FORCED SERVICE: OFFICIAL AND POPULAR RESPONSES TO THE IMPRESSMENT
OF SEAMEN INTO THE ROYAL NAVY, 1660-1815

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A Thesis Submitted to the
University of North Carolina Wilmington in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Department of History
University of North Carolina Wilmington
2009

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ABSTRACT

The British Royal Navy has been the subject of much scholarly examination regarding nearly every facet of its composition, history, and accomplishments. There are, however, a number of aspects of the Royal Navy lack adequate analysis. One of these areas is the practice of forcibly pressing of men into service aboard naval vessels by the government.

The impressment of men into the Navy, the burdensome and sometimes violent means by which men were pressed, and the negative impacts this had on British families and society ignited a vociferous official and popular debate that lasted from the creation of the press in the years after the Restoration of the monarchy to its reduction and elimination after the defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte. This national discussion gave rise to a number of actions taken in an effort to ameliorate or reform the onerous elements of the press.

Through an examination of relevant primary and secondary source documents, this thesis will identify the mechanisms by which the press operated and how they gave rise to the discourse over the existence of the press. Assessing the characteristics of the national debate over impressment leads to an awareness of why there were attempts to reform the practice. The ultimate goal of this thesis is to demonstrate how, through the general failure of these modifications, the perceived necessity of utilizing the press to maintain the Navy’s manpower strength, and the various means used by sailor’s to evade forced naval service, the press persisted despite its unpopularity.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My first thanks go to my parents, Tom and Lisa Prendergast, who first ignited my thirst for knowledge. Without their love, support, and encouragement this thesis and every other endeavor would not have been possible. Next I would like to express my gratitude to my brother, Chris Prendergast, and my sister, Michelle Prendergast, whose intelligence and achievements have always motivated me to strive for success. Their thoughts have been invaluable in writing this thesis and in every other aspect of my life.

I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. William McCarthy, for his guidance. Dr. McCarthy’s suggestions and insights were invariably useful and always provoked me to think and write to the best of my ability. His calm and steady presence made a difficult process a delight. I would also like to convey my appreciation to my committee, Dr. Paul Townend and Dr. Bill Atwill for their contributions to my thesis. Their ideas expanded my understanding of this topic and helped me write a more thorough and reasoned manuscript.

Special thanks go to Michelle Cicero who, more than anyone, was a sounding board for my many ideas and reassured me when necessary. Without her love and support this process would have been considerably more onerous. I would also like to express my gratitude to Dr. Robert Roer, Dean of the Graduate School, whose reasoned decision made it possible for me to complete this program. Finally, I would like to convey my appreciation to novelist Patrick O’Brian. His well-written and thoroughly-research novels about the Royal Navy first peaked my interest in this subject and sustained me while researching and writing my thesis.
INTRODUCTION

Impressment, the practice of coercing men into service in the Royal Navy, was an enduring aspect of British military and civilian life between the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 and the defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte in 1815. During this era, England grew from a nation with few overseas outposts to a global empire. The Royal Navy’s supremacy not only facilitated the defeat of its enemies, it allowed Britain to capture the bases of other colonial powers, develop colonies in areas previously uncontrolled by western nations, and to wage war against native rulers around the world with only limited interference from other European powers. It was mainly as a result of the Navy’s efforts that, in 1815, so much of the globe was dominated by the British.¹ As Britain’s territorial acquisitions grew and imperial responsibilities expanded, the need for the Royal Navy to protect the nation’s far flung assets increased.² Along with the growth of the Navy there was an increase in the official and popular responses to the negative aspects of impressment, the primary means of manning Britain’s expanding fleet.

Britain was involved in major wars for almost half the 155-year period between the Restoration and Waterloo. As it is an imperial nation, the Royal Navy bore the brunt of the burdens of these conflicts. The role of the Navy in assisting Britain to defeat its European rivals was of the greatest consequence as by 1815 the Dutch, Spanish, Danish, and French fleets had all been defeated by Britain, frequently multiple times.³ Along with building and maintaining a fleet, the greatest impediment the Navy faced in defending the home islands and pursuing Britain’s strategic goals (military victory, territorial and commercial expansion) around the globe

³ Black, European Warfare, 1660-1815, 177.
was that Service’s chronic shortage of men.\(^4\) To remedy this continual manpower shortfall, the Admiralty turned to the practice of impressment—the involuntary enlistment of men into the Royal Navy.

The press reached its apogee from the late seventeenth into the early eighteenth centuries but the origins of forcing men into naval service go back to antiquity.\(^5\) While impressment as it existed in the mid-seventeenth through early nineteenth centuries was related to the ancient tradition of conscription it was also rooted in Saxon England and the later feudal period.\(^6\) The transition toward recognizable full-time, extended impressment occurred during the Renaissance, hand-in-hand with the evolution of permanent navies. The navies of this period maintained the seasonal mobilization associated with the feudal period but fleets grew larger and leaders began to recognize the utility of dedicated warships. Despite this movement toward a full-time navy, the defining feature of Renaissance naval warfare remained privateering. This was a pragmatic decision because armadas like Spain’s of 1588 were costly and risky. As a consequence of these perils, a fully-manned, professional navy did not appear in Britain until the late seventeenth-century and that is when impressment in its mature form began. Before this time fleets were collected with short-term objectives in mind and were financed by investors (including the


\(^{6}\) Specifically in the monarch’s custom of requiring the most important seaports in medieval England to provide the crown with a set number of ships and crews each year. The ships of this era, precursors to the Royal Navy, were provided for seasonal campaigning. During the Hundred Years’ War, when King Edward III organized a flotilla to invade France in 1347, only about thirty of the seven hundred ships belonged to the crown. The rest were borrowed from merchants and fisherman and were only used to ferry troops to and from their destination. Piracy was the only other use medieval monarchs had for ships during conflicts. Kings issued letters of marque, licenses permitting mariners to attack ships of other countries. The dual purpose of this government-sponsored thievery was to cripple enemy commerce and fill the crown’s coffers, Herman, 35 and 51.
monarch), not the national treasury, and financial benefit, not strategic advantages was the goal.\(^7\) In the eighteenth-century the Navy finally transformed from a seasonal, largely mercenary force into a permanent instrument of national policy.\(^8\)

This era represents a period of marked evolution in all aspects of British life—military, political, and economic—and impressment is an important part of this change over time. The idea that a military revolution occurred over the seventeenth to eighteenth-centuries is an established part of the curriculum for early modern studies in Britain and covers both naval and land-based warfare.\(^9\) The most important aspect of this military evolution with regard to the Royal Navy focuses on technological advances and the massive increases in the number of ships and men required to meet the demands placed upon His Majesty’s senior service. In 1625 the English navy had about 30 ships, in 1640 about 40, in 1651, as a result of an increased focus on naval affairs by the Commonwealth government, the number of vessels rose to about 95 and in 1660 the fleet stood at roughly 140. The three Anglo-Dutch wars fought between 1652 and 1674, combined with the adoption of the new tactic of fighting with a single line of battle led to a

\(^7\) Ennis, 18-19.

\(^8\) Bernard Ireland, *Naval Warfare in the Age of Sail* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000), 55. Despite these changes in naval warfare and the expansion of the British government there survived in the back benches of Parliament a remnant of the pre-Restoration mindset in officials who only condoned the use of ships only for seasonal campaigns. They were distrustful of central, permanent government and any system of taxation that made the king and his ministers capable of independent action. At the end of the seventeenth-century there had been serious debate about the necessity of maintaining a peacetime army and even at the end of the eighteenth-century there were parliamentary opponents to any measure that would enhance the central administration and the taxation that supported it. This tradition of obstructionism to change and opposition to a large army helps explain the longevity of impressment as the primary method of naval recruitment as late as the Napoleonic Wars, well after the system had been rendered inadequate to the international responsibilities that Britain had accepted with the growth of trade and empire, John C. Dann, ed. *A Diary of Jacob Nagle, Sailor from the Year 1775 to 1841* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988), 166.

\(^9\) The basis of this theory of an early modern military revolution was a lecture given in 1955 by Michael Roberts. Roberts argued there was a mutually sustaining relationship between the professionalism required by tactical changes and the rise of larger and more permanent military forces of the state. Roberts stated that changes in tactics, strategy, the scale of warfare and its impact upon society deserved the description ‘revolutionary.’ Thus, the thesis of a military revolution can be characterized not only as a statement of technological determinism, but also as a repetition of the notion that gunpowder blasted the feudal order at the behest of the centralized state. Black, *European Warfare, 1660-1815*, 3.
naval arms race between England and the Netherlands fueled this increase in the size of the Navy. The rise of the French and Russian fleets and increases in the size and power of naval guns further contributed to this rapid growth of the Royal Navy. By June 1757 the British navy had a commissioned strength of 239 ships, by 1760 there were more than 300 vessels, by 1793 there were 425, and by 1806 the fleet consisted of more than 900 ships of varying types.\(^{10}\)

Additional technological advances contributed to this naval evolution including the practice, adopted in the 1770s, of coppering the hulls of warships to prevent the fouling of timbers in tropical climates. Despite the advances in gunnery, firepower, size of vessels, and coppering there was only so much advancement possible when dealing with wooden ships subject to decay and dependent on wind power.\(^{11}\)

The other major evolution of naval warfare that occurred over this period was the ever-increasing needs for seamen to man the British fleet. During the Anglo-Dutch war of the late 1600s the Navy averaged about 12,000 sailors, while at the height of the War of Spanish Succession in early 1700s the Navy comprised roughly 40,000 men. In the 1740s during War of Jenkins’ Ear/War of Austrian Succession there were nearly 50,000 seamen in the Royal Navy. During the American and French wars of the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries the service’s manpower needs became staggering: 1781-90,000 seamen, 1783-100,000, 1802-135,000.\(^{12}\) By 1807, at the zenith of the wars with France, there was an average of 153,000 men borne for wages and mustered for victuals in the Royal Navy.\(^{13}\) This pattern continued into the modern era, the only change being that the numbers got larger. This meant that in times of war

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\(^{12}\) Ennis, 32.

\(^{13}\) *Navy Board Return*, 25 January 1808, in Hattendorf, et. al., eds., *British Naval Documents, 1204-1960*, 555.
and international tension, when experienced seamen were most needed, the Royal Navy’s need for seamen exceeded the numbers willing to volunteer and the press became more necessary.¹⁴

A major political change during the Hanoverian dynasty was that the citizens of Britain, particularly Londoners, became the overseers of liberty when it was threatened by legislative attempts to circumscribe the democratic process or the rights of the individual.¹⁵  By the time of the American War and the conflicts with France in the later part of the eighteenth-century, there was resounding criticism of the unprecedentedly expensive and seemingly endless war as proof of a ministerial conspiracy to suppress the liberties of Britons. One of the problems facing Parliament was how to reduce the burden of the state in a way that would neither substantially weaken the instruments of the central government, like impressment, nor dramatically broaden

¹⁴ Regarding the composition of the fleet; at any time between 1660 and 1815, volunteers and pressed men came from every nation and colony on the globe, were of every color, and many had deserted from the organized services of Europe (such as other nation’s armies, the English army, or the East India Company). Some volunteers were prisoners of war from Britain’s enemies, who saw service in the Royal Navy as preferable to wasting away in captivity. This opportunity was extended to prisoners of all nations except the French (after 1762), who were viewed as thoroughly unreliable. Even blacks joined from the Americas and West Indies because, given the prejudices of the period, the Navy’s attitude toward them was liberal compared to what they were accustomed. Their professional skill mattered more than their color, making the Navy an ideal choice for free blacks and escaped slaves. Indeed, their treatment was so unremarkable that it is impossible to determine how many blacks served because the Navy did not distinguish them from other races in a ship’s muster. Rodger, 158-59. This diversity in the service marks an incongruity not only with respect to the press but also within British society as a whole. In the class-conscious world of eighteenth and nineteenth-century Britain, the fact that men aboard a Navy vessel were treated equally (at least in comparison with each other) without regard to their race or national origin was rare. This fact is especially remarkable given that many of the men who served in the Royal Navy did so against their will. Ships at sea were communities unto themselves and these small societies existed with a high degree of equality despite the fact they were forged from a hierarchical world and were largely created through decidedly inequitable means. This egalitarianism emerged, at least in part, as a reaction against the stratified social structure aboard naval and merchant vessels and their attendant privileges and abuses. Many a sailor went without good food or spirits while captains, stewards, doctors, and other officers rarely did. Such offenses against equality of condition rankled many seamen and, along with a scarcity of necessities, contributed to the creation of a largely equal society in the lower decks where resources were carefully and uniformly dispensed. Rediker, 247-48.

the narrow political system on which they felt the social authority of the ruling elite ultimately depended.\textsuperscript{16}

Major structural changes took place in the British economy between the end of the seventeenth and middle of the nineteenth-centuries and there is little disagreement that these changes were revolutionary. Much of the economic development that occurred in the eighteenth-century would not have been possible but for the existence of the Atlantic economy. The trade in sugar, slaves, tobacco, and other goods provided the monetary basis for the advancement of British commercial endeavors.\textsuperscript{17} Beyond money, technical change was one of the most salient features of this evolution and the adoption of machinery, the spread of factory production, and the growth in trade were at the heart of the industrial revolution. One of the most striking features of this economic change was the acceleration in the rate of population growth, but the factor that increased more than both output capacity and population was foreign trade. In this period exports and imports expanded quite rapidly but setbacks and abrupt shifts in the pattern of trade occurred, especially during war.\textsuperscript{18} By the 1740s there was broad British trade beyond their colonies or the settlements of the trading companies. British ships did business in ports around the world.\textsuperscript{19}

This increase in industrialization and trade led to a consumer boom in eighteenth-century Britain that reached revolutionary proportions. There was such a convulsion of acquisition,

prosperity, production, and marketing that a greater proportion of the population than in any
previous society was able to enjoy the pleasures of buying consumer goods.\textsuperscript{20} It was the Royal
Navy that ensured the access of the public to the goods they desired. Without the Navy and, by
extension the press, Britain would not have been capable of garnering access to the resources
necessary to manufacture the necessary products or achieve the commercial success that allowed
its citizens the wealth to purchase them.\textsuperscript{21}

While this was a period of broad and rapid transformation in nearly every aspect of
British life, impressment, the instrument that in many ways made these revolutions possible,
remained as an unchanging bulwark of naval policy. Over the course of its existence, the only
substantive change that occurred in the operation of impressment was that the numbers of men
pressed grew.

The increased cost and scope of warfare combined with rapid commercial expansion
necessitated the expansion of central authority and it most visible instrument—the Royal Navy.
From the reign of Charles II until the battle of Waterloo, Britain was involved in a series of
increasingly global wars that necessitated more ships and men with each passing conflict. These
struggles included the two Dutch wars (1665-67, 1672-74), the War of the League of
Augsburg/King William’s War (1689-1697), the War of Spanish Succession/Queen Anne’s War
(1701-14), the War of Jenkins’ Ear/War of Austrian Succession/King George’s War (1739-48),
the Seven Years War (1756-63), the American Revolution (1776-83), and the wars against
Revolutionary and Napoleonic France (1793-1815).

\textsuperscript{20} Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J.H. Plumb, \textit{The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of
\textsuperscript{21} Jeremy Black, \textit{The British Seaborne Empire} (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 94.
It was only with the advent of these major wars that the press deeply affected the overall fabric of English national life.\textsuperscript{22} All these conflicts required a strong navy for fleet and single ship actions, transporting troops and supplies, harassing enemy commerce, protecting British trade, eliminating opposing privateers, and blockade duty. During peacetime or when Britain was under no immediate threat, the Navy was allowed to dwindle to a few thousand personnel while the fleet’s ships rotted in their berths at Spithead and Portsmouth. When danger materialized, officers were recalled from half-pay, men were pressed, and the fleet was resurrected.\textsuperscript{23} This fluctuating need for personnel aggravated the imposition of impressment as, when Britain was at peace, the Navy’s manpower requirements were small and the ranks could generally be filled with volunteers while, during the long periods of war, the need to press men affected the lives of hundreds of thousands of Britons.

Even though the press was vital to the successful prosecution of war, the practice was always controversial and highly unpopular. Mariners disliked forced service. Brawls, riots and sometimes death resulted from attempts to resist the press gang. Local magistrates sometimes arrested press officers for abridging their local authority.\textsuperscript{24} Some localities went so far as to

\textsuperscript{23} Ennis, 31.
\textsuperscript{24} In addition to legal actions against press officials, local officials also frustrated attempts to press men by simply ignoring requests for assistance. This tradition began even before the press became a vital aspect of naval policy and an issue of national importance. In April 1628, Captain Phillip Hill of HMS \textit{Fellowship} informed the Earl of Denbigh that, “I… received warrant to press… seamen… charged all mayors, bailiffs, justices of the peace, constables… to be likewise… assisting unto me… demanded the aid of the High Constable of that Hundred [William Tapsum of Devon] who was denied to be at home, but we had notice of the contrary… who told us… he could not assist us, but he further said that he would warn and send his deputies, which he altogether neglected, to the great hindrance of this his Majesty’s service.”, Captain Phillip Hill, \textit{Letter to the Earl of Denbigh}, 1 April 1628, in John B. Hattendorf, A.W.H. Pearsall, Rodger Till, and Geoffrey Till, eds., \textit{British Naval Documents, 1204 – 1960} (London: Scolar Press, 1993), 167-68. Another early example of local officials purposely neglecting their duties when charged with pressing men into the Navy is found in a letter from H. Terne and A. Odway to the Commissioners of the Navy in April 1653. These men complained that, “the remissness of the constables does not a little prejudice the public in this business… some of them give notice themselves to the seamen to make their escapes from the press, which the Justices inform us they cannot remedy unless the Act of Parliament gave them the
outlaw the practice. Similarly, the national government showed antipathy for the press as naval officers, ministers, and elites advocated alternative plans and introduced legislation aimed at replacing or at least moderating the practice.\textsuperscript{25} Registration, quota, and bounty schemes came and went but the press remained. Many Britons, in both public and private capacities, viewed impressment with distaste but, when national security was at stake, the press gang appeared and the fleet was manned. Indeed, the practice, despite its odium, was so integral to British naval policy that it was still legal and in effect after Parliament abolished the slave trade in 1807.\textsuperscript{26}

The practice of forcing men to serve in the Royal Navy was inherently unpopular in a country that expressed great pride in the rights and freedoms of its citizens. Without a large standing army in Britain to rival those of its adversaries, the Royal Navy became the bulwark of national defense and, by extension, of the rights of Englishmen. As patriotism and financial inducements could not entice sufficient volunteers to man the fleet fully, the liberties of thousands of Britons were abridged to ensure the security of the nation. The price of maintaining a comparatively small army was the toleration of a practice that fit better into an absolutist states, the arbitrary and coerced enlistment of the politically inarticulate.\textsuperscript{27}

This conflict between the needs of the state and the liberties of its people reflected class divisions. The evolving strategic position of Georgian England led to an expansion of the press from affecting only sailors during the Restoration through the lower classes until its reach was extended into the middle classes by the time of the Napoleonic wars.\textsuperscript{28} Even as the practice
began affecting those in the middle class who possessed more political and economic clout than the lower orders, it remained the primary means of manning the fleet in time of war. Impressment touched the life of every Briton, not just those who were forced to serve aboard a man-of-war—sailors, the lower classes (laborers, vagrants, apprentices), landsmen, even those who did not fear impressment (like merchants) had a stake in the practice because a strong navy ensured safe commerce (unless of course a ship owner’s men were pressed out of a merchantman carrying his cargo). Domestic life was affected, as husbands, sons, and fathers, many of them the family’s sole wage-earner, were taken for months or years at a time possibly to die of disease or action thousands of miles from their homes and families.\(^2^9\)

Impressment was undesirable, but to nearly everyone concerned, even perhaps for the sailors themselves, it was also understood to be necessary.\(^3^0\) The alternative was to allow the nation to suffer defeat and possible invasion at the hands of Britain’s continental enemies. Abridging the rights of English subjects was disagreeable, but the consequence of not doing so would have been national catastrophe. The Admiralty was not insensitive to the injustices of the practice but, as it was rare to have a warship contain more than fifteen percent volunteers, the Navy had little choice but to use the press.\(^3^1\)

The press, an unpalatable facet of British society for one hundred fifty years, was viewed as so vital to the national interest that the government, the Navy, and the upper classes were willing to overlook the adverse effects it had on those burdened by impressment. For a century and a half, despite the proposed alternatives, the evasion and sometimes violence of the lower

\(^{29}\) Ennis, 17.
\(^{30}\) Rodger, 151.
\(^{31}\) Ennis, 30.
classes, the harmful individual consequences on those affected, and the less tangential influences on British conceptions of the rights of Englishmen, the press remained a bulwark of national security, a constant source of national conflict, and a persistent example of national emergency superseding the rights of individuals.

