# Shiver My Timbers: Images, Objects and Ideas in the Popular Culture of Seafaring

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*Résumé*

*La mer constitue un environnement vaste et influent et l'interaction que les êtres humains ont eue avec elle a produit une culture maritime particulière. En Occident, cette culture a à son tour donné naissance à un répertoire distinct d'images, d'objets et d'idées populaires qui font régulièrement surface et se répandent dans les médias et sur le marché. Cet article offre un libre examen de certains des aspects les plus notables de la culture maritime populaire et présente des arguments en faveur de l'intégration de la culture populaire aux collections contemporaines du patrimoine maritime. En fait, étant donné que les sociétés occidentales sont de plus en plus étrangères à la vie et au travail en mer, dans une certaine mesure, la culture populaire maritime est devenue la culture maritime pertinente, servant d'intermédiaire pour les perceptions populaires du passé tout en étant elle-même un important témoignage de la culture matérielle.*

*Abstract*

*The sea constitutes a vast and influential environment, and human interaction with it has produced a special maritime culture. In the Western world, this maritime culture has, in turn, generated a distinct catalogue of popular, recurrent images, objects and ideas that permeate the media and the marketplace. This paper offers an informal examination of some of the most notable aspects of maritime popular culture and argues the case for including popular culture within contemporary collections of maritime heritage. Indeed, with Western nations becoming increasingly alienated from life and work at sea, maritime popular culture has to some extent become the relevant maritime culture, serving as both a mediator of popular perceptions of the past, and as an important material-culture record in its own right.*

Approximately seventy-one percent of the earth's surface is covered by salt water. What we refer to simply as "the sea" constitutes a vast, complex and important ecosystem, one that is generally considered to be the cradle of life. We also know of the profound influence that the oceans have upon our climate and weather. Socially speaking, there is something universal in the appeal, mixed with awe, which all large bodies of water hold for human beings. For many people, and this is especially true of Canadians, annual holidays often involve some form of pilgrimage to the water, be it the lake that borders the family cottage, the river one will explore by canoe, or the ocean beach that serves as the focus of so many resorts. Similarly, port cities have about them a special atmosphere,

a fact famously celebrated by Melville in the opening chapter of *Moby Dick*. One can literally smell, feel and taste the presence of the sea, just as one can often identify the special energy that port cities, as junctions of international exchange, provide. All in all, the marine environment constitutes a very special place and so, not surprisingly, human interaction with it has produced a special culture.

In the Western world, this special culture — what one might call maritime culture — has generated a distinct catalogue of popular, recurrent images, objects and ideas that transcend language and learning, and permeate the media, the marketplace and our built environment. In an article entitled "The Case for Kitsch: Popular/Commercial Arts as a Reservoir

of Traditional Culture and Human Values" Alan Gowans has argued that the popular and commercial arts "now appear to present a dynamic, rich foundation for a vital material culture in touch with past and future alike."[1] While Gowans is here engaged in a larger endeavour, that of asserting the primacy of the popular, commercial arts as "the arts of our time, in the traditional sense of the word, 'art',"[2] in so doing he makes a compelling argument for the importance of popular culture and kitsch in our society, noting that "popular/commercial arts, including here material culture, are the means by which traditional attitudes and values are transmitted from one generation to another."[3] He also makes the point that historical consciousness, "a sense of the past," is conveyed

> in part, through historical museums; but far more through movies, television, plays, period furniture, Disneyland and the like, not excluding displays in department stores (which have influenced museum techniques a good deal).[4]

To those working in the museum world today, this statement will come as no new revelation. Indeed, for many years now museums have been preoccupied with learning and applying communication techniques adopted, in whole or in part, from the media and indeed from Disneyland.[5] Yet while the virtues of adopting popular interpretive approaches to formal exhibitions may seem obvious enough to many, Gowans' argument ultimately extends to the contents of museum collections.[6] The purpose of this study, therefore, is to consider the nature and place of popular culture as both subject and object in maritime museums.[7]

Maritime popular culture is dominated by a relatively small number of items which reappear with striking frequency. Indeed, a core sample of images, objects and ideas can usually be found, in whole or in part, wherever it is advantageous to evoke a romantic association with the sea, be it at waterfront tourist venues, seafood markets, restaurants, and last but not least, maritime museum gift shops. Even a brief, selective account of the most common recurrent images, objects and ideas strongly suggests a particular pattern of emphasis. As one might expect, this pattern ultimately proves to be a limited source of formal understanding about maritime history per se, while revealing a great deal about how the history of seafaring is perceived in the popular imagination. Simply to recognize this difference, however, is not

sufficient. In taking its measure, we ought also to consider the state of Western seafaring today, the particular circumstances of which, as I will argue, imbue maritime popular culture with additional significance.

Before attempting to define and explore this subject further, it may be useful to establish a contextual framework in the form of a basic anatomy of maritime heritage and material culture. I will limit this framework to the three most prominent subjects found in maritime museums and historic sites: ships, sailors and shore services. In part, this will serve as a brief introduction and orientation. However, equally important, it may also provide some indication of the connection between the formal heritage found in museums and the popular culture of the media and marketplace, for some general appreciation of the former is required if we are to begin to understand the essential nature of the latter.

The heart and soul of maritime history and heritage is the ship. Why this is so is best explained by the simple fact that the ship was and is the principal medium by which human beings experience the sea. Moreover, for many centuries ships were the largest and most complex of human creations. They were also among the most important, whether in war, commerce or simply as a way for moving people and goods from one place to another. Before the invention of aircraft, ships served as an essential bridge between continents and countries; they were the primary instrument by which humanity first discovered the extent and diversity of the world. The significance of the ship as an essential means to important human ends naturally made it the focus of considerable technological development, a fact which is manifest in a general increase in size, power and sophistication. This development became particularly acute beginning in the nineteenth century with the introduction of mechanical propulsion and metal hulls.

