The Company of Women

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This essay focuses on a shipboard company defined by gender and low-status work. Moreover, it examines workers on passenger liners who were related to the ship as hotel rather than as a means of conveyance. I refer to stewardesses, seafaring women who did traditional female domestic work where women traditionally were not supposed to be: on the high seas. By the end of World War I, they comprised the majority of female employees on passenger vessels, just as chambermaids dominated employment rolls in hotels. In this paper I discuss the ways in which stewardesses on interwar liners were and were not a company. I confine the discussion to women, although in many ways there are similar questions to be raised about stewards.

My operating definition for "company" comes from the *Oxford English Dictionary:* "a number of people gathered together for a common object, usually commercial." In the past this has applied to bodies as diverse as travelling players and craft guilds. These seafaring women domestic workers, serving on a variety of ships, were not gathered together with the common object of being in each other's company. They were primarily a task group assembled by the shipping line for its economic gain. The object was commercial: to utilise the stewardesses to provide services for women and children passengers. If the women had an object in common, it was the extrinsic one of earning a living in the least distressing way available. As B.E. Collins and H. Guetzkow put it, stewardesses were in fact a "nominal or synthetic group... [which] connotes both the artificial nature of the `groups' and the fact that they are constructed from separate and independent parts.'" They were a group of women who were only together for the duration of the trip and who were taken from the companies' pools of labour.

First, I examine the characteristics of this work group in relation to the rest of the ship's company, hotel and catering work ashore and the general labour situation in England and Wales in the interwar years. Second, I discuss the ways that they were a company: as units of labour, stewardesses were perceived as a relatively homogeneous small group in the eyes of shipowners, passengers and male crew. In addition, the women also had many factors in common. Third, I argue that they were not a company in the sense that they did not appear subjectively to experience a firm sense of collective identity because of dissonances based on personality differences and working practices. My perspective derives from sociology and social psychology, as well as labour history and cultural and women's studies.

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The temporal focus is the interwar years, which were the peak of employment for stewardesses because shipping lines were offering increasingly luxurious personal service to attract new passengers. This was a period in which migration decreased, with an average of 619,000 passengers leaving UK ports for extra-European countries in 1910 compared to only slightly more than half that number (328,000) in 1930.[2] The 1920s and 1930s were also a time of declining status for private domestic service ashore, an occupation in which nearly one-quarter of the economically-active female population was engaged.' The eight companies I examine were established, large-scale operators from UK ports. They are Cunard (which sailed mainly to the US and on cruises); White Star (which did US and Australia runs); British India (going mainly to Calcutta and Bombay but also Australia); P&O (to India, China and Bombay); Royal Mail (which went mainly to South America); Elder Dempster (sailing to west Africa); Union Castle (which serviced south and east Africa); and Canadian Pacific (CP, which operated cruises as well as serving Canadian ports). The evidence comes from company archives, especially British India, P&O and Cunard; crew agreements for several hundred vessels; three written autobiographies, plus oral testimony from thirty-seven women gathered by myself and colleagues at the Southampton City Heritage Oral History department; and census records.4 I should point out that in the oral interviews, the women were not asked specifically about any sense of group membership; thus, the ideas developed in this paper are generally based on inferences.

The Company of Strange Women

The title of this paper comes from a Canadian film, "The Company of Strangers," which I significantly mis-remembered as "The Company of Women." It is indeed about women who were strangers initially and then briefly became a disparate company as well as giving each other temporary companionship. In England, at least, it became a minor cult movie for older women.' The plot can be summarised as an odyssey. A coach load of older women gathered together with the object of doing some pleasant sightseeing are stranded when their bus breaks down. Their object then changes to survival in seemingly unsustaining circumstances. They briefly set up home in an old farm. Despite their different cultural origins and sexual orientations, they discover their strengths and commonalities as they try to make this shelter work for them, and fix their broken-down bus.

I offer this model as one that is and is not appropriate for a maritime company of women: domestic workers on interwar liners. These too were disparate women who would normally like sightseeing and who were flung together by circumstances. Their object then became to make situations work for their benefit, creatively and sometimes successfully.

Women comprised one percent or less of the seafaring population and one to two percent of a passenger ship's crew. The census industry tables show in 1921 that there were 2027 men to every 100 females in shipping service as a whole, and 2102 men to every 100 women in 1931.[6] Some idea of the size of the seagoing female domestic staff and the gender ratios over time is contained in table 1. Occupation tables in the 1901 census show that for every stewardess ashore there were four at sea (596 ashore, 3209 at sea). Therefore, the figures in columns 1 and 2 represent only a small part of the total number in the job.

Table 1
Total Numbers and Percentages of Seafaring Domestic Staff Enumerated in the Census, 1841-1951

Year	Female Stewardesses Enumerated as at Home (and as % of Total Female Population)	Total Seafaring Domestic Staff Enumerated as at Home (and % Females)	Total Merchant Seafarers, All Roles, Enumerated as at Sea	Total Merchant Seafarers, All Roles (and Female)
1841	9 (0.0001%)	126 (7%)	138,156	183,071 (0.0004%)
1851	76 (0.0008)	547 (13.8%)	124,744	
1861	146 (0.0014%)	1617 (9.02%)	59, 105	
1871	216 (0.0018%)	3702 (5.8%)		
1881	386 (0.0029%)	6767 (5.7%)	120,649	
1891	389 (0.0026%)		188,391	
1901	420 (0.0025%)		206,138	
1911	596 (0.0032%)	15,110 (3.6%)	99,804	208,214 (0.28%)
1921	933 (0.0047%)	24,798 (3.7%)	55,068	
1931	1 128 (0.0056%)	25.084 (4.4%)	59,572	
1951	696 (0.0030%)	16,394 (4.2%)	91,119	110,750 (0.62%)

Notes: In 1891 and 1901, there was no category for stewarding staff, but only for seafarers in general. I have omitted any figures for men as they would include Abs, greaser, etc., and hence would be skewed and meaningless. The total number of stewards and stewardesses in 1901 was 19,752, but this number should be treated as problematic.

