The Maritime World of Early Modern Britain
The Maritime World
of Early Modern Britain

Edited by
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Amsterdam University Press
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Acknowledgements

While editing this volume we have incurred a number of debts of gratitude. Firstly and most importantly, we would like to thank the eleven contributors to this volume for producing such a wide range of high-quality chapters. We are also grateful to the editors of the 'Maritime Humanities, 1400-1800: Cultures of the Sea' series, Claire Jowitt and John McAleer, for commissioning the book and making it the inaugural volume. At Amsterdam University Press, Erika Gaffney has been a committed and patient editor, and we also offer our thanks to the copy-editing and production teams that have worked alongside her: special mentions go to Judith Allan, Julie Benschop and Louise Visser. We would also like to thank the anonymous peer reviewer for their detailed comments that have improved the book immeasurably. At the National Maritime Museum, Robert J. Blyth, Lizelle de Jager and Nigel Rigby offered advice and assistance in the early stages of the project, as well as a forum for discussion and debate. Colleagues at our respective institutions – the University of Reading and the University of Exeter – have also provided support in a variety of forms.

Lastly, as co-editors, we would like to thank each other. We have both changed jobs since the project was conceived and other commitments have frequently jostled for position, but working together on this book has been a consistent source of pleasure.
Note on Conventions and Terminology

This volume concerns the maritime world of early modern Britain. Many of the words in our title are contested and have their own complex histories, and there are a number of other phrases and conventions that warrant explanation and justification. Our job here is not to provide definitive conclusions to these debates, but to offer a few short sentences to explain our decisions.

Perhaps most obvious is the notion of ‘Britain’ itself. As a political entity, ‘Britain’ did not exist until the Act of Union in 1707, but we use the term here for two reasons. Firstly, the idea of ‘Britain’ had existed for many centuries, and there were repeated efforts to utilise it throughout the early modern era. In 1603, for instance, James VI and I used the name ‘Great Britain’ in an active attempt to persuade his subjects to shift regional loyalties towards a new composite monarchy.1 Indeed, attempts to inculcate a sense of ‘Britishness’ before 1707 frequently utilised maritime symbols, such as Britannia. These points are discussed further in our introduction. Secondly, we wanted to take a ‘four nations’ approach to the subject. We suggest that the histories of England, Wales, Ireland, and Scotland, while distinctive and individual, were fundamentally intertwined, not least by maritime connections; indeed, many of the chapters that follow make just this point.2 During the early modern era, Ireland was never part of Britain in a strict political, legal, or geographical sense, and our volume gives more attention to what might be considered ‘mainland’ Britain, or the British Isles, in modern terms. However, Ireland was subject to the English and then British crown throughout this period, and was undoubtedly part of the British empire and of the maritime world we seek to understand here. In short, then, we use ‘Britain’ to describe a geographical and cultural space, rather than the political construct that would later form.

The term ‘early modern’ has similarly confounded scholars. How one defines and delineates a historical period depends very much on one’s approach and geographical focus, and historical periodisation is by its very nature a generalisation or simplification of the past.3 Given that our focus

2 For further discussion see Brendan Bradshaw and John Morrill, eds. The British Problem, c. 1534-1707: State formation in the Atlantic Archipelago (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996).
3 Laura Sangha, ‘On periodisation: or, what’s the best way to chop history into bits?’, The many-headed monster blog https://manyheadedmonster.wordpress.com/2016/04/21/
is on Britain and its wider engagement with the maritime world, this book uses ‘early modern’ to signify the period from the first European global voyages of exploration in the 1490s, through to the establishment of a global ‘British’ empire in the early 1700s. This has the added advantage of aligning with the reigns of the Tudor and Stuart dynasties (1485-1714).