Over the course of its existence, the military expediency of the press as the best means to man the fleet, the challenges to legality of the press, the economic burdens imposed by the Navy’s cost, the competition with commercial interests, and the burdens and excesses of impressment led to a vigorous official and popular debate about the practice that resulted in a number of attempted reforms such as proposed, but unimplemented, alternative plans and the issuance of protections for merchant sailors and others deemed too important to be pressed. The mixed results of these attempted improvements caused those affected by the practice to continue engaging in varying degrees of obstructionism and evasion which, when combined with the inability to alter impressment and the Navy’s ever-increasing need for sailors, ensured the persistence of the press for whole of this period.
CAUSES OF THE DEBATE ABOUT IMPRESSMENT

The first topic of inquiry is an examination of the circumstances and conditions that led to the one hundred fifty year debate over the press which, in turn, inspired the many attempts at reforming the practice, and that motivated the vigorous evasion of those affected by impressment. There were many specific objections to the practice of seizing able-bodied men for service in the Royal Navy. The press deprived an individual of his freedom without a proper trial or due legal process. It involved the military in civilian affairs and the press and the Navy were costly to a nation with limited means of raising capital. Impressment was condemned as an example of government by coercion rather than by consent, was socially disruptive, interfered with trade, and encouraged violence. Above all, the actual mechanisms by which the press operated penalized the humbler members of society, the poor and middle classes, who were much more likely than an elite to find themselves dragged into His Majesty’s senior service.\textsuperscript{32}

All these criticisms can be found in the official and popular debate over the press and the subsequent actions taken in response to it.

A major cause of the debate over impressment and subsequent actions was that, given the large numbers of men required and the relatively small numbers willing to volunteer, the press represented the most expedient means to man the fleet. As stated, the manpower needs of the Navy increased more than ten-fold between the Restoration and the end of the wars with Napoleonic France.\textsuperscript{33} A major reason the British needed so many sailors to fill the ranks was the large number of men even a mid-sized warship required. Twenty men could navigate a merchant


\textsuperscript{33} Ennis, 32.
It required ten to fourteen men to fire each of a ship’s great guns and it took dozens to furl or let loose a large sail. While any marginally competent person could be taught to work a gun or pull on a line, there was an immense need for skilled and experienced seamen—topmen to take in sails while hanging perilously far above the deck, quartermaster’s mates to take the wheel, each gun required a captain who understood the fundamentals of trajectory, declination and other manner of calculation. Even a waister, a man who stood in the waist of a ship and pulled on ropes, had to know what he was doing.

While the press became the primary means of ensuring the Navy had sufficient numbers of sailors, the recruitment of volunteers was the preferred method of manning the fleet before, during, and after this period. In peacetime it was usually the only method needed but, when Britain was at war or threatened with conflict, the men willing to volunteer were never sufficient to fill the ranks. This need was even more acute as there were never enough skilled and experienced seamen. Volunteers were even hard to come by in the early years of impressment, when manpower needs were light compared with the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. In a report to the Naval Board from April 1678, Philip Lanyon, a Portsmouth naval agent, complained of the lack of sufficient volunteers. He wrote that “last week arrived here one

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34 Richard Walter, Chaplain of the frigate HMS *Centurion*, wrote of the number of men needed to man this mid-sized warship and the difficulty in getting them at the beginning of Admiral George Anson’s circumnavigation of the globe. Rev. Walter noted that Admiral Anson required “three hundred seamen to complement [the vessel], a deficiency which, with all his assiduity, he had not been able to get supplied ... This occasioned an inevitable and a very considerable delay.” Richard Walter, *Anson’s Voyage Round the World*, 1744, 5, in H.W. Hodges and E.A. Hodges, eds., *Select Naval Documents* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1936), 117.
35 Neale, 10.
36 In this period volunteering was largely a matter of individual contracts. One did not join the Navy in the modern sense; men became attached to a ship and, therefore, became part of the service. The sailors who volunteered were highly individualistic men apt to form intense loyalty to a particular commander. The most fortunate captains had men flock to them when they received a commission with a ship while the less lucky commanders had to seek out volunteers who were dispersed throughout the country and whatever the Impress Service could provide. Rodger, 15.
37 Rodger, 153.
of Sir Thomas Allin’s lieutenants… who have beaten the drums for volunteers; the volunteers appear so slowly that the lieutenant is forced to impress men, without which his voyage will prove fruitless.”

This was a common problem throughout the period as, while a larger navy required more maritime labor, the low pay and poor working conditions in the king’s service made men less than willing to volunteer.

The reasons volunteers were favored were practical—those who chose to serve aboard a man-of-war were more likely to be first rate seaman committed to performing their duties with zeal and professionalism than a disgruntled man plucked from the pub or a ship at sea. Despite the Navy’s preferences it was rarely the case that the majority seamen aboard of British naval vessel were volunteers at any time between 1660 and 1815 and this shortfall in volunteers was the main reason for the existence of the press.

Part of the reason the existence of the press itself as the most efficient way to garner sufficient sailors was a cause of the popular discourse over the practice is the fact that it was difficult to determine what proportion of men were volunteers versus pressed. This was because individual ships’ companies showed the percentage of volunteers in the eighteenth-century at between one and two-thirds but this is misleading. Ships’ musters distinguished three types of men: volunteers, pressed men, and men turned over from other ships. The turn-overs present a large part of the problem as in the eighteenth-century a man was said to have joined the Navy

38 Philip Lanyon, Report to the Naval Board, 16 April 1678, in Hattendorf, et. al., eds., British Naval Documents, 1204 – 1960, 299.
39 Rediker, 30.
40 Sir Charles Wager, First Lord of the Admiralty, succinctly expressed the difficulty the Navy faced in gathering enough men and the link between chronic manpower shortfalls and the manner in which men were pressed in a February 1740 letter to Admiral Edward Vernon. Wager complained that, “You know how difficult it has always been to get men, having the worst way of getting them of any nation in the world.”. Sir Charles Wager, Letter to Admiral Edward Vernon, 24 February 1740, in B. McL. Ranft, ed., The Vernon Papers (London: Navy Records Society, 1958), 176.
only as a side effect of his joining a ship; it mattered more how long a man had been in his present ship than whether his last had been a man-of-war or a merchantman. These turn-overs, who in wartime often formed a large part if not the whole of a ship’s company, make it difficult to arrive at a clear idea of the proportion of volunteers to pressed men. Additionally, many pressed men “volunteered” upon being taken to get a bounty, some were reluctant volunteers, some were forced to volunteer by magistrates, and, as it was illegal to press foreigners, they were signed up as volunteers. The numbers of men pressed must have been enormous as sizable percentages of merchant crews, unless successfully hidden in carefully prepared “stowe holes”, were forcibly removed and volunteered for an outward-bound naval expedition. The result of the state’s demand for naval labor and seamen’s refusal to be the coerced supply produced something like a civil war of maritime muscle and skill in which large numbers of outraged individuals were collected within the British fleet where they learned immediately to hate the driving regime of work.

Of those aboard a Navy vessel, volunteers or otherwise, Captain Frederick Marryat estimated that one third of a crew had to be men bred to the sea. These were the men most wary of service aboard one of His Majesty’s ships because they were intimately aware of the hardships associated with naval life. Even though they were celebrated as “Jolly Jack-Tars” who fought hard, drank harder, spent freely, and lived life to the fullest, the life of seamen aboard a King’s ship was brutal and often boring. The men could be flogged for even minor infractions,

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41 Rodger, 153.
42 Neale, 12.
43 Dann, 167.
44 Rediker, 33.
45 Frederick Marryat, Suggestions for the Abolition of Impressment in the Naval Service (London: J.M. Richardson, 1822), 25-34.
46 Ennis, 19-20.
were usually ill-fed, frequently unpaid, and were subjected to the caprices of officers who could be more dangerous to a man’s well-being and health than any enemy. In addition to that, the men had to contend with the crushing boredom of naval routine. Each day followed the last with little variation—four hours of sleep at a time, each dawn the decks had to be holystoned and swabbed, every evening the men were beat to quarters. Added to that was gunnery practice, the rigging of church every Sunday, and the at least monthly reading of the Articles of War which were daunting to anyone serving in the Royal Navy as, of the thirty-six articles all contained the possibility of flogging and eighteen promised execution for offenses ranging from cowardice to sodomy. Execution was not the only danger faced by sailors of this period. Almost half of all those pressed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries died at sea from disease or combat and those fortunate enough to stay alive frequently went unpaid. In an effort to prevent desertion, some captains held their crews’ wages in arrears for years at a time.

These well-known difficulties of naval life resulted in the number of volunteers falling far short of the Service’s need for experienced seamen and, consequently, the Royal Navy turned to the press. Thus the well-known adage that “better one volunteer than three pressed men” recognized by officers like Captain Marryat, demonstrated the importance of trained seamen to the Navy but, unfortunately for recruiters, due to the privations associated with the Service, the proportion of volunteers to those forced into service was also about one in three. To put this into

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47 These unpleasant realities of naval life were present until the advent of the modern period. More than anything the lack of regular pay presented the most burdensome shortcoming of service in the Royal Navy and was a chronic problem from the inception of the full-time Navy. In March 1666 Commander Midleton recalled, during the Second Anglo-Dutch War, the case of a particular seaman who was “put out of the King’s service and out of his wages; so he went away without his wages. I suppose the King oweth him 8 or 9 months’ wages.”, Commander Midleton, Letter, 29 March 1666, in H.W. Hodges and E.A. Hodges, eds., Select Naval Documents, 84.

48 United Kingdom. Law of War and Ordinances of the Sea, Articles of War, 25 December 1652, C.J., vii., 236. The Articles were amended by Act of Parliament in 1749 and again in 1757. The 1749 changes amounted to minor alterations in the language to give captains greater freedom in assigning punishments. In 1757, Parliament reduced the number of Articles from 36 to 35.

49 Rediker, 33.
perspective, in 1800 at the height of the conflict with France, the Navy had roughly 130,000 sailors. Due to reluctance to join the Navy of their own accord, only around 43,000 of those men were volunteers.  

Over the whole of this period manning the fleet was the first obstacle to be met and the last to be overcome in waging war. The Navy’s ever-increasing need for men was fed by the press gang in every British seaport and from every merchant ship unlucky enough to come across a British man-of-war. The Service relied on the press not because it was a cruel taskmaster but because the lack of sufficient volunteers gave it no other options. Volunteering was encouraged by a number of incentives: bounties (around 30 shillings for an able seamen in 1770 but reaching as much as seven times that by the turn of the nineteenth-century when men were most needed), the prospects of prize money, higher rates of pay than pressed men, greater rights to shore leave, and the privilege to request a transfer to the volunteer’s ship of choice, less work and better food than on merchant ships, patriotism, and the excitement of active service in wartime. Those reasons aside, even if the wages of men serving on a King’s ship were equal to those offered on merchant ships, it was unlikely that the Navy would find many volunteers because seamen hated the discipline, boredom, and the brutality of the Service.

In addition to military expediency, there were legal issues that contributed to the popular debate over impressment and the actions taken to reform the practice. The two main avenues

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50 Ennis, 43.
53 Herman, 295.
54 Rodger, 154. For a similar description of the benefits received by volunteers versus pressed men see Bernard Ireland, *Naval Warfare in the Age of Sail* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000), 56.
55 Neale, 11.
where legal questions contributed to the public debate over the press were Wilkite radicalism and the growing collective strength and knowledge of seamen themselves. The first invigorated the belief that impressment was unconstitutional and emboldened civic leaders to take a more aggressive stance against the practice. The second served to stiffen worker resistance to impressment, not simply by direct action, but also through legal challenges and evasion.56

John Wilkes, a radical Member of Parliament in the mid to late-eighteenth century, and his supporters were progenitors of parliamentary democracy and responsible government and were early but powerful advocates of a free press and of an uncorrupt, open legislature, two necessary conditions of representative rule.57 The Wilkites had a ruthless determination that all Englishmen enjoyed certain rights and liberties under the law and that all Englishmen had an equal right to recourse to the law. In this vein, along with imprisonment for debt game laws, the role of bailiffs, and, most especially, impressment, were specific grievances they lodged against the government. The Wilkites were able to win a popular constituency with the bulk of their supporters in London and the provincial towns. Their supporters were small-scale men of business and trade, those most likely to be imprisoned for debt and the poor who shared the Wilkites implacable hatred for the punitive and socially discriminatory actions of the press gangs.58

The Wilkite’s believed few practices were as inimical to the populace at large as the press and regarded it as the most conspicuous infringement on an Englishman’s rights. Wilkes and his followers saw the impressment as an intrinsic violation of subjects’ rights and therefore without

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any legal justification. They used their power as city officials and the jurisdictional autonomy of
the City of London to protect men from the press. These tactics were successful and, quite
possibly, helped inspire the great number of alternatives to the practice that were introduced in
the following years.\textsuperscript{59}

The economic and commercial interests affected by impressment were a further cause of
the official and popular responses to the press. This relates not only to the general costs of the
Navy but also, specifically, to the Navy’s competition with the merchant fleets. Worldwide trade
resulted in heavy commitments to the Navy which was often over-stretched to protect Britain
from invasion and to maintain British interests in European waters. Worldwide naval supremacy
was a vastly expensive ambition, probably only attained in the later stages of the Seven Years
War. Even when attained, it could not be taken for granted. Britain needed constant vigilance
lest other powers erode its mercantile gains and match its naval spending. Thus, war against
commercial rivals became a legitimate tactic.\textsuperscript{60}

Just as more frequent and larger scale wars caused an increase in impressment, the
expansion of British trade resulted in an expansion of the merchant service. The numbers of men
aboard trading vessels grew from 25,000 in 1700 to 40,000 by 1750 with the number growing
even larger as the eighteenth-century progressed.\textsuperscript{61} During periods of war, the simultaneous
mobilization of the Royal Navy and privateering forces generated furious competition for skilled
seamen. Wages in the merchant service rose dramatically during times of war both as
compensation for the increased risk of attack, seizure, or incarceration by the enemy, but also as

\textsuperscript{59} John Brewer and John Styles, \textit{An Ungovernable People: The English and Their Law in the Seventeenth and
Eighteenth Centuries}, 151-53.
\textsuperscript{60} Marshall, 184.
\textsuperscript{61} Rediker, 78.
compensation for the increased possibility of attack, seizure, or incarceration by their own government through impressment.\textsuperscript{62}

Moral considerations were also a cause of the debate over the press and they were largely informed by the egregious means by which the press operated. Faced with a perennial lack of volunteers, as a consequence of both the service’s great need for men and competition with merchant vessels, the Royal Navy turned to pressing men both on land and at sea. The coercion of men into the Navy was accomplished in different ways on land and at sea but both methods were sufficiently egregious to excite comment from Britons of every class and occupation. At sea, British sailors could be pressed from merchantmen and enjoyed better treatment than those taken up ashore who, once in the system, were confined in tender ships to prevent their escape and then were transported to further confinement in receiving ships, which were little better than floating prisons, until the “recruits” were assigned to a ship where their inexperience and lack of skill made them the butt of petty officers and shipmates alike.\textsuperscript{63}

There are few figures to determine what percentage of pressed men were taken while at sea or how many were gathered at any one time or over the course of impressment’s existence because this manner of pressing was outside the purview of the Navy Board.\textsuperscript{64} Regardless of the lack of hard data, it is nevertheless logical to assume the numbers were high as the best place to press was at sea. This is because most potential candidates at sea were sailors and many were prime hands. The pressing of men at sea increased over time and became especially common during the Anglo-French conflicts of 1793-1815 as it became a rare occurrence for a merchant

\textsuperscript{62} Rediker, 32.
\textsuperscript{63} Ireland, 56.
\textsuperscript{64} Rodger, 146.
vessel to make it up the Channel or into a West Country port without being stopped by men-of-
war or by cutters manned by press gangs.\textsuperscript{65} By custom and law (in the early years of the
practice; this was phased out as the need for manpower increased) pressing could only be done
on inbound British merchantmen within soundings who had enough men to spare to allow them
to continue. It was only conducted within the Channel and the Western Approaches by men-of-
war or by tenders manned by parties from a man-of-war sent out specifically to press.

