The Nineteenth Century

7. The Nineteenth Century Revival

The modern sea apostolate really begins with a series of Protestant initiatives. Fr Goldie SJ, a key figure in the revival of Catholic work among seamen, after a careful study of nineteenth-century Protestant efforts, likened his acknowledgment of the Catholic debt to them to Jesus' use of the Samaritan in the parable of the Good Samaritan, offering a good reason, if one was lacking, for examining what the non-Catholic churches were doing for the seafarer before turning to the Catholic sea apostolate.

A recruiting poster from the time of George III, addressed to the 'Royal Tars of England' and seeking men who hated France and would damn the Pope, is reproduced in Kverndal's *Seamen's Missions*, and illustrates the English religious situation well, as does Taylor's being able to cite only two instances of Catholic ministrations in the Royal Navy illustrate the position of Catholics in the RN.[1] Catholic Emancipation in Britain was not achieved until 1829, the hierarchy restored in 1850. Official appointments of Catholic naval chaplains had to wait another fifty years; in 1856 chaplains were appointed at Plymouth and Portsmouth, in 1858 at Chatham and Sheerness. There was a growing awareness among British Catholics, in the early nineteenth century a minority group, possessed of limited resources, and with the privilege of public Catholic worship only on the horizon, of the neglect of Catholics in the RN in contrast with Protestant provision.

The present chapter will examine the long nineteenth century, the effect of the French Revolution and French wars upon navies, and the effect of the cessation of hostilities and consequent reduction in naval fleets on merchant fleets. It is marked by decline of the fleets of traditionally Catholic nations and the rise of others, particularly the British. The seminal role of G. C. Smith and the emergence of the BETHEL movement from what Kverndal has called the 'Naval Awakening', which extended to French and American navies, will be acknowledged. From this naval context would emerge much of the ministry to the merchant seafarers of Britain, France and America.

The principal maritime countries at the opening of the nineteenth century were Britain and France. Its Revolution and successive wars had removed France from the seas as a serious competitor, though its fishing fleet continued in strength. No Catholic country (there was still a Papal navy), nor Germany or America, had a fleet, mercantile or otherwise, to match the British; a priority maintained regardless of indicator - steam, sail, ships built. Spanish

1 Gordon Taylor, *The Sea Chaplains*, 1978.

and Portuguese fleets were marginal, as were those from eastern Europe. The post Revolution French Church was paying for its association with the *Ancien* Régime, its collapse so complete, according to Cabantous, after a careful analysis of baptism registers, marriages and similar indicators, that it would take another forty years, many missions to maritime communities and a complete reorganisation of the French littoral parochial structure, to turn the tide. Cabantous described the period between 1800 and 1840 as a time of transition in the French maritime world, with anticlericalism virulent among naval officers, the Catholic minority more extreme in reaction, and parishes only slowly being won back by the devotion of their pastors. The Revolution had led to the replacement of many religious confraternities by revolutionary groups and the cessation of chaplaincy work in the French navy. In the upheaval, many members of religious orders fled to England where a sympathetic reception allowed them to rebuild on British soil. The impact of these exiled religious orders on the British Catholic sea apostolate will become apparent in later chapters.

A Time of Revival

All the nineteenth-century Christian denominations reveal a growing missionary movement, the reasons for which are complex, and, apart from delineation, beyond the scope of this book. The increasing distance between this period and the troubled years of the Reformation may be significant. While it can be argued that a characteristic of this century was a Catholic Church trying to restore in Europe what had been lost, whereas the Protestant churches were seeking new fields to conquer, it can be added with certainty that the rush for empire and the mass migration of working populations meant also that much of the work which extended the Catholic Church at this time, and to a lesser degree the Protestant churches, was actually a ministry to an extended Europe rather than to new peoples, with, in a sense, seamen as part of that extension. After 1815, improved global communications provided by a period of peace became another factor in the rising concern to spread the Gospel, a concern which seems to have been rooted in the period of war.

A time of war is not one that would prompt religious revival as a first thought, yet Kverndal has described a major religious revival in the Royal Navy between 1793 and 1815, calling it the 'Naval Awakening'. With the coming of peace the consequent dispersal of thousands of naval men carried that revival into the merchant fleet and became a significant factor in the succeeding phase, the Thames Revival. A significant factor when considering the Naval Awakening, and what followed in the merchant fleet, was the rise of the Bible and tract societies. Some of these societies, for example the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS, founded 1804, undenominational), began distributing tracts during the war among French prisoners as well as to British soldiers and sailors. In addition to the BFBS were the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK, 1698, Church of England), the Naval and Military Bible Society (NMBS, 1779, undenominational), the Religious

Tract Society (RTS, 1799, undenominational), the Prayer Book and Homily Society (PBHS, 1812, Church of England), and the Merchant Seamen's Auxiliary Bible Society (MSABS, 1818, an undenominational offshoot of the BFBS), forming a significant cluster around Kverndal's Naval Awakening. Each was providing tracts, initially to the RN, then to the merchant fleet, and to particular groups such as the men of the revenue cutters, before 1820. Those who distributed the tracts became aware not only that seamen could be brought to religious faith but that an almost exclusively lay-led revival was taking place. Lay leadership would not have been disparaged by these organisations, themselves largely the product of lay leadership: SPCK was founded by The Rev Dr Thomas Bray and four laymen; the PBHS by lay members of the so-called Clapham Sect;[1] the NMBS by two Methodist laymen, the RTS by a mixture of clergy and laity; the BFBS similarly, but dominated by lay figures. The BFBS began distribution of tracts and Scriptures to the Army and Navy in response to a petition received from a layman. More attention will be given to these societies below.

