voyage of the *Finisterre*. Smith himself died less than ten years after that journey, at the age of 43, just one year after the birth of his sixth child.[131] His wife, Jane (née McPhail, who had been a domestic servant before marrying Smith) appears to have taken on the mantle of breadwinner, for future census records show her listed as a smallwares shop owner and grocer.[132] Beyond these documentary records, the existence of Neil Smith's journal in archives perhaps helps to supplement some of the personal detail of Smith's life after his last entry on arrival in Penarth docks. For Smith had no obvious reason to retain this record of what was evidently a miserable journey in which he experienced, from afar, the loss of a child. Its preservation, presumably as a family heirloom, suggests that Smith and his family felt impelled to keep the book as a type of souvenir – perhaps less of a souvenir of his voyage to Bali, than a testament of endurance. Whether he passed the book on to his surviving children before he died, or if the mottled pink and black marbled notebook was retrieved from possessions by his wife after his death, it serves as a unique account of the intersections of labour, masculinity, and emotions as recorded in a working-class diary at sea.

## How Do Logbooks End? Turning Maritime Experience into Narrative

Sinor's theorisation of the value of ordinary diary writing by non-professional, amateur, or obscure writers provides a helpful model through which to interpret the hybrid form of the sea diary wherein collective routines and individual experience are intermingled. Yet she is emphatic that any reading of such ordinary writing needs to resist the lure of story and narrative, those strands that beckon enticingly to all kinds of readers, including the literary critic and the historian. As Sinor argues, the search for a narrative thread puts the reader at risk of overlooking the granular detail of the diarist's telling quotidian discourse. In the context of her ancestor's journal, for example, Sinor notes that to 'carve ordinary writing into a narrative … requires jettisoning so much: the blizzards, the warm weather, the shelling of peas, the making of pies, the airing of mattresses, the darning of socks, the ironing, and the mopping of the floors'.[133] The reader who skims over these domestic details in pursuit of the pivotal moment, a development in character, or a narrative hook, she argues, may overlook the socially rich and telling aspects of the diary's representation of everyday life.

Sinor's argument is important in recognising the value of women's life writing throughout history, including its unpublished and vernacular forms. Yet, in the context of the maritime diary or logbook, narrative and its enticements are less easily held at bay. Indeed, as I have argued throughout this chapter, it is hard to maintain even the principle of 'ordinariness' in relation to the writings of so-called ordinary sailors (a term applied in a broad sense to rank-and-file or lower-deck seafarers). For even the most commonplace archival sea diaries contain details of incidents that could be considered extraordinary, unusual or dramatic, particularly with regard to the broader tradition of Victorian working-class writing with its traditional emphasis on deep locality and vocational continuity. Many incidents relayed in the logbooks might strike the non-initiated reader as reminiscent of maritime fiction rather than 'ordinary' life. Even the most commonplace sea journals contain accounts that document fierce rows between crew members; the threat of mutiny; the imprisonment of rebellious workmates; disease, illness, and infections; deaths at sea (and, on passenger ships, births at sea); grisly work accidents; shark dissections; a fearsome squall; a drunken captain; a shipmate's suicide; and even the odd shipwreck or abandonment of the vessel. The son of a Cornish maltster and farmer, Richard Behenna, for example, kept a diary while working as a cook and ordinary seaman on ships to Bombay, Sydney, and the West Indies in the 1850s; his journal includes a dramatic present-tense account of a shipwreck and rescue on a journey from Callao back to England in 1856 (although how the logbook-diary survived the shipwreck is disappointingly not mentioned).[134]

At a broader level, there was simply nothing mundane or ordinary about the enterprise of international maritime labour performed across global space. While shipboard routines may have been necessarily banal and repetitive, the life experiences of working sailors, in the floating, homosocial, multinational, and multilingual settings of the merchant ship, were anything but. In fact, the 'plain style' or prosaic tone of maritime diaries often serves to minimise or belie the unusual nature of the experiences recalled. This paradox is highlighted, for example, in the case of a 17-year-old British sailor who noted in his journal with characteristic understatement on the extraordinary nature of seafaring life: '*Saturday January 2*. The mate says we are going to Australia instead of England which is not pleasant news.'[135] Sea journals, as noted previously, often blend the commonplace with the extraordinary and narrate dramatic incidents in prosaic style. As Moran argues, this tendency for seamless collocation is a feature of diary writing more broadly:

'Untroubled by the historian's reaching after pattern and significance, diarists often juxtapose the public and private, the momentous and banal, in unexpected ways.'[136]

The curious blending of the commonplace and the outlandish meant that some sea diarists struggled to keep pace in their writing with developing circumstances. 22-year-old Mansfield, for example, sailing from Liverpool to San Francisco, was in the habit of noting rote details of weather and work. But he adopted a more narrative form in order to convey a recent crisis: 'Yesterday was a fearful day, two men were washed away from the wheel with a narrow escape of their lives, the same scene nearly filling the Cabin. The Huge waves like mountains seemed at times to combine their whole force to crush our frail Bark sometimes thrown nearly on our beam ends.'[137] On 28 June 1869, which Mansfield incongruously marked in his diary as 'Coronation Day', he laid bare his own sense of fear and a desperate longing for the safety of home:

> I must say I was almost afraid to go & turn in that night, when I was laying in my berth & hearing the seas strike our side & knocking us sometimes nearly on our beam ends & Did not know a moment but it may be our last. I thought about everybody at home how they had been enjoying themselves today, I could not sleep but lay there anxiously wishing for the morrow. And myself at home.[138]

Having begun his diary setting out the orderly coordinates of latitude and longitude and logging the tasks he had dutifully completed, Mansfield now found himself narrating a real-time tale of near-shipwreck: 'The captain rushed out of Cabin to the wheel & kept the Ship away just in time to save the Ship & our lives from instant destruction. For had one more sea come on board she must have went down.'[139] In actuality, the *Lady Heathcote* made its way back safely to Liverpool after 136 days at sea. Records suggest that Mansfield went on to work as a shipwright in Portsea; by 1901 he was more safely grounded as a general shopkeeper who occupied rooms above his shop in Portsmouth with his wife and two daughters.[140]

William Thomas, a 21-year-old ship's carpenter and the son of a sailor from Toxteth in Liverpool, also used his notebook to record the terror of being caught up in a storm on his voyage from Liverpool to Quebec in 1872, on the *Indian Queen*. In an account simply titled 'My Diary', Thomas regularly detailed the weather and work, and noted significant occurrences such as interesting views, pleasant social exchanges on board ship or with other passing vessels. But when the weather shifted, so too did the tenor of his narrative. On Saturday 27 July 1872, entries that had previously chronicled Thomas's familiar litany of chores were

transformed into the account of a desperate struggle to keep the vessel seaborne: '5a.m. shipped a heavy Sea Smashed in the Work Shop Door, knocked Tom across the Shop Wet my Bed & the Sail Makers half filled the two Rooms. Tom Sails and Myself got locked in my Room the Door got [jammed] had to break it oppen it had to Bail the water out with a Bucket.'[141]

In an acceleration of pace, Thomas's diary entries were reduced to brief – yet regular – updates on the crew's attempt to keep the ship afloat:

> Tuesday July 30th
> Fine Weather, Steering N.W. by N.
> 4 a.m. All hands Bout Ship.
> 7 a. m. Warm Weather Steering E. by S.
> 8 a.m. All hands Bout Ship.
> 12 noon All hands Bout Ship. Repairing a Grating on poop.
> 5 p.m. All hands Bout Ship.
> 8 p.m. Pumped ship. Fine night.[142]

The diary – or at least what was preserved of it – breaks off on 2 August 1872. But a handwritten copy of a report serves to fill in the conclusion of the voyage. This account, originally given not by the diarist but by the ship's second mate, recounts the abandonment of the ship five months later in December 1872, after a storm finally caused the vessel to become flooded. It echoes the close call that Thomas had narrowly averted months earlier, including how the crew had worked tirelessly to pump water away from the ship in order to keep it afloat before it finally capsized:

> Still continuing to blow with [terrific] Fury and Sea making continual Breaches over the Vessel the ten [remaining] of the crew managed to Lash themselfs in the Mizen Rigging [where] they continued up to the Morning of Dec 2nd. During this time the Bodies of the Chief Officer and Steward [were] all That was Seen of the Twelve missing. Dec 3 Weather more moderate But completely Waterlogged Main Deck Burst open and ship Fast Breaking up. The Few Survivors were now in Great Distress There Being no possibility of Getting anything to Eat and no Water the tanks having been stove in With The Timber. 7a.m. Saw a Vessel to Windward and Made all maner of Distress Signals.[143]

Fifteen men died during this gale, including the captain, the master of the ship, first officer, and twelve ordinary crew members. The surviving crew, including William Thomas, were rescued by the *Don Guillermo* sailing from New York to Liverpool, where they were 'Receved With Every Kindness' and 'Everything Done possible for our Comfort'.[144] Like the layering of documents that provide narrative resolution in one kind

of Victorian novel, the second mate's report offers a strange coda to this 'ordinary' sea journal. Presumably Thomas salvaged his earlier diary from the shipwreck, later transcribing the official report of the shipwreck into the back of the notebook as evidence of his survival.

Like Thomas, the young 15-year-old ship's apprentice Charles Cartwright, the son of a grocer from Liverpool, also encountered more than he had bargained for when he set sail in 1894 on the Liverpool barque the *Craigmullen* bound for Natal, then a British colony on the south-eastern African coast. Cartwright personalised his journal with doodles and drawings on the flyleaf, including a sketch of a woman in profile and a domestic image of a house surrounded by trees with smoke drifting from the chimneys. The diary, however, offers few insights into his personal thoughts, and the entries are mainly focussed on work. But by December, conditions on board had started to seriously deteriorate, and the sailors faced the impending catastrophe of a drastic shortage of food. The diary details the effect of a lack of provisions on the working crew:

> No unnecessary work being done now. Men went aft & told the Captain they could not work day & night on the grub we were getting. All we get now is salt meat, rice, biscuits, coffee, sugar & vinegar. Nothing else is the ship fore & aft, and almost every night now, all hands are called out. Everybody is so weak, that all hands have even to take the topsail.[145]

Despite these difficulties, the ship's company attempted to mark Christmas towards the end of the month, dining together 'for appearance sake', and on 24 December Cartwright wrote, in an entry which highlights the strangeness of sea life: 'Had a concert in the Hf-deck at night. Santa Clause paid a visit & filled certain fellows sea boots with rice etc. Watches altered again.'[146] In an oceanic version of a Victorian Christmas, Cartwright described how '[t]he evening was spent in spinning & listening to seasonable yarns around the yuletide log (Paraffin oil lamp)'.[147] But the jovial events could not mask the severity of the situation on the ship and Cartwright noted the rapidly worsening health of the cook and the carpenter due to malnourishment. By the time they marked New Year's Day with the '[r]inging of bells, singing and shouting', the cook and the carpenter were dying – 'The Cook is delirious now & chips is in a very low condition. Both are laying in the main cabin, & Alf & myself have the job of watching them day & night.' Fearful for his own health, Cartwright noted plainly in his journal, 'Scurvy is showing signs now. All hands showing some sign of it. Eat nothing but rice & biscuit now, so as not to excite the scurvy by salt meat.'[148] In entries that are both visceral and prosaic, he

recorded the eventual death of the cook and carpenter, referring to them according to the habit of shipboard 'metonymic naming',[149] while simultaneously maintaining his precise log of the vessel's movements:

> Sunday 12th. The Cook died this morning. He had been unconscious all week. Lat 30° 10°S 87° 48°W.
> Chips [carpenter] no better.
> Monday 13th Buried the Cook, & sold his effects by auction 28° 52°86°46°W.
> Wednesday 13th The Carpenter died this morning. He was like a skeleton, & as he started immediately to discolour, we buried him right away. Lat 26°S Long 83° 20°W.
> 16th Sold chip's effects by auction.[150]

According to the diary, by 29 January they had reached Pisco where they were able to restore their provisions of food. In passing, Cartwright mentioned that the first mate, Mr Mann, had left their ship, setting sail for Valparaíso to join a mail boat heading home.