The standard procedure for impressment of in-bound merchant vessels is illustrated in an
August 1745 dispatch to the Admiralty by Edward Vernon when he was stationed in the English
Channel aboard HMS \textit{Royal George}. Vernon wrote that he had “one Folkestone cutter, which I
keep at present employed… for examining all the ships [homeward bound merchant ships] going
thorough here, and Impressing when an opportunity offers for it.”\textsuperscript{66} Taking men from
merchantmen in the Channel endured for as long as the press. Nearly four decades after Admiral
Vernon’s description of the practice, James Trevenen, then a lieutenant aboard HMS \textit{Crocodile}
(and later Captain in both the Royal Navy and the Imperial Russian Navy) wrote a letter in July
1781 where he noted that, “When cruising in the Channel a fleet of merchantmen was sighted,
Hoisted out the pinnaces and cutter. Sent them a-pressing. At 10.0 our cutter returned with 3
men; at 12.0 the pinnace returned with 13 men.”\textsuperscript{67}

A captain’s authority for pressing men while at sea was contained in press warrants
issued by the Admiralty. These documents were specific; they instructed a captain exactly who
could be pressed, vigorously reminded all officers to avoid any unethical behavior (in a financial

\textsuperscript{65} Dann, 167.
\textsuperscript{66} Edward Vernon, \textit{Dispatch to the Admiralty}, 25 August 1745, in Ranft, ed., \textit{The Vernon Papers}, 453.
\textsuperscript{67} James Trevenen, \textit{Letter}, 6 July 1781, in Christopher Lloyd, ed., \textit{A Memoir of James Trevenen} (London: Navy

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sense, not in the means employed—a captain faced fines if he pressed a protected seaman), and ordered all British subjects and officials to refrain from interference with the lawful pressing of an individual. The following example of a press warrant was received by Captain Lord William Fitzroy of HMS *Aeolus* on 23 June 1808:

In pursuance of his Majesty’s Order-in-Council, dated the eighteen day of November 1807, we do hereby empower and direct you to impress, or cause to be impressed, so many seamen, seafaring men, and persons whose occupations and calling are to works in vessels and boats upon rivers, as shall be necessary to either man his Majesty’s ship under your command or any other of his Majesty’s ships giving unto each man so impressed one shilling for preset money. And, in the execution hereof, you are to take care, that neither yourself nor any other officer authorized by do demand or receive any money, gratuity, reward or any other consideration whatsoever, for the sparing, exchanging or discharging any person or persons impressed or to be impressed… You are not to entrust any person with the execution warrant but a commissioned officer… This warrant to continue in force till the thirty-first day of December 1808, and in execution thereof, all mayors, sheriffs, justices of the peace bailiffs, constables, headboroughs, and all other of his Majesty’s officers and subjects whom it many concern, are hereby required to be aiding and assisting unto you, and those employed by you, as they tender his Majesty’s service, and will answer in the contrary at their perils.  

In contrast with the often brutal methods for pressing men on shore, when an individual was taken from the sea, the methods were less severe, largely because the targeted sailors had little chance for escape and the stringently delineated standards of conduct imposed by the Admiralty. Admiral Vernon issued orders to his captains in the West Indies in July 1740 to

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69 An example of the less harsh experience of men pressed at sea versus those gathered from the land, those taken while under sail were often allowed to volunteer on the condition that they would be allowed greatly needed leave. This practice was encouraged by the East India Company and other merchant interests and approved by the Admiralty as humane and efficient. This arrangement was made feasible by requiring men to be entered and mustered into service so that they were legally in the Navy and liable to be treated as deserters if they did not return when their ship was ready to sail. Another advantage of being pressed at sea was the good possibility of a seaman’s
“give the strictest charge to all your Lieutenants employed in the service to execute your orders with all possible civility and to see the ships safely anchored where they shall desire it.”

The second method of pressing men was gathering them from ports and even the countryside. This approach excited considerably more public dialogue than sea-borne impressment because of its more violent connotations and the fact that it often occurred in full view of the populace. As with sea-borne impressment, there has been little useful analysis of how the Navy was manned from the shore. There are some official statistics but they are not informative in themselves and can be positively misleading largely because the Admiralty itself used sleight of hand to conceal the number of pressed men, so the latter would receive benefits not available to pressed men and to avoid further inflaming the public.

Prior to 1793, the burden of recruiting landsmen and sailors on shore fell on a ship’s commander. After that year, captains unable to find sufficient seamen could utilize the Impress Service, a specialized body commanded by captains and lieutenants who belonged to no ship and therefore had no particular agenda but whose full-time duty was to search the land localities and seaports most likely to produce reliable seamen. Even after 1793, many commanders wished to find the best men possible rather than rely on what the Impress Service sent them and often looked first to their home districts, especially if they were from the landed class or resided in or near a seaport. Even before the existence of the Impress Service, those captains from the landed class were better able to get men themselves. Philip Lanyon, the Portsmouth naval agent

directly becoming a petty officer or midshipman and there was nothing to stop a pressed man from rising to the highest levels in the Navy. Rodger, 139-40.

Edward Vernon, Orders to His Captains, July 1740, in Ranft, ed., The Vernon Papers, 416.

Rodger, 154.


Rodger, 155-56.
commented about this in 1678 when he wrote to the Naval Board that “Sunday last arrived here
his Majesty’s yacht Anne from Sir John Kempthorne… for volunteers; having received some…
she sailed this day for Falmouth where I believe she may get some considerable number,
especially Sir John being this country’s man, whereof I presume he will be supplied with so
many as the yacht can carry.” 74

The Impress Service’s powers were entirely legal and carefully circumscribed. In fact,
by the late eighteenth-century, the need for men was so great that the Admiralty made the
Impress Service part of the Navy and commanded by an admiral with the nation divided into
districts commanded by captains. 75 Despite the legal authority of press gangs their members
were often the subject of controversy due to a habit of using excessive force. Their behavior
became so outrageous that by 1770 the Admiralty had to issue special instructions to Impress
Service captains and lieutenants to attend strictly to their duties and give as little offense as
possible because many “complaints have been made to the Board of the disorderly proceedings
of the press gangs employed in Town [London].” 76 This reiteration of policy regarding press
gangs did not solve problems with the violence inherent in its operation. Just a few weeks later,
the Admiralty had to rebuke a Lieutenant Vitu and dismiss him from the Impress Service for
disregarding his orders by using violence in entering houses in search of men to press. 77

74 Philip Lanyon, Report to the Naval Board, 1678, in Hattendorf, et al., eds., British Naval Documents, 1204 –
1960, 299.
75 Ennis, 38.
76 Admiralty Minutes, 30 October 1770, in Ruddock F. MacKay, ed., The Hawke Papers, A Selection: 1743-1771
77 Admiralty Minutes, 3 November 1770, in MacKay, ed., The Hawke Papers, A Selection: 1743-1771, 468.
In its operation, a gang's powers were limited as it could only seize individuals connected to the sea—professional sailors.\(^78\) The press gang targeted men between sixteen and forty-five years of age who had been to sea in some capacity previously, men who had the necessary experience to make good sailors and who lacked the political influence likely to impede the process. Certain occupational groups were exempt—naval dockworkers and shipbuilders, merchant ship apprentices, pilots, seamen on outgoing trading vessels, and men given protections from the Admiralty or Parliament.\(^79\) The trade in false protections was so widespread that one of the Impress officer's most delicate duties was to examine protections, detect the numerous forgeries, and release those with the genuine item.\(^80\) Even though the Impress Service operated on shore, impressment of genuine landsmen was forbidden by law until the 1790s but the definition of who actually "used the sea" (the standard by which it was determined who could be pressed) was flexible so it was in the interest of any able-bodied man who could avoid being pressed to do so.\(^81\) As a result, in extreme emergencies the gangs pressed landsmen, able-bodied but unskilled and impoverished men who could be trained in the basics of seamanship.\(^82\)

The Impress Service collected men by using the press gang; a permanent recruitment teams comprised of regular officers, petty officers, and locally recruited assistants that operated in British towns, many far inland, and provided a continuous trickle of men.\(^83\) These land-

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\(^79\) Dann, 167
\(^80\) Rodger, 176.
\(^81\) Ireland, 55-56.
\(^82\) Ennis, 15. Prior to and after the ban on pressing landsmen in the 1790s many of these untrained individuals chose to volunteer for service in the Royal Navy. They did this for a number of reasons ranging from attempts to escape criminal actions to the chance for adventure to pecuniary gain. An example of these recruits is found in a July 1743 letter from Admiral Edward Hawke to Thomas Corbett, Secretary of the Admiralty. Hawke remarked that “seamen are very scarce in and about London, and that most of the men who enter voluntary with him are landsmen.”, Admiral Sir Edward Hawke, *Letter to Thomas Corbett*, 20 July 1743, in MacKay, ed., *The Hawke Papers, A Selection: 1743-1771*, 6.
\(^83\) Ireland, 55.
bound press gangs roved the seaports and inland towns armed with clubs (cutlasses or firearms would maim the men they needed) and usually targeted obvious sailors. Seamen were easy to recognize, much to the delight of the press gangs, because of the tattoos that often adored their forearms, their clothing, gait, and the wrinkled and darkened skin that made them, both literally and figuratively, marked men.84

While the Impress Service sought to snatch nearly every unprotected sailor available, one group press gangs generally avoided targeting was criminals. Despite this fact, there existed a criminal element in the Service. Most were merely debtors (of less than £20 by 1706 Act of Parliament) but one class of felon was allowed to serve aboard a warship—smugglers. These were often fine seamen and perfectly reliable when removed from temptation, opportunity, and their old associates. They were so useful that sometimes these men were rated as petty officers immediately.85 Smugglers were often sought out by naval officials for impressment for two reasons: first, they were good seamen and, second, their service aboard a warship eliminated a criminal element from society. Admiral Sir John Norris commented on this in a letter to the Admiralty Secretary, John Burchett when he wrote, “4 or 500 men might be easily had from Dover, Deal, Sandwich, Thanet, and Folkestone, which would not only be of great consequence for the service, but an effectual means to destroy a great part of the smuggling trade carried on in those parts.”86 Apart from smugglers and debtors the Navy admitted no one from prison, as a thief or murderer could easily destroy the smooth, efficient running of a naval vessel.

84 Redicker, 12.
85 Roger, 170-71.
In order to facilitate pressing men, gangs set up at inns, taverns, and anywhere else seamen gathered and executed carefully planned raids that were the result of good intelligence (information was gathered by payment, while some provided information out of spite or a master might give away an apprentice to rid himself of responsibility for the youngster). Those press gangs that gathered men from the pub, in, or elsewhere ashore often faced opposition from townspeople. In 1805, a recruiting officer in Bristol suffered humiliation at the hands of some determined women. While attempting to take a man in the village of Pill at an inn owned by Joseph Hooker, he was attacked by Mrs. Hooker, her daughter, and a female servant. These three women rescued the seaman enabling him to escape out the back door. It is not surprising that women often vigorously sought to hinder press gangs as these naval patrols often snatched their men without warning. These unexpected snatchings often left women with a house and children to support and no income.

An accosted individual acquiesced, produced protection (a ticket stating he was immune due to his profession or that he belonged to another ship), fled, or fought the gang. Those who fought were often successful especially if there were a large number of seamen. When seamen were ashore, they usually converged on the rowdy punch-houses and brothels so that the press gang could not often do its work of body snatching without a fight and, at times, a bloody defeat.

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87 Rodger, 172.
89 Cordingly, 29-30.
90 Ennis, 36-37.
91 Rediker, 59.
Often, this violence did not end once the press gang delivered a man to a waiting vessel. One example of this is Richard Seller, a Quaker long-shore fisherman from Kilnsea near the Yorkshire port of Scarborough who recounted his unpleasant experience with the press. Later in the history of the press, fishermen like Seller were exempted from service but, at this time, that was not the case. Seller was taken by a press gang at the outset of the Second Anglo-Dutch War of 1665-67 as he went about his business on a Scarborough pier and took part in the ensuing naval actions, being held against his will aboard HMS Royal Prince.

Seller began his account with a description of his pressing. He wrote, “I was pressed on Scarborough Piers and refusing to go on board the Ketch, they beat me very fore on the land… they hoisted me in with a tackle… and they bunched me with feet… and was so maimed, that they were forced to swaddle me up with clothes.” When Seller informed the crew that his religious beliefs were the reason he refused to serve or fight, they beat him again. The theme of regular and largely unprovoked beatings and his only comfort being his faith are repeated frequently in Seller’s account of his time in the Navy. It was not until a wealthy business associate of Seller’s uncle intervened that the fisherman’s service came to an end.

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92 In addition to the violence that often accompanied the activities of the press gang, there were other disadvantages associated with these roving bands of pressers. Their behavior discouraged volunteers because the gangs gave a bad impression of the Navy and set obstacles in the way of volunteering—seamen were afraid to approach the coast to volunteer for fear of being pressed and losing their bounty. Rodger, 78. This was a real concern as bounties could be substantial to an impoverished sailor or landsman—in 1770 the Admiralty instituted a 30 shilling bounty for every able seaman and 20 shillings for every ordinary seaman. Admiralty Minutes, 21 September 1770, in MacKay, ed., The Hawke Papers, A Selection, 1743-1771, 453. The fact that later that year these bounties were raised to £3 for an able seaman and £2 for an ordinary seaman indicates how badly men were needed and how ineffectual bounties were in attracting men to volunteer for service in the Royal Navy. Admiralty Minutes, 12 October 1770, in MacKay, ed., The Hawke Papers, A Selection: 1743-1771, 461.


95 Seller, 4-26.
Press gangs also used cutters to patrol rivers and harbors and to go far enough out to sea to collect sailors before they could escape ashore from merchantmen about pay and release its crew.\textsuperscript{96} One advantage of this method was that these men could be delivered straight aboard a tender for processing while men pressed inland had to be marched or transported handcuffed by wagon.\textsuperscript{97} The mechanism of pressing men who worked on rivers is present in Captain Lord William Fitzroy’s orders on the subject from 26 June 1808. Captain Fitzroy wrote, “I do hereby depute Lieutenant William Browne Chamberlain belonging to his Majesty’s [ship] Aeolus under my command, to impress seamen, seafaring men and persons whose occupations and callings are to work in vessels and boats upon rivers, according to the tenor of this warrant.”\textsuperscript{98}

There were disadvantages to this method as well—the ever-present risk of mutiny aboard a tender and extended confinement in these ships could try the patience of even the most enthusiastic volunteer.\textsuperscript{99} There was also the problem of disease among the men restrained aboard a holding ship awaiting assignment. The conditions were filthy, diseased, cramped, and often fatal. Dr. James Lind, Physician to His Majesty’s Royal Hospital at Haslar and Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians commented on the conditions aboard tenders. In 1779 he wrote that, “I have known a thousand men confined together in one guardship, some hundreds of whom had neither a bed, nor so much as a change of linen… In this case, it was impossible to prevent

\textsuperscript{96} Press gangs also acted as a naval police force. They set up roadblocks to prevent the free movement of deserters, they pressed men suspected of spying, of aiding prisoners of war in escaping, those detected selling grog to the sick, individuals who concealed deserters, and unusually troublesome privateers (the Admiralty had to revoke their protection first). Rodger, 179-80.

\textsuperscript{97} Rodger, 172-73.


\textsuperscript{99} Rodger, 176.
the generation or progress of disease. The fatal mischief lurked in their tainted apparel, and rags;
and by these was conveyed into other ships.”

As to the quality of men gathered, many commanders were unimpressed with results regardless of whether the sailors were taken by their own officers or the Impress Service. Commander Midleton of HMS Mars expressed his disappointment in the inferiority of pressed men in a letter written in March 1666 during the Second Dutch War. Midleton was “not only sorry but ashamed to see such men as are sent from Devonshire… not one is a seaman of 10 of them that cometh to this place… all are so extreme lousy that it was a sad sight to see them.”

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101 In contrast to the men they pressed, the Navy went to great lengths to retain and encourage good men in the press gangs. Their members were well paid and officers received substantial allowances and large expense accounts. In 1770, captains assigned to the Impress Service were paid £5 a week and lieutenants received 5 shillings a day. Admiralty Minutes, 30 October 1770, in MacKay, ed., The Hawke Papers: A Selection, 1743-1771, 465. This made the Impress Service expensive but, given the need for vast numbers of men, the government was willing to fund it. Those in command of press gangs were often experienced men who served as Impress officers while recovering from wounds or dealing with family issues before resuming their sea careers. Most officers in the Impress Service were experienced and well-aware of the importance of efficiently discharging their duties but some succumbed to the opportunities for blackmail or corruption their positions afforded. For instance, some officers were willing to accept poor quality men to get bonuses that were paid based on the number of men provided, not their value (10 shillings per seamen and 5 shillings per landsmen in the late eighteenth-century). Rodger, 166-67. Naval officers were not the only people to benefit financially from pressing men into the Service. In a June 1734 report from Admiral Sir John Norris of H.M.S. Britannia to the Admiralty Secretary, Norris noted that “naval officers pay to the Warden’s officers twenty shillings for every seafaring man so brought in.” Admiral Sir John Norris, Report to the Admiralty, 19 June 1734, in Baugh, ed., naval Administration, 1715-1750, 111. Whatever the benefits of being an officer employed with the Impress Service, it was a duty that allowed little opportunity for promotion and was often strenuously avoided by ambitious officers. In March 1803, William Henry Dillon, then a senior lieutenant and later Vice-Admiral of the Red and Knight Commander of the Royal Guelphic Order, referred to the Impress Service as the “unpleasant service” when he was assigned to it. Dillon wrote that when he was ordered to report to the Impress Service the news was “so astounding that I was completely taken aback, as I thought it a degrading appointment. None, generally speaking, but worn-out lieutenants were employed in that Service.” Sir William Henry Dillon, K.C.H., Vice-Admiral of the Red, Michael A. Lewis, ed. A Narrative of My Professional Adventures (1790 – 1839), Volume II, (1802 – 1818) (London: Navy Records Society, 1956), 9-10. While performing his duties Dillon waged a paper war in an attempt to be relieved of his duties. Dillon wrote to his father, Sir John Talbot Dillon, Lord Hawke, and the First Sea Lord, John Jervis, First Earl of St. Vincent. In May 1803 his request was granted and “to my astonishment the First Lord of the Admiralty complied with my application by cancelling my commission.” Dillon, 14. In six weeks with the Impress Service Dillon had pressed 150 men and despite the successful prosecution of his duties he did not “see much cause to feel any keen disappointment in the change of my destiny [an appointment as lieutenant aboard HMS Africaine].” Dillon, 14.