In addition to their obvious utility, power and presence, ships are also a common element in important and poignant social transitions such as exploration, emigration, deportation, and homecomings. It is, therefore, no surprise that ships and seafaring figure so prominently in the Western mytho-poetic tradition: Homer's *Odyssey*, the Biblical story of Noah, the Norse Sagas, and the Irish *Imrama* are among the more obvious examples. In modern times, perhaps the most common and vivid remnant of the mytho-poetic, almost religious, dimension of ships can

be found in the ship-launching ceremony. This small drama, performed by specially selected dignitaries before an assembled crowd, is the technological equivalent of a baptism, involving speeches, presentations, a benediction and a climactic christening to mark the new vessel's introduction to the sea. Thus, above and beyond their quantifiable size, form and value — social, economic and political — ships have traditionally been imbued with a certain mystic grandeur; and societies that build or are otherwise dependent upon ships usually celebrate this association through ritual, art and material culture. Yet, notwithstanding the range and richness of the subject, when we consider the ship in popular culture, as we will shortly, we find reflected an oddly fragmented image in which a particular historic period, and certain specific technologies, dominate the picture, obscuring in the process the many details and great variety inherent in its history.

This brings us to the people most closely associated with ships: namely sailors. Among Western nations, sailors are part of a very old profession which has, over time, accumulated a wealth of distinguishing characteristics, qualities and attributes. This includes such things as costume, folklore and leisure (crafts and song), ritual, speech, social habits, instruments and tools. There are, naturally enough, notable national and regional variants of this culture though these may be thought of as branches arising from a common trunk of technology and experience. In short, the history and heritage of the mariner — Jack Tar to use a common English rubric — represents a vast, multi-faceted subject, one which, given the rise in social history, has proven a rich seam of material for research. For our purposes, it is sufficient to note here that one of the salient results of this scholarship has been to reveal the weaknesses and limitations of any one stereotype. Still, as we will see, two specific historical incarnations of the mariner have taken on a life of their own and now, with the help of advertising and the media, enjoy a special prominence in a world of popular recognition and association.

The third and final element in this quick profile of maritime heritage is what I will call here shore services. This encompasses both architecture and technology, such as lighthouses, life-saving stations, wharves, shipyards, chandleries and warehouses, as well as economic and social institutions from taverns and brothels to schools, hospices, hospitals, brokerages and company offices, all specially developed for and devoted to seafaring and shipping. The place of the ship at the centre of maritime heritage — already noted — is apparent in the emphasis one finds in many museums towards those institutions, like shipyards, shipping companies and lighthouses, that produced or served ships directly. Generally speaking, many of those services that were connected to the social and economic aspects of seafaring have a lower profile, or perhaps have proven more difficult to present to a family audience, and so have traditionally received less attention by those responsible for maritime heritage preservation. In many cases they have been relegated to a supporting role, or have been the subject of temporary exhibits.

This, then, is an overview of three pillars of maritime heritage. By and large, these three areas represent the focus of institutional investment for most maritime museums, in real and intellectual terms. Not surprisingly, they also provide the essential elements from which most of the images, objects and ideas of maritime popular culture are derived, and in relation to which they may be examined and better understood.

The small catalogue of popular items that follows is neither comprehensive in scope, nor developed from a formally structured investigation. Instead, it is the result of informed observations and documentation undertaken over a number of years by a professional curator of maritime history and technology. In today's climate of heightened accountability, curators are increasingly mindful of the general public's understanding and expectations regarding their subject areas. The world of popular culture is one obvious place to look for clues and insight, and the present effort, however limited, is the result of my exploration of this dynamic realm. The catalogue is made up of examples drawn from a wide range of printed publications, the general marketplace, and visits to various waterfront developments in Canada.

My reading of these images and objects is admittedly personal, but it is enriched by my professional knowledge and experience, including visits to various maritime museums and historic waterfronts in Europe and North America, and by my engagement with individuals and communities that were once, or are still, connected to life and work at sea. There is certainly room for alternative interpretations and it is hoped that this paper will inspire further thought and discussion. Formal research into the actual conceptual origins and commercial success of the images and objects

discussed remains to be done, but it should be noted that many of the items mentioned here are either logos or have otherwise gained prominent exposure though simple longevity.

For the purposes of the present exercise, my primary interest was in identifying patterns of emphasis among the many examples gathered and these emerged fairly readily. Thus, informal though it may be, this selection of maritime popular culture is, I would argue, representative. It reflects both the wide range of commercial applications and contexts, and the concentration of images and ideas around a few salient themes. Viewed as a whole, the effect is not unlike looking into a carnival mirror: a bright surface where one recognizes the essential contour and colour of the subject and finds, beyond the humourous exaggeration of certain features, some essential insight or meaning.

## Looking in the Mirror: Ships

In the maritime world reflected by the shiny surface of popular culture, one vessel type dominates: the square-rigged, multi-masted sailing ship now widely referred to as simply the "tall ship." Indeed, even the term "tall ship" is itself a product of popular culture. Meaningless in nautical tradition, the usage apparently originated in advertising aimed at promoting the bi-centenary gathering of large sail-training ships in New York in 1976 (OpSail '76).[8] Whatever its origin, the enthusiastic use of the term has only served to reinforce the popular association between one specific ship type — or, more accurately, a rough facsimile of this type — and the infinitely more complex history of Western shipping. Here, as with all of the popular maritime images, the examples cited are but a salient selection.