The Naval Awakening produced the seminal figure of George Charles Smith, a Baptist minister attached to a chapel in Penzance, who had served in the RN before his conversion. In 1809 circumstances led to his conducting a Naval Correspondence Mission, involving an extensive ministry by letter to men of the Navy in the five years following. The dramatic reduction in the size of the Navy on the outbreak of peace was matched by a corresponding growth of the peacetime merchant fleet, numbers of Christian naval officers on half-pay, and older vessels surplus to requirement. With some of these officers, in 1818 Smith bought an old naval vessel for use as a floating church in the port of London, starting the undenominational Port of London Society (PLS) for work among seamen.

Presented thus there appears to be a natural progression in the early years of the nineteenth century from Christian neglect of the seaman to a rapidly developing, if not yet wide-spread, missionary movement for his conversion. With the Thames Revival, groups of men on colliers began meeting in what Kverndal has called 'cells' for the purpose of worship and witness, prompting suspicion similar to that encountered by early Methodist groups in the RN. Enthusiasm in English religion at this time was suspect. Kverndal traced the Thames Revival to Wesleyan Methodists in Rotherhithe, particularly to Zebedee Rogers, a shoe maker and a man familiar with collier brigs, who began regular prayer meetings on board some of these vessels in 1814, following an emotional encounter with a captain after a prayer meeting in the Silver Street Wesleyan Chapel. In his work Rogers was supported particularly by Samuel Jennings, a timber merchant.[2]

Smith's foundation of the PLS followed his engagement with some of these groups. In the following year, a combination of tensions and opportunity led him to found the undenominational British and Foreign Seamen's Friend

1 An informal group of wealthy Anglican Evangelicals mostly worshipping at the parish church of Clapham where the influential Rector was J. Venn.

2 Kverndal, *Seamen's Missions*, 151ff. Kverndal, *George Charles Smith . . .* , 50ff.

Society and Bethel Union (BFSFSBU) to extend PLS work beyond London to meet the men's spiritual and welfare needs. His foundations, mainly due to his character, proved to be fissiparous, seldom remaining within the orbit of their founder. However, the movement grew and Smith encouraged local groups to copy the work of the BFSFSBU. In each case the encouragement came mainly from the central production of a magazine through which local groups maintained contact by correspondence. Recognition that they belonged to the parent society was indicated by the bestowal and display of the BETHEL flag.[1] This had emerged in 1817 as the preferred signal for worship on the Thames colliers, originally with the word 'BETHEL in white sewn on a blue ground, soon with the addition of a white star and dove. This flag, adopted by Smith as, by now, well recognised, was accorded to captains sympathetic to the movement and intending to hold prayer meetings aboard ship and in foreign ports. There was also, at least in London and Liverpool, a parallel effort by the Church of England. Elsewhere, for example in Dublin, were more peripheral societies of uncertain denominational status, of which the barest details have survived, but all part of the general movement.

Despite the fragmentation of Smith's foundations the general trend of the century was for societies to coalesce. A major combination came about in 1856, when the Anglican layman, W. H. G. Kingston (Fig. 6), a prolific author of popular stories for boys, after a rapid tour of several British ports (Dublin, Kingstown, Cork, Queenstown, Waterford, Milford, Liverpool), brought about an amalgamation of Anglican work, The Missions to Seamen (MtS), which would absorb in 1858 the Bristol Channel Mission (founded by The Rev Dr John Ashley in the 1830s), and later another product of the Evangelical Revival, the Thames Church Mission (TCM), founded in 1844. An exception to this pattern of combination was the 1881-2 foundation of the (Royal National) Mission to Deep Sea Fishermen (MDSF), spawned by the TCM to meet a particular need.

Nineteenth-century foundations were not confined to the British Isles. In large part inspired by Smith's pioneering work, churches in Norway (1864), Denmark (1867),[2] Sweden (1869), Finland (1875), and Germany (1886) established ministries dedicated to seamen. These denominational societies enjoyed an homogeneity which the Bethel Unions lacked, able to claim denominational support, where undenominational ones had to rely largely on private subscriptions. The denominational approach also made for a hitherto absent centralism. If the language of the market, wrested from its usual context, is applied here, these national bodies and denominational societies have about them something of the chain store with its numerous branches and central management, sometimes subsidised from the centre, where Smith's Bethel Unions would better attract the description 'franchise', the financial links being replaced for the Bethel Unions by the BETHEL flag (a common logo), a system of correspondents, and a common method of organisation;

1 Kverndal, *Seamen's Missions*, 156ff.

2 Henning Henningsen, *Somand og Somandskirke: Dansk Somandskirke i fremmede Havne 1867-1967*, Christiansfeld, 1967.

effectively a reflection of the Baptist family, to which Smith owed his allegiance, where each gathering was considered a complete church in itself.

This chapter opened by trying to indicate briefly why the nineteenth century should have witnessed this outburst of missionary activity, which was confined neither to work among seamen nor the Anglophone community. Another missionary movement (*Läsare*) had spread from Sweden to America, its roots in the previous century, while Kverndal gives abundant evidence of the 'Great Awakening' as a feature of American religious life generally.[1] If the Naval Awakening is to be given a serious explanation, part of the answer must lie in the rise of standing navies and their better organisation, accompanied increasingly by the appointment of regular chaplains; Kverndal's linking it to the work of Charles Wesley has something to commend it. Despite the lack of strong evidence here it may be significant that Kverndal has been able to chronicle a lesser awakening in the US navy. The work of G.C. Smith needs to be set against the background of both the Awakening, and the rise of the Bible and tract societies, which will be considered below. Smith receives a full measure of attention in Kverndal's monumental work, *Seamen's Missions: their Origin and Early Growth*.