Midleton was displeased not only with the worth of pressed men but also with some of the officers engaged in pressing. In the same letter he compared a senior officer who the actual business of impressment with a junior lieutenant as “either a fool or a knave” and that behaving in such a manner “cannot be convenient for the King’s service that them that have the charge of it to be absent.” Nearly a century later some officers still held a low opinion of many men provided by the Navy by the press. In a 1743 letter to Thomas Corbett, Secretary of the Admiralty, Admiral Sir Edward Hawke complained that, “among the pressed men sent down…, there are several of them very little, puny, weakly fellows that have never been at sea and, I think any officer must allow, can be of little or no service.”

This discussion of the causes—military expediency, legal issues, economic and commercial considerations, and the moral problems created by the press’s operation demonstrates what a pervasive and onerous element it was in British life for nearly a century and a half. The very existence of the press as the most expedient means of manning the fleet, the sheer numbers of men taken to satisfy the Navy’s ever-growing manpower needs, and the treatment sailor’s received after impressment were important causes of the public discourse over the press. Added to those considerations were legal questions surrounding the constitutionality of the press advocated by radical reformers like the Wilkites and the seamen themselves as they gained greater collective strength and knowledge over this period. A further cause of the debate was the expansion of trade that resulted in greater competition for men between the Navy and merchant service which increased both the cost of the Navy and the aggressiveness of its

recruitment methods. The final cause of the public discussion over the press was moral considerations largely informed by the onerous and sometimes violent means by which the press operated. An understanding of these negative aspects of impressment makes apparent why the practice excited 150 years of debate. The next issue to examine is the nature of progression of the official and popular debate that pervaded Britain as a result of the burdens of the press as described above. Knowledge of the course of this public discourse over the press makes clear why there were calls for the reformation of the practice and why, ultimately, it existed for so long.
OFFICIAL AND PUBLIC DEBATE ABOUT THE PRESS

The previous discussion elucidated how the operation of the press was sufficiently troubling that it led to a vociferous and long-term debate of the practice. The course of that debate is charted though an examination of the opinions of government officials, naval officers, and private citizens of this period and their views formed the basis of the actions taken by those who wanted to reform the press and those who wished to avoid it entirely. Naval officers and government officials generally viewed the press as best means to acquire sufficient seamen and, therefore, as the most effective method to ensure the Navy’s success. While most officers had conflicting feelings—they believed impressment was a means to an end but disliked the negative effects it had on seamen and their families—a small number often lacked sympathy as they viewed the difficulties of sailors whose freedom was taken as secondary to naval expediency. With regard to the opinions of private citizens, many thought the press was an unconscionable abridgement of seamen’s rights and an unwelcome blemish on the nation. Still, just as with Navy officers and government officials, some viewed the press as either an unpleasant necessity or as an effective enforcer of social order which could be utilized to rid their communities of undesirable elements while protecting trade and advancing Britain’s strategic position.

The views of those most directly involved in the press are instructive in analyzing impressment’s place in British society and the impressment’s persistence. In the period between the Restoration and Waterloo, the Royal Navy became an emblem of national identity and the main component of Britain’s military and economic success. This triumphant, patriotic image of the Navy had been encouraged by naval victories, the public spectacle that came with ceremonies that took place on land such as the launching of new warships, and the prestigious
public face of the Navy’s administration, the Navy Office had an entire block dedicated to it in Somerset House on the River Thames.\textsuperscript{105}

Naval officers and officials generally viewed the press as the most effective way to ensure the Navy’s success. Naval officers were almost universally literate and had a permanent connection with the Service; it was their career and means of financial support while ordinary seamen, whether impressed or volunteers saw themselves primarily as members of a ship’s company and often moved from the Navy to the merchant service as circumstances and preferences allowed.\textsuperscript{106}

Despite the undeniable injustices of impressments, the attitudes of some in the Navy and the government toward the men affected often lacked sympathy. To these individuals, the plight of the seamen whose liberty was contravened was secondary to the needs of the service. This was particularly the case in the era before impressment became increasingly unpopular but their vehemence is not dulled by years. In 1653, Nehemiah Bourne, resident Commissioner of the Navy at Harwich, complained to the Commissioners of the Admiralty and Navy of, “the ungrateful and disingenuous spirit in the seamen I lament, who are neither sensible of what is the public or their private interest and concernment, but are below the beasts that perish.”\textsuperscript{107} He further noted, “they are not such as do their work, which I signified to the bailiffs… and hope, if they send any more, they will be of another magnitude.”\textsuperscript{108}

\textsuperscript{106} Lincoln, 13.
\textsuperscript{107} Nehemiah Bourne, \textit{Letter to the Commissioners of the Admiralty}, 10 November 1653, in Hattendorf, et. al. eds., \textit{British Naval Documents, 1204-1960}, 282.
\textsuperscript{108} Nehemiah Bourne, \textit{Letter to the Commissioners of the Admiralty}, 10 November 1653, in Hattendorf, et. al. eds., \textit{British Naval Documents, 1204-1960}, 282.
For Bourne and those who shared his opinions, these sailors, gathered up *en masse* by local law enforcement officials and deposited without ceremony at the Navy docks, should have been mindful of the importance of their coming task and grateful for the opportunity to serve. These unfortunate and unwilling wretches ranked below animals to Bourne and he wanted them replaced by a different class of unwilling recruit—one who would be capable of doing his proper duty.

Many officers, without bearing such ill-will toward those pressed, viewed the impressment in practical terms—these men needed to serve because the Navy required sailors. An example of this is Admiral Charles Knowles who wrote a letter about the effects of a 1747 press riot in Boston. Parliament had passed an Act that prohibited pressing in the sugar islands in the West Indies.\(^{109}\) This act encouraged colonists in Boston and throughout New England to believe they should have been exempted from the press as well. Admiral Knowles described the consequences for pressing men as follows:

> It is plain no governor’s authority will ever be able to raise men for the King’s Service let the emergency be ever so great… The difficulties were many that commanding officers had, to keep the King’s ships manned before the passing of this Act, but they are insurmountable, and the consequences I fear will grow worse… if their Lordships don’t interest themselves in getting it repealed.\(^{110}\)

Admiral Knowles’ measured description of his inability to man his ships indicates his general disinterest in the passions inflamed by this controversy. He betrayed no feelings on the matter and simply reported that, while it was difficult to press enough men before, it had now become nearly impossible to accomplish this vital task. While some officers and officials had no

\(^{109}\) United Kingdom. *An Act for the Better Encouragement of the Trade of His Majesty’s Sugar Colonies in America*, 1745, 19 Geo. II c. 30.

sympathy for the effects of impressment and others empathized with pressed men, there were still others who simply went about their business and gave little thought to the matter.

While some officers and naval officials viewed impressments with only a cold calculation of how best to man the fleet and achieve victory, others had conflicting feelings. Most of these men saw the press as means to an end but lamented the negative effects the practice had on sailors and their families. These Navy men who were otherwise inclined to decry the cruelty or excesses of impressment viewed the practice as a necessary component of British society and military objectives and it was these naval men who pursued reforms aimed at lessening the burdens of the press.

In 1742, for example, Admiral Edward Vernon, in command of a squadron in the Caribbean, wrote a series of letters to the Admiralty Secretary, Josiah Burchett, in which he voiced his beliefs on the subject. Vernon wrote that “I often reflect with myself the want we are in of some more humane and assured methods for speedier manning our fleets on any future emergencies, as I dread the consequences that many one time or other result from the want of it.”

Vernon continued this line of reasoning in his next letter to Admiralty Secretary Burchett:

As I have always thought both the prosperity and security of his Majesty’s kingdoms depended on our being able to support superiority at sea as their only real security, so I have always wished to see some happy means established for the speedy manning of our fleets... And as I am thoroughly persuaded nothing can be more disagreeable to their Lordships than the violent methods now in use for that purpose, I flatter myself no one of his Majesty’s subjects would take a greater pleasure than I should in contributing my might towards giving a relief to their Lordships’ compassionate humanity in that particular. And I can’t but humbly conceive so necessary and desirable an end may be attained if it be but

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attended to with that care and circumspection that the importance of it requires; as I think it everyone’s interest that is a sincere well wisher to the honour and security of the Crown, and prosperity of the kingdom, to contribute to it, and hope they will do so when it is properly explained to them.”

For men like Admiral Vernon, national security was of paramount importance and the Royal Navy represented the best tool for preserving Britain’s interests. While those who shared Vernon’s attitudes desired a more humane and equitable means to acquire sufficient seamen to accomplish the Royal Navy’s objectives and would support sensible alternatives, they stood firmly behind the press as the most practicable and efficient way to do so.

Admiral Vernon also saw the disadvantages of impressment for less idealistic reasons than concern for the integrity of human freedoms. He criticized the press as being incompatible with the health of seamen. In a 1745 letter to Thomas Corbett, Secretary of the Admiralty, Vernon wrote that:

Impressing in general… destroys the lives of numbers annually, and occasions a general sickness amongst all the ships of the fleet… And as I esteem it to be highly for his Majesty’s honour and service… some humane method should be established for preserving the lives of so valuable a body of men as our seamen, and reconciling their good will to the public service, from which great honour would result to the Crown, and great prosperity and security to the kingdom.

While this is another forceful argument by Admiral Vernon against impressment, it is also a very limited one. Vernon, like many officers of this era seemed incapable of advancing beyond platitudes in their condemnation of the practice. Whether he was opposing the press in grandiose terms—the rights of men and basic human dignity—or in a narrow way—the health of sailors—Vernon was intractably wedded to the concept that the burdens of the press were better

112 Edward Vernon, Letter to the Admiralty Secretary, 1 February 1742, in Baugh, ed., Naval Administration, 1715-1750, 127.
113 Edward Vernon, Letter to the Admiralty Secretary, 8 December 1745, in Ranft, ed., The Vernon Papers, 547.
than the alternative, an insufficient number of sailors and failure of the Navy to meet its obligations.

Like Admiral Vernon, James Trevenen, then third lieutenant aboard *HMS Conquestador*, expressed his pity for those men for whom impressment was most cruel—those taken from inbound merchant vessels. In a letter to his mother, written in 1780, he lamented that he would “frequently witness the most distressing situations, by seeing men after so many years’ absence and on the point of being united with their wives and friends, snatched at once from all their hopes, and doomed to severe trials and greater danger than ever in the course of many more long years of absence.”

It was not just naval officers who wrote of the pain and trial of separation, but also those most directly affected by it. One private citizen who protested the seizure of her loved one was Mary Creed, pregnant when she wrote the Admiralty a few days after Christmas 1806 about the burdens of her husband, John’s, impressment. She pleaded her case that,

Sir, You will be pleased to put before the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty the deplorable situation I am in by having my husband, who is very sickly, and unfit for service, taken from me by the Press Gang... I am big with child, and have no other way of support but him, he likewise supporting his old father and mother, and if he was examined by any Doctor he would be found more fit for a hospital than a ship, having entirely lost the use of his right hand.

James Trevenen and Mary Creed elucidate an effect of impressment that was infrequently discussed by naval officers but greatly felt by those who depended on pressed men—the burden of the practice on families. These were the human costs of impressment that extended beyond

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115 Cordingly, 30.
the excesses of the practice’s mechanisms. Too often these burdens were lost in discussions of
the impact on sailors or more nebulous conceptions like the violation of an individual’s rights
and liberties or urgent ones about national survival.

One high-ranking officer who felt un-conflicted sympathy for men subject to
impressment was Commodore Midleton. In 1666 he was tasked with pressing men in
Portsmouth and wrote about the pitiable state of some seamen. Midleton remarked on how,
“they are half sick, and I fear some of them will die… I dare almost undertake to be punished for
them; however, do therein as God shall direct you. Their wives and children are to be pitied.
However you order them, send none down to me… I have not heart to press them.”\textsuperscript{117}

Of the officers who served aboard British warships, the group that felt the most
compassion for the men pressed into service was chaplains. Richard Walter, chaplain of HMS
Centurion wrote of the wretched treatment of these men in 1740. He lamented that “they
themselves were extremely averse to the service… and fully apprised of the dangers…the
concern that appeared in their countenances, which was mixed with no small degree of
indignation, to be thus hurried from their repose into a fatiguing employ…would result in all
probability in uselessly perishing by lingering and painful disease.”\textsuperscript{118} An open letter written by
an anonymous chaplain is the late 17\textsuperscript{th} century is the most direct condemnation of the practice by
a naval official. He wrote of impressment’s evil:

\begin{quote}
… the violent pressing and carrying away of those poor men whose wages is so
stopped without any care taken for their distressed families in their absences… for
the bad provision made for them at sea, being necessitated in many ships to feed
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{117} Midleton, Letter, 29 March 1666, in H.W. Hodges and E.A. Hodges, eds., \textit{Select Naval Documents}, 84-85.
\textsuperscript{118} Richard Walter, \textit{Anson’s Voyage Round the World}, 1744, 5, in H.W. Hodges and E.A. Hodges, eds., \textit{Select Naval
Documents}, 118.
upon unwholesome and stinking victuals, whereby many of them are become sick and unserviceable, and many are dead. Shall not their blood be required at the hands of those that, for their gain, undertake the victualling, thought they be persons greatly in favour… Certainly the great God of heaven and earth will make inquisition for blood if men do not. It cannot but be fresh in your memories how the arm of the Lord hath from time to time been make manifest in pulling down the mighty from their seats and breaking all unjust powers in pieces.\footnote{119}

Commodore Midleton, the unknown chaplain and Reverend Walter’s views mark a rare instance of an official or officer connected with the Navy’s remarking upon, not only the suffering of these men, but the personal indignation at forced servitude. This one officer and two clergymen place upon those in power the moral obligation to end, or at the very least, lessen what they deemed an evil practice. The rarity of such unequivocal criticisms of the press is perhaps one of the most telling reasons why the practice lasted for so long—the hollow words offered in sympathy for the impressed did not reflect a serious consideration of the inhumanity of the practice.

In addition to naval officers, the Admiralty and government officials expressed attitudes that shaped the continued employment of impressment despite its negative aspects. The government was bound to be supportive of the Navy and the actions carried out to ensure the Service’s potency since it was recognized as the key to Britain’s diplomatic and military strength.\footnote{120} This leaves little doubt that these governmental entities would support any successful means of ensuring that the Navy had enough men to meet its ever-widening responsibilities regardless of their sympathetic views toward those negatively affected by the practice.

\footnote{119} Open Letter, 1674, in H.W. Hodges and E.A. Hodges, eds., Select Naval Documents, 67-68.
\footnote{120} Lincoln, 41.
In the period of impressment’s infancy, the mercurial opinions of Samuel Pepys are central to any consideration of the practice. Pepys served in various government posts most notably as the Clerk of Acts (the naval officer in charge of supplies and facilities) from 1660-73 and as Admiralty Secretary (the administrative head of the Navy) from 1673-79 and 1684-89. Pepys’ opinions are vital not only because he was integral in the establishment of the press at the birth of the Royal Navy but his diary is extremely illuminating. Pepys’ dozens of entries and allusions to the subject are invariably negative and, most damningly he describes the practice as tyrannical and unlawful.\textsuperscript{121}

Pepys’ opinions on impressment seem to indicate he would have been a likely candidate to replace it with a less pernicious practice. Pepys was humane and a reformer whose reorganization of the Royal Navy was the result of careful study and touched every aspect of the Service from shipbuilding to supplies.\textsuperscript{122} Even with these attitudes Pepys never attempted to abolish the practice because he was also a pragmatist. His diary entry of 4 June 1664 demonstrates this practicality. Pepys wrote that without the press “we cannot really raise men for this fleete of twelve sayle, besides that it will assert the King’s power of pressing, which at present is somewhat doubted, and will make the Dutch believe that we are in earnest.”\textsuperscript{123} Pepys also recognized the dangers associated with impressments. On 28 March 1668, he wrote “if we press, there will be mutinies in the town; for the seamen are said already to have threatened the pulling down of the Treasury Office; and if they do once come to that, it will not be long before they come to ours.”\textsuperscript{124} This reveals an understanding of the sailors’ grievances but while he was

\textsuperscript{121} Ennis, 40.
\textsuperscript{122} Ennis, 41.
\textsuperscript{124} Pepys, 634.
privately sympathetic, he realized that the press was necessary for the preservation of the nation and the monarchy, as protector of liberty and property, to which he owed his position.

Pepys’ two beliefs—his private conviction that the practice was unlawful and his public acceptance of its necessity—foreshadowed the basic arguments that dominated the impressment debate throughout the following one hundred fifty years.\(^{125}\) Pepys was most prescient about impressment because he recognized the incongruities and causes for potential strife that arose in subsequent decades as the need for men continually increased. The incarnation of the practice that existed at that time was relatively mild—landsmen were not in danger of being pressed and the fleet was inactive for much of the autumn and winter so the period of service was fairly short. Further, the sheer numbers of men pressed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were substantially greater than at this period. Even though he was coordinating and chronicling a mild form of the press, Pepys anticipated that the national outcry against the practice would increase as it expanded. As the imposition grew, impressment evolved from a naval administrator’s worry into a running national controversy.\(^{126}\)

In 1745, Secretary of the Admiralty Thomas Corbett dealt with the same concerns that had troubled Pepys in a letter to Admiral Edward Vernon:

Their Lordships command men to acquaint you that they are as much averse to the present methods of Pressing as any man can be, and wish some better method was established to man his Majesty’s ships. But till the Legislature has done so, their Lordships think it their duty and also of all his Majesty’s officers to exert their utmost diligence to procure men to serve his Majesty at sea, according to the

\(^{125}\) Ennis, 42-43.  
\(^{126}\) Ennis, 43-44.
present methods, how disagreeable soever they may be; and not to expose the nation to danger from reasons of private tenderness.  

Just as were their officers in the Navy, the Admiralty was unwilling to change the method by which the fleet was manned without the express consent of Parliament and the MPs had to concern themselves with broader questions of national importance than the plight of some thousands of men serving aboard ships far from Whitehall. In the same vein as their subordinates, the Admiralty saw national defense as a greater concern that the abridgement of the liberties of a relatively small percentage of the population.  