It is curious to note the variety of products wherein the image of the "tall ship" serves as a product icon. Of the many examples, some are certainly more intuitively logical than others; for example, beer. The tall ship has served as a feature in advertising for the German brewer "Beck's" where the text notes that Beck's is the leading import beer from Germany (the ship as symbol of international trade) and the catch phrase is the common affirmation of good fortune: "your ship's come in." North American beer drinkers will also recognize the tall ship's presence on the label of Molson's *Export* beer (again an evocation of international trade) sold by the venerable Canadian brewer. Here the ship is clearly intended to suggest an exotic



*Fig. 1*
*Sidewalk sign employing the familiar* Molson's Export *tall-ship logo*
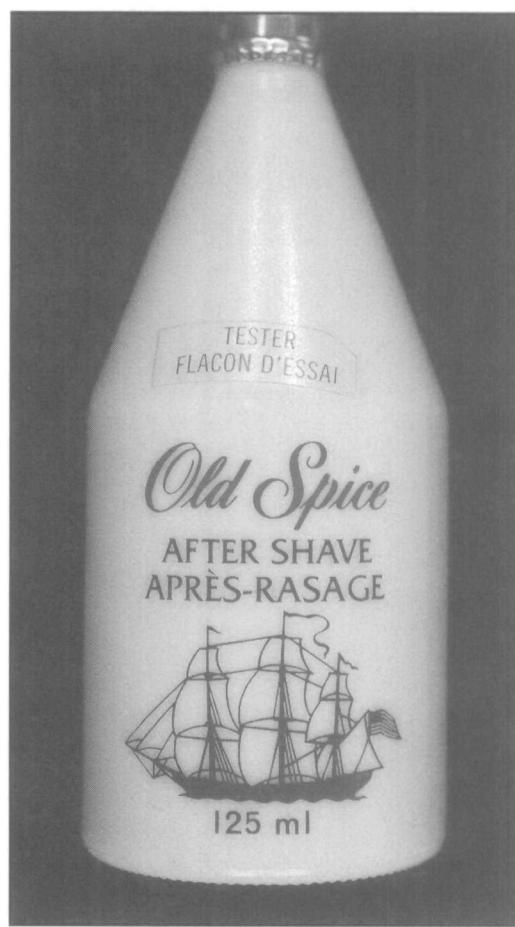


*Fig. 2*
*A "vintage" bottle of* Old Spice *aftershave*

product shipped from a foreign land and — like the tea of the great clipper ship epoch — one highly valued in a competitive market. The fact that this is a brand sold largely in North America and, therefore, transported today primarily by modern semi-trailer truck, does little to lessen the inherent power of the image and its historic associations.

It might also be said that any brewery's use of the image of the tall ship has a gender-specific appeal, in so far as social beer drinking has traditionally been a part of male-bonding celebrations such as may be associated, in the popular imagination, with the predominantly male society found at sea. Whether or not this was part of Beck's and Molson's marketing strategies, the tall ship was certainly significant in the promotion of *Old Spice* male toiletries. Effectively mass marketing aftershave, scented soap and other such soft luxuries to men was, at least in the 1970s, very much an issue of mind over matter. Men were at once encouraged to clean and decorate themselves — to soften and scent their natures — with a particular product, the packaging and presentation of which was associated directly with the rugged, self-reliant maleness of the sailor. The message, in short, was that tough guys could also smell good (the same guiding principle also drove the promotion, more amusingly, of the popular 70s *High Karate* brand of toiletries). In addition to adopting the historically resonant tall ship as its long-time logo (now updated to the silhouette of a racing yacht), *Old Spice* took this obvious maritime association one step further. It applied the image of the tall ship to a trademark decanter that by its simple, white, ceramic appearance

suggests the bottles used for medicines aboard sailing ships in centuries past. Finally, there is the brand name itself, which clearly alludes to one of the great, historic inspirations for seafaring: the search for spice.

Of course, trading spice was only a means to an end, namely making money. In this respect, it may not seem so surprising that an investment management firm such as Connor Clark might also choose the tall ship as a promotional image. The use appears slightly more nuanced, however, when the accompanying banner text is read: "This Way to Superior Portfolio Performance." At first glance, the square-rigged sailing ship would seem an unlikely image of "superior performance" at least when compared to such modern conveyances as jet aircraft. However, further reading shows a deliberate effort to engage potential customers in an extended maritime metaphor, one where "clear sailing" is contrasted with "rough patches of monetary restraint and...sudden market squalls," against which the company offers a "steady investment course" over the long term. Clearly, then, the allure is essentially conservative and the tall ship represents a cautious — or to use a nautical phrase, "steady-as-she-goes" — approach in deliberate contrast to riskier, get-rich-quick schemes.

A subset — or perhaps an abbreviated form — of the tall ship can be found in the common use of specific technologies associated with large sailing ships, most notably the ship's wheel and the anchor; the means by which it is, respectively, steered and stopped. Although wheels have been used to steer ships for most of the last 300 years and the anchor has ancient origins, the actual technologies used, adapted and stylized in popular culture are predominantly those most closely associated with the "great age of sail."[9] This means ships' wheels made of wood, reinforced with brass, and characterized by spokes and protruding handles. As for the anchors, they are usually of a sort known formally as the standard, fisherman's or admiralty anchor, characterized by large flukes. The popular adaptation and commercial use of anchors and ships' wheels is arguably more numerous and varied than the image of the tall ship itself.

Examples for the anchor range from clothing, "J. G. Hook," to the cruise line, "Royal Caribbean," to the official tourism logo for the state of Rhode Island. More generally, the anchor is usually applied to any item wherein a nautical association is desired, for example on a child's

*Fig. 3*
*A small, classic ship's wheel as double-door handle, Sidney, B.C.*

cap or a brass bottle opener target-marketed to the yachtsman. The same is also true for the ship's wheel, with perhaps the best known example of this particular nautical association, at least among millions of Web users, being the Internet provider "Netscape." Moving from image to functional object, real and replica ships' wheels are commonly used as props and decoration in seafood restaurants (just as it is common to find anchors used as a form of public art wherever a nautical association is deemed appropriate). In one observed instance, the classic ship's wheel was divided down the middle and thereby used, rather ingeniously, as the handles on a set of double doors. Indeed, any trip to a seaside tourist community will provide the casual observer with numerous examples of this phenomenon. What is perhaps less obvious, but important to this discussion, is the predominance of nautical references of a particular type and time.

## Looking in the Mirror: Sailors

Historically speaking, the mariner's working appearance was characterized by variety — influenced by regional traditions and conditions — and, outside the Navy or passenger service, practical irregularity. This may come as a surprise, since references to the seafaring profession no doubt conjure certain specific images and ideas. Not surprisingly, most of these, when considered, prove to be firmly based in popular culture and come readily to mind in large measure as a result of their being recycled regularly, with slight variation, by the media and the commercial arts. Above all, two types dominate: the pirate and what I will call here simply, "The Captain."