We hope the last key term, ‘maritime’, is rather more straightforward, focusing as it does on humankind’s relationship with the sea. Maritime history does have a reputation for overly-technical language (though this reputation is not entirely deserved), and we have gone to great lengths to steer clear of nautical terminology. However, there are a few areas where editorial decisions needed to be taken. Historians disagree on when one can begin to talk of a permanent ‘Royal Navy’ (as opposed to the more episodic mobilizations of the medieval period), but we use this term throughout to signify warships owned by the English and then British state; Scottish monarchs before 1603 also possessed naval ships, but the English navy provided the institutional nucleus for what became the Royal Navy. Indeed, the volume refers to a large number of ships, and ships’ names are italicised throughout. The reader will find no mention of ‘HMS’ (His/Her Majesty’s Ship), which was not in common use until the early nineteenth century. Lastly, we also use the word ‘it’, rather than ‘she’, to describe sea-going vessels. While the latter may be traditional, we feel it is outdated and problematic, and that the former is more appropriate for a twenty-first century audience.
Introduction

Richard J. Blakemore and James Davey

The idea of Britain as an island nation with an intrinsically maritime character and history is well-established. It is generally accepted that Britain has, and always has had, a close relationship with the sea, and that its people have always been predisposed towards travelling across the waves, drawing wealth and sustenance from them, and ruling over them. This idea also has a long heritage. One of the most famous expressions of it is in the words that William Shakespeare gave to John of Gaunt in Richard II, probably written in the 1590s:

This royall Throne of Kings, this sceptred isle,
...  
This Fortresse built by Nature for her selfe
Against infection, and the hand of warre,
This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall,
Or as a Moate defensive to a house,
Against the envy of less happier Lands,
This blessed plot, this earth, this Realme, this England

Like most popular ideas, however, this one begins to break down under a closer examination. Strictly speaking Britain is not an island, but an archipelago; and nor is it one nation but several, united relatively late in their existence. Shakespeare here writes exclusively of England because at that time there was no Britain in a political sense. Furthermore, it is highly unlikely that the real John of Gaunt would have placed such faith in the sea as a ‘Moate defensive’, setting England apart in splendid isolation from ‘less happier Lands’. He operated in an essentially European political world and pursued serious designs on the Castilian throne, while a French

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invasion was a very real possibility throughout his rule of England during the infancy of his royal nephew.²

Indeed, Shakespeare depicted the sea as a threat just as much as an asset, due both to its own hazardous and stormy nature and to the access it granted to invaders in those periods when travel by sea was generally easier and quicker than travel by land. Some hint of this can be found, perhaps, in a later passage of the same speech: ‘England, bound in with the triumphant sea, / Whose rocky shore beates backe the envious siedge / Of watery Neptune’.³ Contradicting the tone of the earlier lines, the sea is no longer England’s defender but one of its assailants and (‘bound in’) even its jailor. This theme of violence and peril appears elsewhere in his canon, too. Twelfth Night begins with a shipwreck, in which the siblings Viola and Sebastien are separated – with comical consequences – while arguably Shakespeare’s most well-known maritime scene in The Tempest has the sorcerer Prospero conjure up a storm to isolate and divide his rivals, and carry out his long-nurtured plans for revenge.⁴

In this latter case, Shakespeare’s fascination with the sea was most likely prompted by the shipwreck of the Sea Venture off the coast of Bermuda in 1609, an event which captured a significant amount of popular attention as the news arrived in England.⁵ It is thus no coincidence that Shakespeare chose to articulate the premise of a naturally maritime nation, as problematic as that premise is in terms of historical realism. Despite the dangers it posed, the maritime world became vitally important for Britain to a much greater extent than ever before from the sixteenth century onwards. The shipping and commerce of these islands, previously confined to northern Europe, now expanded to encompass transoceanic and eventually global networks. Alongside this, a ‘Royal Navy’ was founded, the first permanent naval force in the world, which secured ever-greater support from the state. Whether

through public or private investment, and whether positive or negative, the influence of the sea and seaborne activity on British politics, economics, society, and culture increased markedly. This growth of Britain's maritime world aligned with a period of conscious nation-building. Shakespeare's lifetime witnessed the first joining of Scotland and England under a single monarch in 1603, with Wales and Ireland also ruled by the English crown, followed later by more extensive political and legal unions in 1707 and 1801. Though the peoples of these islands inhabited neither a united kingdom nor a predominantly maritime one at the start of this period, by its end they were well on the way to living in both. The story of Britain becoming maritime is therefore deeply intertwined with the story of Britain becoming Britain.