The public, from the upper to the lower classes, also expressed views on impressment that are instructive in understanding how the practice lasted for so long. It is generally difficult to determine what the men pressed thought of their situation beyond descriptions of the practice and what those on the higher end of the socio-economic scale thought of it. This is not because sailors of the era were unthinking louts or tireless, uncomplaining workers for the common good but this was an age of limited literacy and narrow access to the means of dissemination. Literacy figures are notoriously unreliable, as the measure by which conclusions are drawn was the ability to sign one’s name but this was not direct proof of one’s the ability to read or write. Despite the difficulties in determining the portion of the populace that could read, the long-term trend in Britain between the sixteenth and late-eighteenth centuries was a growth in literacy. Available, if undependable, figures show a gradual improvement in male literacy

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128 Lincoln, 43.
129 Among the earliest examples of public condemnation of the press came from the Quakers who lived on the east coast of England and were subject to this legal form of kidnapping while their co-religionists in America were liable to naval impressment on the high seas. Over the course of several decades the Friends’ worked out procedures to gain the release for any of their members unlucky enough to be pressed on shore or at sea. Long before the practice ceased at the end of the Napoleonic Wars, Quakers seem to have become free of this menace owing in large part to the decline of seafaring Friends and the effectiveness of their writings in warning their brethren of the risks. Bock, 3.
from ten percent in 1500 to 45 percent in 1714 and 60 percent by the end of the 1700s. Rates for females were considerably lower, generally averaging about half those of men. This large trend conceals considerable variation as elites were far more literate than the poor.\textsuperscript{130}

There were exceptions to illiteracy among seamen, who were generally culled from the lower classes. Recall the case of Richard Seller, the Quaker who was frequently beaten after being taken by the press gang at the outset of the Second Anglo-Dutch War because he refused to fight on religious grounds. Given Seller’s pacifist beliefs and his treatment at the hand of naval personnel, it is unsurprising that he decried the practice. He believed that not only war offended God, but so did the manner in which men were being forced to serve in the Navy. This did not stop him from rendering non-military assistance to those with whom he served. Seller’s willingness to help with the wounded in time of battle is admirable given the abuse he suffered and this contrasts with later Quaker and non-Quaker pacifists who refused to lend any aid to their naval captors.\textsuperscript{131}

Another Quaker who was pressed and faced the prospect of military service in contravention of his pacifist leanings was John Smith, an American from Dartmouth Massachusetts. Smith bore many hardships resulting from his impressment due to “Christian peaceable testimony [his Quaker beliefs].”\textsuperscript{132} Smith resisted authority by refusing to render any assistance to his shipmates regardless of the verbal or physical punishments inflicted upon him. He did this in obedience to what he considered to be a higher command.\textsuperscript{133}


\textsuperscript{131} Bock, 4.


\textsuperscript{133} Bock, 4.
It was not just the lower classes, those most often subjected to the harshness of impressment, who held deep convictions against the practice. In 1728, James Oglethorpe, founder of the colony of Georgia, expressed his opinions on the plight of pressed seamen. Oglethorpe questioned, “How comes it then that so very useful a part of His Majesty’s subjects as SAILORS are… prest into the Service, denied their liberty, and turned into slaves? For SLAVERY is nothing but SERVICE by FORCE. The PREST PERSON is assaulted and seized… and hurried into prison.”134 Here Oglethorpe decried not only the existence of the press but also the mechanisms by which it operated. By comparing the practice to chattel slavery, Oglethorpe demonstrated the argument against impressment that came to carry the greatest moral force. By linking the press with slavery, opponents of the practice advanced a position not easily defended by even its most ardent proponents. Further, Oglethorpe showed that a pressed man’s rights were abridged by the manner in which he was pressed. His person, not just his long-term liberty, was violated by the aggressive nature of his seizure and a recruit suffered the added ignominy of being placed in what amounted to prison aboard an unhealthy processing tender.

In contrast to Oglethorpe’s pity for the plight of press men, many British magistrates viewed the press as a means for disposing of unwanted members of their communities. This group’s view on the practice was guided by the practical utility of impressment in the discharge of their duties. Magistrates were fond of assisting the Impress Service in attempting to rid their districts of paupers, idiots, cripples, vagabonds, and petty criminals despite the lack of any legal justification for pressing them and the fact that few remotely passed for good candidates (although there was more success in pawning them off on the marines).135 Because jail was a

135 Rodger, 170.
frequent remedy for debt, these men were often unfortunates rather than hardened criminals (especially as the hardened criminals were mostly dead in a country where several hundred offenses were punishable by death). 136 James Trevenen, third lieutenant aboard H.M.S. Conquestador saw this firsthand and he documented in a 1780 letter to his mother. He wrote that “daily arrived vessels from all parts of Great Britain and Ireland with hundreds of men on board. Those whose fortunes have been broken by calamity, ruined by extravagance, and dissipated in gaming, all promiscuously huddled together with the draining of the jails and the outcasts of society from town and village.” 137

However useful this was for magistrates’ efforts to remove undesirable elements from society, the unsuitability of this practice were often recognized by naval officers like Trevenen who further commented on the “poor unfortunate man who has… been deprived of family and prospects; and the miserable wretch who compounds to risk his life in war to save his person from transportation are subject to every species of distress, as they labour under these great misfortunes.” 138

Many private citizens in Britain believed, like many naval officers and government officials, that the press was an unpleasant necessity. They decried its adverse effects on those pressed and lamented the inhumane manner in which it was sometimes executed but they recognized the practice as the only way to fill the ranks and defend Britain. In a 1773 letter to Lieutenant Robert Tomlinson, Reverend John Newton wrote:

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Your letter informed me that you had been busy in digesting a scheme of manning the Navy without impressing. The design is humane; the accomplishment would be highly desirable… To be sure impressing is a hardship—I remember I thought so when I was impressed in the year ’44… I would have destroyed the ship to have regained my liberty… The Navy is a considerable bulwark of our liberty; it is a pity the sailors should themselves be subject to what most of them dread no less than they would slavery, and indeed they who are liable to be torn from their families, and sent upon the most distant dangerous and disagreeable services, without their own consent, can hardly be called Freemen. But it is long established custom, and other ways of manning the Fleet with speed and certainty I presume are clogged with great difficulties.\textsuperscript{139}

John Newton held an opinion that was common in British society but he is unique in that the Reverend also spoke from personal experience. In 1773, as impressment was nearing its zenith, Newton expressed to Robert Tomlinson, the great champion of alternatives to pressing, that while the practice was frequently inhumane and akin to slavery, it was the best and most efficient means for the Navy to obtain sufficient seamen. He pointed out why reforms so often failed, specifically proposed alternatives to the existing mechanisms for pressing men failed; it was difficult. The many wars of this period created a climate ill-suited to changing well-established custom. So the known quantity that was impressment remained and the freedoms of some were subjugated to the good of the whole.

Even merchants petitioned the Admiralty to avoid pressing certain men for sympathetic reasons. The Secretary of the East India Company wrote to the Admiralty Secretary, Josiah Burchett, of his knowledge that the Navy intended to press men out of the recently returned merchant vessel Catherine. The East India Secretary beseeched Burchett to “commiserate the

case of the poor men. The ship hath been out above 3 years and hath been very sickly... we are
told there are but 20 men... on board that went out in her, and that they are so infirm... should
they be presently put to sea again, it would be their death.\textsuperscript{140} This concern could be viewed
cynically as motivated self-interest—the East India Company sought the exemption of their
sailors from naval service so they could be further utilized by the E.I.C. Given the hardships of
extended time at sea, however, it is more likely that the E.I.C. Secretary’s concerns were genuine
and he wished to see these seamen treated humanely, something that could not be accomplished
if they were pressed.

However concerned some merchant companies were with their situation of their men,
some viewed commercial interests as anathema to the strategic objective of the Navy. This
opinion was voiced by Peregrine Osborne, 2\textsuperscript{nd} Marquess of Carmarthen. Unlike many civilians
and naval officers, the Marquess’ attitude toward impressment did not have their genesis in the
plight of those pressed. Rather, the Marquess’ objections were rooted in commerce. He believed
only one remedy to the current system was severe enough to prevent sailors and merchant ship
owners from undermining the effectiveness of the Royal Navy.

The Marquess elaborated on twenty proposals to increase the speed and effectiveness
with which the fleet was manned. His target for reform was the merchant service—he advocated
continuing an embargo upon all merchant ships until the Navy was at full capacity. The
Marquess further sought to remove the desirability of merchant service by capping wages at

\textsuperscript{140} Letter from the Secretary of the East India Company to Admiralty Secretary, 10 April 1717, in Baugh, ed., Naval
Administration, 1715-1750, 96.
thirty shilling per month under penalties to be determined.\textsuperscript{141} The Marquess’ belief that the merchant service’s generosity was hampering the Navy’s ability to gather enough sailors was common, as was his conviction that commerce, not the welfare or treatment of seamen was of primary importance.

The Marquess’ view that competition between the Navy and the merchant service was the root of the problem is supported by evidence. As good seamen were in short supply, wages aboard merchantmen dramatically and a sailor could make three to four times as much in the merchant marine as in the Navy and he was more likely actually to receive his wages.\textsuperscript{142} Before 1793 a merchant seaman made about a guinea and 27 shillings a month. In the early years of the wars with Revolutionary and Napoleonic France he could make about 40 shillings and in the later part of those conflicts, a merchantman could make upwards of £3 a month. Because of these pay inequities, when there was a great need for personnel, the government would forbid enlistment in foreign merchantmen. In an emergency men were even prohibited from joining the British merchant service.\textsuperscript{143} This competition from the merchant fleet for prime hands led the Navy to increasingly more vigorous efforts to press seamen.

Part of the reasons for the intense competition between the Navy and merchant interests in rooted in the cost of the service. For most of this period, Britain did not have an income tax with which to fund the Navy or provide sufficient wages to compete with the merchant fleets.\textsuperscript{144}

\textsuperscript{141} Peregrine Osborne, 2\textsuperscript{nd} Marquess of Carmarthen, \textit{A Copy of the Marquess of Carmarthen’s Method for the Speedy Manning Her Majesty’s Royal Navy}, 1705, in J.S. Bromley ed., \textit{The Manning of the Royal Navy, Selected Public Pamphlets} (London: Navy Records Society, 1976), 42.
\textsuperscript{142} Neale, 10-11.
\textsuperscript{143} Ireland, 55.
\textsuperscript{144} Britain’s first income tax was levied from 1798 to 1816 in order to pay for the wars with Napoleonic France. It raised roughly £6,000,000 per year at its inception. Charles F. Bastable, \textit{Public Finance} (London: MacMillan and Co., Ltd., 1917), IV.IV.13§6. Britain had other tax systems such as the window tax which raised £2,000,000 per
In comparison to £1 7s per month an ordinary hand aboard a merchant vessel could make a month in the mid-eighteenth century, Edward Harvey, an ordinary seamen who served aboard HMS *Prince* for five months netted £2 4s 7d for the entirety of his service.\(^{145}\)

This is merely a microcosm as the cost of the whole Navy was astronomical. In 1711 the cost of paying and feeding (19 s per man per month) every sailor in the Royal Navy was £569,318.\(^{146}\) As of 31 December 1721 the net debt of the Navy was £1,506,581 and the total projected expenses for 1722 was £813,905. Despite those estimates Parliament only granted £564,599 for the Navy that year which resulted in a net projected debt for 1722 of £249,306 to be added to the arrears accrued up to that time.\(^{147}\) As the wars involving Britain became more frequent and of expanded scope as the eighteenth-century progressed the Navy’s responsibilities grew and these figures became exponentially higher. This lowered the government’s ability to raise adequate funds, which increased the debt and led to greater pay inequities with the merchant service. This made the Navy an increasingly less attractive option for sailors which, in turn, led to more aggressive and frequent pressings. In light of these realities, Britain never seriously considered paying sailors more, and in light of contemporary concern about naval expenditure this is not surprising.\(^{148}\)

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\(^{145}\) £1 14s 2d was deducted from his gross pay for slop clothes, bedding, surgeon’s services, and sick clothes. Edward Harvey, *Pay Ticket*, 3 June 1755, in Hattendorf, et. al. eds., *British Naval Documents, 1204-1960*, 527.

\(^{146}\) *Account of Naval Expenditures*, 1711, in Baugh, ed., *Naval Administration, 1715-1750*, 473.

\(^{147}\) *Account in Possession of Sir Robert Walpole, First Lord of the Treasury: Money Granted, Received, and Expended for the Service of the Navy*, 1722, in Baugh, ed. *Naval Administration, 1715-1750*, 473-74.

\(^{148}\) Black, *European Warfare, 1660-1815*, 219. For an expanded discussion of these contemporary concerns see the Goldsmith-Kress collection of economic literature. This collection provides books, serials, pamphlets, and broadsheets from the 1460-1850 period and focuses on economics interpreted in the widest sense, including political science, history, sociology, and special collections on banking, finance, transportation and manufacturing. Included in the history sources are discussions of the economic concerns related to impressment.
Officers in the Royal Navy were well aware of this situation. An example of a naval attempt to press men in the merchant fleet is contained in orders issued by Vice-Admiral Edward Vernon, commander of British squadrons in the West Indies during the War of Jenkins’ Ear. Even though sailors avoided volunteering in the Service in order to receive better pay with less discipline, Admiral Vernon sought to gain valuable, experienced men at the expense of merchant ships. In a January 1741 order to Captain Perceval of HMS Torrington Vernon instructed him to, “continue the established rule in practice since my being in command here, of taking one man out of five and under, and so on in that proportion, from all outward-bound ship and vessels, and a third man out of all Guinea men.” The Admiral did not order the molestation of merchant ships, vital to the economic power of Britain, in order to strengthen his military position at the expense of commerce, but because he believed those actions were for the overall benefit of the nation. Vernon laid this out in an order to Captain Hore of HMS Ludlow Castle in May 1741 when he wrote, “And you are to observe my general orders of taking a man from all vessels having five and under… for the recruiting of his Majesty’s ships, and all seafaring men… you are to secure for the public service.”

In the case of merchantmen impressed on their return from overseas, the voyages that took them around the world in pursuit of trade and commerce lasted for years. Just as these merchant mariners were on the brink of returning home, the Royal Navy pressed them to serve the crown for an open-ended period. What upset these merchant seamen and their families was not so much the forced service, though that was bad enough; it was the fact that these men were

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149 Edward Vernon, Orders to Captain Perceval of HMS Torrington, January 1741, in Ranft, ed. The Vernon Papers, 168.
150 Edward Vernon, Orders to Captain Hore of HMS Ludlow Castle, 24 May 1741, in Ranft, ed. The Vernon Papers, 239.
151 Lincoln, 89.
prevented from seeing their friends and loved ones. William Richardson, a pressed merchant sailor, thought the practice of intercepting home-bound trading vessels was as bad as slavery and he pointed out that men who complained that they were unable to see their loved ones were likely to be flogged. Still, he reckoned that if seamen were allowed a few weeks’ liberty after a long voyage, they would soon tire of shore life and return contented to their ships.\textsuperscript{152}

During this era, the men aboard ships frequently provided the sole financial support for their families and their absence, caused much hardship.\textsuperscript{153} While this was a significant challenge, a pecuniary analysis does not take into account the devastating emotional impacts these prolonged absences had on families. Many sons and daughters grew up without the benefit of fathers, and mothers often missed their son’s growth into manhood. These youngsters sometimes had occasion to turn to lives of crime, to the general detriment of society. Trevenen points out the human cost of pressing these men which was so often lost in discussions of efficiency and national need. The glossing over of this tragedy contributed to the longevity of impressment.

Just as the press had consequences on the family, it also had distinct class implications as well. These are cleavages were most evident in the realm of popular culture. Lower class consumers had a voracious appetite for ballads that showed the press in a negative light. An example of this is “The Bristol Bridegroom” (1791), which showed the press as a ruthless, hostile practice that reinforced class distinctions by forcing poor young men to go to sea. In this ballad, a merchant fears that his daughter is planning to spurn her high-born suitors for a

\textsuperscript{153} Herman, 186.
carpenter. This is unacceptable to the father, as the carpenter will likely be pressed. His daughter’s projected life as the wife of an underpaid pressed seaman is deplorable to the merchant so he undermines their courtship. Broadside ballads like “The Bristol Bridegroom” can be read as class grievances that mirror popular attitudes in ways other genres cannot—how those most affected by the press felt about it.\textsuperscript{154}

Another example of popular social commentary on the press in seen in a cartoon by James Gillray titled, “The Liberty of the Subject.” It portrays a group of thuggish sailors taking a terrified tailor from the streets while a furious-looking woman (his wife) has a hold of one sailor by the ear and hair while another woman is accosting the sailors with a mop. This is a common aspect of popular prints and ballads—condemning the snatching of a man from his wife or sweetheart by the press gang.\textsuperscript{155}

A similar criticism is found in an engraving issued by publisher Carrington Bowles in 1785 that depicts a distraught young woman being comforted by a well-dressed country gentleman as a naval officer armed with a club takes her sweetheart away assisted by two smirking sailors. The accompanying verse explains that, “But, woe is me! The press gang came/And forc’d my love away./Just when we named next morning fair/To be our wedding day.”\textsuperscript{156} In actual fact, press gangs did often did drag young men away from their wives and betrothed, thereby acquiring a notorious reputation as home wreckers.

Upper and middle class patrons flocked to Edward Neville’s musical comedy \textit{Plymouth in an Uproar} (1779) which portrayed the press gang not as an instrument of oppression but as an

\textsuperscript{154} Ennis, 17.
\textsuperscript{155} Cordingly, 26.
\textsuperscript{156} Cordingly, 26.
effective enforcer of social order. It provided sailors for the fleet to protect trade while dispersing the mob.\textsuperscript{157} In that play, the character of Lieutenant Beauclerk gives voice to some upper class beliefs about the men subject to impressment. He comments that the men he presses “divide their time between two public houses.”\textsuperscript{158} Further, the character of Ben, a sailor, is perpetually shown to be drunk and staggering about comically. This indicates a belief that the maritime orders were near-constant drunkenness with its attendant bad behavior.

Lieutenant Beauclerk is in command of a press gang and consistently demonstrates heroic qualities. He is able to court a certain young lady, Emilia, over the advances of a member of the nobility after he rescues her from a mob of thugs. The villain harassing Emilia exclaims upon seeing the Lieutenant, “A press gang—the devil—I’ll not suffer alone. Sir, do not wreak all your fury upon us, we are but the tools of our employer.”\textsuperscript{159} The ruffian’s reply indicates not only the heroism and chivalry of a press officer but demonstrates the fear lower class vagrants have of their power. Emilia’s extreme and complimentary gratitude toward her savior furthers the image of the gallant press officer.\textsuperscript{160}

High-placed members of society did not express their approval of the press merely by attending farcical plays. They also welcomed officers whose duties they respected into their homes. Sir William Henry Dillon recounts in his memoir how many upper class individuals celebrated him and were appreciative of his duties. He wrote that in 1802, he received:

… naught but marked attention and kindness. The colonel of the regiment quartered here and several of his officers were equally sociable. This bearing towards me from all parties mentioned encouraged me to persevere in my

\textsuperscript{157} Ennis, 17.
\textsuperscript{159} Neville, 12.
\textsuperscript{160} Neville, 13.
professional labors. The numerous invitations sent to me proved that my conduct was favourably reviewed. I never dined alone. I was fully aware that many of the merchants who were extremely hospitable expected that I would be lenient, and avoid visiting their ships.