Of course, it is hardly original to note that irony (as often as not unintentional) is a prominent feature of modern advertising. In the case of the pirate in popular culture, the irony generated by the distance between historical reality and popular usage is particularly acute. Here it bears remembering that piracy on the high seas remains, even today, a very serious problem and pirates are unequivocally a very menacing, ruthless and deadly threat.[10] Historically speaking, the image of the pirate is no less ugly, though time, national politics and popular literature and entertainment have naturally allowed for a certain romanticism to influence our perceptions.[11] Even given the general hardships and brutality of life during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries —
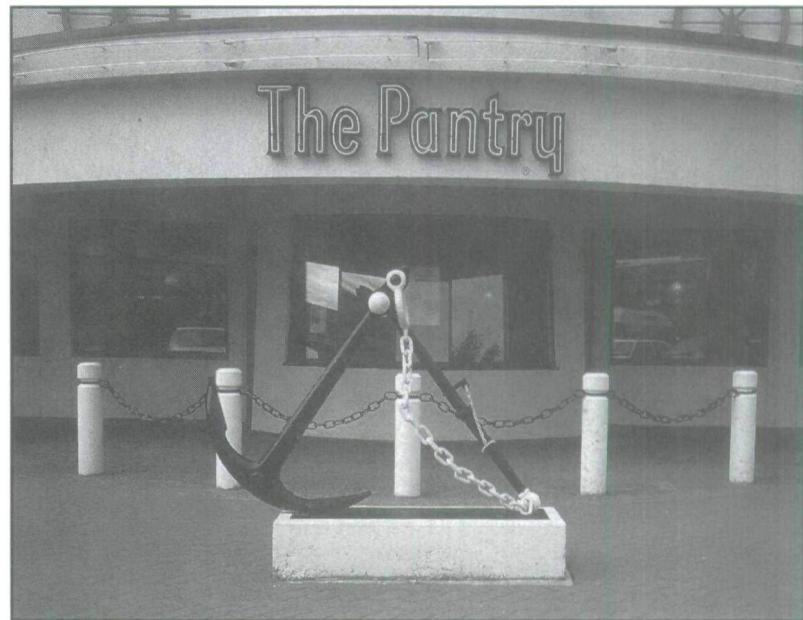
the period from which most of our historical accounts, legends and popular ideas of piracy stem — the acts and ends of piracy managed to stand out, albeit fuelled by authorities anxious to underline the threat to civil order and to alienate the pirate from humanity. Perhaps the alienation from society was mutually reinforcing, but without doubt pirates lived in a world characterized by extreme violence, so much so that the average mariner, who hardly lived a life of comfort and personal liberty at sea, had good reason to fear them.

Reflected in the mirror of popular culture, however, the pirate image has shed almost all of its menace, leaving only the romance and attractive machismo. Rum drinkers will easily recognize the brand name of *Captain Morgan* and his commercial image as a dashing, handsome, man's man dressed in period costume. Less well known to many will be the role of the real historical Captain Henry Morgan. Captain (later Sir Henry) Morgan was a buccaneer based in Jamaica, who led an international band of pirates in a series of celebrated (by Morgan's countrymen at least) plundering raids, as part of a semi-official extension of England's attempt to challenge Spanish power in the Caribbean. While his cunning, courage and effective leadership rightly deserve recognition, the morality of his efforts and objectives were dubious even in the shadowy context of seventeenth century politics and war. And while the historical portrait of the real Captain Morgan is not as clear as we might wish, the existing record indicates that his excessive drinking was

*Fig 4*
*Ship's anchor as parking-lot sculpture, Mariner Village Mall, Sidney, B.C.*

obvious even among his contemporaries, an irony either lost on, or ignored by, the distillers of the brand of rum that bears his name.[12]

While such a romantic, highly selective use of history is hardly unusual in the world of advertising and promotion, in the case of the pirate in popular culture, the extent to which this figure has been transformed is truly striking. One especially notable example is an illustrated printed advertisement for *Club Med* that depicts a passionate encounter on a tropical island between a man dressed as a buccaneer (albeit a very well-groomed one) and a woman with a full mane of blonde hair, and a simple, loose barmaid's blouse. The illustration style is
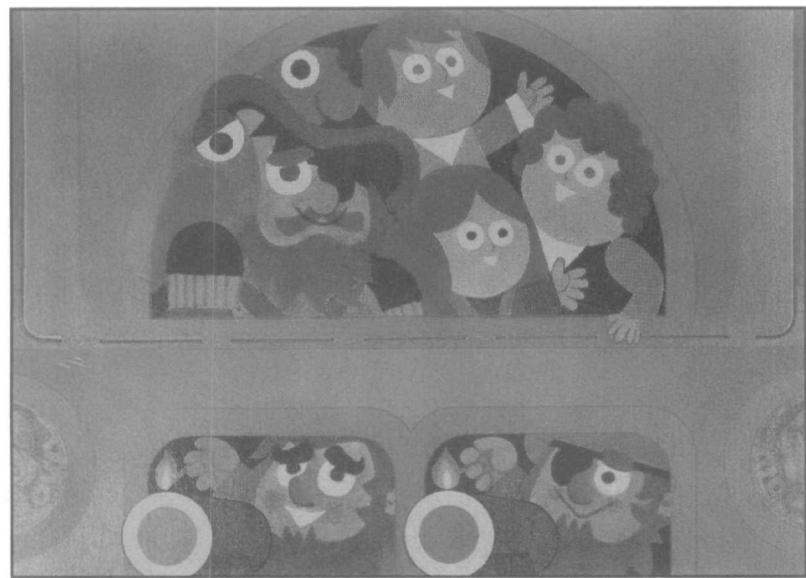
of the sort that is usually associated with romance paperbacks. While admittedly some of the more obvious signature pirate elements are missing from this scene — patch, parrot, bandana — the accompanying text propels the irony of even this mild pirate association to a level beyond that of *Captain Morgan's* rum. Here, we read the line: "If only the real world were this real." One can only hope that the writers of this ad copy were not thinking of the real historical world of pirates, for to do so might well encourage a gross misreading of the degree of consent depicted, which, in the context of the product on offer (highly social holiday getaways) is surely very far removed from the intended allure. But perhaps nowhere is the transformation of the pirate image more flagrant than in its use in the marketing of products to children. Notable examples are the *LEGO*™ pirate figures — itself a small micro-reservoir of popular pirate references — and the use of pirate culture in the promotion of children's fast food by the Canadian restaurant chain *White Spot*. In this latter instance, a standard combination meal is presented under the title "Pirate Pack" and delivered in a cardboard ship richly illustrated with fun, cartoon images of children and pirates playing together. To judge from the longevity of the idea, this transformative use of the pirate as a promotional concept has never been the subject of complaint or protest. In fact, it is fair to assume that it has been well received by the public in the positive spirit that was clearly intended. Still, to grasp fully something of the magnitude of the transformation, one needs to think of the likely response to a similar children's promotion in which a motorcycle gang was featured.