An important part of this transition came with the re-imagining of Britain as a maritime nation and, as the elegant phrases of Richard II and Shakespeare's lasting impact demonstrates, this self-image entailed the reinterpretation of Britain's entire past. An equally famous paean to Britain's maritime potency, the ode ‘Rule, Britannia!’, was written in 1740 to commemorate the accession of George II. Though the original title and lyrics contain an exhortation towards maritime dominance, not a celebration of it, they nevertheless, like Shakespeare, assume that a natural and divine ‘charter’ existed between Britain and the sea, protecting the country from both ‘haughty tyrants’ and envious other ‘nations, not so blest as thee’. Just as significant, though often forgotten, is the poem's original context: it was first performed as part of a masque which lauded the supposed seaborne successes of Alfred the Great during the ninth century. Britain becoming

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7 James Thomson and David Mallet, Alfred: A Masque. Represented before their Royal Highnesses the Prince and Princess of Wales, at Cliffden, on the First of August, 1740 (London, 1740), pp. 42-3; See also David Armitage, ‘Empire and Ideology in the Walpolean Era’, in Armitage, Ideological
maritime, therefore, also rather paradoxically resulted in the belief that it always had been.

If these ideas presided over contemporary understandings of the maritime world, then historians have frequently shown themselves to be just as captivated. Indeed, that belief cast a long shadow over British maritime history, which initially embraced deterministic and nationalistic narratives seeking an explanation for Britain’s later naval and commercial dominance. These historians – whether consciously or not – embraced ideas of exceptionalism and a (usually anglocentric) national identity and destiny similar to that found in Richard II and ‘Rule, Britannia!’, often neglecting both the diversity and conflict that existed within Britain and the importance of relationships with other European nations and other peoples from around the globe. These assumptions obscured important questions about Britain and the sea. How much, and in what manner, did communities in these islands really engage with the maritime world in the early modern era? Was Britain’s transformation the result of a coherent maritime strategy, or a series of hesitant and halting steps? Most importantly, if we talk about a maritime nation in this period, just what ‘nation’ are we talking about?

Over the last two decades or so, scholars have begun to unpick the layers of myth and jingoism that previously subsumed this subject, and to question the received wisdom that surrounds it; there is now a remarkable profusion of new research that seeks to challenge those accepted notions about Britain’s maritime past. These new approaches are part of a wider trend to rethink the history of the sea. Researchers from a variety of disciplines have begun to identify oceans, voyages, and navies as fertile grounds for analysis, and as a result there are a number of approaches that now have a stake in defining the discipline of maritime history. The traditional focus on strategy,
operations, and technology is being supplemented with ground-breaking research. Recent scholarship has examined the relationship between the sea and constructions of identities (both national and gendered) as well as its impact on art, music, and popular culture. It has explored the social and cultural realities of life on board ship, the burgeoning communities that supported and depended upon seafaring, and the complex connections that existed between ship and shore. The history of ‘discovery’ has been replaced with one of ‘encounter’, focusing on moments of cultural exchange and the numerous incidents of violence and exploitation that came to define European imperialism. Perhaps most importantly, maritime history


has become firmly entwined with world and global history, most notably with the Atlantic and Indian Ocean ‘worlds’ that now have established historiographies of their own.13

In this book we seek to build upon this scholarship by exploring how Britain’s relationship with the sea changed across the early modern period; by investigating how the peoples of the British Isles came to be, and came to see themselves as, a maritime nation; and by considering what impact this had both on Britain and its connections to the wider world. We start with the opposite premise to Shakespeare and ‘Rule, Britannia!’: Britain’s transformation in these centuries was not a stately progress towards a preordained zenith, or the realisation of some innate national potential, but a messy, complicated, and disputed process, often driven by external influences. The essays published here do not pretend to offer a comprehensive discussion of this process, but instead represent new research into specific aspects of it, in order both to illuminate that bigger picture and to indicate the directions in which the maritime history of early modern Britain is now moving. In this introduction, we will briefly survey three core themes which unite the individual contributions of our authors, three ways in which Britain’s maritime world changed profoundly between the sixteenth and the

eighteenth centuries: the scope and scale of British seaborne activity; the efforts of the British government to control this activity; and the development of the idea of Britain as a maritime nation.