The Bible and Tract Societies

In considering the various societies which paved the way for dedicated work among seamen it is necessary to return to the eighteenth century. SPCK and SPG found their place in chapter six, their work among emigrants significant and spilling over into contact with the crews, but the work of both was limited by charter. Evangelical dissatisfaction with this led to the founding of the Society for Missions to Africa and the East in 1799, renamed the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in 1812. Its foundation came in a roundabout sort of way: in 1786, the year the first convicts were transported to Botany Bay, members of the Eclectic Society (founded 1783), among their number some of the leading Evangelicals in the Church of England, began to consider how best the Gospel might be spread in New South Wales. Pressure from Evangelicals like Wilberforce and John Thornton on Prime Minister Pitt resulted in the sending of a chaplain to the convicts and, incidentally, the foundation of the CMS.[2]

The foundation of the CMS reflects the rise at this time of the Evangelical movement, responsible also for other foundations, directly or indirectly involved with the sea, as, for example, a Bible Society (1779) which initially provided Bibles to the Army, then shortly after 1779 changing its name to the Naval and Military Bible Society (NMBS),[3] eventually to be incorporated into the Scripture Gift Mission (1888), both undenominational. The NMBS, with a Council of Anglican bishops and Evangelical worthies drawn from the senior ranks of the RN, had among its objects the dissemination of the Scriptures to sailors and soldiers of His Majesty's Service and in the service

1 Henry C Whyman, *The Hedstroms and the Bethel Ship Saga*, 40ff.
2 F.W.B. Bullock, *Voluntary Religious Societies 1520-1799*, 243f.
3 Kverndal, *Seamen's Missions*, 71ff.

Obituary picture of W.H.G.Kingston, *The Boy's Own Paper*, 1880.

of the Honourable the East India Company, and to fishermen and all mariners, whether connected with inland or general navigation; objects to be achieved through a network of auxiliary societies.

The 1826 NMBS Report (in the chair, Admiral Lord Gambier), its 48th, gave a breakdown of ships and corporations supplied with Bibles or Testaments, including bargemen and others at Weedon, the Seamen's Friend Society at Edinburgh, merchant seamen at Lynn, merchant seamen and fishermen at Norwich, the Mariners' Church Society, and mariners at Torquay. Its list of auxiliaries indicates how such groups multiplied in this period, for this and other societies: Dublin (1817), Edinburgh, Portsmouth (1819), Cork, Stirling (1820), Deptford, Greenwich, Woolwich (1824), Blakeney (1825), Bath, Bristol (1826), Plymouth, Devonport, Stonehouse (1826), Torbay (1826), plus Cove and Fermoy. The 1827 Report added Southampton, Sheerness, Chatham, Gloucester, Witham, Braintree, Halsted and Sudbury. Of these places some served ports, some canals, and, presumably, some were supporters' groups.[1]

A similar society, the Religious Tract Society (RTS), was founded in 1799 at a time when the Anglican body for tract dissemination, SPCK, was at a low ebb, with a committee consisting of equal numbers of Anglicans and Nonconformists.[2] Details surviving from its foundation confirm that seamen were soon recipients of its tracts. By 1817 it was supplying the Navy, as was the NMBS, plus the hulks moored at Sheerness on the River Thames, and in 1818 'colliers on the Thames, the crews of four ships proceeding towards the North

1 Miller, *From Shore to Shore*, 48.

2 I follow custom in referring to Protestants outside the Church of England as Nonconformists, but am aware that Catholics are among those who do not conform to the State religion.

Pole, to the convict ships, . . . to the Committee for the Relief of Poor Seamen.' Succeeding copies of the *Missionary Register* offer more details, including that its most popular tracts, *Conversation in a Boat between Two Seamen* and *The Swearer's Prayer*, sometimes prompted remarkable conversions after even casual reading.[1] From 1819 the RTS had a regular ship visitor distributing tracts in the Port of London, the success in his work soon leading to the formation of smaller tract societies in Aberdeen, Sunderland and the Isles of Scilly, which were likewise printing and distributing tracts especially for seamen. The Port of London agent reported visiting between eleven and twelve hundred ships during 1821, where, usually, his tracts were well received.

The SPCK began providing Bibles and copies of the *Book of Common Prayer*, in 1814 to six quarantine vessels at Milford Haven, and various convict and prison ships, in 1816 adding two bound volumes of Bishop Wilson's sermons to its distribution of Bibles, Testaments, and Prayer Books to each of the 62 Revenue Boats established around the British coast for the prevention of smuggling. The sermons were given without charge because the men's work on the revenue boats prevented their Sunday church attendance, this generous gift prompting an appeal for a similar grant from the Inspecting Commanders of H.M. Revenue Cutters (42 being supplied), who expressed their intention not only to read the 'Church Service' (presumably Morning or Evening Prayer) on Sundays for the crews, but also to include one of Bishop Wilson's sermons.[2]

The British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS), like the RTS having a committee of Anglicans and Nonconformists (fifteen of each), was founded in 1812, in part because of SPCK's failure to print a Welsh Bible.[3] By 1816 it was providing Scriptures to bargees on the Grand Junction and other canals.[4] By 1818 its work among seamen had grown sufficiently to create the Merchant Seamen's Auxiliary Bible Society (MSABS), which relieved the BFBS of Bible distribution to seafarers, the MSABS intending to 'provide Bibles for at least 120,000 British Seamen, now destitute of them'. In its first two months a total of 1,721 men on 133 outward-bound ships were visited at Gravesend by the MSABS agent, Lieutenant Cox, who distributed 580 Bibles and Testaments.[5] To extend Bible distribution to seamen four depositories followed in Liverpool, adding a year later, another BFBS auxiliary, the Hull Marine Bible Society.