This passage indicates two aspects of private citizens’ views about the press. First, the upper classes were not only concerned with the burdens impressment placed on large swaths of the populace. Their hearty greetings and warm well-wishing demonstrates these individuals’ approval of the duties he was engaged in performing. Second, merchants were willing to take any advantage possible to avoid the impressment of their men. Tomlinson did not relate whether the concerns of these traders was rooted in their profit margin or a desire to help their employees avoid the rigors of naval service but, at the very least, they did not disapprove of impressment enough to avoid Tomlinson socially.

The one hundred fifty year debate over impressment was waged across all classes of society and generally demonstrated the press to be an unpopular tool of naval policy. It was opposed by naval officers both for its burdens and inhumanity. Those in the Royal Navy who were disposed to disapprove of the practice also often saw it as an impractical means to man the fleet. Private individuals at both the top and bottom of the socio-economic scale similarly viewed the press in largely negative terms. While private citizens were more likely to decry the press as a ghastly and degrading practice, some also saw it as an inefficient way to fill the Navy’s ranks. This is not to say the press was universally deplored—there were those who saw it not as undesirable but simply as a means to an end. Those who applauded the press were few and generally from levels of society that did not see the negative effects it had on large segments of the population. Even though the press was widely viewed unfavorably, those opinions did not sway policy. Those who opposed impressment either lacked the political clout to affect policy or
relied for their livelihood (either commercial or naval) on its continued existence. The result of this meant the press persisted almost unaltered for the entirety of the period between the Restoration and Waterloo.
OFFICIAL AND POPULAR RESPONSES TO IMPRESSMENT

The issues related to the press that ignited the public debate about the practice also led to a number of action to ameliorate the difficulties of impressment and led those affected by it to engage in various methods of avoidance to circumvent involuntary service in the Navy. The first area of inquiry on this subject is the many alternatives put forth by private citizens and naval officials designed to alleviate the burdens of the press or eliminate it altogether. Next is an assessment of protections—the means by which some individuals, deemed too vital to be pressed (fishermen, dockworkers, and the crews of out-bound merchant vessels), were granted immunity from impressment. The last area of analysis is the actions, beyond merely verbalizing their opinions, taken by some to avoid the press. By understanding what resulted from the official and popular discussion about impressment, the reasons for the practice’s long existence can be determined.

The first subject for scrutiny was the alternatives proposed by members of the public and government officers designed to ameliorate the impositions of the press. Given the problems with pressing expressed by officials and officers connected with the Navy, many attempts were made to induce Parliament to adopt some method of manning the fleet that would reduce impressments. While alternatives were often suggested, they were rarely attempted for two practical reasons; first, the national emergencies created by the many wars of this period did not inspire people to change course regardless of their well-intentioned sympathies. Second, the methods suggested would fail to fill the Navy’s ranks with sufficient numbers of men. So a well-established practice remained and the liberties of some were denied to protect the freedoms

161 Bullocke, 105.
and status of the entire nation. These attempts to find ways to obtain the requisite numbers of seamen and ensure mariners stayed in the Service were prevalent from the beginnings of impressment and were proffered by government officials, naval officers, and private citizens.

While later alternatives were designed to get men to join a ship’s company by assuaging the hardships of impressment, most early schemes tried to increase voluntary enlistment or persuade men to remain with the Navy. This was accomplished by making life in the Service more palatable and, thus, encouraging men to continue their service which would reduce the numbers of men the press needed to provide. One such proposal made in 1652 attempted to encourage recruitment in three ways. First, sick and wounded men would continue to receive pay until they were cured, money would be laid aside to provide for these men and hospitals and surgeons should be reserved to deal with these sailors. Second, the author suggested that wages be raised—from 19 shillings to 24 shillings for able seamen and to 19 shillings for everyone else. Third, shares of prize money would be augmented by an additional six months pay (pro-rated for those who had not yet reached that mark) and in lieu of shares in future prizes, all officers and men be allowed 10 shillings a ton for plunder, £6 13 shillings 4 pence a gun for every ship taken, and a share of £10 a gun for every man-of-war sunk.162

The anonymous author of this proposal believed, as did many in the early stages of impressment, that sailors’ unwillingness to join the Navy related to pecuniary interests rather than their aversion to forced servitude and the wanton denial of their rights as Englishmen. That is why, even had this scheme been implemented by a frugal Parliament, it would not have resulted in any great increase in the number of voluntary entrants into the Royal Navy.

The Navy Board made another such suggestion to the Admiralty Secretary in 1716. The Board suggested, “paying off the ships yearly or as often as possible… would leave the mariners at liberty to enjoy their families and friends, to spend their wages… and to employ themselves afterwards as they shall think fit… in his Majesty’s service, which are things well known to be the delight of a seaman.”163 This would remedy one of the sailor’s main complaints, irregular pay. It would also blunt one of the major attractions of the merchant service—regular and higher pay. Men who received their pay promptly could better assist their families or enjoy their shore leave which might lead them to be more susceptible to remain in the Navy for pecuniary and patriotic reasons.

Most alternatives offered were directly related to reducing the negative aspects of the press. In 1774 Robert Tomlinson, an officer in the Royal Navy who eventually reached the rank of captain suggested one of the most complete and detailed attempts to reform impressment. Tomlinson had spent a good deal of his career performing the unpleasant task of impressing and he became disgusted with the cruelties it sometimes involved.

Tomlinson’s preface was a passionate plea about the “unspeakable distress, which impressing of seaman brings upon this kingdom” and his belief that “such inconveniences and distresses may be avoided in the future if the Royal fleet be manned without impressing.”164 He laid out his worry that general opinion held “it is not possible to man the Navy, upon an

163 Navy Board to the Admiralty Secretary, 15 December 1716, in Baugh, ed., Naval Administration, 1715-1750), 169.
164 Robert Tomlinson, A Plan for Manning the Royal Navy, etc, 1774, in Bullocke, ed., The Tomlinson Papers, Selected from the Correspondence and Pamphlets of Captain Robert Tomlinson, R.N. and Vice-Admiral Nicolas Tomlinson, 117.
exigency, without the usual mode of impressing… that general prejudice would get the better of my arguments, and of course all my labour would prove abortive.”

The main point of Tomlinson’s scheme, on which he constantly placed the greatest emphasis, was that seamen should have a limit placed on their time of service. Every able seaman who voluntarily entered the Royal Navy would only be required to serve for three years; every ordinary seaman, four years; and every landsman, five years (presumably because it would take the later two classes some time to become as skilled as an able seaman). After his term of service expired, each man was free to remain in His Majesty’s employ or seek to make his own bargain with the Merchant Service, the rates of pay of which would only be limited for seamen who had not entered royal service which encouraged men to join the Navy before the Merchant Service. Further, Tomlinson proposed pension schemes for injured and retired sailors (paid for by holding back some wages which was off-set by higher pay scales) and that able seamen’s share of prize money be higher than those of ordinary seamen and landsmen so as to encourage men to seek promotion and to attract those who would otherwise be drawn to privateering. The remainder of the treatise was devoted to refuting possible objections, and to elaborate calculations about his scheme’s financial benefits and the funding of the pensions.

Tomlinson’s plan was practical and one of the most comprehensive alternatives proposed to that time. It also received some influential support. Martin Hawke, 2nd Baron Hawke, wrote to Tomlinson that, “As to the scheme itself, I shall say but little concerning it, you know my

165 Robert Tomlinson, A Plan for Manning the Royal Navy, etc, 1774, in Bullocke, ed., The Tomlinson Papers, Selected from the Correspondence and Pamphlets of Captain Robert Tomlinson, R.N. and Vice-Admiral Nicolas Tomlinson, 117.

sentiments already with respect to its utility, merit, and ingenuity; whatever countenance my small share of abilities can give it, you may always command.”

In addition to Hawke’s sponsorship in the House of Lords, Tomlinson received backing in the Commons from the Honorable John Luttrell, who expressed in a letter that the proposal was “exceptionable in some instances.”

Despite Tomlinson’s supporters and the merits of his suggestions, his scheme to overhaul the Navy’s means of obtaining sailors failed. Tomlinson’s plan was reduced into a bill for Parliament and leave to introduce it was sought by Luttrell on 11 March 1777. After a short debate, introduction was refused by one hundred and eight votes to fifty-four due largely to the poor speech given by Luttrell who dwelt upon the cruelties of impressment rather than advancing the principles of the bill.

In 1786, William Pulteney, a Member of Parliament from Shrewsbury, submitted a bill that had many points in common with Tomlinson’s plan. The most important area of contact between Tomlinson and Pulteney was the limitation of a seaman’s period of service (five years versus Tomlinson’s three). Further, similarly to Tomlinson, Pulteney proposed a tiered Fellowship of Seamen that, as a sailor’s years of service increased, brought additional benefits including bounties on enlistment, pensions for unfit men and retired seamen, limitations on pay in the Merchant Service, and a levy to provide the money for the pension scheme.

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169 Bullocke, 106-107.
170 Bullocke, 108-110.
Pulteney’s plan, like Tomlinson’s, came to naught, it is evidence of the concern over the inhumanity of the press, the frequency of attempts to reform this system, and the ultimate failure of these schemes which fell before custom, efficiency, and the parsimonious nature of Parliament.

While the above alternatives never went beyond suggestions, some schemes were actually implemented. One example of this was a system that required the registration of skilled seamen to be called up when needed, first attempted under Admiralty Secretary Samuel Pepys in 1686. This system collapsed when first needed during the War of Spanish Succession in 1700 because not enough sailors registered and those who did were reluctant to report. The system was discontinued in 1711.171

Two other major alternatives were attempted from time to time but never lasted very long. Offering bounties, a onetime payment for joining the Navy, was frequently put forward but always failed as these cash payments never attracted the requisite skilled men but rather the desperately poor. Further, as men were not “in the Navy” but attached to a specific ship, bounties varied between ships and years thus encouraging desertion to get more or better bounties. The second proposed alternative was a Quota Scheme first introduced by William Pitt in 1795 which required local governments to provide men for the fleet. This program failed because districts responded by providing criminals and debtors.172

It was not just concerned naval officers and Admiralty officials who suggested alternatives to impressment. A Parliamentary committee put forth a Marine Plan in 1780 to consider whether any, and by what means, more effectual encouragement could be given to

171 Ennis, 33.
172 Ennis, 33-34.
induce volunteers to enter the Royal Navy. With the exception of Sir Herbert Mackworth (Cardiff Boroughs) and Charles Brett (Sandwich) the composition of the committee that proposed this plan is unknown.\textsuperscript{173} It was, however, indicative of the Commons desire to find alternatives to the impositions of the unpopular press.

The Plan was established for three purposes: first, to establish a general register of all bound to any water-based occupation; second, to use bounties and immunities to encourage men to join a Fellowship of British Seamen whose members could be called upon to serve in the Navy at times of need; and, third, to establish Proper Marine Offices in the various ports of the United Kingdom for the purpose of carrying the plan into action.\textsuperscript{174}

The plan set forth a number of ways to establish a general register tracking individuals connected with the sea, rivers, and other water business. First, the committee proposed that all boys under age nineteen who intended to follow the sea indentured and recorded in the public register of some Marine Office and, after the period of their indenture, receive a certificate that he was registered and available for sea training. Second, every person aboard a ship (excepting warships) needed to register with the Marine Office at the port from which the vessel was sailing. Third, any person who did not comply with the requirements was liable to be taken by press warrants and any captain or officer of a ship found to have hidden individuals was liable to a pecuniary penalty. Fourth, all owners, commanders, officers, and chief mates of the East India Company were exempted from the above requirements.\textsuperscript{175}

\textsuperscript{173} Bromley, 337.
\textsuperscript{174} Marine Plan, 26 May 1780, in Bromley, ed., The Manning of the Royal Navy, Selected Public Pamphlets, 337.
\textsuperscript{175} Marine Plan, 26 May 1780, in Bromley, ed., The Manning of the Royal Navy, Selected Public Pamphlets, 337-38.
The plan established the Fellowship of British Seamen in an effort to provide financial inducements for men to register with the Marine Office. These payments varied according to the five classes into which sailors would be divided by the Marine Office. The first class consisted of apprentices and Fellowship members of less than three years. In event of seaman was rendered unfit for duty while in the King’s Service, the government would provide an individual with an annual pension of not less than £9. As an individual’s time within the Fellowship increased so did his privileges like increased pension benefits, a greater weekly allowance, and higher wages. Additionally, membership in the Fellowship included varied other perks ranging from payment for lost sea chests to the Marine Office providing for seamen’s children if he were killed. Finally, the Fellowship provisions set out the manner in which seamen of all five classes would be called to service aboard a King’s ship. The final section of the Plan related to the creation, location, staffing, and operation of the various Marine Offices.176

The Plan, while never established as law, touches several important aspects of the debate over the press. The most obvious point was that some in the government worked tirelessly to find means of attracting sufficient seamen to fill the Navy’s ranks without resorting to the press. This indicates both London’s disdain for a patently unjust system and its sensitivity to inflaming the passions of a citizenry largely opposed to the practice. This sensitivity only extended so far—if an eligible person did not register he was subject to impressment and if a merchant captain resorted to subterfuge to retain prime hands, he was to be fined. The Plan also showed that regardless of the financial inducements offered, it was nearly impossible to man the fleet by volunteers alone. Further, it demonstrated that one of the overriding goals of Parliament was the

That goal was not openly stated but is proven by implication due to the Plan’s exempting the best sailors from the East India Company from registration, which reflected Parliamentary influence. The key to Britain’s ability to prosecute the many wars it had and would endure was the wealth garnered by a commercial empire that was vast as the nation’s many foreign outposts.

All these proposed alternatives, whether put into practice or not, failed to provide a workable alternative to the practice of compelling men to serve aboard Royal Navy vessels against their will. The sympathy those who offered these schemes felt for the men did not override the need to man the fleet. The press endured because it remained the best and most efficient means of meeting the Navy’s progressively increased manpower quotas that ranged from around 12,000 circa 1680 to more than 150,000 in the later years of the conflicts with Napoleonic France.

While those connected with the Navy, be they officers or government officials, generally expressed at least a degree of sympathy for the plight of those adversely affected by impressment, the lack of action taken to resolve their concerns demonstrates that their primary motive was not the rights of these men, but the service they could provide to the Navy and the nation. The utter failure of all alternative schemes attempted throughout the existence of the press furthers the conclusion that, for the most part, the pity felt for the seamen subjected to this egregious practice consisted of little more than hollow platitudes. The granting of protections

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177 An example of this is found in instructions from Parliament forwarded to Admiral Edward Vernon by the Admiralty in May 1741. Admiral Vernon then dispatched these orders to Captain Hore of HMS Ludlow Castle which commanded him “not to impress any men actually belonging to the coasting trade of Jamaica.”, Edward Vernon, *Orders to Captain Hore of HMS Ludlow Castle*, 24 May 1741, in Ranft, ed., *The Vernon Papers*, 239.
reveals it to be not a means for shielding sailors, but a way to further certain commercial interests like those of the East India Company.

In addition to the proposed alternatives by naval and government officials, private citizens put forth a number of suggestions to ameliorate the injustices of impressment. A pamphlet titled “England’s Glory Revived” published in 1693 by Robert Crosfeild, a man known almost solely by his frequent and varied writing on the Navy (his works never contained a printers’ or booksellers’ name), presented a series of proposals for the manning of the Royal Navy. Crosfeild believed that the sea affairs of England were suffering and these misfortunes arose from the methods used to supply the Navy with seamen. Crosfeild contended that war was the enemy of trade and pressing men into the Service led to the nation obstructing and annoying its own trade. The consequence of this, he argued, was the loss of vast sums of money by merchants and the crown. This argument foreshadows much of the debate regarding the value of the press. The merchant class consistently argued that commercial interests were of such vital importance to Britain that their sailors should remain untouched by impressment. Contrarily, the Admiralty held that the need for prime hands in the Navy was of principal importance as, without a robust and effective Navy, England’s commercial fleet would be harassed and taken by its enemies.

While Crosfeild did not wish to obstruct war, indeed, he desired fully to assist his Majesty in prosecuting a just and honorable a war, he at least rhetorically labored under the mistaken belief that “sailors are as zealous for the public service as any men in the kingdom.”

Crosfeild held that by increasing the wages of seamen would have no reason to shun service and the King’s belligerent goals and the profit of merchants would both be served. This is perhaps the first time someone suggested that financial inducements would solve the problem of chronic manpower shortages in the Navy. The government did not heed this suggestion, and the Navy had to continue pressing men to meet its needs.

A further example of the many proposals propounded in this period for the manning of the Navy was an anonymous broadsheet titled “Proposals to Increase Seamen,” published in 1693. The author states that in the earlier years of the seventeenth-century when the Navy needed only ten to fifteen thousand sailors there were a sufficient number of able, experienced hands that volunteered for service. He believed that the increasing number of landsmen pressed into His Majesty’s ships led to a general degradation of the fleet’s efficiency. For the author, “breeding” more seamen was the only way to return the Royal Navy to its former glories. The author’s plan for breeding these seamen required the utilization of landsmen but required that they be trained rather than forcibly pressed and unceremoniously dumped aboard a man-of-war. The plan was two-fold: first, all individuals operating businesses upon the waterways of the kingdom be allowed to take additional apprentices; second, all ships using the coal trade, either to England or Wales, should carry one landsman for crown service for every score of chaldron of coals taken on board. The government would subsidize the training of these men by providing per diem for clothing and victualling. When the landsmen was transformed into a seaman, he could then be pressed into the Navy as an experienced hand.  

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180 Proposals to Increase Seamen, 1693, in Bromley, ed., The Manning of the Royal Navy, Selected Public Pamphlets, 12-14.
This plan demonstrates the inventiveness of alternatives to the traditional press even at an early stage in the practice’s existence. The training of inexperienced men for the Service in this manner would have had dual positive effects—it would have increased the productivity of water-based private enterprises while providing the Navy with able seamen at a minimum cost to the government (4 d. per diem for clothing and food).