Source: Great Britain, National Census of England Wales, 1841-1951, Population and Occupation Tables.

What size were these small companies of women? The answer depended very much on the number of women passengers aboard and the class in which they were travelling. The ratio of stewardesses to passengers appears to be have been one to twenty in first and second class and one to ninety in third class and steerage. In both crew agreements and the few staffing ledgers that exist in the company archives of P&O and the British India Steam Navigation Company (BI), it is clear that the groups were comprised of between two and thirty-five stewardesses, but usually about two on BI and Elder Dempster ships; six on Royal Mail and Union Castle; and twelve on CP Duchess-class ships. A range of crew agreements examined over the period shows that the number varied according to season (about ten percent less in winter) and historical period. The agreements demonstrate that the

higher the standard of service to passengers (for example, on world cruises, and in the late 1920s before the relative democratisation of passengers conditions), the greater the number of stewardesses. This was especially the case as the number of passengers travelling with their own ladies' maids declined.' Table 2 shows that Cunard ships could have as many as thirty-five stewardesses aboard if fully laden.

The social location of these stewardesses within the ship and the liner company is important because it affects the ways in which they were constructed as a separate group. Stewardesses were the main female portion – as much as ten percent – of the Steward's or Victualling Department, the only department to employ significant numbers of women. That department in turn comprised between one-quarter and one-third of a ship's complement (the other departments were deck, engineering, cooks and, sometimes, purser's). For example, a P&O Steward's Department ledger covering the 1920-1929 period shows that 127 of the 1604 stewarding staff (7.9%) were women.'

Table 2
Cunard Stewardesses and Total Crew on Selected Interwar Ships

Ship and Tonnage	**Year**	**Class**	**Class**	Class	**Crew**	Steward Crew	Stewardesses	**Female Crew**	Stewardesses as % of **Passengers**
Scythia (19,730)	1921	350	350	1500	434	N/A	II	14 (3.2%)	0.63%
Berengaria (52,226)	**1919** Lpool to NY	970	830	1000	1180	N/A	16	N/A	0.57%
Franonia (20,175)	1937 Soton to NY	330	420	1500	422	246	19	34 (8.05%)	1.5%
Carmania (19,524)	1921	425	365	650	N/A	N/A	16	N/A	**1.11%**
Berengaria (52,226)	1929 Cruise	972	630	515	943	N/A	35	52 (5.05%)	2.45%

Source: Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN), Maritime History Archive (MHA), Board of Trade (BT) 99, Crew Agreements; and Duncan Haws, *Cunard Line* (Hereford, 1987).

Traditional masculine shipboard hierarchies meant that employees in so-called "soft jobs," as in the Steward's Department, were treated as less than proper seafarers. [9] Indeed, oral testimony suggests they were not even seen as proper men – especially as so many stewards were homosexual. A range of oral evidence from the Steward's Department makes it clear that being a steward on a ship was a way that gay men could be "out" and even be camp in women's clothes at shipboard parties. [10] Stewardesses were therefore a group subject to double denigration as both "not proper seafarers" and as "not men."

As early as the 1890s, according to responses to employment queries to women's magazines, stewardesses were not a remarkable part of the shipping line's workforce but simply one – female – sector. Initially the new role was somewhat noticeable. For example, newspaper advertisements in the 1870s presented stewardesses as a special boon to

and formal crew photographs show that they appear to have been rather favoured personnel. Such evidence suggests that they were more like the captain's honorary daughters under his protection in the Deck Department. It was not until the turn of the century that stewardesses were, on paper, placed within the Cook's and Steward's Department. But internal company documents indicate that, although, a discrete sub-group, stewardesses were increasingly seen as part of the stewarding crew. For example, in the case of BI in the 1920s stewardesses' personnel details sit between hairdressers and general servants as part of Stewards Department Staff Afloat; they are not part of a separate female-only ledger."

According to Catherine Hakim's models of segregation in gendered work, stewardesses were segregated both vertically and horizontally.12 They were horizontally segregated in that they were in the lower grades; a stewardess could gain no promotion higher than chief stewardess. Table 3 shows the pay bands in which women were typically located, using one particular ship as a case study. The pay bands are typical even though the number of female crew is higher than is normal on passenger ships other than the extremely well-staffed CP vessels on the UK-Canada route in that period.

Table 3
Female and Male Monthly Wage Rates on the Duchess of York to Montréal,
26 October 1934 - 16 November 1934 (% of Total Crew)

	Women	Men	Total Crew
£50+	0	0.34%	1
£40 - £49	0	0	0
£30 - £39	0	2.07%	6
£20 - £29	0	3.46%	10
£10-£19	0.69%	19.03%	57
£5- £9	5.19%	62.62%	196
£1- £5	0.34%	93.77%	19
Total	18 (6.22%)	271 (93.77%)	289 (100%)

Source: MUN, MHA, Crew Agreements of Duchess of York.

Second, stewardesses were vertically segregated in that they were concentrated in domestic duties, whereas men on a ship performed a much wider range of work. Among seafarers in the water transport industry as a whole, the census industry tables show that in 1921 and 1931 women were in just one category: pursers, stewards and domestic staff. While exceptional women, such as engineer Victoria Drummond, worked in engine departments, this traditionally masculine occupation did not open up until the 1970s. Similarly, in the Deck Department, until the 1950s women wireless operators had to struggle for places, as the case of Olive J. Carroll demonstrates." Table 4 demonstrates the extent of the segregation.