Unlike most of the obscure merchant voyages recorded in the logbooks addressed in this chapter, the fateful adventure of the *Craigmullen* gained a modicum of fame. In 1908, the chief mate mentioned by Cartwright – Edmund Mann – published an article titled 'The Ship that Disappeared' for *The Wide World Magazine*, an illustrated monthly magazine of 'true narrative' tales of travel and adventure, and whose motto was 'Truth is Stranger than Fiction'.[151] In his account, Mann cast himself as one of the heroic sole survivors of the *Craigmullen*, a vessel, he claimed, that had been lost at sea for 100 days and from which 23 of the 25-strong crew had dramatically perished, including an amiable 15-year-old boy apprentice (whom we can assume to be our diarist, Cartwright). The details of Mann's sensationalist story, on which he apparently 'dined out' for several decades, were finally probed by an apprentice seaman (turned amateur detective) who grew suspicious of the story.[152] He eventually located the ship's Articles that revealed that Mann had exaggerated both the duration of the *Craigmullen*'s 'disappearance' and the number of deaths on board. But it was the archival discovery of the amateur log by 15-year-old Cartwright – a document that had survived in lieu of the ship's official log – that finally confirmed the extent of Mann's confabulations. As revealed by Charles Clark, so precise was Cartwright's logging of the ship's coordinates in his personal journal that it was possible to trace the exact course of the vessel and thus to establish the extent of Mann's creative embellishment of a one-hundred-day drift.[153] The unassuming and unofficial logbook also made clear that on the day Cartwright was supposed

to have tragically perished at sea – at least according to Mann's tale – the boy was in fact sitting down to enjoy his makeshift shipboard Christmas dinner.[154] Putting aside the possible reasons for the first mate's rogue version of what was already a dramatic story of nautical misadventure, what is relevant here is the way that Cartwright's logbook experienced a type of afterlife, providing exactly the archetypal 'log-book truth' of the kind 'often invoked figuratively in sea narratives as a stand-in for truth, or as an objective register of experience'.[155] The older archival document invalidated some of the details of the published spin-off, yet it still had the power to convey – albeit in the sober, direct voice of the seaman's log – the material reality of death and burial at sea.

It would be easy to simply herald Cartwright's true version and dismiss Mann's fictions. The two accounts on the face of it certainly seem diametrically opposed; the private logbook against the public account; the amateur writer versus the published author; calendrical jottings versus a story with a heroic arc; logbook truth versus narrative fiction. Yet these different and divergent accounts point to the complexity of the stories made at sea and remade or revived on shore and read by different audiences. For the two accounts contain their own silences and gaps, yet both also reveal important things about the experience of individuals at sea, and how they turned that experience into textual form.

The question posed by Philippe Lejeune in his classic essay 'How do diaries end?' thus takes on a more literal significance in maritime life writing.[156] As already noted, most sea journals reached a natural point of closure, as writers literally signed off as their vessels arrived in port, or, in more extreme cases, the diaries went down with the ship. Back on dry land, some ordinary sea journals had the capacity to experience significant afterlives beyond the initial context of their production: as cherished family objects, as demonstrated by the cases of John Dand or Neil Smith, or as telling evidence dredged from the archives by historical detectives, as shown in the strange case of the *Craigmullen*. Ostensibly a type of writing borne of oceans, logbooks therefore could assume new forms and functions on land. Even the writing held within the original logs had the potential to transmute into new amphibious forms once the logbook returned to land. Some sailor-writers copied out their original diaries into new notebooks.[157] Others drew on their journals as a form of evidence or *aide mémoire* for the compilation of retrospective autobiographies. Indeed, some sailors directly inserted passages from the logbooks into their narrative accounts, presumably to augment the sense of authenticity or, like a novelist, to create immediacy and a 'reality effect'.[158] In addition to this, a number of retrospective narrative