Statistics were beginning to be kept by the Bible and missionary societies, principally for circulation to encourage supporters. The first year's report of Lieutenant Cox (Fig. 15) showed him to have supplied Scriptures to '1,681 vessels, having on board 24,765 men, of whom 21,671 are reported able to

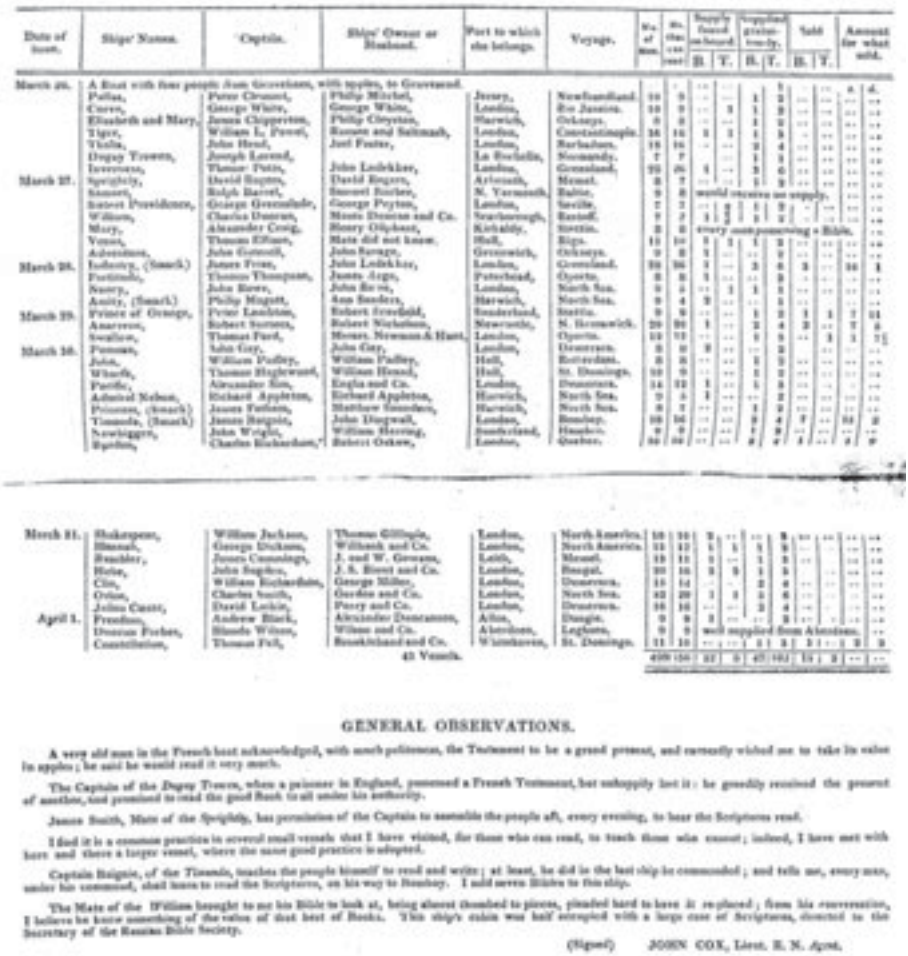
1 *Missionary Register,* 1818, 403ff. Tracts were not always well received. Charles Hopkins was scathing about what he called tract mongers.

2 *Missionary Register*, 1816, 348..

3 Bullock, *Voluntary Religious Societies 1520-1799*, 232.

4 *Missionary Register*, 1816, 278.

5 *Missionary Register*, 1816, 175; 1818, 503; 1819 etc. In early 1818 SPCK referred an application from the Society for the Aid of Destitute Seamen in London for a supply of 'suitable books' to the MSABS which responded with a hundred each of Bibles and Testaments in assorted languages. Godron C. Cook, *Disease in the Merchant Navy*, 81.



GENERAL OBSERVATIONS.

A very old man in the French boat acknowledged, with much politeness, the Testament to be a good present, and earnestly wished me to take its value in apples; he said he would read it very much.

The Captain of the *Dupuy Treves*, when a prisoner in England, possessed a French Testament, but unhappily lost it: he gratefully received the present of another, and promised to read the good Book to all under his authority.

James Smith, Mate of the *Sprightly*, has permission of the Captain to assemble the people all, every evening, to hear the Scriptures read.

I find it is a common practice in several small vessels that I have visited, for those who can read, to teach those who cannot; indeed, I have met with here and there a larger vessel, where the same good practice is adopted.

Captain Brigstie, of the *Tweeds*, teaches the people himself to read and write; at least, he did in the last ship he commanded; and tells me, every man, under his command, shall learn to read the Scriptures, on his way to Bombay. I sold seven Bibles to this ship.

The Mate of the *William* brought to me his Bible to look at, being almost thumbed to pieces, pleaded hard to have it replaced; from his conversation, I believe he knew something of the value of that best of Books. The ship's cabin was half occupied with a large case of Scriptures, directed to the Secretary of the Russian Bible Society.

(Signed) JOHN COX, Lieut. R. N. Agent.

