The Captain Lays Down the Law

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The sights and sounds and smells of Buzzards' Bay provided the backdrop for the childhood of Joseph Bates. From the moment of his birth near New Bedford in 1792, he was surrounded by influences that inexorably led him to choose the life of a seaman. It was said of New Bedford in those days that one-third of the population was away at sea, another third had just returned, and another third was getting ready to ship out. New Bedford, or that portion across the Acushnet River that was set apart as Fairhaven in 1812, was to be Joseph's home for over sixty-five years.

Along with his love for the sea, he carried within himself a strong bent for reform in virtually all the areas in which it manifested itself in antebellum New England. Also in early middle age he began to take religion very seriously. As he grew older he exhibited what today would be regarded as almost a fanatical devotion to moral and religious reform movements.

The full extent and degree of Captain Bates's religious and reform convictions are apparent in his account of his final voyage on the brig *Empress.* The ship's Registry in the Melville Whaling Museum in New Bedford carries the following facts regarding the *Empress:* It was built at Rochester in 1824; Joseph Bates, Jr., was given as the Master. It had a single deck, two masts, and a square stern. It was registered as a brig of 125 tons. After the final voyage of Joseph Bates, his brother Franklin became the Master. The following year the brig was sold at St. Catherine's. When the brig was only three years old, Captain Bates took her for his last voyage as Master, and a unique trip it proved to be.

On August 9, 1827, the *Empress* left the picturesque harbor of New Bedford for east coast ports of South America. She carried an assorted

cargo and a new crew recruited from Boston, all of whom, with the exception of one, were strangers to the ship's captain. As the pilot left the *Empress,* a strong breeze blew them out onto the turbulent ocean for the long voyage to the south. The night had already set in as they took their departure from Gay Head light. At this time the captain called all of the crew aft on the quarterdeck for some instructions regarding the voyage.

When the men had gathered about, a set of rules and regulations to govern their voyage was outlined for them by the captain. Perhaps never before nor since has such a set of rules been outlined to a group of hardy, rough, seagoing men. In general, conditions on merchant ships in this period were harsh at best and often brutal and brutalizing.[1] Liquor played a heavy part in the degradation of the crews, and contributed to the shocking conditions which were the rule rather than the exception.

First, said the captain in his orientation lecture to them, the members of the crew were to use the full name in addressing each other. "Here's the name of William Jones; now let it be remembered while we are performing this voyage that we all call his name William. Here is John Robinson; call him John. Here is James Stubbs; call him James. We shall not allow any Bills, or Jacks, or Jims, to be called here." In this way he went down the list of all the names and requested them to address one another in a respectful manner, and to call themselves by their proper names.

The second rule that he announced was that there was to be no swearing during the voyage. At this, one of the crewmen named William Dunn said, "I have always had that privilege, sir." "Well," said the captain, "you cannot have it here," and he quoted the third commandment to show the wickedness of profanity. William Dunn spoke up again and said, "I can't help it, sir!" Then he pointed out that when he was called up in the night to reef topsails in bad weather, and things didn't go just right, he would swear before he would think of what he was saying. The captain said, however, that he would discipline him properly if he forgot this rule, and Dunn gave the meek rejoinder, "I will try, sir."

A third unique rule laid down by the captain as land faded from sight was that there would be no washing or mending of clothes on Sunday. The captain said, "I have a good assortment of books and papers which you may have access to every Sunday. I shall also endeavor to instruct you, that we may keep that day holy unto the Lord." They were to have every Saturday afternoon free to wash and mend their clothes. At sea and in harbor he would expect them to appear every Sunday morning in clean clothes. Furthermore, there would be no shore leaves on Sundays.

Seaman Dunn was again moved to speak out. "That's the sailor's privilege. I have always had the liberty of going ashore Sundays." The captain was adamant, however, and said that Dunn and all the crew must live up to this rule also. Then he endeavored to show them how wrong it was to violate "God's holy day," and how much better they would enjoy themselves in reading and improving their minds than in joining in all the wickedness that sailors were in the habit of indulging in when in foreign ports on Sunday.

Finally the captain said, "Another thing I want to tell you is, that we have no liquor, or intoxicating drinks on board." He did have a bottle of brandy, and one of gin in the medicine chest. These he would administer when he thought members of the crew had need of their medicinal properties. "This is all the liquor we have on board," he said with finality, "and all that I intend shall be on board during our voyage." He strictly forbade their bringing any liquor aboard when they were ashore in foreign ports.