Even within this lowly category of "pursers, stewards and domestic staff," women were restricted to a very small number of sub-categories. The crew agreement of the *Duchess of York* on a voyage to Montréal in October 1934 shows 144 roles available to men

and only six to women (see table 5). These women's roles were chief stewardess, stewardess and ladies' hairdresser in the Stewards Department; and nurse, senior shop attendant and junior shop attendant in the Deck Department. Nursing sisters had officer status and they tended to be treated by male crew as "ladies" rather than "women," as affirmed by oral evidence from *QE2* nursing sister Gill Hayes.14

Table 4
Seagoing Women in Water Transport, 1921-1951

	1921 F	1921 TOTAL	1931 F	1931 TOTAL	1951 F	1951 TOTAL
Naval Officers and Pilots	0 (0%)	14,008	3 (0.02%)	14,634	1 (0.008)	11,418
Engineering Officers	0 (0%)	42,688	0 (0%)	15,106	2 (0.017)	11,515
Petty Officers, Seamen and Deckhands	0 (0%)	25,084	0 (0%)	37,623	6 (0.02%)	29,972
Firemen, Trimmers, Greasers and Donkeymen	0 (0%)	25,984	0 (0%)	24,084	N/A	N/A
Pursers, Stewards and Domestic Staff	933 (3.9%)	24,798	1128 (4.49%)	25,084	696 (2.51%)	27,656
Wireless Operators (Sea-going)	N/A	N/A	0 (0%)	1210	1 (0.084)	1 177

Note: Shore-based job categories excluded, including typists, machinists and cleaners in shipping offices.

Source: Great Britain, National Census of England and Wales, 1921, 1931 and 1951, Industry Tables.

Table 5
Female and Male Work Roles Available on the *Duchess of York* to Montréal, 26 October 1934-16 November 1934

Department	Women (and % of Workforce)	Men (and % of Workforce)
Stewards	3 (2%)	55 (36.6%)
Deck	3 (2%)	31 (20.66%)
Engine	0	27 (18%)
Cooks	0	31 (20.66%)
Total	**6 (4%)**	**144 (96%)**

Source: See table 3.

The effect of both vertical and horizontal segregation was that stewardesses were confined in two of the lowest paying departments, and near the bottom of them at that. Of the 289 crew depicted in table 6, the largest number of low-paid workers were in the Steward's Department. Access to passengers who tipped ameliorated the wages to some extent: "Gratuities were our living," said Cunard stewardess Edith Sowerbutts. "We lived off tips and saved our wages," agreed CP stewardess Dianne Drummond. But bedroom staff received lower tips than dining room or bar staff (a non-female workforce). Stewardesses

might well be expected to have internalised the notion that their relatively low wages reflected low social value. Yet in oral testimony they do not articulate this; instead, they took pride in their equal pay with male counterparts (which had existed since the end of World War I) rather than questioning their lack of access to higher paid jobs. "No, we didn't think about doing any other kinds of jobs. Deck? Phoo! No! You'd never expect that," said CP stewardess Evelyn Huston. [15] They *dated* engineers and, exceptionally, deck officers rather than themselves entering such roles.

Table 6
Female and Male Monthly Wage **Rates** by Department on the *Duchess of York* **to Montréal,** 26 October 1934-16 November 1934

Monthly **Pay**		**Stewards**		**Cooks**		**Engine**		**Deck**	
	Total & % **of** Crew	**Female**	Male	**Female**	Male	**Female**	Male	Female	Male
£50+	1 [.34%]	0	0	0	0	0	1 [0.34%]	0	0
£40 -£49	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
£30 - £39	7 [2.40%]	0	1 [0.34 %]	0	0	0	1 [0.34%]	0	5 [1.73%]
£20 - £29	12 [4.12%]	0	2 [0.69%]	0	1 [0.34%]	0	7 [2.42%]	0	2 [0.69%]
£10-£19	57 [19.5%]	1	13 [4.49%]	0	11 [3.80%]	0	17	1 [0.34%]	14 [4.84%]
£5 - £9	196 [67.3%]	14 [0.03%]	122 [42.2%]	0	21 [7.26%]	0	1 [0.34%]	1 [0.34%]	37
£1-£5	18 [6.18%1	0	10 [3.4%]	0	1 [0.34%]	0	1 [0.34%]	1 [0.34%]	5 [1.12%]
Total	**291 1100%]**	**15** [5.19'%]	**148 [5.12** %]	**0**	**34 [11.96** %]	**0**	28 **[9.68** %]	**3 11.03%]**	**63** [21.7%]

Source: See table 3.

Table 7
Women and Men Employed in Catering and Personal Service Work Ashore, and Domestic Work at Sea, 1931

	Hotel and Catering	Private Domestic Service	Domestic Work on Ships	Total Occupied Workforce
Women	3.8%	21.8%	0.0002%	5,122,979
Men	0.68%	2.26%	0.2071%	11,563,591
Total	**1.67%**	8.27%	**0.15%**	**16,686,570**

Source: Calculated from raw totals in Great Britain, National Census of England and Wales, 1931, Industry Tables.

This kind of job segregation was not particular just to working women at sea. As floating hotel and catering workers, stewardesses were also part of a British workforce

specialising in personal service. The difference is that on a ship, especially the larger "passenger factories," stewardesses were confined to the bedroom area as maids and auxiliary nurses. They did not challenge men for a place on the bridge (equivalent to the hotel manager's office), the engine room, or in places akin to the hotel reception desk, foyer, restaurant or bars. Interwar stewardesses were not stewards on the promenade deck or in the high-tipping passenger bars and dining saloons. The hotel and catering industry on land and sea was notorious for its casual, low-status and seasonal labour, and for women's low position within it. Table 7 demonstrates how much the industry employed women rather than men, while table 8 depicts the high ratio of male managers to women operatives.

Table 8
Women and Men in Personal Services, 1931

	Employers	Operatives	Self-Employed	Total
Women	2.78%	91.9%	5.23%	1,617,599
Men	10.6%	75.1%	14.19%	628,117
Total	**4.98%**	**45.5%**	7.74%	**2,245,716**

Source: See table 7.

It is clear from table 7 that women in private domestic service drastically outnumbered men: a fifth of all occupied women were in this sector compared to only one-fiftieth of men (at sea the figures were reversed; see table 5). The reasons for such segregation have been discussed at length by feminist labour historians. [16] Domestic work was predominantly the preserve of women on ashore. So too, although to a far lesser extent, was hotel and catering. Table 7 affirms the extent to which shipboard employment patterns reflected those ashore in creating a gendered pool from which such labour would be taken."