Extract from Lt Cox's Log of ships visited -BFBS *Monthly Extracts*, 1820.

read'; his statistics rare indications of scripture ownership and literacy levels. On these vessels he found 1,475 Bibles and 725 Testaments, all in private ownership and not for common use. They were unevenly distributed: as many as 590 ships, having 6,149 men on board, of whom 5,490 were literate, were without Bible or Testament. The MSABS was able to issue free 1,075 Bibles and 4,068 Testaments to foreign-bound vessels, selling a further 390 Bibles and 207 Testaments at half price, yielding £89. 4s.10d.

Cox reported his approaches being 'contumeliously rejected' on only four occasions. More often his offers were met with pious responses, usefully brought to the attention of BFBS supporters in its reports. Many, but not all, of the vessels he boarded were smacks with small crews. A Dutch ship with a crew of twelve held on board daily prayers and singing, with grace said at meals, and every crew member in possession of a Bible.[1] The Mate of the *Sprightly* from Arbroath (eight crew), with his Captain's permission, gathered

1 *Missionary Register*, 1819, 167f.

men aft every evening to hear the Scriptures read, while Captain Baignie of the *Timanda* of London (eighteen on board), concerned that his men could read and write, promised they 'shall learn to read the Scriptures' on their voyage to Bombay. The MSABS was encouraged sufficiently to produce a sample letter for captains, offering Bibles at a subsidised price, and suggesting for crews of eight or nine, 1 Bible and 3 testaments, and for larger crews, a Bible for each watch, and a testament for every three or four men. As an inducement the letter continued, 'The Committee beg to call your special attention to this subject, as suggesting the best means of improving the moral character of seamen, and promoting among them the habits of regularity and subordination'.[1]

In 1820 the *Missionary Register* reported that 7,803 seamen on 789 ships had been saved from sailing without Bibles by the MSABS. The National Bible Society of America, perhaps encouraged by such statistics, called upon its coastal auxiliaries to become Marine Bible Societies providing Scriptures to seamen. In 1824 it drew attention to the Calcutta Bible Association's second annual report, which announced the formation of a Marine Sub-Committee to help establish Bible associations actually on board ships. The success of the MSABS allowed the NMBS to direct its work to the armed forces. Initially financed by the BFBS, money for the MSABS came from many different sources, including a donation of 100 guineas from Trinity House. After seven years' existence, the MSABS claimed to have provided 9,275 Bibles and 10, 647 Testaments. Its income for the year was £911. 4s. 7d and expenditure £860 .8s .6d; a happy state of affairs.

The 1826 MSABS Annual Meeting, presided over by Admiral Viscount Exmouth, heard that a further 1,555 Bibles and 893 Testaments had been distributed. Annual meetings ran to a pattern, reporting similar statistics. A point of interest is the names which appear, overlapping frequently with other Anglican or Nonconformist meetings concerned with seamen: The Rev. Andrew Brandram,[2] Captain Colin Campbell C.B., RN, John Petty Muspratt Esq., W. Parker Esq., Captain G. Gambier RN,[3] The Rev. Professor Shedd of New Orleans, Captain Edward Parry RN, and Captain Bazalgette RN. The work of the society continued for many years; as late as 1849 its Liverpool Auxiliary engaged a colporteur to work with local shipping. He reported distributing 2,471 Bibles in his first year, only seven in English, suggesting that the pattern of this ministry had broadened; of these Bibles, 928 were sold to Roman Catholics and 1,543 to Protestants. No indication of the languages of Bibles sold is given; of more interest to supporters would be sales to Catholics.[4]

The specifically Anglican society in the field of tract and Bible distribution was the Prayer Book and Homily Society (PBHS); founded in 1812, it too appeared regularly in the *Missionary Register*'s pages. It began disseminating tracts, Prayer Books and the *Book of Homilies* at reduced prices among seafarers

1 BFBS Annual Report, 1818, 251. BFBS archives are held at Cambridge University Library.

2 Newly appointed Master of the Queen's Chapel of the Savoy.

3 Son of Admiral Lord Gambier, a Methodist, whose ship, the *Defence*, in 1793 suspected of being a 'prayer ship' had proved itself also a fighting ship.

4 W. Canton, *The History of the BFBS*, vol. II, 164.

in 1825, largely through the efforts of individual committee members. Its agent was sick for its first six months, limiting sales, but a fourteen month distribution total was announced to 1,261 ships visited, of 1,614 Prayer Books, nineteen copies of the complete *Book of Homilies*, and almost 1,500 canvas-bound copies of the shorter *Book of Select Homilies*, some given free for the use of ships' crews at a total cost to the PBHS of about £100. It was reported that the visits of committee members and agents had prompted some masters to resume the practice of reading Divine Service (Morning and Evening Prayer from the *Book of Common Prayer*) for crews on Sundays. The *Book of Select Homilies* was considered sufficiently admirable a medium for Church teaching that in 1827 its distribution was extended to include Naval vessels, allowing the society to report that all H.M. Ships in ordinary at Sheerness, Chatham, Portsmouth and Devonport had been supplied with the 'Formularies of the Church', and all prison hulks visited and their chaplains given free volumes of the *Book of Select Homilies* to offer to the prisoners. The same report drew attention to the neglect of fishermen, particularly of river fishermen. Expansion continued, with forty representatives being appointed in various ports in 1828, amongst whom were seven clergy, the remainder laymen under clerical supervision (as supporters would wish to be assured, and guaranteeing the PBHS its cloak of ecclesiastical respectability), most new to the work and functioning in an honorary capacity. These representatives were able to report Bibles, testaments and '8,788 Homily Tracts, and Festival Services in the same form, principally in Foreign Languages, distributed among sailors who have visited English ports'.[1] It is possible that the PBHS was the earliest agency working among seamen to make a serious attempt to respond to the presence of non-English speakers.