memoirs by mariners are interspersed with what appear to be transcriptions from personal logbooks. James Richardson, born in 1784 and educated at the Middlesex Society in London (a school for the children of the poor), left an extraordinary handwritten account of his merchant and naval seafaring career, that includes vivid details of family life sustained across oceans. While it is predominantly a retrospective account, the narrative is clearly based on the writer's own archive of sea diaries, a form that lends itself to 'real time' accounts of military action at sea ('Ajax 84 Gun Ship took fire in the night. 300 souls lost. Awful sight. … Knees rather shakey soon better. Bang… Bang… Bang – dead silence.')[159] Behenna's *A Victorian Sailor's Diary*, despite its title, is a similarly hybrid text, in which the writer's retrospective account is spliced with the present-tense logbook style. The unpublished working-class memoir of Alfred George Henry Lay (born 1869) also appears to be partially based on Lay's diaries kept at sea.[160]

Sometimes it was the logbook that survived, rather than the person who wrote it. Thomas Knight, the son of a Scottish printer compositor, was a 19-year-old apprentice sailor on the *Roseau* headed to the West Indies in 1879.[161] He transcribed the notes of his voyage for his mother (in a dedication he wrote, 'the thought crossed my mind that the perusal of some parts might afford you a little amusement, by giving you a little insight into the life of "Jack Afloat"').[162] Alongside this, Leslie composed a colourful sketchbook that contained images of the ship and ports underscored by illustrative captions, as well as an elaborately illustrated storybook that featured three stories: 'The Adventures of Tom and Jerry', 'The Adventures of a Castaway', 'Ye Pirate Ship'. The first of these drew on the style and protagonists of Pierce Egan's urban picaresque novel *Life in London* (1821), resulting in a hybrid form of graphic novel fusing elements of nautical fiction, the imperial adventure story, and autobiography. On Leslie's subsequent voyage, as second mate on a ship that transported coal from Cardiff to Cape Town, he fell from the ship's rigging in a storm and drowned in the South Atlantic seas. His body was never recovered, although the preservation of the logbook suggests that it was returned to his family and conserved as a memento. Tom Leslie had turned his life into an adventure story at precisely the moment that he lost it.

## Logbook Fictions: Late-Victorian Literary Developments

Other diary-writers survived to transform their journals into fiction on shore, thereby rendering literal what Cohen calls a process of transferring 'navigation into narration'.[163] Robert Brown, for example, who served as

third mate on a voyage to China and New York in 1874–1875, transposed his experiences, recorded in journals, into stories.[164] He wrote three juvenile adventure novels on similar themes in quick succession: *Spunyarn and Spindrift: A Sailor Boy's Log, Or, A Voyage out and Home in a China Tea-Clipper* (1886), *Jack's Yarn, Or, Perils in the Pacific* (1888), *Jack Abbott's Log, A Yarn of the Merchant Service* (1890). In *Spunyarn*, the narrative opens with the boy's journal writing ('If you please, I am Tommy Davie, and this is my log'),[165] and the narrative premise rests on the boy's compilation of the notebook given to him by his father, which the latter expected to be returned, complete with interesting anecdotes. Essentially the log provides a structural device that allows for immediacy and what Jennifer Wicke calls the 'first-hand frisson of narrative in progress'.[166] But this form also serves to draw attention to the way in which 'personal' writing on vessels was undertaken within a social (and hierarchical) environment. At one point a more senior crew member demands to read Tommy's account 'to see there is nothing treasonable in it', while Tommy admits himself to enlivening its pages with the help of his friend ('Edwards has written a lot for me, descriptions and so on, that I can't manage by myself').[167] Brown was ostensibly drawing on his own first-hand experiences as he wrote his novel, but other novelists, such as William Stephens Hayward, seem to have adopted the logbook style as an accessible and engaging literary device for the purposes of juvenile fiction, offering, like the diary form, the possibility of 'a series of surprises to writer and reader alike'.[168] In Hayward's *Tom Holt's Log*, for example, the narrator's adoption of the log style puts the reader vicariously at the centre of the dramatic events on the ship. The boy narrator thus uses the present tense, hour-by-hour form of the log, to sensationally render the drowning of the entire crew of the *Phantom*: '26th August, Noon. – I can scarcely realize the whole terrible truth. As I write, my trembling hand can scarce hold the pen! Alone on the ocean!'[169] Towards the close of the novel, the narrative is passed on to a fictional editor who steps in to relay the final account of Holt's return to England after four years at sea. The trusty logbook crops up again, however, when it is used as a marriage register for Tom and Polly at the novel's conclusion, a symbol that neatly binds the filaments of the adventure story with the conventions of the Victorian marriage plot.