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Perhaps the most obvious change to Britain’s maritime world was its expansion, in terms of the quantity, frequency, and range of voyages which set out from Britain. Before the sixteenth century England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales traded primarily with nearby Europe, especially in wool and cloth to the markets of Flanders and northern France. Commodities from further afield reached these islands, but usually not in British ships. This situation transformed completely in the early modern period. Estimates of tonnage are quite imprecise, due to the available evidence, but there is no doubt that the number and size of British mercantile, fishing, and military vessels all increased during this period. Gary Baker and Craig Lambert provide a snapshot of the early stages of this growth in their chapter, providing a considerably higher level of precision than has previously been possible.

As their chapter shows, it was not just the volume of shipping but the variety and the distance of destinations which changed. The proportion of British commercial shipping engaged in long-distance trade doubled, while British fishermen expanded into the North Atlantic and the North Sea. In the course of the sixteenth century, English expeditions set out for


Africa, the Americas, the Mediterranean, and Russia. The first voyages to the Indian Ocean followed at the turn of the seventeenth century with the foundation of the East India Company, a response to the Dutch *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (Dutch East India Company). There were later Scottish initiatives to trade in Africa and settle in the Americas, although these met with variable success: the consequences of the most infamous disaster, the Company of Scotland's short-lived colony of Caledonia on the Gulf of Darien, contributed towards the 1707 Act of Union. However, Irish, Scottish, and Welsh sailors, merchants, soldiers, and colonists were to be found in 'English' ships, colonies, and trading posts in both the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans. These commercial and military voyages were the...
INTRODUCTION

essential basis for the development of British colonial and trading activities around the world. The Company of Scotland was not the only failure, and many travellers did not return, but the presence of British ships and seafarers nevertheless became steadily more established in many areas of the world, and by the eighteenth century what had once been exploratory trips had become regular trade routes. Similarly, while the primary purpose of the substantially increased Royal Navy's fleet may have been the defence of the British Isles and Ireland, naval squadrons had become a permanent presence in Mediterranean, American, and Indian waters by the end of our period.


took to the sea for a short time, while others spent their working lives as sailors, but in either case the expansion in British shipping brought them face to face with new experiences, challenges, and opportunities which their predecessors had not encountered. Cheryl Fury and Claire McLoughlin explore some of these in their contributions: respectively, the problems of discipline in East India Company ships, and the political and practical intricacies of Scottish trade with Spain during a period of Anglo-Spanish warfare. The ways in which seafarers, traders, and other travellers grappled with such challenges, and seized such opportunities, did much to shape Britain’s maritime world – though, as we have noted and as these chapters also show, not all were fortunate, few of these endeavours were entirely harmonious, and there were many who suffered among those who strove either to achieve or resist Britain’s imperial ambitions.23

This seafaring affected society in Britain on a wide scale. In her chapter, Elaine Murphy discusses how the British civil wars at sea impacted upon women, both the relatively small number who went to sea and the many more who stayed ashore but were engaged, in some form, in maritime activity. Murphy’s work reflects a growth in interest among maritime historians in both gender and the connection between seafaring and communities ashore, and seaborne activities certainly changed the lives of men and women across Britain and the world.24 Within Britain, several coastal or


riverine communities depended on their existence as ports, and developed distinct maritime districts. The largest and most famous was east London, a sprawl of wharfs, dockyards, warehouses, and seafarers’ homes. Stepney, the extensive parish stretching along the north bank of the Thames east of the Tower which encompassed much of this area, was as heavily populated as any town or city in Britain except for London itself, reflecting the importance of the maritime industry there.\textsuperscript{25} While London dominated British shipping, other major ports – Bristol, Cardiff, Dublin, Glasgow, Hull, Leith, Liverpool, Portsmouth, Swansea, and many more – had a considerable social and economic impact on their hinterlands and more widely as nodal points which linked the regions of Britain to each other and to the world. Indeed, regardless of where they stepped aboard ship, seafarers came from all across Britain, and they played a key role in disseminating the results of their labours at sea to their families and acquaintances ashore.