Table 8 shows the extent to which women in personal service ashore were in primarily lowly grades, just as tables 3, 5 and 6 showed the same thing at sea. A crucial difference is that two percent of women ashore achieved the status of employer and five percent were self-employed (such as boardinghouse keepers). But on ships all the stewardesses were employees. The lack of opportunity for such progress meant that stewardesses were effectively consigned to a group united by its low status and immobilised by lack of opportunity. By contrast, women personal service workers ashore might be fractured as a body by the desire (and occasional chance) to open their own small establishments and to rival their ex-employers.

Table 9 looks at women's positions within shipping services as a whole. "Shipping services" include all women from shipping company clerks to pier master's cleaners, and from dock office telephonists to ship's masseuses – non-seafaring as well as seafaring women. The table shows that an even higher percentage of women were employees than in the personal service sector depicted in table 8. And it indicates that being involved in shipping could be very lonely work for women. They were a distinct minority – one of the tiniest minorities in the industry. Women comprised just 5.9% of all shipping service workers, and the figure is that high only because of a dramatic increase in women typists working for shipping lines. [18] The ratio of women operatives to employers was far worse for

women at sea, as table 9 shows. In 1931 there was less than one woman to every hundred male employers (this is distorted because by the inclusion of women barge owners) compared to two women for every three male employers in personal service.

Table 9
Women and Men in Shipping Services as a Whole, 1931

	Employers	Operatives	Self-Employed	Total
Women	0.64%	98.4%	0.112%	6216 **(5.9%)**
Men	4.6%	94.6%	0.737%	97,672 **(94.0%)**
Total	**4.3%**	**94.8%**	**0.69%**	**103,888**

Source: See table 7.

Were These Women a Company?

The film analogy is again useful. In "The Company of Strangers," the women were approximately homogeneous in that, apart from the driver, they were roughly the same age, white (except for a Mohawk) and heterosexual (bar one), although divided by class and place of origin. On the ships I investigated, the stewardesses were in fact a company, at least in some senses, although age and attitudes to sex and work divided them more than the retired women in the film. On the one hand, there were at least six ways in which they were unified to some extent by what they did and who they were. Similarly, there were at least four ways in which others perceived them as a company. Sometimes these categories overlapped. And there were a minimum of four ways in which they were not a company, as I demonstrate below.

How did they qualify as a company? First, they all performed the same task: looking after women passengers and their cabins. In terms used by E.L.Trist and her collaborators, they were in an identical role task group, where "all concerned are supposed to do the same amount of the same task and work more or less independently of each other."[19] Oral testimony shows there was separation in that each stewardess independently did the same jobs at the same time: making up morning tea trays at 7 am; undergoing captain's inspection at 11; turning down beds at 6 pm; and finally quitting at 10 pm. Separately, but in parallel, they each dealt with passengers calls for cases; requests for assistance with children; ministering to the sick; and preparing passenger's clothes for the next event. "You got right on with your own job and you didn't really see each other until you got to your cabin at night," said CP stewardess Evelyn Huston. Union Castle stewardess Belle Fellman underlines this independent working: "We only saw each other at mealtimes."20

Second, there was a certain age homogeneity, with most women clustering in their thirties and forties (see tables 10 and 11).[21] The significance of this age clustering is two-fold. First, it suggests that a relatively large number of stewardesses on each ship likely shared some attitudes and experiences from having been raised in the same historical period. Second, since many were at approximately the same stage in life meant that the psychological tasks with which stewardesses were engaged would be similar. Life course

theorists such as Erik Erikson propose that women in their late thirties and forties are preoccupied by "generativity," creativity and productivity.[22] That is, they are usually exploring what makes them human beings: establishing and guiding the next generation and often feeling the need to be needed. This suggests that stewardesses would be generally service-oriented and especially responsive to the children and mothers in their care.

Table 10
Age and Gender in the Steward's Department, 1901-1951

	age 10-	age 14-	age 15-	age 20-	age 25	age 35-	age 45-	age 55-	age 65-	age 75-
1901	0	0	9 (2.09)	35 (8.1)	109 (25.3)	148 (34.4)	91 (21.1)	34 (7.9)	4 (0.9)	0
1911	0	0	17 (2.8)	57 (9.5)	201 (33.7)	173 (29.0)	97 (16.2)	40 (6.7)	10 (1.6)	1 (0.2)
1921	1 (0.1)	N/A	87 (9.1)	82 (0.60)	193 (20.2)	300 (31.4)	190 (19.9)	74 (7.7)	10 (1.0)	16 (1.7)
1931	0	6 (0.5)	41 (3.6)	63 (5.5)	214 (18.9)	337 (29.9)	317 (28.1)	131 (11.6)	16 (1.4)	3 (0.2)
1951	0	0	19 (2.6)]	44 (6.0)	169 (23.1)	181 (24.7)	170 (23.2)	98 (13.4)	46 (6.3)	3 (0.4)

Notes: Women as a percentage of all female stewarding workers in each decade arc in parentheses. 1931 figure for "age 14" includes women of fourteen and fifteen; "age 15" includes women between sixteen and twenty; and "age 20" includes women between twenty-one and twenty-four. The methods of ranking ages changed at mid-century.

Source: Calculated from raw totals in Great Britain, National Census of England and Wales, 1901-1951, Occupation Tables.

Table 10 shows that the majority were between twenty-five and fifty-four, with a peak between thirty-five and forty-four. While a thirty-year span might suggest diversity, in fact the stewardesses exhibited remarkable similarities. To a young Dianne Drummond they all seemed rather old: "35-50 and very sedate. You were old by then, in those days." Similarly, Edith Sowerbutts stated that "I can't emphasise too much that [we]...were mature women...Our main interest was in keeping our good jobs, earning a living, looking after home commitments. We thought it sauce for anyone to inquire about...our behaviour ashore, which, on the whole [was] remarkably correct." She spoke as a stewardess in her late thirties, surrounded by women whom she *felt* to be of the same age because of a lack of youth culture among interwar working-class women.23

A third way in which these women were a company is that they were almost entirely white and born in the British Empire, usually in port cities. There was just the occasional Belgian, especially in White Star, which used Antwerp as an embarkation point (see table 11). The concentration in Liverpool, London and Southampton is high. But place of birth is not necessarily synonymous with place of residence, and over half of BI's staff in the 1920s was not London-based, despite shipping from that port, according to the Steward's Department ledgers.