As prevalent as the pirate is in maritime popular culture, arguably the most dominant figure representing the mariner is that of "The Captain:" a white-bearded man with a mariner's cap and appropriate attire, usually a dark jacket over a white sweater or some variation of the same; a pipe is optional. Among North American consumers today, perhaps the best-known incarnation of this character is *Captain High Liner*, the fictional representative of the Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, based *High Liner Foods* first introduced in company advertising in 1978. Yet, in creating this character as a maritime equivalent to other such product personalities (for example, *Betty Crocker*), *High Liner Foods* was clearly building on a pre-existing archetype, one whose presence is apparent throughout the

world of the maritime popular and commercial arts. Indeed, they may well have been inspired, perhaps unconsciously, by the popular American cartoon figure "Popeye" or, more precisely, Popeye's bearded father "Poopdeck Pappy."[13]

One common manifestation of "The Captain" is a popular kitsch marine figurine which can be found, with only slight variations, in numerous seaside tourist shops — including museum boutiques — across North America.[14] Roughly carved out of wood (or sometimes moulded to resemble carved wood) and hand-painted, this mass-produced item appeals to the buyer both as the embodiment of a romanticised way of life, and, stylistically, as a reflection of the folk-art tradition which arose from that life. The same archetypal image can also be found in both local marine-related business — again often associated with seafood restaurants such as Wallymagoo's Marine-Bar, Toronto — and, more subtly, in the promotions and programs of the increasingly popular cruise business. Venerable Cunard Lines has issued an advertisement featuring a modern colour photograph of an attractive couple speaking to the Captain of their ship. Though the photo is clearly posed and planned, the ad text, in the form of a testimonial from the depicted Captain, suggests the mariner is real and, real or not, the figure was no doubt an enthusiastic choice on the basis of his visual similarity to the archetype.[15] Another example, found in a *New York Times* travel feature on cruising, is a photograph in which an onboard program of traditional marine crafts and skills is depicted. The presentation is here also being given by someone who sports a cap and white beard in close accordance with the generic Captain character.

## Looking in the Mirror: Shore Services

Turning from sea to shore, there is among the matrix of buildings, services and structures associated with seafaring, one item which stands out above all others — in this case both literally and metaphorically: the lighthouse. The use of the lighthouse as a popular culture image or logo is so frequent and pervasive, that any survey must by force be highly selective. The evident popularity of the lighthouse has much to do with its innate symbolic power. As it is commonly portrayed, the lighthouse combines two elements, each of which has strong, positive powers of association: a powerful light meant to be visible at great distance, and a strong tower, raising the light aloft and protecting it from the
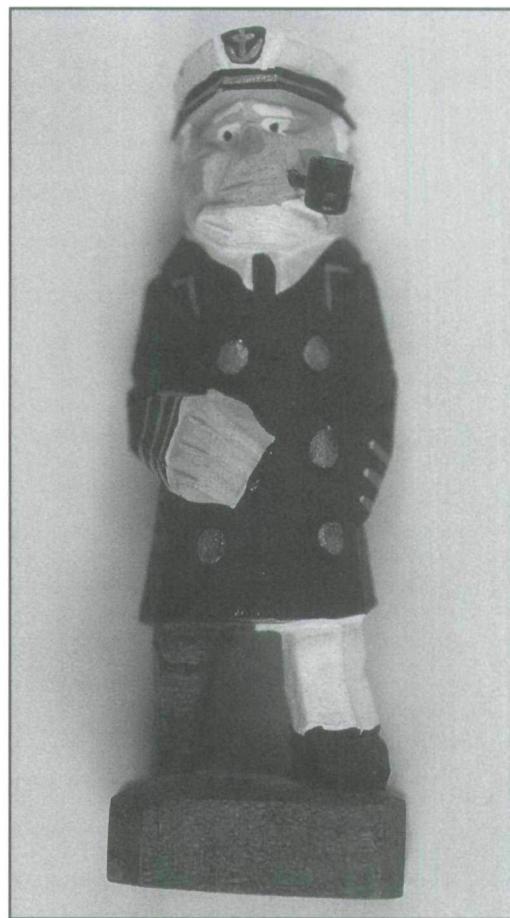


*Fig. 7*
*Souvenir Captain figure*

violence of its environment. Even a simple description of this navigational aid contains obvious messianic undertones: a lighthouse is a beacon that provides guidance and reassurance through darkness and storms. This inherent appeal is further reinforced by historical connections reaching back into antiquity, whence the great lighthouse of Alexandria, one of the Seven Wonders of the World, guided mariners to a port city whose famous library made it synonymous with learning and wisdom.

Although the lighthouse originated in antiquity, the structure most often depicted in popular culture is predominantly one which was firmly established and widely duplicated in the nineteenth century. The commercial use of this image naturally includes a large number of seaside tourist promotions, often for places where the economy was once more closely connected to, or reliant upon, seafaring. Aside from the larger metaphysical associations, the basic idea of a destination for the traveller is also operative. Examples of its use as a destination logo range from regional promotion (Atlantic Canada), to state tourism (Massachusetts), to

geographic areas (Cape Anne) and specific overnight accommodation (Brant Point Inn).