Beyond juvenile fiction, Conrad also adopted the insertion of logbook passages in his autobiographical novella *The Shadow-Line: A Confession* (1916), in which the young, nameless captain who narrates the voyage keeps a diary in order to cope with his sense of isolation at sea, at one point referring to it directly as 'an extract from the notes I wrote at the

time'.[170] The narrator later offers another 'sample' of these uncanny diary entries, 'a few detached lines, now looking very ghostly to my own eyes'.[171] As Jeremy Hawthorne observes, these transcribed entries were possibly based on real extracts from Conrad's time spent in command of the *Vidar* and *Otago* in the late 1880s.[172] Other Victorian novelists went on to deploy logbook techniques and tropes in their fictions in a contrasting way – not to suggest the stability of realism, but precisely to interrogate the instability of narrative truth. Thus if the logbook style lies at the origins of the realist novel in the form of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, and sets the tone for the action-driven, 'staccato language of events' feature of imperialist adventure fiction, it also emerges in the Victorian novel as one more example of the plethora of documents and texts that make up the complex tapestry of modern life.[173] In this respect, the very *unreliability* of the logbook is deployed in Charles Dickens's mid-century *Dombey and Son*, when Captain Cuttle is forced to accept that Walter Gay has been drowned at sea in a presumed shipwreck on the basis that the ship's log is 'the truest book as a man can write' (a logbook truth undermined by Walter's eventual safe return).[174]

The potential duplicity of the logbook, however, finds its apotheosis in the *fin-de-siècle* fictions of Robert Louis Stevenson, an author whose works signal an exciting movement from maritime adventure yarns into the uncertainties of modernist narrative. Stevenson's last completed novel, *The Wrecker* (1892) was a joint literary endeavour with his stepson Lloyd Osbourne. Appropriately enough it was conceived in collaborative fashion at sea, when the two close friends found themselves adrift in a schooner near the South Seas Abemama atoll, with ample time to devise the novel's labyrinthine plot.[175] *The Wrecker* is Stevenson's longest novel – a strange, sprawling, violent, homoerotic, and generically-mixed work that brings together some of the well-rehearsed conventions of the maritime shipwreck story, with aspects of Victorian detective fiction. Like Stevenson's late, short-form masterpieces set in the South Seas – 'The Beach of Falesá' (1892) and *The Ebb-Tide* (1894) – the oceanic setting of the novel is far removed from the traditions of earlier maritime adventure or imperial romance, taking place instead on the fringes of the informal empire populated by rogue traders, mercenary opportunists, remittance men, global vagrants, and desperate beachcombers.[176] Maritime adventure in the novel is transformed (or exposed) as a story of ruthless capitalist adventure. The plot is notoriously complex, convoluted and proto-modernist in its design; as Stephen Arata notes, '*The Wrecker* also proves to be a canny meditation on narrativity: that is, on the procedures by which fictional events are

translated into intelligible story.'[177] Briefly, it centres on the machinations of two Americans, Loudon Dodd and James Pinkerton, who, together with an improvised crew, speculate on a 'wrecker' which is positioned in a lagoon at the inlet of an island in the North Pacific. They buy the shipwreck in the belief that it contains the treasure of the modern world – smuggled opium – only to find themselves caught up in a bloody plot centring on fraud, double-bluff, and murder and involving a parallel crew who had previously been involved in similar pursuits. The logbook – that apparently authentic signifier of maritime experience – plays an important structural and symbolic role in the complex narrative. For when Dodd and Pinkerton enter the wreck of the *Flying Scud*, they are confronted with a scene of abandonment that includes the *Mary Celeste*-like remains of a meal strewn across the table, and a crew that has seemingly disappeared mid completion of a logbook entry. In their attempt to understand the mystery, the visitors read the cabin in the manner of a detective at an oceanic crime scene:

> 'See! they were writing up the log,' said [Captain] Nares, pointing to the ink-bottle. 'Caught napping, as usual. I wonder if there ever was a captain yet that lost a ship with his log-book up to date? He generally has about a month to fill up on a clean break, like Charles Dickens and his serial novels.'[178]

Suggestively comparing logbook writing to the composition of serialised fiction, Nares inadvertently points to the unreliability of this key maritime document. Indeed, it will subsequently be revealed that the *Flying Scud* is, in fact, a crime scene. As later comes to light, the crew of the eerily abandoned ship were violently assassinated by an earlier set of opportunistic visitors, the men of the tellingly-named *Currency Lass*, mastered by Norris Carthew, a classic English remittance man also in ruthless pursuit of the fortunes to be made from wreckers. Having massacred the crew, the men of the *Currency Lass* attempted to cover their tracks by washing down the bloody scene and ensuring that the interrupted log did not incriminate, thereby 'cooking the new log'.[179] In doing so, the murderers and imposters momentarily debate the extent to which logbooks (real or faked) can ever provide realistic and reliable evidence of events:

> 'Well, it don't look like real life – that's all I can say,' returned Wicks.
>
> 'It's the way it was, though,' argued Carthew.
>
> 'So it is; and what the better are we for that, if it don't look so?' cried the captain, sounding unwonted depths of art criticism.[180]

Throughout *The Wrecker*, Stevenson and Osbourne play with the instability of meaning in the watery *fin de siècle* where traces and identities can

more easily be effaced, and surface appearance cannot be trusted (a motif explored in further detail in Chapter 3). In Stevenson's last novel then, the logbook functions as a false document, a cooked book, a replica, and simulacrum, the original having been destroyed and rewritten in order to cover up the 'damning evidences' of the crime of murder in pursuit of profit in the oceanic spaces of the shadow empire.[181] The function of the logbook within the plot of the novel thus symbolises the slip towards the uncertainties of modernism: once relied upon for its stolid presence and plain style, the logbook no longer signals authenticity, truth, nor even reliable authority.

## Conclusion: Circulating Forms

This chapter has ended with the entry of the artefact and trope of the logbook into the literary sphere of *fin-de-siècle* writing. But it would be misleading to posit a linear trajectory implying the maritime diary's movement from a solid book of facts and truth to a more unstable textual form. In fact, my intention has been to show that the sea journal has a long, rich, and varied cultural history and is enmeshed within a net of varied literary relations. It emerges from its origins in travel writing at the very beginning of the English novel, shapes the development of diary writing, takes on new forms as an accessible mode of working-class writing at sea, occupies the role of family book and heirloom within Victorian material culture, and takes up its place as one of the many textual forms and devices that clutter the pages of the late Victorian novel. As my examples have shown, sea journals were not just circulating objects, travelling through time and space, across land and sea, but recycled objects – written, received, and edited at different times, by different readers and for very different purposes. The genre traversed not just geographical space but also cultural life, winding its way through various modes of fiction and non-fiction alike. The logbook was ostensibly a mimetic form, but like all realist forms, it was constructed and stylised, providing a selective and necessarily partial view of experience. Usually written by a sole individual, marooned at sea within a sealed floating vessel, the personal logbook might appear as the individualist text par excellence. Yet, as this chapter suggests, at root the logbook was formed in the context of social relations and could serve as a repository and conduit for thoughts, emotions, and communication between seafarers and their extended family and kin. The logbook was a social text in another way too. For sailors did not write ex nihilo; in logging their entries in a self-contained book,

they were drawing on their own familiarity with real and adapted logbook forms, familiar through experience or from their reading of fiction and travel narratives. Like its sister form, the diary, whose form and influence has been linked to the development of modern urban experience, the marginal form of the logbook is a reminder of the way in which maritime experience – ordinary as well as extraordinary – also shaped literary life.