Cox's statistics for Bibles and literacy levels on board merchant ships visited are supplemented in the 1828 PBHS Report by figures relating to religious observance on board 590 ships visited in the Port of London, where 891 Prayer Books were sold, and 1,500 copies of the *Book of Select Homilies* given.[2] On these 590 ships, Divine Service was held regularly when at sea (weather permitting) on 207, occasionally on five, and never on the remainder.

The books and tracts of the PBHS sound unappealing to present-day ears. Cheap printing and increasing levels of literacy had allowed the tract to become a popular medium for Gospel sharing. Sailors, with little to fill their leisure time at sea, welcomed reading material. The tract could go where ministers could not, passing from hand to hand, and continuing its ministry until discarded, worn out or washed away. It avoided the whim of the ship's master and could impart sound teaching; well-written, it could even be exciting. Equally, tract scattering could be a hindrance to the Gospel; there are hints that these early agents of the PBHS had to discriminate when placing tracts.[3] Dissemination of tracts got visitors on board ships, and these were the men who started the early societies.

1 *Missionary Register*, 1828, 372ff.

2 The extraordinary figure for the *Homilies,* which required considerable concentration, may be explained if it is understood to refer to the homily tracts of the preceding paragraph.

3 Cp Basil Lubbock, *Round the Horn before the Mast*, 22f.
See also, Miller, *Priest in Deep Water*, 92.

G.C. Smith[1]

It was an agent of the RTS who remarked in 1821 upon 'the active zeal of the Port of London Society for preaching the Gospel among seamen in a noble chapel on their own element', adding that when he observed 'The British and Foreign Seamen's Friend Society and Bethel Union' holding prayer meetings on the River Thames he detected the hand of the Lord at work. The Lord's hand was working through George Charles Smith, born in London in 1782, raised an Independent Christian, and, aged fourteen, apprenticed to Captain Clark of the brig *Betsey* of Salem, Massachusetts, sailing for Boston, until pressed by HMS *Ariadne*. This experience did not deter Smith from returning to the RN, voluntarily joining HMS *Agamemnon*, on which he served five years; he witnessed the Nore Mutiny, served under Duncan at the Battle of Camperdown (1797), and Nelson at the Battle of Copenhagen (1801). He led a disparate life until an illness, followed by the death of his mother, ended in a conversion experience in 1803. Now twenty-one, and returned to London, he was drawn to a Baptist Chapel, then began preaching in the Plymouth Dock at Devonport among his former naval mates while undergoing training for the Baptist ministry. In 1807 he was called to be pastor of the Octagon Chapel, Penzance, his base for the next seventeen years, while he preached widely among seamen in West Country ports.

Smith's oratory was not without effect, while his ministry was continued in the printed word when he was asked to correspond with some sailors, in 1809 founding the Naval Correspondence Mission after an invitation to preach on board a ship at Penzance; effectively his first mission to sailors.[2] Then, in 1812, he was called to London where he preached in the open air.[3] London, seat of empire and busy port, was notorious for the conditions in which its sailors had to live; press gangs, brothels, crimps and much else made their lives very hard. The *Weekly Dispatch* carried an item on 30th April, 1837 which could have been written in 1812:

> It is really heart-rending to hear of the various ways in which the 'British Tar' is imposed upon as soon as he is paid off. The harlots and a variety of other wretches in the vicinity of Wapping, &c., pounce upon him like so many hyenas. It is a pity so little protection is shown to that noble body of men.

The paper printed details of seamen being flogged, kept up the mast or on the poop almost to the point of death from exposure, bound and trailed overboard until nearly senseless, clapped in irons, given the cat-o'nine tails, swindled by boarding house keepers, involved in drunken debauches and murders, pressed and carried aboard ship, and more. There were opium dens in Limehouse, brothels on the Ratcliffe Highway, and gin palaces and public houses at every turn, waiting to

1 Kverndal, *Seamen's Missions*, deals comprehensively with Smith: 113ff. His book, *George Charles Smith of Penzance*, 2012 adds little.

2 Kverndal, *Seamen's Missions*, 121f.

3 In addition to Kverndal, a useful source of information was the *Soldiers' and Sailors' Magazine*, 1862.

welcome the returning sailor, newly paid off and carrying large sums of money.

The evidence suggests prayer meetings began on vessels in the Port of London early in the nineteenth century, the first apparently organised by the master of a Tyne collier for his crews and those on neighbouring vessels in 1812.[1] Soon a BETHEL flag would be hoisted when a service was about to be held. Smith's main ministry, a preaching tour on the Continent excepted, remained in Penzance, but he was making his name as a fiery preacher in London; it is hard to imagine that he was not involved in the steps which led to the increase of such services. The 1819 formation of the undenominational Protestant PLS followed, soon associated with the MSABS and similar societies, and the obtaining of a floating chapel for which plans had been laid in 1817; the work of Smith and R. Marten Esquire.