While the connection in all these cases is intuitive, linking a seaside vacation with a structure associated strongly and positively with the seashore, it is worth noting that both the actual utility and importance of the lighthouse is, in fact, diminishing. Today, most lighthouses are automated and have no full-time keeper, a transition which has greatly diminished a unique, quietly heroic, way of life; in Canada those few that are still occupied tend to be the most remote. Moreover, with the advent of modern navigation technologies such as GPS, electronic charts and sophisticated on-board integrated systems, there is less and less reliance on lighthouses by commercial shipping. In response to this, many lighthouses have been entirely removed from service, only to be taken over by local preservation groups. In this way, lighthouses in Europe and North America are being literally transformed from a seaward-facing shipping landmark, to a landward-facing tourist attraction. It is a trend which will likely only increase and, from a popular culture perspective, it is a particularly informative one, since it echoes a larger phenomenon (about which more later).

The promotion of services and products with the lighthouse image is by no means limited to tourism. The list includes mass media (*Castle Rock Entertainment, a Time Warner Company*), shoes and clothing (*Rockport* and *Weatherproof*), prescription heart medication (*Norvasc*) and even an automobile (*General Motors Blazer*). In this last instance, the product is promoted with an advertisement that, through the magic of photo manipulation, places the vehicle, lights on, at the top of a lighthouse tower where normally the lantern would be found. The accompanying text reads: "A little security in an insecure world." Leaving the best to last, the small seaside town of Sidney, B.C., boasts a wonderful example of popular culture manifest in the built environment. "The Mariner Village Mall" not only adopts the lighthouse as its logo, it also effectively incorporates an ersatz lighthouse into its very structure. Even more delightful, from the point of view of this discussion, is the fact that the tower is bracketed by a large ship's wheel on either side, while the parking lot features a couple of classic fisherman's anchors as ornamental sculpture. All that may be missing are security guards dressed as pirates.

## Finding the Meaning in the Mirror

This brief catalogue of popular, recurrent images, objects and ideas serves as a significant indication of the way in which seafaring is commonly perceived and understood among the general public. Distilled to its essence, what we find in this catalogue is overwhelmingly a nostalgic portrayal of the sea as a source of adventure, romance, and metaphor. Still, all of the items discussed originate in historical technologies and types, and to that extent, they do convey, albeit obliquely, information about Western

*Fig. 8*
*Mariner Village Mall, Sidney, B.C. Note the combination of lighthouse structure, ships' wheels and parking-lot anchors.*

maritime heritage; what they lack in precision they may make up for in reach. Retired mariners, historians and curators may well be aware of the reductive and romantic nostalgia inherent in these examples, but among a huge cross-section of society they remain powerful signifiers of the material culture of seafaring and effectively function as such. Simply to state the obvious, if this were not so, then these images and objects would not be produced with such frequency and used in so great a range of applications.

Yet recognizing the commercial intention behind their repeated and varied appearance is less important than understanding their persistent appeal. In part, the answer lies in an easy recognition derived from the popular literature of an earlier era, most notably the classics *Moby Dick*, *Treasure Island* and *Peter Pan* (the latter two being particularly influential in the romanticisation of the pirate).[16] Beyond the enduring qualities and characters of these stories, all of which have been rejuvenated, amplified and further disseminated through the popular magic of the movies, there is also — though this is more difficult to quantify — the elemental appeal of the sea itself. The same general facts of geography and history that give the sea so great an influence over our sense of place and distance, and make it such a compelling force in the human imagination, are also the source of much of the romantic and metaphorical resonance of these popular maritime images, objects and ideas.

This raises the question: how has something as universal and timeless as humanity's experience of the sea come to be represented in the West by so limited a set of technologies and types, dating mostly from a period of about two hundred years: roughly the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? The answer may well lie in the fact that it was during this same period that Western nations managed, through exploration, empirical experience and scientific endeavour, to domesticate the sea. In these two centuries, significant milestones were reached in hydrography (the production and widespread distribution of standardized, reliable charts), navigation (the invention of the marine chronometer to determine longitude at sea), shipbuilding (the introduction of steam and steel); and communications (the invention of wireless radio). Then, in the twentieth century, the dramatic development of aviation shifted the primary frontier of human endeavour, with its power over the popular imagination, from the sea to the sky. With this change, it may be that the

common, public perception of seafaring effectively became fossilized, creating in the process the raw material of maritime popular culture.[17]

Recognizing the romanticised, selective nature of maritime popular culture and its distance from the lengthy, complex history of Western seafaring is an important first step. However, to appreciate fully the value and meaning of these romanticised images and objects requires consideration of another divide: that between the West and contemporary maritime industries and culture. Indeed, the significance of maritime popular culture may owe much to the fact that there is today very little operative social reality — direct experience — effectively to offset or alter its influence. During the last half-century, these popular images, objects and ideas have flourished against a background of growing Western alienation from life and work at sea. Not that ships and seafaring are irrelevant to the modern economy; far from it. Shipping is as important today as ever, arguably more so as the volume of trade has continued to grow. The important difference, however, is that Western nations are today largely absent from the business of building, servicing and especially serving aboard modern ships.[18] In 1998, the editors of the popular literary magazine *Granta,* aptly acknowledged this phenomenon in their introduction to an issue dedicated to the sea:

*The sea can still make us scared and wistful— the Titanic, Charles Trenet singing La Mer — but it also seems to have lost its power. The tide of images, metaphors and stories has been steadily retreating. There are some great and popular exceptions — the novels of Patrick O'Brian, Hollywoods's new Titanic — but even these see the sea as history, evocations of the way we were. Why should this be? One obvious answer is that as travellers we no longer need the sea. Another is that ships have deserted great cities and their shorelines...With the ships have gone the men who sailed them, their waterfront bars long closed, the old piers turned into museums or marinas.*[19]

This touches upon an essential point. For simply to state that the popular culture of ships and the sea presents a romantic version of history adds little new to what we already know about the reductive tendency of popular culture (though admittedly a case-by-case analysis of origins can yield some interesting results). Seen in the context of Western alienation from contemporary seafaring experience, however, the images, objects

and ideas of maritime popular culture begin to take on a more important meaning and function. They are vivid manifestations of "the sea as history" alive and operative in the culture of the present; they embody and perpetuate a significant part of our collective memory, that which concerns our relationship with the sea. Or, to borrow Alan Gowans' formulation, these images and objects constitute "a dynamic, rich foundation for a vital material culture in touch with past and future alike."[20] Given the decline of, and growing detachment from, contemporary maritime trades in the West, popular culture has become, in some respects, *the* relevant maritime culture, in so far as it continues to function and resonate in society in a way that no Panamanian-registered car carrier, lap-top-using Supercargo, or the vast expanse of a container terminal, can.