Table 11
Enumerated Pursers,Stewards and Domestic Staff by Six Principal Industrial Areas in England and Wales, in Raw Total and as Percentages, 1921

Area	Women	Women as % Total Women	F&M	F&M as % of Total F&M
Greater London	190	31.6%	5073	30.31%
Lancs, parts of Cheshire and Derbyshire	313	52.7%	8584	51.29%
Yorks, West Rdg with City of York	8	1.33%	124	0.74%
NE Coast	52	8.65%	1390	8.30%
Birmingham & district	5	0.83%	46	0.27%
S Wales	33	5.49%	1516	9.05%
Total	**601**		**16,733**	

Source: Calculated from raw totals in the Census of England and Wales, Occupational tables.

Table 12
Birthplaces of Crew on the *Duchess of York,* 25 July 1930 (Percents)

	Stewardesses	Bed. Stewardesses	Total Stewards Dept.	Total Engine Dept.	Total Cooks Dept.	Total Deck Dept.
Greater Liverpool (N of Mersey)	40%	51.6%	63.6%	39.2%	76.4%	43.4%
Birkenhead and Wirral (S of Mersey)	0	6.45%	4.97%	7.14%	3.92%	2.63%
London	4%	9.67%	0	0	0	2.63%
Midlands	4%	0	3.9%	0	1.96%	5.26%
Southern GB	0	0.67%	0	7.14%	1.96%	5.26%
Northern GB	36%	9.67%	10.4%	0	3.92%	7.04%
Eastern Britain	0	6.45%	1.49%	0	0	2.63%
Scotland	4%	0	2.48%	32.14%	5.88%	5.26%
Ireland	4%	9.67%	3.48%	10.7%	0	3.90%
Wales	4%	3.22%	2.98%	3.57%	3.92%	4.26%
British Colonies (excl. Canada)	4%	0	0.49%	0	0	3.90%
Foreign	0	0	0.99%	0	0	1.40%
Unknown	0	3.22%	].99%	0	1.96%	2.63%
Canada	0	0	0	0	0	2.63%
Totals	25	**31**	201	28	**51**	**76**

Source: MUN, MHA, Crew Agreements.

Table 12 shows how people from a single port could crew a ship. The example of *Duchess of York* shows a rather extraordinary level of consistency which was true of most transatlantic CP ships but not of other lines. A possible effect of this homogeneity of background at a time of continuing British imperial notions of racial superiority might have been the creation of a sense of self-importance, especially after seeing steerage passengers from other countries treated like cattle. For example, Cunard stewardess Edith Sowerbutts, took great pleasure in behaving protectively towards emigrants. "I had to intervene where I found emigrants were being bullied, pushed around or otherwise treated like...third-class citizens." She made sure that they were respected by the crew, who wanted to bathe them two at a time, working to get them to their destinations; her "shipmates dubbed them as my `League of Nations.' *Queen Mary* stewardess Deidre Conran did not want to identify with emigrants but did feel a sense of pity towards them: "Oh, the poor things. The way they slept, it was terrible. Our rooms weren't much better anyway." [24] It was a "them and us" situation in which the stewardesses were glad to be part of "us."

A fourth way these women were a company had to do with living arrangements. Quartered together, they were billeted in an area far from the sailors known as "Virgins' Alley," protected by the sergeant-at-arms from male intruders. The women shared a female crew bathroom and two- or four-berth cabins. There was no staff common room, except on CP vessels, and usually no formally separate mess facilities: they ate either in their cabins or in whatever dining room they were allocated. They met mainly after 10 pm, in their individual private spaces, usually united by exhaustion after thirteen-hour working days.

When Edith Sowerbutts was a stewardess on Cunard's *Franconia,* an extra barrier was built to divide the women staff from the men: "the partition...was to separate us from such extraneous grades as photographers, musicians and the like...this `chastity partition'... deprived [us] of some of the ventilation so necessary in the heat of the tropics." Quartering women away from men had two additional meanings which gave the women a position of collective privilege: they were often allocated relatively quiet space where they could sleep, and it was with the pampered people on board, not down amid the low-status workers. Shaw Savill stewardess Naomi Rudder records that "It was usually sailors, engineers and male staff who got that [aft cabins near propellers]. Stewardesses were forward with the passengers." This separation was one of the factors that led Dianne Drummond to say that "It was like a little town. You'd know some and [there would be] some strangers." [25] As dwellers in a particular hamlet, stewardesses were perhaps a company by virtue of shared geography, strengthened by some of the women also living together ashore.

A fifth feature that united them was that they were women without an enduring sexual relationship with a man. They were either single, widows or women whose marriages were effectively at an end (see table 13). To put this into context, in 1921 forty-three percent of male stewards were married. But for the stewardesses, a concentration of unmarried women meant that there was at least some homogeneity of status, even if their attitudes towards men, romance and possible sexual encounters may have differed. Marie Small, a Cunard stewardess, affirmed that "most were single [except for] one widow...They were still going [when I left]. I was more interested in getting to the top [than in marrying]." Naomi Rudder, a nurse before she was a Shaw Savill stewardess, lived happily throughout her career with the nurse from her ship, Pip Granton-Raine. She said that "I'd had several

opportunities [to marry] but I like the independent travelling life." Pip also "had her profession and that's enough...[I had] lots of offers. I'd just tell them marriage wasn't my line. I was a bit of a devil."26

Table 13
Stewardesses Enumerated as Married, Divorced or Widowed, and Single

Year	Single	Married	Divorced/ Widowed	Total
1901	46.6%	53.3%		420
1921	54.6%	20.7%	24.5%	933
1931	54.3%	16.4%	29.1%	329

Note: The 1901 census included only two categories, single and married.