These results were multifarious, and both direct and indirect. Sailors’ incomes, from wages and from trade, were important to their families and the port districts where these incomes were spent, as part of familial and communal ‘makeshift economies’.\textsuperscript{26} The cargoes that sailors brought
to Britain, as Beverly Lemire has shown, impacted on all levels of society, as expensive commodities satisfied the desires of the elite while cheaper goods circulated among the seafarers’ own plebeian networks. Tobacco from North America brought not only a new and intoxicating substance for consumption, but also new social behaviours and cultural expectations, as well as a whole new industry of pipe-making. Textiles from India and elsewhere changed the clothes worn by workers and the wealthy alike. In her contribution here, Meredith Greiling discusses how other kinds of social practice were also transmitted by sea: the cultural and religious links between Scotland and northern Europe ran deep and remained profound throughout this period.

The expansion of British seaborne activity, then, brought change to Britain, and to the many places where British seafarers travelled, sometimes to trade, sometimes to invade. This change should therefore not simply be seen, as it often has been, as a move outwards, an exporting of British endeavours. On the contrary, it was a fundamentally two-way phenomenon, and a dynamic one, as the initially disparate strands of seafaring became increasingly coordinated. This activity therefore brought not only social, economic, and material changes to Britain, but political change as well.

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Trade had been important to the monarchs of England and Scotland for centuries before the early modern period, due to both its impact on the economic wellbeing of their realm and the more direct implications for their own finances. Customs on imports and exports were a key part of royal income, and as trade expanded and as governance became a more expensive undertaking, so the importance of customs revenue increased. The rulers of early modern Britain therefore took a direct interest in the commerce of their subjects, and issued a range of regulations governing

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what they could trade, with whom, and how much tax to pay on it.²⁸ In
other ways, too, the sea mattered to these monarchs, principally for its
military significance. For medieval English kings, the ‘narrow seas’ linked
their possessions in Europe with their realm in the British Isles, while for
both Scottish and English monarchs the ability to move forces by sea, and to
defend their own shores, were critically important, and this too intensified
in the early modern period.²⁹ From the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries,
England and Scotland fought repeated wars with their European neighbours
and – until 1603 – with each other, and most of these conflicts took place
at sea, or involved travel by ship.³⁰

In this same period occurred what some scholars have called a ‘military
revolution’, an expansion of military force requiring more expenditure and
more bureaucracy, thus driving the formation of more powerful states.
Although naval developments were initially overlooked, several historians
have since argued that the institutional, technical, and financial require-
ments of early modern navies were just as important to this phenomenon
as was warfare ashore, if not more so.³¹ In a sense, then, early modern

²⁸ Davis, English Shipping Industry, Chapter 14; Michael J. Braddick, The Nerves of State: Taxation and
the Financing of the English State, 1558-1714 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996),
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Papers, 91/05 (2005), pp. 15-19.

²⁹ Susan Rose, Medieval Naval Warfare, 1000-1500 (London: Routledge, 2002); Susan Rose,

³⁰ For narrative accounts of naval conflict in the early modern period involving England and
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and State Formation (Berlin: Lit, 2012); Richard Harding, Modern Naval History: Debates and
Britain became a ‘fiscal-naval state’, as Patrick O’Brien and N. A. M. Rodger have argued. The navy was often the largest single item of government expenditure, entailing both rising taxation and the apparatus to collect and disburse those funds and to organise naval activity. A permanent naval administration was founded towards the end of Henry VIII’s reign, and the admiralty grew in size and influence to become a major department of state by the early eighteenth century.