This phenomenon is evident in different ways at different levels. For example, its development is apparent in Paula Johnson's examination of the evolving material culture of a community of watermen in Smith Island, Maryland.[21] Her research provides both a case study of how the transition from the sea as workplace to "the sea as history" happens in a contemporary coastal setting, while also offering a convincing argument for the serious study of the cultural activities and artifacts that are the products of this change. There is, of course, a distinction to be made between the folk-art activities and artifacts of communities like that on Smith Island, closely tied as they are to individual experience, memory and local traditions, and mass-produced maritime kitsch. Nevertheless, when one considers that these watermen are also living modern lives exposed to American mass culture and the temptations and necessities of the tourist economy, the distinction begins to blur.[22] To what extent is the difference largely a matter of proximity in time and place? If the watermen's way of life completely disappears, will future generations continue to transmit their memory through collectables and souvenirs? Whatever the answer, the general approach used in this particular local study might also be usefully applied to Western society writ large which, as we have seen, produces, sells and consumes the generic products of maritime popular culture.

A good place to start is in the maritime museum community. There, even the casual observer may be struck by the comfortable co-existence between the formal history and heritage presented in the galleries, and the generic popular culture proffered and sold in the adjoining gift shops. Rather than simply dismiss this as a reflection of creeping commercialism, or a necessary response

to budgetary pressure, the presentation and sale of popular culture in maritime museums deserves further consideration. After all, the visitors are, generally speaking, people who have come to the museum in order to experience, and learn from, the authentic material history on exhibit. What then do these same visitors seek and apparently find on the shelves of the museum boutique and how does it relate to their enhanced understanding of maritime heritage? The answer may come as a surprise, for as Stephen Cutcliffe and Steve Lubar have pointed out in an article discussing industrial history museums,

> *exhibits...are only a small part of the visitor experience. Bathrooms, restaurants, shops — the entire setting — are essential to the success of the visit. Curators would do well to remember that the visitor does not necessarily draw the lines between exhibit and public space that the museum staff does."* [Emphasis mine][23]

Indeed; and if, as has been suggested, one should acknowledge that the items for sale in the shop do constitute "a dynamic, rich foundation for a vital material culture" then it is surely possible to begin thinking of the museum boutique as a kind of informal gallery in its own right, a prospect which begs the question of whether or not a case can be made for the preservation, study and interpretation of maritime popular culture?[24]

To consider this project should in no way be seen as pandering; nor is it intended as a postmodern or relativist argument. Instead, the point here is simply that the case for inclusion deserves to be made in any serious attempt to preserve, study and interpret our contemporary relationship with the sea. Western maritime museums, with their largely Whiggish intellectual foundations, today face the awkward dilemma of being rooted in a meta-narrative that has been fractured by the events and trends of the last fifty years. Groups of objects that once reflected active political, social and economic forces in Western society have effectively been transformed into a collection of lesser antiquities.[25] At the same time, it might also be argued that the distinct emphasis found in many maritime museums on technology from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries along with a certain type of mariner and shipboard experience, to say nothing of the celebratory spirit in which it is all generally presented, is really not so very far removed from the leitmotifs and tone of maritime popular culture, as some might wish to think.

Put in a more positive way, there is simply an undeniable connection between popular culture and popular understanding, one which deserves greater attention in maritime museums. Moreover, this general rule is made all the more pertinent by the diminished connection between Western society and contemporary seafaring. From a material culture point of view, it is hardly revolutionary to suggest that there can be as much social history inherent in a souvenir figurine, as in a piece of scrimshaw, even if the rarity and value of the latter attract greater attention and scholarship. In addition, museums today are increasingly considering the need for contemporary collecting, both as a serious, long-term exercise — *Samdok* in Sweden — and as a response to the growing pressure to connect historic collections to the life experience of the visitor.[26] In this respect, maritime museums face a very serious challenge, in response to which popular culture represents only one of several potentially fruitful new areas of future emphasis and growth.[27] The important thing is for curators not to succumb to the temptation to view maritime popular culture as merely trivial, or to limit themselves simply to exposing the amusing ironies. To do so would be at once professionally self-indulgent (the ironies are almost invariably more apparent to the curator than the public) and, at the same time, the loss of a rare opportunity to join the past and present together. Instead, curators ought seriously to consider the meaning and significance of maritime popular culture both as a mediator of the public perception of Western seafaring heritage, and as an important contemporary material-culture record in its own right, one worthy of preservation, study and interpretation.

## NOTES

1. Alan Gowans, "The Case for Kitsch: Popular/Commercial Arts as a Reservoir of Traditional Culture and Humane Values," *Living in a Material World: Canadian and American Approaches to Material Culture* (St John's: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1991), 141. It is this article that first inspired the present inquiry into maritime popular culture. In fact, Gowans introduces his ideas using an extract from E. C. Segar's comic strip *Popeye the Sailor*, though here he does so for the political content rather than the maritime features of the principle character, 127–129.
2. Ibid, 130.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 130–131.
5. George F. MacDonald and Stephen Alsford, "Museums and Theme Parks: Worlds in Collision?" *Museum Management and Curatorship* 14, no. 2 (June 1995): 129–147.
6. A superlative example of using popular culture in a museum exhibit is *1699: When Virginia Was the Wild West*, Colonial Williamsburg, Williamsburg, Virginia, 1 May 1999, to 13 February 2000. This exhibit made use of popular ideas and techniques from both the movie Western and comic books to enliven its interpretation of seventeenth century Virginia. See Thomas Andrew Denenberg. "1699: When Virginia Was the Wild West: An Exhibition Review," *Winterthur Portfolio* 35, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 291–300.
7. Gowans' analysis and understanding of art history, and the importance he attributes to the popular commercial arts today, is based on his concept — clearly defined — of social function or "those functions the activity called 'art' has traditionally performed in society." In essence, he argues that the so-called "high art" of the avant-garde no longer performs these same social functions, whereas the popular arts do. Alan Gowans, *The Unchanging Arts: New Forms for the Traditional Functions of Art in Society* (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1971), 54. While Gowans' art historical analysis may be applied equally to the images and objects of maritime popular culture,