Source: Great Britain, National Census of England and Wales, Occupation Tables.

Oral testimony shows that women were often united in looking after each other in the face of predatory males and workplace spies; they warned each other about whom to watch out. Royal Mail stewardess Merry Black, sister of a male nurse on a VD ward, performed an abortion for one of the pregnant laundry maids out of humanitarian instincts. "She was only a kid...about fifteen and a half...I was putting myself on the line, wasn't I... but they took her for a ride, those blokes." Equally, they facilitated each other's romances. Merry Black was friendly with a ship's hairdresser who wanted intercourse with the head of stores: "When I'd go ashore, she'd say `alright to come down to your cabin?' I'd say, `Yeah, leave me a drink.' And when I wanted her cabin, then I'd use her cabin. You know, we'd work it between us." Knowing how much a regular income meant to the many female carers among stewardesses who were supporting families on their own, they could be united in looking after each other's jobs rather than the company's interests. Edith Sowerbutts writes of one of the many "pre-1914 vintage" seadogs who took to the bottle. "She got away with it for a long time. She was protected by loyal shipmates, male and female, who used to cover up for her when she was tiddly. When thus incapable on docking or sailing day, they would hide her away in a spare room and guard her carefully."27

Finally, stewardesses were also a gang which sometimes socialised together in po rt, mainly for shopping and sightseeing. Edith Sowerbutts writes that in Hong Kong and Shanghai the stewardesses "revelled in the gorgeous silks and souvenir shops." And CP stewardesses such as Dianne Drummond loved sightseeing in Montréal. In New York, Welsh-born Cunard stewardess Marie Small thrived on trips to Radio City and seeing spectaculars like "Gone With the Wind." [28] Their lives were deeply disciplined and necessitated contingent undifferentiated bonhomie on board. But when they shed their uniforms, the women could enjoy an almost schizoid sense of freedom. This is confirmed by photographic and oral evidence.

There were also at least four ways that outsiders would have perceived stewardesses to be a company. Above all, they were defined by what they were not: male. They were rare females in a men's world that traditionally paraded its hostility to the presence of women. This small and socially excluded company was comprised of women who were behaving

unusually for their sex. Such behaviour often creates male unease and insecurity with how to deal with this. They were not traditional women rooted in their own hearth or doing paid housework in someone else's house. They were women in a relatively public place: a floating hotel. They were even seen as free of encumbrances, in the sense of being spinsters, widows, or no longer actively married.

A second way was that stewardesses worked in a separate female sphere. Even though they saw each other for less than ten percent of the working day and were not even mustered together each day, in others' eyes they were a separate part of the ship's company. CP, as noted above, even provided them with their own common room. Naomi Rudder felt that male unease, and the habit of seeing the stewardesses as a separate and unlikeable clan, was all the stronger because the stewardesses' work situation excluded males. "Some [stewards] resented you, because you were only dealing with the women." That is, stewardesses were thought to have an easier job, which is rather at odds with stewards' views that female passengers were more demanding. "Strange, but with the beautiful inconsistency of men, most stewards resented the women getting equal pay...They *thought* they did more work! It was in some instances much heavier, that's all. But the stewardess covered the entire section of two stewards, sometimes three," as Edith Sowerbutts noted.29

The stewardesses could experience themselves as having more in common with women passengers than with male colleagues. Fundamental to this may be the practice of evacuating women and children first on sinking ships. As a member of this category a stewardess had rights that her male colleagues did not. And stewardesses were doing the clean female work whereas the men, like those on land in the interwar years, were, as Joanna Bourke points out, carrying out mainly menial jobs "connected with primitive dirtiness." For example, stewards mopped corridors, while stewardesses did not. Edith Sowerbutts outlines other gendered demarcations on White Star: "Whereas men handled all the baggage, cleaned the portholes, vacuumed the carpets, the women cleaned all wash basins [and] washed mountains of glassware... With the amalgamation with Cunard, chamber pots came within their purlieu...Where there were top bunks, men made them up."30

Third, stewardesses were the only group of workers on a ship doing work for which they had been trained since their earliest years. Since this was low-status, female work in a masculine-oriented world it linked the women into a group. Finally, stewardesses were uniformed as nurse-like menial staff. To outsiders they appeared to have a common identity which gave them a superficial homogeneity: a white-aproned, white-stockinged, white-capped corps of women caregivers. Depending on the shipping line, a stewardess could either be mistaken for one of the maids or a hospital nurse. Edith Sowerbutts wrote baldly that "Cunard...girls looked like parlour maids with their pretty little muslin caps, frilled afternoon aprons. [When Cunard merged with White Star] our Lady Superintedent soon introduced a more up-to-date uniform...[yet] by today's standards we were [still] frumps."31

There were also at least four ways in which seafaring women engaged in domestic work did not comprise a company. First, according to oral testimony they had different attitudes to their jobs. There were two key divisions. The first was about extrinsic and intrinsic attitudes. Some were younger women who were travelling opportunistically and briefly to see the world. An example was Cunard Stewardess Doreen Sugar, who in 1924 "went away to see the world." As Edith Sowerbutts noted, "In the 1920s and 1930s, with

widespread unemployment and poor pay, many well-qualified women were glad to have the opportunity to go to sea." By contrast, there were those who were primarily committed to careers, often ex-nurses who had chosen to pursue their vocation at sea. The second division, which overlaps the first, was between those who worked as a result of an active choice and those who had acquired the job almost by default, such as unmarried daughters who were the sole supporters of elderly parents, or as "ship's widows" with children. For example, after her husband died suddenly at sea, Wendy House, who later became a Cunard leading stewardess, went away to sea when her baby was still breastfeeding. She put two of her girls in the Seamen's Orphanage and left another and the baby with her mother. It was the only way to make ends meet.[32] These motives particularly affected their sense of responsibility to the company, their attitude to passengers and their spending patterns.