The impact of the navy and the maritime world on British politics has rarely received the attention it deserves outside of specialists in the field. In both England and Scotland, the state-orchestrated Protestant reformations relied upon naval forces to protect the realm from Catholic and other foes, not only in the famous Armada campaign of 1588 but throughout the sixteenth century. A few decades later, Charles I’s failed foreign policy during the 1620s, including humiliating naval defeats, contributed to the crisis of his reign. Parliament’s control of the navy during the civil wars that erupted from this crisis was key to their eventual victory over the king, and to the success of the subsequent Commonwealth governments in defending themselves from internal and external threats, and in subjugating Scotland and Ireland. The role played by the navy was pivotal at several moments in 1659–60, leading to
the restoration of Charles II, and again in 1688–89, when his brother James VII and II was overthrown in favour of James’s daughter Mary and her husband William III; it also played a key defensive role throughout the reigns of Charles, William and Mary, Mary’s sister Anne, and their Hanoverian successors. To a considerable degree, both through its routine activity and its revolutionary actions, the navy shaped the British state that emerged during this period. Moreover, while the state became more powerful within Britain, with the navy both requiring this power and reinforcing it, the expansion of Britain’s colonial and commercial interests created a wider imperial network in which the state was embedded. The growth of the British state and the first phases of the British empire were coeval and concomitant.

Throughout this period, but especially in the earlier stages, both naval mobilisation in Britain and Europe and the imperial activity beyond it involved partnerships between the crown and its subjects. Naval administrators depended heavily on private finance, private suppliers, and privateers – and often the men running the navy were also investors in these enterprises. While this led to accusations of corruption, by contemporaries and historians, it was the only way any early modern state could effectively harness the available resources. In the same way, the crown was initially


a co-investor in early voyages across the Atlantic or to the Indian Ocean, without any close control over them; in Elizabeth I’s case, at least, this was to preserve plausible deniability in the face of protests from Spain and Portugal, who claimed an exclusive sovereignty over those oceans. Bernhard Klein’s chapter in this volume examines one example of these hybrid endeavours, the sixteenth-century voyages to West Africa, while Fury’s, already mentioned, deals with another in discussing the East India Company. Monopolistic corporations like the East India Company, as well as the various colonial administrations, allowed the crown to delegate certain powers to groups of merchants, investors, and colonists: not only the authority to pursue trade or to colonise, and to exclude competitors, but also to establish and implement law, and to wage wars. These companies and colonies allied and fought with African, American, and Indian rulers; they employed thousands of workers and migrants from Britain, Europe, and elsewhere in the world; and they were instrumental in Britain’s expanding role in the transatlantic slave trade. Like the navy, they also had an impact on domestic politics. The state within Britain and the early British empire,
therefore, are best conceptualised together as an essentially composite organisation, comprising many agendas and interests.

Yet, over the early modern period, this organisation became increasingly coordinated. As Alan James argues in his chapter on the writings of Walter Ralegh, and as noted briefly above, this has often been retrospectively interpreted as the first stirrings of a later age of imperial power, and it is important for us to avoid such anachronism, to eschew the Whig narratives which originated in the nineteenth century and assumed parliamentary and naval supremacy were Britain's birth-right. Early modern attempts to express a naval ideology, like Ralegh's, were contingent on current political circumstances and also on the authors' personal career, rather than expressing any maritime national 'spirit'. Nevertheless, Britain's rulers did seek to exert more control over their seafaring subjects and were increasingly successful in this design. Whereas Tudor and early Stuart monarchs had possessed some ambitions along these lines, only with the turmoil of the mid-seventeenth century did there emerge a government with both the will and the capability to pursue a more aggressive policy. The Navigation Act of 1651, reissued by Charles II in 1660 and again later, was a specific measure intended to challenge Dutch trading success, but it also encapsulated a vision of a joined-up maritime empire under the direction of the central government: initially an English one which sought to exclude everyone else, but becoming more British over time. A similar vision is apparent in the measures taken later in the seventeenth century, and early in the eighteenth, to force Britain's American colonies to accept new and more restrictive definitions of privateering, and to suppress piracy. In both cases


these measures provoked resistance, evasion, and conflict, but even with their limitations they represent some realisation of the British government’s ambitions. Those ambitions rested on a new perspective on Britain: the idea that it was a maritime nation.