By 1825, according to the Annual Report, as in the *Missionary Register*, 'this Meeting rejoice[s] . . . in those zealous exertions at Liverpool, Leith, Dublin, and other out-ports - at Gibraltar, Calcutta, and other of our Foreign Dependencies - and in America'. The floating chapel flourished at its mooring off Wapping.[2] It is illustrative of the overlapping of early kindred societies that here a Mr Sherriff Brown moved a motion, doing so again at the London Episcopal Floating Church Society meeting; the Gambiers, last seen at the MSABS Annual Meeting, were also present. There was the perennial concern about money (1826: income £375. 15s. 5d; expenditure £539. 3s. 5d) and more support desired from owners and insurers of ships, in whose interest it was claimed that seamen be better behaved; a result expected if more could be led to faith.

Smith's work increased as need unfolded. In 1819 he founded the British and Foreign Seamen's and Soldiers' Friend Society and Bethel Union (BFSSFSBU), in 1820 the first *Sailors' Magazine*; in 1825 claiming the first mariner's church in England, meanwhile continuing to conduct a number of preaching missions. The BFSSFSBU was supported by most of the people who supported the PLS and seems to have grown in a similar way. In 1826 a motion was approved 'to give every possible stimulus to the Foreign Operations of the Institution by, among others, the Gambiers, Professor Shedd, The Rev. Mr Crosbie of Dublin, and The Rev John Jack 'missionary from Astrachan'. In 1822 Smith founded the Watermen's Friend Society for giving religious instruction to watermen, bargemen and coal-whippers; in 1824 the Shipwrecked and Distressed Sailors' Family Fund (which coincided with the start of the undenominational London City Mission and the opening, according to one source, of a Mariner's Church in Wellclose Square); in 1826 the first Shipwrecked and Destitute Sailors' Asylum and Sailors' Home.[3] In 1829 he was responsible for the first temperance mission to sailors and the foundation of the Maritime Penitent Female Refuge. Although a Baptist, Smith attracted support from other denominations including the Established Church.

The PLS and the BFSSFSBU, sharing a common president and working

1 M.R. Kingsford, *Life of W.H.G. Kingston*, 125.
See also Smith's tract, *Bethel or The Flag Unfurled*, 1819.

2 *Missionary Register*, 1825, 251.

3 *Missionary Register*, 1826, 233.

harmoniously, merged in 1827, to form 'The Port-of-London and Bethel Union Society, for Promoting Religion among British and Foreign Seamen', to become in 1925 the British Sailors' Society, and since 1995 the British and International Sailors' Society. It is implicit in its early annual reports that all went well; they would hardly suggest otherwise. The 1828 meeting heard of another of Smith's foundations, the Merchant Seamen's Orphan Asylum. The society's school in Wapping was commended for its aid to 'the numerous and destitute children of Seamen and Rivermen' with 180 boys and 90 girls in attendance. The Floating Chapel, also at Wapping, reported two services every Sunday and a monthly Communion service, an annual attendance of 17,585 at services, 9,014 of these being seamen; there were 135 seamen attendances at Communion.[1]

If these developments were not enough, it was at this time that the next important foundation took place, the Mariners' Church Society (MCS). At various times there were several societies using this name. This one, of either 1825 or 1827, merged with the BFSFSBU in January 1846 to form the Seamen's and Soldiers' Evangelical Friend Society, from 1848 the Seaman's Christian Friend Society, a markedly protestant organisation, and particularly given to tract dissemination.[2] This MCS can be traced to Smith.[3] It was based in the old and disused Danish church in Wellclose Square, London, perhaps to be associated with the Home opened there at No. 19 by George Gambier and Captain R. Elliott. They financed this Home from November 1827, appointing a mate to issue relief, and allowed Smith to use it as an operational base. On the 1st January, 1828 a warehouse was opened offering straw beds for sailors, the 'donkey's breakfast' of the sailor's bunk; then, when the Brunswick Theatre collapsed on the 28th February 1828, its site was obtained and replaced with a Home in 1829. At this point Smith resigned, perhaps to initiate other work; opinion is divided on whether the parting was amicable. Gambier withdrew at the same time, Elliott remaining, together with an unnamed Captain RN mentioned only as a supporter. Elliott at this time was involved with the Church of England, starting in January 1828 a Home in Dock Street under its auspices, its foundation stone laid by Prince Albert.

The Wellclose Square MCS assumed in 1827 the title of British and Foreign Seamen's Friend Society and Bethel Union, which had been discarded by the earlier BFSSFSBU on its amalgamation with the PLS. This MCS had a monthly magazine called the *Steam Packet*, renamed the *New Sailor's Magazine*, which resembled very closely the *Sailors' Magazine* of the BFSSFSBU.[4] To add to

1 *Missionary Register*, 1828, 227.

2 C.H. Milsom, *Guide to the Merchant Navy*, 132.

3 Kverndal, *Seamen's Missions*, 266ff.
Stephen Friend, *The Rise and Development of Christian Missions amongst British Fishing Communities during the Nineteenth Century*, (hereafter, *Fishermen's Missions*) 85 suggests that this was intended to be an auxiliary of the BFSFSBU, that the relationship was soon fraught, Smith being forced to resign in 1826 when he was in the process of founding a third seamen's mission in London. I have rather dodged the complicated issue of Smith's many foundations and fallings-out but the message is clear enough.