A second way was that stewardesses did not work together as a group but rather did the same duties in isolation. Biographical evidence, particularly Maida Nixson's autobiography, *Ring Twice for the Stewardess,* shows that each worked in her allocated section, in a team with two male bedroom stewards who did "men's work." When she first joined a new ship, the Senior Stewardess told her that ¯Your two men are Knowles and Barry. Your predecessor called them Nag and Bully. Don't let them get you down'...It soon became evident that I could not enjoy from these twain the matey co-operation I had enjoyed in my former ship. `Make up the lower bunks,' growled Barry. `Know enough not to set to work like a shore housewife' [Knowles grated]. Get the bottles and glasses and start cracking.'" In Trist, *et al.'s* terms, they were in a reciprocal role group with stewards, where "the interdependent components of a main task are shared out among two or more persons who work together to complete it."[33] Men were their main daily colleagues. But the bigger lines forbade female and male stewards to be in a cabin at the same time and so stewardesses only had the company of their male colleagues in the corridors and pantry. It was almost easier to get to know the passengers than another steward or stewardess.

Third, stewardesses were further divided by the different decks on which they worked. In some cases they might also sleep on their working deck rather than in a collective sleeping area on a lower deck. Working on a higher deck meant three things: less work, because the passengers brought their own servants (although this could lead to rivalry and resentment at unequal workloads); identification with the class of passenger they served (which meant some first-class stewardesses could gain very grand self-identities and manners, according to oral testimony); and being subjected to different tipping levels. On the latter point, first-class was better than second or steerage, which led to economic rivalry.

Finally, maturity of attitude also divided some stewardesses. While their average ages tended to be similar, oral testimony shows there could be two groups: the wise, probably cynical, senior and quite elderly women who were realistic about the job and about life, and the travel-hunting twenty-five-year-olds out for a good time who usually defied the difficulties and disrespected conventions if they dared. Laura Crimmond recollects that "I was very green and knew nothing of the ways of the world, really...so it was quite a shock...I didn't know anything about gay people and things like that." Because they were working in a confined and gossip-ridden space, many stewardesses behaved in a guarded way, rather than being part of a female social group. CP stewardess Dianne Drummond remembered that they "all had a man friend, their own little private lives." In the interwar years they were

on formal terms, using each other's surname and title: Miss Sowerbutts, Mrs. Kilburn. And different stewardesses had different perceptions and experiences of affinity. Doreen Sugar, working on Cunard cruises in the 1920s, recalled that "there was no jealousy or bitchiness. The older women would swap and exchange leaves with the younger ones." By contrast, Ilsa Guigood reported that "There's so much jealousy on ship...They'd watch you like hawks." On Shaw Savill, Naomi Rudder found that "the older women were against us terrible – we happened to be young and I suppose they resented it." She did, however, behave in a sisterly way, being especially sympathetic towards the widows who went to sea raw with grief: "Poor things, they were in distress through what they'd been through before they went to sea." Referring to one stewardess who was a widow of a chief officer, she remembered that "I used to pray at night that good things would happen to her, as she lay up above."34

Like most seafarers on liners, regardless of gender, stewardesses were part of a non-static work group that could change rapidly. This meant that any affinities could be broken up: there was not necessarily time for cohesion to develop. Elsie Black managed to stay on the same Canadian Pacific vessel, *Duchess of Atholl,* for eleven years. Although my survey of a twenty-year run of crew agreements showed that these Duchess-class vessels ferrying from Liverpool to Canada had an exceptionally static component of stewardesses, Black found that "your friends changed a lot." Marie Small on Cunard learned that "after the war, you changed ships more. During the war you didn't know what ship you'd go on [next]."35

Conclusion

I have tried to argue that interwar stewardesses both were and were not a company. My research thus far shows that while interwar liners did have separate companies of women, these female workers were more united in others peoples' eyes than in their own. The companies of women were divided by type and area of work, attitude, maturity, and the employment patterns that led to frequent shifts to other ships.

The company of stewardesses had some of the characteristics of the women in the "The Company of Strangers" in that they could collaborate to survive difficult circumstances. They gave each other advice and support; performed the same tasks; shared the same cultural background; and lived in the same women-only quarters. The majority had no enduring bond with a male partner ashore and their off-duty pleasures were often together. Passengers and other crew may have seen the stewardesses as a group by virtue of their gender; their separate and female sphere of work; the reality that they were the only workers doing what they had been trained to do since childhood; and above all the uniform that made them seem like a corps with a cohesive identity. But in fact the women were much more diverse than they appeared. They were doing the job for different reasons and with varying long-term commitments. They did not work together but in isolation or with men; they belonged to different decks, so there were spatial and class divisions. Finally, stewardesses were divided epistemologically by their experiences and different attitudes. But as in the film, those women tolerated what could be great personal differences and some even ended up living together. They enjoyed together some of the landscapes they explored.

In interviewing stewardesses I have also found women who were independent and anti-dependent. They were often people with enormously polished social skills who

preferred to be loners. Most had little sense of union solidarity. Some were rivalrous about status and very anxious about their own prestige – not least in response to the snobbery of some passengers and the misogyny of male colleagues. Yet many also said they subsequently missed the companionship: "there was always someone to go out with." Keeping company with the strangers of each new voyage was thus a complicated affair.

NOTES

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1. B.E. Collins and H. Guetzkow, "Group and Individual Performance" in Peter B. Smith (ed.), *Group Processes* (London, 1970), 64.

2. See, for example, the discussions in Abraham Cornelious, "Dreaming between Europe and the US," the English summary of a Dutch thesis at National Maritime Museum (NMM) 656.616.2; and Howard Johnson, *The Cunard Story* (London, 1987), chapter 12.

3. Great Britain, National Census of England and Wales, Passenger and Migration Tables, 1911-1931, Passengers from UK Ports to Extra-European Countries. Noreen Branson and Margot Heineman, *Britain in the Nineteen Thirties* (London, 1973), 175, note that while there was no shortage after the sharp drop in WWI – indeed the number of live-in domestics rose because of high unemployment in industrial areas – women employers complained that the servants available were "independent, incompetent and wanted too much money."