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We argued at the beginning of this introduction that Britain did not begin the early modern period as a quintessentially maritime nation, or with a widespread perception that it was one. Only with the economic, social, and political developments outlined above did this ‘maritime-ness’ appear, and it brought with it not just a growing belief that Britain was inherently maritime, but that this was a preordained and natural state of affairs. This shift occurred on several interconnected levels. The political agenda and legitimacy of Britain’s rulers was underpinned by claims that they were sovereigns over the ‘British seas’, a maritime region of indeterminate but implicitly capacious extent. Initially these represented separate, and sometimes competing, English and Scottish claims, but with the Stuart dynasty these were fused, and infused with the more direct Scottish approach. As Rebecca Bailey discusses in her chapter, Charles I took particular interest in enforcing this sovereignty, both in practical naval strength through the ‘Ship Money’ fleets, and in the popular representation of this activity in printed and material culture. In the same way as Shakespeare had, and ‘Rule Britannia!’ later would, Charles and his supporters appealed to history for precedents, such as King Edgar, supposedly master of a grand Saxon navy. Edgar appeared alongside many other historical examples in legal texts and poems which asserted the king’s claims, and more prominently as the figurehead of the king’s grandly decorated new flagship, the Sovereign of the Seas. The inter-regnum governments, after they had overthrown Charles I, upheld the same principles of sovereignty, and they were embraced again by Charles II after his restoration to the throne. In the later seventeenth century, as Philippa (2014), pp. 37-66; Mark Hanna, Pirate Nests and the Rise of the British Empire, 1570-1740 (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Rebecca A. Simon, The Problem and Potential of Piracy: Legal Changes and Emerging Ideas of Colonial Autonomy in the Early Modern British Atlantic, 1670-1730, Journal for Maritime Research, 18 (2016), pp. 123-37.

44 Fulton, Sovereignty of the Sea, Chapters 1-5; David Armitage, ‘The Empire of the Seas, 1576-1689’, in Armitage, Ideological Origins, pp.100-24 (pp. 105-8).

45 Important legal texts originally written in Charles I’s reign were printed during the 1650s: John Borough, The Soveraignty of the British Seas (London, 1651); John Selden, Of the Dominion, Or, Ownership of the Sea, trans. by Marchmont Nedham (London, 1652). There were also several
Hellawell shows in her contribution to this volume, these ideas of sovereignty also featured in the burgeoning scientific discussions coalescing around the Royal Society. Understanding of the natural world was positioned as a vital resource for enhancing the king’s sovereignty over the sea.

Beyond the person and power of the monarch, the idea of Britain as a maritime nation developed a distinct personality, though never far detached from the ruling dynasty. Where Shakespeare had referred to England alone, and pictured it as a ‘fortress’ and a ‘precious stone’, other contemporary writers adopted the Latin name ‘Britannia’, with increasingly maritime connotations. John Dee’s *General and Rare Memorials Pertayning to the Perfect Arte of Navigation*, published in 1577, portrays on its frontispiece two female figures beseeching Elizabeth for her naval protection. For Dee, this concept remained closely associated with the queen: he was among the first to write of a ‘British empire’, by which he meant a universal Tudor monarchy across Britain and Ireland, and he also penned treatises supporting the queen’s claims to maritime sovereignty. In reality a British monarchy came not with the Tudors but their Scottish Stuart successors, and Britannia remained a recurring icon. Anthony Munday described how the pageants welcoming James VI and I to London in 1603 began first with ‘The Shippe called the *Royall Exchange*’, and then featured ‘a Fayre and beautifull Nymph, Britannia hirselfe’, standing upon ‘a Mount triangular, as the Island of Britayne it selfe is described to bee’. Bailey, in her chapter, discusses the masque *Britannia Triumphans* in which Charles I himself played the leading role of ‘Britanocles’ when it was performed at court in 1638. The reign of his son, in

later writers on the same subject, who again often emphasised historical precedents, such as Robert Codrington, *His Majesties Propriety, and Dominion on the British Seas Asserted* (London, 1665), and John Evelyn, *Navigation and Commerce, Their Original and Progress* (London, 1674). See also Capp, *Cromwell’s Navy*, pp. 75-6, 83-5; Davies, *Kings of the Sea*, Chapter 8.