At the close of all this, the captain knelt down and commended his ship and his men to God, "whose tender mercies are over all the works of his hands, to protect and guide us on our way over the ocean to our destined port." The following morning, all but the man at the helm were invited to the cabin, to join in morning prayer, where they were told that this would be the practice morning and evening. All were urged to join in these sessions. On Sundays when the weather was suitable, worship was held on the quarterdeck, otherwise in the cabin, where there was generally a reading from selected sermons and from the Bible. There was some grumbling about being deprived of shore leave on Sunday, but the captain later reported that "we enjoyed peace and quietness, while they [sailors on other ships] were rioting in folly and drunkenness."

After a passage of forty-seven days, the *Empress* arrived at Paraiba (Joao Pessao) on the east coast of South America. Then the vessel continued on to St. Salvador (Bahia) and St. Catherine's. Most of the time Bates, on his little reform ship, traded along the stretch of modern Brazil as far south as Rio Grande, near the modern Uruguay boundary. He experienced much adventure and traded with a degree of peril from privateers and pirates emanating from Brazil's neighbor to the south. The chief cargoes which Bates dealt in were dry hides, rice, coffee, and farina. This latter seems to have been in great demand at this time, and Bates was impressed with its nutritious qualities.

After trading for several months up and down the coasts of South America, and after numerous high adventures, the *Empress* returned again to

New York and New Bedford. Apparently the crew made a reasonably good adjustment to the stringent regulations laid down by the captain at the outset of the voyage — all except William Dunn, who had to be reprimanded once or twice during the voyage for drinking while he was on shore leave.

On arrival in New York, the crew, with a single exception, chose to remain on board to discharge the cargo. They chose also to continue with the ship until they arrived in New Bedford, where the *Empress* was to be fitted out for another voyage. She arrived in New Bedford about the twentieth of June, 1828, almost a year after having sailed under the austere regulations decreed by the captain. Some of the men inquired about going on another voyage, but Captain Bates had decided this would be his last. His younger brother, Franklin, took over as Master of the "temperance brig" *Empress* for its next voyage. The conditions on board were much as they had been on the previous voyage.

A very revealing document, showing the inner religious struggle of Captain Joseph Bates at this time, is his log book, which is in the Old Dartmouth Historical Society library on Johnnycake Hill in New Bedford, Massachusetts. This "log book" is much more than a ship's log. It reveals the introspective reflections of a man who is very deeply concerned about questions of religion and his own spiritual condition in the light of what he now believes to be the reality of a Christian experience. This log book, handwritten by Captain Joseph Bates and over a hundred pages in length, gives an insight into the strong feelings on religion which he was experiencing at this precise time.

Typical of the comments was his entry of September 28, 1827 (Sunday): "I know not what the Lord is preparing me for, or why I have such conflicts in my mind. . . . But I feel sometimes such a spirit within me for fear I shall be led to commit some dreadful sin for which I know I must suffer."

Captain Bates was somewhat of a pioneer in promoting the temperance ship idea. He felt heavily burdened to improve the moral tone on shipboard, for the young seamen especially. Regarding the concept of a temperance ship, the *Sailor's Magazine and Naval Journal,* published by the American Seaman's Friends Society, reported that forty ships sailed from New Bedford in 1830 "with supplies of distilled liquor for medicinal use only" and then reported the following year that seventy-five similarly equipped vessels sailed from New Bedford a year later. As a part of the reform wave of this period which touched all facets of existence, there was a great deal of concern expressed over the welfare of seamen, and most

seamen who were acquainted with ship life seemed to agree that hard liquor was the most serious problem they had to deal with in connection with the seagoing men of the period.

Following his final temperance ship project, Joseph Bates devoted his energies successively to a variety of reform movements in the 1830s and onward, including manual training projects for young people, and an attempt at raising mulberry trees for silk cultivation. Then he gave himself completely, and his modest fortune which was considered in 1840 to be a "competency," to advance the Millerite movement. The failure . . . of the Millerites and various subsequent groups in predicting the imminent apocalypse did not deter Joseph Bates, but he clung to these ideas and proclaimed them for the rest of his days. Until his death in 1872 he gave himself over to the work of itinerant preacher. He rests far from the sea in Monterey, Michigan, at the side of "Prudy," his faithful companion of over fifty years.

NOTE

1 "Seafaring [in this period] at best, was a rough, dangerous calling, and sometimes rendered unbearable by the brutality of master or mate." S. E. Morison, *Maritime History of Massachusetts* (Boston 1961), p. 259.