my focus is different, though complementary: it is an examination of popular culture not as art (worthy of a gallery), but as maritime heritage (worthy of a museum). Still, the debt to Gowans is great, since his compelling case for popular culture validates, and makes room for, the present exercise.
8. While many of the largest sail-training ships do conform closely to the popular archetype of the multi-masted square-rigged vessel, it is interesting to note that "tall ship" events today include almost any large, sail-powered vessel.
9. The "great age of sail" is admittedly a rather amorphous phrase. Here it is meant to refer to that period from roughly 1700 to 1850 when the technology of the large, ocean-going sailing ship was perfected and remained unmatched by developments in steam propulsion. After 1850, the relative importance of the sailing vessel in trans-oceanic navigation began to diminish.
10. The problem, well known among mariners and shipping professionals, was recently given a very vivid and public airing in the *New York Times Magazine*. See Jack Hitt, "Dangerous Waters," *New York Times Magazine* (20 August 2000), 36–41, 52, 68–69.
11. For an excellent, insightful account of the history and romance of the pirate, see David Cordingly's *Under the Black Flag: The Romance and the Reality of Life Among the Pirates* (New York: Harvest Books, 1997). The book's first chapter, entitled "Wooden Legs and Parrots" is particularly interesting for its coverage of the popular stereotypes in literature and film.
12. For a concise account of the historical Captain Morgan, see Cordingly, *Under the Black Flag*, 42–55
13. The E. C. Segar comic strip character "Popeye" dates to 1929, and became well-known among subsequent generations through the animated cartoon series which it inspired. Poopdeck Pappy was introduced to the series in 1936. In 1980, Robert Altman made a live-action film based on the cartoon.

14. One such figurine was, in fact, the focus of an earlier paper by the author on maritime museums and popular culture. The object was subjected to a simplified material culture analysis in order to demonstrate its potential as a legitimate artifact of maritime heritage. Garth Wilson and John Summers, "Maritime Museums and Material Culture Studies," *The Northern Mariner* IV, no. 2 (April 1994): 31–40.

15. A one-page feature in the magazine *Sea History*, reveals the contents of this ad to be factual. Capt. R. W. Warwick, "At the Helm of the Queen Elizabeth 2: A Family Tradition," *Sea History* 95 (Winter 2000–1): 14.

16. Regarding Robert Louis Stevenson's contribution, Cordingly notes: "The effect of *Treasure Island* on our perception of pirates cannot be overestimated. Stevenson linked pirates forever with maps, black schooners, tropical islands, and one-legged seamen with parrots on their shoulders." Cordingly, *Under the Black Flag*, 7. For his comments on J. M. Barrie's influence, see pages 19–21.

17. Seen in this light, the remarkable popularity of "Tall Ship" gatherings and events may be interpreted as part of a nostalgic celebration of this elemental triumph. For what is more powerfully emblematic of maritime endeavour during this period than a full-size working version of the primary technology?

18. The one partial exception to this rule may be the cruise industry. Still, as some of the examples given show, it is a business that is as well-served by nostalgia and romance as any other seaside tourist operation.

19. "Introduction," *Granta* 61 (Spring 1998).

20. Gowans, "The Case for Kitsch," 141.

21. Paula J. Johnson, "Boat Models, Buoys and Board Games: Reflecting and Reliving Watermen's Work," *Material History Review: Ships, Seafaring and Smallcraft* 48 (Fall 1998): 89–100.

22. Gowans makes this point as well, noting that "…the boundaries between folk art and popular/commercial art are always murky." "The Case for Kitsch," 130.

23. Stephen Cutcliffe and Steve Lubar, "The Challenge of Industrial History Museums," *The Public Historian* 22, no. 3 (Summer 2000): 23. Both maritime and industrial museums are, generally speaking, the products of a Whiggish world view. They therefore have much in common and in some cases are even one and the same.

24. The wonderfully eclectic British journal *Things* "published twice-yearly by an independent group of young writers and historians as a forum for the free discussion of objects, their histories and meanings" has enthusiastically embraced this prospect. A notable example can be found in two separate reviews by Laurel Blossom of the exhibit *The Endurance: Shackleton's Legendary Antarctic Expedition*. The first concerns the exhibit itself and the material culture it presents; the second concerns the contents of the exhibit gift counter. See Laurel Blossom, "Freeze Frame — *The Endurance: Shackleton's Legendary Antarctic Expedition*, American Museum of Natural History, New York," *Things* 10 (Summer 1999): 65–70; and "Tchotchke Schlock: Souvenirs of the Shackleton Exhibition, American Museum of Natural History, New York," *Things* (Summer 1999): 113–115.

25. I have discussed this problem and related issues at greater length elsewhere. See Garth Wilson, "Editorial," *Material History Review: Ships, Seafaring and Smallcraft* 48 (Fall 1998): 1–11, and "Maritime Museums and Material Culture," *Maritime Life and Traditions* (2000): 83–84

26. Goran Rosander, ed., *Today for Tomorrow: Museum Documentation of Contemporary Society in Sweden by Acquisition of Objects* (Stockholm: Samdok Council, 1986). See also Mina Rieur Weiner, "New York Inside Out: An Exhibition and Experiment in Collecting Twentieth Century New York," *History News* 55, no. 3 (Summer 2000): 12–18.

27. Wilson, "Editorial," 6–8.