4 *Missionary Register*, 1827, 236.

the confusion, its first Annual Meeting was held under the name of the British and Foreign Seamen's and Soldiers' Friendly Society, but the contemporary *Missionary Register* makes it clear that this was indeed the MCS renamed. This meeting was well attended (requiring a second room), not least by Anglicans, some involved with the Episcopal Floating Church. The Report for this MCS in 1829 is further confused in the *Missionary Register* by being indexed under 'Episcopal Floating Church Society', and claiming as its achievements 'The Sailors' Home' or Royal Brunswick Maritime Establishment, with its Receiving and Shipping Depot, Distressed Sailors' Refuge and a Sea Boys' Rendezvous; The Sea and River Tract Society and Thames Mission; and The Sailors' Orphan House Establishment for fifty boys and fifty girls.[1]

There is much confusion here with a number of the works overlapping. Apparently Smith, Gambier and Elliott remained on good terms, despite Elliott's move towards the Established Church. Indeed, Elliott seems to have moved to ease pressure on Smith's existing work, going at Smith's suggestion to found the Dock Street Home. Little has been said of rivalry and disagreement, but much of the confusion between these early Protestant societies derived from the character of Smith. *The New Sailor's Magazine* of 1829 reveals that Smith's relations with the committee of his original Bethel foundation had reached a stage where one committee member, named only as 'Philo-veritas', took it upon himself to precede Smith's preachments about the country with letters to people of influence accusing Smith of dishonesty in his direction of the society's funds.[2] Despite the Port Society's disclaimer of Philo-veritas it advertised a meeting to examine the state of the trust, proposing that all monies coming through Smith or the Seamen's Friend Society might be returned to donors. Smith fulminated in print, likening himself to the apostle John on Patmos, reminding readers what his labours of twenty years had achieved among seamen, and drawing attention to the circulation of his *New Sailor's Magazine* (its foundation surely confirming earlier troubles) which was treble the circulation of the magazine of which he had been deprived. His new 'Sailors' Guardian Society' would be firmly allied to the British and Foreign Seamen's and Soldiers' Friend Society, 'lashed, yard-arm and yard-arm'. Smith convened a meeting of ministers to arbitrate. According to Kverndal, these accusations were found to be unfounded and Smith received a public apology from his

1 *Missionary Register*, 1829, 212, 216. There were a number of foundations for orphaned or destitute children of seamen around this time The Port of Hull Society for the Religious Instruction of Seamen, founded 1821, initially opened a floating chapel, followed by a school to teach men to read, then in 1837 by its Sailors' Orphan Institution (Milsom, *Guide to the Merchant Navy*, 166f). On the Thames was the Sailors' Orphan Girls Episcopal School and Asylum, of 1829, among its patrons, Captain R.J. Elliott. The children were 'ministered to by the Rev C.B. Gribble, Chaplain of the newly erected Church for Seamen'. Children to be admitted were required to show evidence of baptism and vaccination and to attend the Established Church twice on Sundays. On leaving each received a copy of the *Book of Common Prayer*. These details survive in its 20th Annual Report (1848). Miller, *From Shore to Shore*, 48-49.

2 *New Sailor's Magazine*, 1829, 384ff, 406ff, 464ff.

calumniator. Since more accusations and fallings-out followed, either Smith was trampling on egos, cutting corners, or over-working.[1] It is hard not to think of ruffled feathers and broken egg shells. The original slander seems to have originated with an assistant secretary of the British Reformation Society, whose name was coupled with that of Lieutenant Brown, Secretary of the Episcopal Floating Church Society, the two bodies having offices under a shared roof.

A comprehensive unravelling of Smith's foundations appears in Kverndal's *Seamen's Missions*. Once the confusion has been acknowledged, the reader grasps with relief the bits which can be understood. For example, the straw bed asylum which replaced 19, Wellclose Square was a warehouse in Dock Street. The Royal Brunswick Theatre was in Well Street, now Ensign Street. The Royal Brunswick Maritime Establishment, to allay suspicions of heterodoxy, was placed under the auspices of the Bishop of London in 1831, though continuing its association with Smith's work, and its Chaplain, Mr Gribble, was the incumbent of St Paul's Church, Dock Street. Perhaps in 1829, certainly before 1835, Elliott set up his own 'crewing office' to try to avoid some of the evils of the crimping system.[2] The Home was extended with the support of Queen Adelaide in 1848, and enlarged in 1865, retaining its royal patronage. This refuge for destitute seamen became a model for other, albeit smaller, institutions serving sailors around the globe. By 1890 it included the adjacent St Paul's Church for Seamen, had a staff of more than forty people, and provided four meals a day, hot baths, a tailor's shop, over 500 beds in individual cabins, a savings bank, a barber, a daily visit from a surgeon, reading and smoking rooms, a library, and more. It also housed a Navigation School.[3]

The confusion of titles and many organisations of the first half of the nineteenth century, of which Kverndal lists many more, hides a firm foundation being laid for a style of sea apostolate in which the Church went to the seafarer. Smith, virtually alone, had woken the denominations, even the Church of England, from somnolence. His was the first sailors' home of modern times, and his the hand which lay behind so many groups working among seafarers around the world. At another time this might not have been so, but London's position made a better time hard to find; most modern missionary activity on behalf of the seafarer in the churches can be traced directly or indirectly to Smith, an achievement undiminished by his imprisonment for debt in 1836, and on three subsequent occasions.[4] The fissiparous nature of his foundations reflects something of the character of the man; now, in the second half of the century these societies would begin to coalesce, most of the undenominational ones into the British Sailors' Society, and the Anglican ventures into The Missions to Seamen.

1 Kverndal, *Seamen's Missions*, 275f.
2 Kingsford, *W.H.G. Kingston*, 125ff. See also the Annual Reports for these years.
3 Alston Kennerley, *British Seamen's Missions and Sailors' Homes*, *passim*. Alston Kennerley, Joseph Conrad at the London Sailors' Home, 70-102.
4 Friend's *Fishermen's Missions*, offers more detail of these difficulties. Kverndal, *George Charles Smith of Penzance*, 104.