Regardless of whether they were proposed by members of the government or Navy officers or were privately produced alternatives, these plans were not implemented. Most plans designed to lessen or eliminate the abuses and burdens of impressment never went beyond discussions in pamphlets, newspapers, clubs, and street corners. The few, like Robert Tomlinson’s proposal, that came before Parliament rarely made it out of committee and none were ever implemented to any degree that would actually affect the operation of the press.

The next area of discussion about the actions taken in regard to impressment was the practice of granting protections, a paper exempting a man from impressment granted by either the Admiralty or Parliament, to those involved in seafaring occupations like fishing, dock workers, and those aboard out-bound merchantmen. The practice of granting protections demonstrates how the British government and the Royal Navy viewed the press as it relates to commerce and represents one of the few means by which the government sanctioned an individual’s evading the press. For an island nation with limited resources and far-flung colonial

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181 An example of a protection was that given for “protecting all men belonging to the coal ships of that port [Dublin], as otherwise the city of Dublin will be reduced to the greatest distress”, Admiralty Minutes 13 October 1770, in MacKay, The Hawke Papers, A Selection: 1743-1771, 462. Another example is a protection granted in 1805 to John Chew, a laborer at Deptford Dock, for four days and it states, “These are to certify all whom it may concern, that the bearer hereof John Chew labourer is employed in his Majesty’s yard at Deptford. You are therefore to let him pass quietly to and again between the said yard and his own habitation and Chatham during the space of four days from the date hereof, without being otherways impressed.”, Henry Peake, Protection for John Chew, 30 November 1805, in Hattendorf, et. al., eds., British Naval Documents, 1204-1960, 552.
possessions, international commerce was the lifeblood of economic and military success. Under the protection of the British flag merchants had explored new markets and enlarged old ones; and the productions of the nation’s artisans and manufacturers were carried to the most distant corners of the world.\textsuperscript{182} English trade routes were the arteries of the imperial body and they unified distant parts of the globe, different markets, and distinct modes of production.\textsuperscript{183}

Trade was so important that the government, by issuing protections from impressment, guaranteed the Navy had a much smaller pool of seamen from which to fill their ships’ musters. Given the importance of the Royal Navy in the popular imagination and in practical fact, it is remarkable that the Admiralty would allow so many able hands to remain off-limits. This dichotomy strikes at the heart of impressment—the practice existed to allow the Navy to defend the nation but, without trade, Britain’s prominence would be diminished and the need for a large naval fleet would be greatly reduced.\textsuperscript{184} To accomplish its goals and secure its continued existence the Admiralty hampered its own efforts to field the best fighting force possible.

Despite the reduction of available prime hands created by granting protections, sometimes the Navy and merchants helped each other accomplish their goals. The Admiralty Minutes of 13 January 1740 demonstrate an intertwining of the commercial and naval need for sailors. The directors of the East India Company requested protections for the seamen aboard eleven outward bound ships and in exchange the E.I.C. proposed “to furnish his Majesty’s ships

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\item[\textsuperscript{182}] Lincoln, 19.
\item[\textsuperscript{183}] Rediker, 21.
\item[\textsuperscript{184}] Admiral Edward Vernon addressed the Navy’s importance in protecting trade while expressing irritation at the unwillingness of merchant captains to provide sufficient sailors for service aboard warships in a February 1739 order to Commodore Brown of HMS Strafford. Admiral Vernon noted that it was a growing practice for British ships to “load [cargo] where they cannot be protected by his Majesty’s ships and lay exposed an easy prey to the enemy… and wilfully exposing the trade of his Majesty’s subjects to be a prey to them.” He continued that one motive for the risks taken by merchant vessels was an “obstinacy on the masters against contributing in any sort to have his Majesty’s squadron recruited, that is sent hither for their security and protection.”, Edward Vernon, \textit{Orders to Commodore Brown of HMS Strafford at Port Royal}, 22 February 1739, in Ranft, ed. \textit{The Vernon Papers}, 72.
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with a number of men not less than one-fourth part of the number to be protected for the service of the company.”  

There were two kinds of protections: those granted by an Act of Parliament (masters and chief mates of all merchantmen over 50 tons, apprentices within their first 3 years at sea, landsmen within their first 2 years, fishermen, whalers, and colliers) and those granted by the Admiralty (men who served aboard privateers and transports, dockyard workers, and the crews of vessels in government service). Parliamentary protections were always valid, whereas Admiralty protections were only binding if the holder’s ship was afloat or fitting out for an overseas voyage. An example of a protection granted by Act of Parliament concerns fisherman employed to provide fish for London. The Admiralty resolved to place an advertisement in the *Gazette* “directing all the officers employed in pressing not to molest the men and masters of the said boats, provided they are not seamen.”

These protections, while important to prevent inference with the economy and trade, could be a vehicle for fraud and manipulation. Ship-owners used them to reduce wartime wages, engaged in widespread forgery of apprentice indentures, and created false protections for English sailors wishing to pass as foreigners. The Admiralty was aware of the extensive practice of seeking false protections and was wary of granting them in certain cases. One example of this is found in letter from First Lord of the Admiralty, Sir Charles Wager to the Admiralty Secretary Josiah Burchett. Wager indicated his suspicion that recent protection requests for large coastal vessels were actually foreign traders and suggested that “all those… who come for Protections

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187 Rodger, 177.
should be suspected and some proof made that they are coasters; and if that is not done I don’t see where this abuse with stop.”\textsuperscript{188} The seeking of false protections by merchants for their crews was not the only manner by which these improper warrants were sought. Admiral Sir John Norris wrote that “as soon as a man can but get three half-crowns or ten shillings to given any freeman of Sandwich, he get them a Protection.”\textsuperscript{189} By the 1740s the trade in false protections had grown to such a degree that the Admiralty ordered that each one contain a description of its holder together with his address and every man not carrying his papers was pressed, regardless of whether he had a valid protection.\textsuperscript{190}

An Admiralty warrant exempting the master and crew of the merchant vessel \textit{Lady Julia} provided:

\begin{quote}
You are hereby required and directed not to impress into his Majesty’s service nineteen men and boys included… provided they are actually on board the said ship, or working in a boat near to the ship, and in the service of the ship, and that this protection be kept on board the ship… And we do hereby direct that this protection for securing the aforementioned persons, and them only form the press, shall continue in force for three months from the date thereof… To all commanders and officers of his Majesty’s ships, press-masters, and all others whom it doth or may concern.\textsuperscript{191}
\end{quote}

This demonstrates how circumstances and policies combined to protect some sailors from impressment. Because of the long duration and hazardous nature of their voyages, British merchants recruited some of the finest sailors in world whereas men-of-war often had to make do

\textsuperscript{190} Rogers, \textit{Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain}, 101
\textsuperscript{191} Admiralty Warrant Exempting the Master and Crew of the Lady Juliana from Impressment, 28 November 1812, in Hattendorf, et. al., eds., \textit{British Naval Documents, 1204-1960}, 556.
with large numbers of ordinary seamen and landsmen.\textsuperscript{192} This served Britain’s broad strategic aims while frustrating the Navy, which the government charged with protecting commerce.

Even though providing protections limited the numbers of men available for pressing, trade was a valuable means of acquiring men in another way. At the end of the eighteenth century in the face of mounting criticism from those opposed to the slave trade, many merchants and planters reiterated the usefulness of trade as a nursery for seamen, claiming that slavers employed 25,000 sailors annually.\textsuperscript{193} The morally objectionable nature of their comments aside, these men of commerce make a valid point. The more trade was increased, the more seamen were needed, and as their numbers increased, the so did the ranks of prime hands that could be spared for service with the Navy.

The commercial and trading classes, broadly merchants and manufacturers, understood that their interests were best served by supporting the Navy. Though they did not have a universal lobby in the modern sense, they looked to the Navy to safeguard the vital shipping lanes on which their wealth depended, controlling piracy, and upholding Britain’s mastery of the sea. While commercial interests were usually best served by peace, occasionally mercantile pressure groups were belligerent, demanding action against foreign nations that encroached upon trade.\textsuperscript{194} This interdependence between the Navy and trade was expressed succinctly in 1761 by merchant Wyndam Beawes who stated the widely held view that, “Trade is the Nursery of

\textsuperscript{192} Rodger, 178. 
\textsuperscript{193} Lincoln, 91. 
\textsuperscript{194} Lincoln, 77.
Sailors, that Sailors are the Soul of the Navy, that the Navy is the Security of Commerce, and that these two united, produce the Riches, Power and Glory of Great Britain.”195

Trade was, in fact, so important to British strategic objectives that pressing men from the merchant fleet was carefully controlled and most officers strictly follow the rules. Admiral Edward Vernon, who felt a great deal of compassion for pressed men but saw taking men as vital nevertheless followed the rules which limited taking men from merchant vessels. Vernon directed Captain Perceval of HMS Torrington, “But for the encouragement of all such as shall bring provisions for the subsistence of his Majesty’s Forces in these seas from the Northern Colonies, you are not to impress any men from the vessels so employed, they having the assurances sent them of my conforming to such promises from their encouragement in the said service.”196

The men covered by protections were carefully circumscribed by the Admiralty so as to allow a ship’s captain to press as many able seamen as possible while avoiding legal difficulties. The Admiralty sent explicit instructions to Captain Broderick of HMS Exeter in the mid-eighteenth century that stated, “You are to observe that Protections are intended to protect only those seamen who are actually in the ship, or working in the boat near to the ship and in the service of the ship; but if any men go ashore with the Protection, it shall not only be of no use to protect men from being pressed ashore.”197

196 Vernon, Orders to Captain Perceval of HMS Torrington, January 1740, in Ranft, ed., The Vernon Papers, 169.
197 Admiral Instructions for Pressing to Captain Broderick of the Exeter, Article 6, undated, in Baugh, ed., Naval Administration, 1715-1750, 134.
Great care was taken by the Admiralty to stress upon naval officers that sailors with authentic protections should not be pressed or otherwise harassed. In an undated eighteenth-century order from the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty to several captains of Royal Navy ships on the North American station, they emphasized that, “Whereas you will herewith receive press warrants to enable you to raise men for keeping up as much as possible the complement of the ships under your command… it is not meant that the trade of his Majesty’s subjects in America… should be distressed… you are to take great care that indiscreet or unreasonable use be made of them, and never to molest… any seamen found on board with Protections granted by us, pursuant to Act of Parliament.”

Joseph Nagle provides a rare glimpse of protections from the point of view of the seaman. Nagle was one of four children of German immigrants to Pennsylvania who entered service with the Royal Navy in 1775. His journal reveals a self-confident man who judged others based on competence rather than rank and who, throughout his decades of service, went out of his way to avoid promotions.

Nagle spent his entire adult life aboard ships engaged in trade around the world and he expended a considerable amount of effort avoiding the Royal Navy’s attempts to press him. As he was a valuable and experienced hand, Nagle nearly always had a protection which was invariably honored by naval officers who pressed aboard his ship. Nagle detailed several attempts to avoid impressment by shipmates who were not so fortunate as to have amnesty. One

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198 An Order from the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty to the Several Captains of His Majesty's Ships in America, undated, in Baugh, ed., Naval Administration, 1715-1750, 133.
199 Dann, xvii-xx.
such encounter occurred in 1804 when Nagle’s ship was engaged in trade in the Atlantic. He writes:

We had a number of men stowed away from the press. No sooner than we came to anchor [at Kingston, Jamaica], but the flagships boats was on board. The second mate was stowed away in the magezene, and I having a protection was put on the books as second mate and guner, but they searching so strict, they found the second mate. Then the lieutenant got foul of me, but my protection being good, he could do nothing with me… We had then 16 men that they did not find.\(^{200}\)

This illustrates not only the value of experienced men to those in the business of commerce, but also the value of the sailors to the Navy. The practice of engaging in subterfuge and avoidance by those subject to impressment was as lively on the seas as it was on land. And, as almost always happened, naval officers followed their instructions explicitly when dealing with protections regardless of how blatantly a man was involved in an attempt to trick the Navy out of a valuable seaman.

While subject to frequent abuse, the practice of granting protections represents the only real method by which men subject to the press were able to avoid it. The next section deals with the manner in which men sought to evade the press through illegal, violent, or passive means. As a consequence of the press system, many seamen and non-sailors spent much of their time eluding or fighting the press gangs and avoiding the Royal Navy when sailing on a merchant ship. This resistance took a number of forms and the strongest antagonists the Navy encountered in the attempt to press men were those who had deserted from the Service and faced court martial and the gallows if pressed and discovered.

\(^{200}\) Jacob Nagle, in Dann, ed., *A Diary of Jacob Nagle, Sailor from the Year 1775 to 1841*, 283-284.
The restrictions created by protections and the irritation created by forgeries eliminated large numbers of the sailing population from naval service and that made the job of finding skilled sailors harder and made the efforts to man the fleet more drastic and intrusive. This created a situation where resentment and resistance compelled the Navy to resort to greater force which bred more opposition. Magistrates attempted to frustrate gangs whenever they could and in the West Indies and America they claimed the right to ban the press altogether. Local governments attempted to pawn criminals, drunks, and the mentally deficient off on the Navy while riots against the press gangs, often instigated by deserters, broke out frequently in British ports. Additionally, Impress officers were regularly arrested and their sailors assaulted or killed (in 1743 a judge ruled that killing a gang member was a legitimate act of self-defense).  

For these reasons, most ship’s commanders preferred to press sailors themselves while at sea rather than rely on the Impress Service where the unwilling could escape and the local townspeople could interfere. Despite the attempts, both violent and peaceful, to avoid impressment, life on a man-of-war was never so bad, and life on merchantmen or ashore never so good that seamen automatically resisted taking “the King’s shilling.”

Merchant seamen had built a stout tradition of armed self-defense in their dealing with the Royal Navy. They used all manner of weapons and suffered every conceivable injury and wound in their efforts to stop pressing naval officials from boarding their vessels. Sometimes merchantmen fired on press tenders (merchant officers professed they were powerless to stop their men but had financial gain in keeping their men) and pitched battles were not unknown.

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201 Herman, 295-96.
202 Herman, 296.
203 Rediker, 238.
204 Rodger 180.
The actions taken by merchantmen ranged from actively battling naval officials to dodge impressment to passive measures like charting courses to avoid known impressment grounds and allowing men to hide among the cargo.\textsuperscript{205}

An example of energetic avoidance of the press occurred in 1743 when men from HMS *Dover* attempted to press men from the East India ship *Britannia*. Captain Frederick Rogers of the *Dover* wrote to the Admiralty Secretary,

I hoisted out my boat and wrote Captain Sumner my intent... I sent two of my lieutenants with their press warrant. At their coming alongside they [the *Britannia’s* men] hove several large pieces of iron into the coat and cut and wounded several of my men. But at the request of Captain Sumner they permitted my lieutenants to come in... read the proclamation... and instructions... They abused him very much, and then threatened to heave him overboard... the men were very mutinous and swore they would not be pressed... they took out their tompons and primed them. I could get nothing but opprobrious language from them... seeing one of them come aft and present his piece at me, I called to him to desist. But he immediately fired, and missing, shot the man that stood next to me; then all discharged their small arms into my ship. I then ordered my men to enter with cutlasses... the rest of my men being entered, they retired to close quarters, from which they hove several granadoes, but soon surrendered. They had five men killed and several wounded... I have several wounded and I fear one must die.\textsuperscript{206}

This incident ranks among the most extreme examples of the lengths to which merchant sailors went to evade the press. Given the gravity of the incident one would expect the consequences to be grave. The fact that the Admiralty treated the episode only in passing is indicative of the fact that, while this confrontation was unusual, similar ones were fairly common. Riots and fights against the press gangs were frequent, pitched battles between

\textsuperscript{205} Ennis, 32.
incoming merchantmen and press cutters were not uncommon, and processing tenders were sometimes seized by pressed.207 The Admiralty Minutes of 8 September 1743 contain a comment on the battle between the Dover and the Britannia. The Admiralty resolved only to write a letter to the secretary of the East India Company and commented that the events could have been avoided if the captain of the merchant vessel had locked up the ship’s firearms.208

Similarly, the press gangs that entered pubs and taverns to press men were often met with violence from individuals and groups who did not wish to be recruited. If men were killed in one of these skirmishes, the naval officer in command would be court-martialed for murder, in part because an acquittal might safeguard him against a civil trial for murder with no hope of an impartial verdict.209 Most encounters between press agents and those they sought were not violent. Typically, men simply hid in order to evade impressment. In 1777 Martin B. Hawke, in a letter to Robert Tomlinson, wrote that, “at the village of Towton… and the neighboring villages, the countrymen quit their work and hid themselves for fear of a press gang… they were everywhere dispersed like a covey of partridges. These men were all industrious men, of good character.”210

Unlike army recruitment which required a civilian authority to attest to the eligibility of a recruit, naval impressment operated independently and, often in contravention of, civilian authority which gave the practice an arbitrary character that offended British sensibilities. As a reaction Britons, especially Londoners, often collaborated with the men attempting to avoid the

207 Rodger, 182.
208 Admiralty Minutes, 8 September 1743, in Baugh, ed., Naval Administration, 1715 – 1750, 128.
209 Rodger, 181.
210 Martin B. Hawke, Letter to Robert Tomlinson, 5 February 1777, in Bullocke, ed., The Tomlinson Papers, Selected from the Correspondence and Pamphlets of Captain Robert Tomlinson, R.N. and Vice-Admiral Nicolas Tomlinson, 86.
press. London was the center of the impressment controversy because of its central role in trade—the ships that filled the Thames emptied their sailors into a city that had a suspicion of military authority as a tool of tyranny. The growing merchant/middle classes in London also had a great stake in trade and were, therefore, opposed to their best sailors falling victim to the Navy’s aggressive recruiters.\footnote{Ennis, 26-29.}

The press gangs were often thwarted by a citizenry that was opposed to the practice. Due to the carefully circumscribed legal character of impressment, local authorities were vital to the press gang’s success but it was uncommon for them to find much assistance from an area’s residents.\footnote{This was not always the case as there are examples of local officials helping naval officers press men in their jurisdictions. One such example comes from the writings of Admiral William Dillon who recounted that, in March 1803, when a frigate arrived to press men, “a party of marines was landed to prevent any attempt at a rescue… All the labourers at the various docks turned out, and at one time their shouts and threats gave reason to apprehend some serious disturbance. But the Mayor, assisted by all the Corporation, showed much spirit and determination, which kept all quiet. I had my share of abuse that day, but no one dared to lay hands on me.”, Dillon, 11.}

It was customary though not legally necessary for officers to get their press warrants from local magistrates as demonstrated by Admiral Sir John Norris’ command that pressing men in the Cinque Ports should begin with “acquainting the mayor and other civil magistrates and officers.”\footnote{Admiral Sir John Norris, \textit{Letter to the Admiralty Secretary}, 28 May 1734, in Baugh ed., \textit{Naval Administration, 1715 – 1750}, 111.} Even if informed, these officials were frequently uncooperative due to their parochial worldview.\footnote{Rodger, 168-69.} Commodore Edward St. Lo of HMS \textit{Breda} in Jamaica dealt with the issue of local intransigence in 1717 when he wrote the Admiralty Secretary, Josiah Burchett that, “we are terribly threatened here [by the local officials] for impressing men, without which the service could not be carried on. To make them better tempered I have ordered
none shall be molested that come from the Northern Colonies… though all means imaginable are used to assist and persuade our men to desert us.”