4. Violet Jessop, *Titanic Survivor: The Memoirs of Violet Jessop, Stewardess* (Phoenix Mill, 1997); Edith Sowerbutts, "Memoirs of a British Seaman" (Unpublished typescript, Imperial War Museum Archive, c. 1980); and Maida M. Nixson, *Ring Twice for the Stewardess* (London, 1954). See also the novels about stewardesses: Coralie Stanton, *The Pretty Stewardess* (Dundee, c. 1930); and Lyn Andrews, *The White Empress* (London, 1989).

5. Directed by Cynthia Scott, 1990, National Film Board of Canada. It became a cult film for older feminists because it offered a vision of an active and communicative rather than a passive and isolated old age.

6. Great Britain, National Census of England and Wales, 1931, General Summary, Industry Tables.

7. The main staffing records relating to stewardesses are at the NMM. See BI 30/34-36, Ledgers of Stewarding Staff Afloat, 1913-1955; BI 30/38, Applications to Steward's Department,]913-1955; and P&O 77/23, Chief Steward's Conduct Report, 1920-1924.

8. P&O 77/23. This ledger, however, does not reflect the entire situation in the department; several ledgers were kept simultaneously, but the others are not extant.

9. Sari Maenpaa, "A Woman at Sea," *Nautica Fennica* (1995), 23-33, uses David J. Morgan's gender-specific constructs of labour from *Discovering Men: Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities* (London, 1992).

10. Photographs in my possession of crew fancy-dress parties confirm this. As well, Nixson, *Ring Twice,* 32, observed that `"Sheilas'...seem to have a natural leaning towards sea life."

11. NMM, BI 30/34-36, Stewards Department Staff Afloat.

12. Catherine Hakim, *Occupational Segregation* (London, 1979).

13. See Cherry Drummond, *The Remarkable Life of Victoria Drummond* (London, 1994); Olive J. Carroll, *Deep Sea "Sparks"* (Vancouver, 1993); and Birgitta Gustafsson, "Wireless Women,"

Women and the Sea Network *Newsletter*, No. 3 (Spring 1999), 3.

14. Gill Hayes, "Interview," December 1997. See also Jo Stanley, "Not All Plain Sailing," *Nursing Times*, XCIV, No. 8 (February 1998), 28-30.

15. Edith Sowerbutts, "Memoirs of a British Seaman" (typescript, c. 1980, Imperial War Museum Archive); Dianne Drummond, "Interview," 6 August 1986; and Evelyn Huston, "Interview," 3 May 1986.

16. See, for example, Harriet Bradley, *Men's Work, Women's Work* (Cambridge, 1992); and Martha Blaxall and Barbara Reagan, *Women and the Workplace: The Implications of Occupational Segregation* (Chicago, 1981). Domestic service is discussed in *Born to Serve: Domestic Service in Liverpool, 1850-1950* (Liverpool, 1985[?]); Claudette Lacelle, *Urban Domestic Servants in 19th Century Canada* (Ottawa, 1987); and Caroline Davidson, *A Woman's Work is Never Done: A History of Housework in the British Isles /650-1960* (London, 1986).

17. Both these shore-based patterns logically suggest that women might comprise up to twenty-one percent of a ship's crew. Yet tables 2, 3 and 5 show they were eight, six and five percent, respectively. On some passenger-plus-cargo vessels, like the Elder Dempster ships on the Liverpool-West Africa route, they could be virtually absent, despite the need for seagoing domestic labour.

18. For a further discussion of this point, see Jo Stanley, "Finding a Brief Flowering of Typists at Sea: Evidence from a Cunard Archive," *Business Archives*, No. 76 (November 1998), 29-40; and Stanley, "The Mystery of the Disappearing Purser's Typists," *American Neptune*, LIX, No. 2 (September 1999), forthcoming.

19. E.L. Trist, *et al.*, "Sociotechnical Systems," in Smith (ed.), *Group Processes*, 41-54.

20. Huston, "Interview;" and Belle Fellman, "Interview," 21 February 1992.

21. They were generally older than women in non-service jobs ashore. By 1931 they had become an older group than males in the same department, with their numbers peaking at thirty-five to forty-five rather than the twenty-five to thirty-five peak for male stewards. It is worth noting that in the 1920s P&O imposed an upper limit of fifty-five.

22. See for example, Erik Erikson, *Identity Youth and Crisis* (New York, 1986), 130.

23. Drummond, "Interview;" and Sowerbutts, "Memoirs," 127.

24. Sowerbutts, "Memoirs," Il and 15; and Southampton City Archives, M0082, Deidre Conran, "Interview," 17 August 1990.

25. Sowerbutts, "Memoirs," 146; Naomi Rudder, "Interview," 5 January 1987; and Drummond, "Interview."

26. Marie Small, "Interview," 24 March 1988; and Rudder, "Interview."

27. Merry Black, "Interview," 12 September 1993; and Sowerbutts, "Memoirs," 176.

28. Sowerbutts, "Memoirs," 176; Drummond, "Interview;" and Small, "Interview."

29. Rudder, "Interview;" Informal conversation with retired seafarers, Adelphi Hotel, Liverpool, 28 May 1998; and Sowerbutts, "Memoirs," 121.

30. Joanna Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain 1899-1960: Gender, Class and Ethnicity* (London, 1994), 93-94; and Sowerbutts, "Memoirs," 120.

31. Sowerbutts, "Memoirs," 128.

32. Doreen Sugar, "Interview," 21 January 1996; Sowerbutts, "Memoirs,"]43; and House daughters, "Interview," 1988.

33. Nixson, *Ring Twice*, 23 and 45; and Trist, *et al.*, "Sociotechnical Systems," 50.

34. Southampton City Archives, M0078, Laura Crimmond, "Interview;" Drummond, "Interview;" Sugar, "Interview;" Southampton City Archives, M0016, Ilsa Duiguid, "Interview;" and Rudder, "Interview."

35. Elsie Black, "Interview," 6 September 1986; and Small, "Interview."