1672, saw Britannia first appear on English coins, on the low denomination of farthing, therefore circulating to all levels of society. The same figure appeared on coinage throughout most subsequent reigns and, by the end of the eighteenth century, had acquired a trident (as well as songs about ruling the waves), thus intensifying the maritime association.\(^{50}\)

Yet it was not just Britain, whether through its monarch or by itself, that was inherently maritime: it was increasingly believed that British people were natural seafarers too. This is particularly clear in the way that seafaring characters became commonplace in British culture. Claire Jowitt, in her chapter, explores the important role that the figure of the sea captain played in Elizabethan drama, just as she has previously examined how pirates were used both dramatically and politically in literature during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.\(^{51}\) Colloquial stereotypes and terms for sailors like ‘tarpaulin’ and ‘Jack Tar’ appeared for the first time in the later seventeenth century, and acquired considerable importance thereafter.\(^{52}\) Similarly, innumerable ballads about sailors and sea-travel circulated across the seventeenth century, celebrating the connections between seafarers, the navy, and the nation, a triumvirate which became ever more popular in the eighteenth century.\(^{53}\) The experience of naval or imperial service and

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\(^{50}\) For an example of the 1672 farthing see British Museum object number 1926.0817.164; on the development of this imagery more generally, see Katharine Eustace, *Britannia: Icon on the Coin* (London: Royal Mint Museum, 2016).


travel, by bringing together ever greater numbers of people from all over the British archipelago, also played an important role in developing a sense of ‘Britishness’ at multiple social levels, even while this did not subsume or obliterate local, regional, or distinct national identities. Just as British people increasingly travelled by sea, or encountered objects that had done so, they were ever more likely to perceive the sea, seafaring, the navy, and the empire as central parts of British national life.

Even with this burgeoning nationalist culture, the idea of Britain, its rulers, and its people as inherently and distinctively maritime was profoundly shaped by international interaction. British discussions of seapower, as Alan James demonstrates in his chapter, were developed in response to European ideas: even claims to British maritime sovereignty were most often a riposte to Dutch, French, Portuguese, and Spanish writers – countries with whom Britain was both a trading partner and an imperial rival. The fact that British writers moderated such claims from 1689 onwards out of deference to their new Dutch king shows just how much ideas about Britain's maritime world were influenced by both the domestic and the international context. Moreover, as Bailey discusses in her chapter, Charles I’s critics also adopted maritime topics and tropes, revealing the deep fissures that existed within the British political system.

Despite the best efforts of the government to prevent it, many British subjects served other empires, even in wars against Britain, while foreign sailors worked on British ships, naval and commercial, so that the cultural trope of British ‘tars’ must be set beside the much more complex reality of


56 For example Philip Meadows, *Observations Concerning the Dominion and Sovereignty of the Seas* (London, 1689).
an international labour market. Several historians have emphasised that British identity was defined through interaction with certain imagined or encountered ‘others’, whether national, racial, or religious, and often from a position of vulnerability and fear rather than imperial dominance. Other scholars, meanwhile, have highlighted the coexistence of (and sometimes conflict between) multiple layers of localised, cultural, and ethnic identities that could cut across imperial boundaries. Britain’s rulers and peoples may


have begun to appear and to think of themselves as British and as naturally and uniquely maritime, but only through continuous and contentious dialogues with each other and with the rest of the world.

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It is an exciting time to be a scholar of maritime history. Not only is there a vibrant research culture which extends beyond the confines of any particular field or discipline, there is a growing recognition that this subject has the potential to escape the narrow parameters which have previously dogged it, and with which it is still often caricatured. The story of human society’s relationship with the sea has much to tell us about the global past, and the global present.60 This is true of the maritime world of early modern Britain, just as it is of other maritime histories. The changes we have summarised briefly in this introduction, and which are explored in more detail in the following pages, transformed Britain and its place in the world. They changed the connections between Britain and other places and regions, through trade and empire, with both productive and destructive results. They changed the political structure in Britain and its empire, shifting the balance of power towards certain institutions (the crown and parliament) while also increasing the importance of some interest groups (primarily overseas merchants). They changed the very idea of what Britain is, and of what it is to be British.

They have also left us with a paradox. The well-established idea of maritime Britain with which we began, and which still persists today, emphasizes isolation, exceptionalism, and domination. The reality of Britain’s maritime world, as it emerged across the early modern period, reveals a picture of connection, exchange, and interdependence. We hope that our book will contribute further to unearthing – or, in a more suitable metaphor, dredging up – this historical reality.