Twenty years later Captain Lisle of HMS Scarborough who attempted to fill his complement in Barbados faced the same predicament. Captain Lisle wrote that he had no trouble pressing from incoming ships but the “West India Governors are so tenacious of what they call their prerogative that it’s difficult to raise any from the shore.” It was rare to find a mayor of a seaport willing to upset his constituents by assisting the Navy and though the press was legal, officers and gangs were often threatened with imprisonment and sometimes incarcerated.

Private citizens, as well as local officials, colluded to frustrate the impressment of sailors. In his memoir, Sir William Henry Dillon wrote of his time with the Impress Service and how, in 1802-03, “letters were constantly coming to acquaint me with the news that seamen would enter if I would call with my boat at a certain place at an hour fixed. I attended to several of those letters, but found they were written to draw off my attention where more wanted.” Dillon

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215 Commodore Edward St. Lo, Letter to the Admiralty Secretary, 7 December 1727, in Baugh ed., Naval Administration, 1715 – 1750, 106.
216 Captain Lisle, Letter to the Admiralty Secretary, 11 December 1742, in Baugh ed., Naval Administration, 1715 – 1750, 131.
217 Rodger, 169.
218 Dillon, 13. Admiral Dillon recounted another instance, in March 1803, where his lawful attempts to press men was obstructed by private citizens. Of this encounter he wrote how his men unluckily passed through the street where a pressed man lived and when his wife saw him under the power of the press gang she “burst out in wild lamentations. Her screams brought a large number of persons to the spot, some of whom made an attempt to rescue her husband; but they failed… Shortly afterward… an individual… offered me £300 to liberate him… I told this gentleman… his proposal was useless.” Admiral Dillon continued that the man was “much valued by his employers. His taken had made some stir, and my quarters were surrounded by many of his friends… the carpenter, aware of my attention being drawn off from him, with an exertion beyond all description threw open the window and lept out. He fell upon all fours, then, taking off his shoes, ran off, effecting his escape.” Admiral Dillon then described the consequences of his attempt to take the man as he “soon experienced the ill will of the mob. On one occasion I was assaulted by a shower of brickbats: on another, a volley of either musket or pistol balls was fired into my room… it became necessary for the Mayor to interfere, and some constables were directed to watch over the safety of my person.”, Dillon, 10-11.
attributed these unpleasant annoyances to the sympathetic families and friends of those subject to impressment.

These public disorders not only occurred with great regularity but they also became more frequent as the Navy’s ever-increasing need for men amplified burdens on the government and society. Once such disturbance was witnessed by Admiral Charles Knowles in Boston in 1747 and he relayed the incident in a letter to Secretary of the Admiralty Thomas Corbett. Knowles related the mood of those involved and wrote that the people were filled,

… with not only a hatred for the King’s Service but a spirit of rebellion… no riot was ever carried to a more insolent length. The Governor, Council, and Assembly were stoned and forced to fly out of the general Court House. Afterwards the Governor was mobbed in his own house and obliged to retire to the Castle for safety. Captain Erskine who was ill ashore and some other officers were made prisoners by the mob; and some of them led through the streets in ridiculous procession before them; and those who secretly… prompted the mob on this wicked mischief advised them not to release one of the King’s officers on any other terms than man for man with me of those I pressed… it was with some difficulty that the mob was prevented from burning the new 20-gun ship… crying that they supposed they must man her too when she was launched.219

The actions of these Bostonians demonstrate the degree to which those affected by the press opposed it. They were willing to detain and humiliate Navy officers, disregard government officials, and attempt to destroy property to vent their frustrations over the impressment of a handful of men. Incidents such as these were relatively rare in the long public debate over the press but they show how deep feelings on the subject ran.

The most extreme type of action taken was the many violent anti-impressment riots that occurred throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Seamen were

involved in nearly every riot in port cities in the eighteenth century and many of these
disturbances were directly related to popular anger over the press. Riots occurred in Boston in
the 1690s and 1740s, Philadelphia in 1741, 1742, 1759 and 1769, Newport in 1719, New York in
1705, Charleston in 1701, and nearly every other port in the 1760s and 1770s. There were
protests in London and Liverpool throughout the eighteenth century, particularly in the 1760s
and 1770s.\textsuperscript{220}

In the late 1760s, sailors engaged in a series of revolts that culminated with seamen in
London, the world’s largest port, striking the sails of their vessels and crippling the commerce of
the empire’s leading city.\textsuperscript{221} In 1797 naval sailor engaged in mass mutinies at Spithead and the
Nore, an anchorage in the Thames estuary. The mutineers wanted better pay and the removal of
a handful of unpopular officers; neither flogging nor impressment was mentioned in their
demands. They maintained naval routine and discipline aboard their ships, allowed some ships
to leave for convoy escort duty or patrols, and agreed to end the mutiny immediately if French
ships were spotted heading for the British coast. When the situation calmed, an agreement was
reached that granted pardons for all crews, the reassignment of some unpopular officers, and a
pay raise. Inspired by the example of their comrades at Spithead, the mutiny at the Nore began
when the crew of the HMS \textit{Sandwich} seized their ship. Several other ships followed suit though
many slipped away refusing to join the mutiny. Their demands mainly involved pardons,
increased pay and modification of the Articles of War. As their situation became desperate, they
required an immediate peace with France and the dissolving of Parliament. The Admiralty
offered nothing but pardons in return for an immediate return to duty. The mutineers expanded

\textsuperscript{220} Rediker, 249.
\textsuperscript{221} Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, \textit{The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden
their initial grievances by blockading London and preventing merchant vessels from entering the port. After the successful resolution of the Spithead mutiny, the government and the Admiralty took a hard line, largely due to the social revolutionary demands of the Nore mutineers. At the resolution of the mutiny, a total of 29 leaders were hanged, others sentenced to be flogged, imprisoned, or transported. The remaining members of the mutinous crews received no punishment.  

Many press officials, however, did not receive as much accommodation as these naval mutineers even though they were merely executing their duties. Some were sometimes subjected to litigation as men who had been pressed sued for false imprisonment, some would sue because a gang had obstructed their movements, and sham charges of murder were sometimes brought. Whenever gangsmen were charge with the murder of civilians the Admiralty attempted to handle the situation delicately so that local passions could be checked. Despite some hesitation of some naval officers, the defendants were invariably handed over to civilian power.  

Examples of the sometimes violent opposition and legal suits against to press officials are legion. Several examples of this were relayed to the Admiralty in a series of correspondence from the American colonies in 1742-43. The Admiralty felt the American colonists’ behavior was egregious that they forwarded the complaints *en masse* to the British courts because “the obstructions given by the people of those colonies to the usual methods of pressing… have been of late so violent, and carried on with such instances of contempt of the government and such personal ill-treatment of

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223 Roger, 111.
the captains, we think it incumbent on us to lay before your Excellencies copies of the
complaints received form said captains.”  

Captain Hamar of the sloop HMS Spy was one naval officer who faced the threat of
prosecution for discharging his press duties. The merchants of Charleston, South Carolina
“entered into a subscription to prosecute Captain Hamar on his return from his cruise for every
man he impressed. And they declare it is their intention to prosecute every captain of a man of
war who shall impress any seamen out of their ships.”

Captain Gordon of the sloop HMS Hound reported that “several traders have entered into a combination to prosecute every captain
who shall press a seaman in Virginia, though it be even a deserter from his own ship… Captain
Dandridge of the Southsea Castle and myself are under prosecution.”

Captain Hardy of HMS Rye reported that while he was pursuing the usual methods of pressing out of merchant ships and
taking great care as to not molest outward bound traders a local merchant laid “a fine of £20
sterling and cost of suit if an action is brought against any officer who shall impress any seamen
out of a privateer or any trading ship on the coast of America; which proceedings discouraged
me from pressing anymore.”

Captain Knowles of HMS Suffolk pressed several men in La Guarira and Porto Cabello
only to have the local citizenry fire upon his lieutenants and press crew. Captain Knowles
arrested the ringleader of the affair in order to prosecute him but an armed mob from the island
freed him “and the next day myself and Captain Gage were arrested and carried to jail, where we

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224 Admiralty Memorial to the Lords Justices, 26 September 1743, in Baugh, ed., Naval Administration, 1715-1750, 129.
225 Captain Hardy, Letter to the Admiralty, 3 January 1742, in Baugh, ed., Naval Administration, 1715 – 1750, 130.
227 Captain Hardy, Letter to the Admiralty, 26 April 1742, in Baugh, ed., Naval Administration, 1715-1750, 130.
remained for two days and a night till we gave bail in twelve thousand pounds each.”

The record does not indicate the outcome of these cases trials frequently resulted in convictions against the evidence whereas members of a press gang could be killed with a great measure of impunity. The Admiralty defended its people but as there was little chance of finding an unbiased jury and great risk of further inflaming public opinion, the Admiralty was reluctant to go to the law in any but the clearest cases.

Rather than evade or confront the press seamen sometimes sought to exploit the ways in which impressment was intertwined with the law. Many pressed men resorted to a broader legal means to prevent their being taken. In 1758, a bill passed the House of Commons but failed in the House of Lords that would have extended habeas corpus (a writ requiring a person be brought before a judge or court especially for an investigation of a restraint of the person’s liberty; used as a protection against illegal imprisonment) to pressed men. Although this act was designed to stop impressment into the army it would have forced the demobilization of the Navy during the Seven Years’ War. Though the bill failed, local magistrates who were willing to frustrate the Navy by fining or imprisoning press officers and men granted the writ if the faintest doubt existed as to the legality of pressing any man. These writs proved enough of a nuisance that the Admiralty issued a circular instruction to all captains on how to deal with them (send the man to the Admiralty under guard). The more legitimate use of these writs was to retrieve accidentally pressed foreigners and, over time, the writs proved to be only a minor irritant.

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229 Rodger, 169.
230 Rogers, Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain, 101.
231 Rodger, 187-88.
An inquiry into the proposed alternatives put forth by private citizens and naval officials that were designed to alleviate the burdens of the press or eliminate them altogether, an assessment of protections, and the various actions taken by some to avoid the press demonstrate that the practice was so deeply rooted in British culture and society that it was difficult to change it. This traditionalist attitude explains why the many alternatives were never implemented and why protections, though flagrantly abused, remained the only way to legally way to avoid the press. But the time-honored institution that was impressment faced vigorous opposition not simply with the words of naval officers and private citizens but through the actions taken by those most affected by the practice.

No alternatives were seriously attempted and impressment remained the best way to meet the Navy’s personnel requirements. The ships needed their full complements because Britain had no other options. It could not be militarily effective without the Navy as the defense of Britain’s far-flung imperial and commercial interests depended on the fleet. Further, regardless of how offensive the press was, the many alternatives proposed were politically untenable because of the immense influence of those who benefited from the practice and the negligible influence of those pressed. Common sailors and their families (even the potentially more articulate landsmen pressed in numbers from the 1790s) were poor and had no ability to shape policy or escape impressment while the merchants who depended on shipping opposed alternatives. Had any of the schemes worked, most of the seamen affected would have been

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232 Ennis, 35.
drawn from the merchant ships owned by the upper classes. While the practice can seem arbitrary, it was enforced in a way that avoided crippling commerce.\textsuperscript{233}

There were many actions taken in response to the well-known negative aspects of the press that had excited a century and a half of official and public debate. The many alternatives put forth by private citizens and naval officials designed to reduce or eliminate the burdens of the press were never passed into law largely due to their expense and uncertainty about whether they could effectively gather enough sailors in times of national emergency. Protections—the means by which some individuals, deemed too vital to be pressed were granted immunity from impressment—were the only legal way to avoid the press but their issuance was so laden with fraud that government and naval resources were too often wasted in pursuing the corrupt and correcting mistakes. The actions taken by individuals, frustrated with the burdens of the press and the lack of progress in reforming the practice, evaded involuntary service in the Navy in ways that ranged from passive avoidance to legal challenges to violent clashes with naval vessels and press officials. The failure of attempted reforms, when combined with the great need for seamen and their general unwillingness to forcibly serve, ensured the continual existence of the press throughout this period.

\textsuperscript{233} Ennis, 35-36.
CONCLUSION

Impressment, the practice of coercing men into service in the Royal Navy, was an enduring aspect of British military and civilian life between the Restoration of the monarch and the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo. This period saw the expansion of Britain’s navy from a largely seasonal fighting force to a full-time professional entity. With the expansion of the Navy and British commercial and territorial interests there was an ever-increasing need for men to fully man the fleet. Due to the brutal, boring, dangerous, and low-paying aspects of the King’s Service, the Admiralty was unable to encourage enough sailors to volunteer. This led the Navy to turn to forcing seamen to serve aboard its warships.

There were many causes for the wide-ranging popular debate over impressment. The first is the fact that the press represented the most expedient and efficient way to man the fleet. Theoretically, volunteers were the preferred means of gathering enough men for the Navy but because of the hard life the service offered—the boredom, hard discipline, danger, low and infrequent pay, and the Navy was unable to attract sufficient volunteers. That, combined with the staggering numbers needed as the frequency and scope of Britain’s military engagements increased, ensured the Royal Navy’s need to press sailors. Second, there were legal considerations that contributed to the debate. Many in Britain, particularly radicals like the Wilkites, who believed the press was an unconstitutional, punitive, and socially discriminatory violation of the rights of Englishmen added to the chorus of those opposed to the press.

Third, the fact that the Navy’s need for seamen caused it to run afoul of many commercial and economic interests furthered the official and popular dialogue over the practice. As the Navy grew larger so did the merchant service and these simultaneous mobilizations
combined with the better and more frequent pay and the less harsh conditions meant the Navy was unable to compete for the most skilled sailors. Fourth, the moral implications indicated by the mechanisms by which the press operated—taking men from merchant vessels on the high seas and using press gangs in every port in the empire contributed to ethical outrage over the press. The inhumanity of talking men as they came home from long voyages without access to their families or much need shore leave along with the violence, riots, and public disturbances caused by the operation of the press gangs led to a century and a half of debate about the practice at every level of British society.

That debate generally demonstrated the press to be an unpopular tool of naval policy. It was opposed by naval officers as burdensome, inhumane, and as an impractical means to man the fleet. Nevertheless, despite their misgivings about the impressment and the sympathy for those affected expressed by such important figures as Admiral Edward Vernon, naval officers viewed the press as the lesser of two evils. The Navy needed to fulfill its responsibilities and without the press, those obligations would be in jeopardy. In the end, national security issues trumped the private belief of many officers that the press was an inhumane and unwanted practice.

Government officials, like their naval subordinates, saw impressment as an undesirable but necessary practice. Men like Samuel Pepys and Thomas Corbett privately viewed the press as inhumane and outdated and wished for a better way to encourage men to join the Navy but they did not wish to risk the consequences of abandoning an effective tool of recruitment. The public, from all socio-economic levels also saw the press in mostly negative terms. Private citizens like James Oglethorpe were freer to condemn the practice as a brutal practice but
impressment was not unanimously abhorred. Some viewed it not as an objectionable practice but merely as a necessary means to an end—manning the fleet to protect trade and advance British influence and territory or as a convenient way to rid their communities of undesirable elements. Those who viewed the press in a more positive light, like those who flocked to farcical comedies which portrayed the press not as oppressive but as an effective enforcer of social order, were in the minority and generally did not see or simply ignored the negative effects it had on much of the population. Even though the press was generally opposed, the critics’ views did not change policy. The opponents of the press lacked the political clout to sway policy or relied on its continued existence.

There were many alternatives suggested by private citizens and naval officials in an attempt to alleviate or eliminate the burdens of the press or eliminate them. These proposals were designed to offer naval personnel better pay, better conditions, shorter times of service, and something akin to a pension plan. Despite the positives they represented, none of these alternatives ever succeeded in becoming law because of traditionalist sentiments, the prohibitive cost involved, and the view that the press was simply too vital to be abandoned or altered without knowledge of the effects. Britain was an island nation that depended heavily on trade and commerce, had far-flung colonial possessions, and, in comparison with continental powers like Russia, Prussia, and France, had a small standing army for most of this period. Given these realities, it is unlikely naval officials or even the general public was willing to risk the dangers associated with an under-manned Navy which could have happened if a proposed alternative was implemented and did not succeed in attracting sufficient sailors to the king’s service. Further, the Royal Navy was mythologized in Britain. The public was enamored with the image of the Jolly Jack Tar who fought hard for king and country while similarly enjoying the pleasures of
life on shore. Even one of Britain’s unofficial anthems lends credence to the mythology of the Navy. The refrain of “Rule Britannia” is, “Rule Britannia, Britannia rule the waves/Britons never, never, never will be slaves” which directly links control of the seas with freedom.

While there were legal ways to avoid the press—protections—these could only be utilized by those engaged in other vital industries such as trade and fishing. Even though there was a successful cottage industry in creating false protections, the damage to the economy would have been too great to eliminate them and expanding their scope would deprive the Navy of many potential seamen.

The actions taken by those most affected by the practice—sailors—and the private citizens who supported their cause represented the height of opposition to the press. There were riots throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries, seamen periodically mutinied as a protest against their conditions and treatment, press officers were arrested and sued, Navy vessels were fired on by merchantmen, and sailors used all manner of evasion and subterfuge to escape being pressed. Despite all of these actions taken to avoid or eliminate the press, it remained a bulwark of the Navy until technology made the practice obsolete and modern reforms improved the pay and situation of seamen.

Impressment, despite its flaws and the adverse effects on some of the populace, persisted for one hundred and fifty years because a fully effective Navy was too important to national defense and commercial and imperial expansion. Despite protestations about the injustices of the press the public, the government, and the Navy through apathy, limited political influence, a realization of its necessity, a comprehension of the financial impossibility of any other system, or
the gain to be had through the practice’s existence contributed to its remaining for a century and a half.
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SECONDARY


