Seamen Ashore: Port Visits of Late Nineteenth-Century Finnish Sailors

Yrjô Kaukiainen

In *Jack in Port,* Judith Fingard painted a vivid description of what she called "the demise of sailortown." Life in port cities, she claimed, underwent a profound change during the nineteenth century. The seamen of the 1820s, 1830s and 1840s still enjoyed "the unhurried pace of the pre-industrial age" which "meant that sailors' visits to port were sufficiently lengthy to enable them to make a significant contribution to both the economy and the character of sailortown." Yet the following generation, sailing in the 1850s, 1860s and 1870s (when "the opportunities for seafaring grew by leaps and bounds") experienced an increase in the tempo of shipping which, among other things, shortened stays in ports. But the greatest changes came at the end of the century: "The third generation sailor, active in the last quarter of the century, belonged to a dying occupation... [when] the short stopovers characteristic of the new pace of commerce allowed the sailor little time to go ashore...As a result the late 1890s saw the demise of sailortown."[1]

While this description is doubtless true for the principal seaports of Atlantic Canada, it is important to remember that international ports have continued to change rapidly even after "the demise of sailortown." Indeed, present-day ports have little in common with even the most developed harbours of a century ago. Moreover, the scale and scope of the change have been different in various parts of the world as well as disparate types of ports. It is clear, however, that Fingard has underscored a fundamental change which has been equally important during this century: the shortening of time in port. While mid-nineteenth century sailing vessels spent weeks or even months in port, typical turnaround times for modern ships are now counted in hours. Accordingly, the presence of sailors has diminished even in traditional "steamer ports."

While the general picture is clear enough, it is not easy to find relevant data on the actual speed and magnitude of the change. While there are some good local data on turnaround times, such as those published by the Atlantic Canada Shipping Project, systematic statistics covering longer spans of time are the exception. Moreover, quantitative data on time in ports are far from sufficient to understand how the profound transformation of shipping has affected ports and port cities. We also need to know how often sailors were allowed to leave the ship, how long they were allowed ashore, and how much money they were able to spend while there. Moreover, we should also remember that although sailors were the most characteristic of all portside elements, they were not

The Northern Mariner/Le Marin du nord, **VI, No. 3 (July 1996), 39-46.**

necessarily as prominent quantitatively — all important nineteenth-century ports contained large numbers of stevedores, riggers, shipwrights, dockmen, boatmen and others who were needed to handle the vessels and cargoes. It is important therefore to see how changes in shipping affected these wharfside occupations.

This essay is a modest attempt to bring a few additional features to the big picture. First, I have collected data on typical turnaround times of Finnish deep-sea sailing tramps and a few steam liners. Second, I have tried to find out how much time Finnish sailors were permitted ashore while in port. Third, I have looked at how much money they had at their disposal. It seems that despite ships remaining in port for considerable periods of time, seamen had such limited time in "sailortowns" and such modest sums to spend that economically they were less important than might have been expected. Of course, Finnish seamen were such a small and perhaps atypical element that few universal conclusions can be drawn. Moreover, the data are illustrative rather than statistically representative. Still, I think that the evidence shows that the issue was more complex than might be concluded by looking at turnaround times alone.

Plentiful data on the voyages of Finnish foreign-going vessels can be found in the registers of the Finnish Mutual Maritime Insurance Association.[2] Typically, they record dates of arrival and departure, which allows us to calculate turnaround times in ports. But since all necessary dates are not found in each case, the data must be checked carefully to exclude incomplete voyages. Accordingly, a good deal of checking and simple manual work are involved. For this reason, I began by taking a small sample containing the ships of a single Finnish seaport, Raahe.[3] It should be sufficient, however, to show us the tempo of late nineteenth-century windjammers.

The cases range from the late 1850s to the turn of the century. Although the sample is small — thirty-six ocean-going ships with a cumulative time in business of only 200 years — it shows a consistent pattern.[4] If calls at "ports for orders" and longer stays at home for fitting-out are excluded, turnaround times for Raahe bluewater ships averaged thirty-four days. Visits in western European and Scandinavian ports (thirty-two days) were shortest, while those in North America (thirty-three days) were only marginally longer.[5] In southern and eastern Europe the average stays were more than thirty-seven days and in other ports (Caribbean, South America, East Asia) forty-three days. As an illustration, we can examine the voyages of the brig *Chloris* (260 net tons). The vessel left Raahe in September 1857, and between November 1858 and September 1861 (a period for which the register is complete) it visited the following ports:

Alexandria	37 days	Shields	32 days
Falmouth (for orders)	13 days	Alexandria	24 days
Leith	16 days	Falmouth (for orders)	8 days
Colombo	37 days	London	16 days
Madras	73 days	Swansea	12 days
Penang and Singapore	44 days	Lisbon	26 days
Akyab	24 days	Raahe (home)	37 days
London (via Falmouth)	23 days		

In this context, the precise number of days in port is not very important — the principal point is that sailing vessels were expected to stay for longish periods in various ports. The figures cited above are also in fairly good agreement with those for Atlantic Canadian craft. Eric Sager and Gerry Panting have shown that turnaround times for four major Canadian fleets averaged about thirty-two days in the 1860s, declined slightly in the following decade and increased to thirty-seven days in the 1890s, a development that probably reflects the gradual change in voyage patterns and a relative increase in more long-distance trading.[6]

Turnaround times of over thirty days imply that Raahe ships spent no less than forty percent of their active lives in ports, a proportion similar to Atlantic Canadian vessels. Thus, for each month actually at sea the crew spent twenty-two or twenty-three days in various harbours. While this proportion may seem high, it is important to remember that the ships were not just loading or unloading but were undergoing needed maintenance. As well, if the ship had to be taken to a drydock, it first had to be emptied. Vessels arriving or leaving empty also had to dump or load the necessary ballast. During busy seasons they often had to wait for a berth, or for barges or lighters if anchored in the roads, and the bureaucracy — in particular in southern Europe, South America and East Asia — might cause delays. It is also clear that the longer the voyage the more time it took to buy and load all the necessary provisions.

While the means were consistent enough (for example, as far as the proportion of turnaround to total time was concerned, two-thirds of all cases fell between thirty-nine and forty-six percent) there were variances between different ships. Logically, one might expect that vessels in long-distance trades would have spent proportionally more time at sea, and in individual cases this was true, as is shown by a ship of about 1000 net tons which between the fall of 1871 and the autumn of 1875 made three voyages to East Asia and spent only thirty-six percent of its time in ports (including ports-for-orders). Overall, though, there was no systematic relationship between distance sailed and time in port. Instead, it seems that vessel size was more strongly related to time in port, with smaller vessels normally having quicker turnarounds. It seems that the larger the vessel, the greater the problems in organizing loading and discharge effectively.

Although the efficiency of large ports improved vastly during the second half of the nineteenth century, the evidence does not reveal any corresponding trend in turnaround times. While the size of the sample may partly be at fault, some other factors also contributed. First, there was an increase in mean vessel size which, as we have seen, tended to lengthen turnaround times. Moreover, the bulk of the material dates from the 1870s and 1880s, a period marked by a downward trend in the business cycle. This affected the trend, since among other things it was more common in the 1880s for tramp ships, like those in the sample, to have to wait for cargoes. But sailing vessels were also gradually being relegated to more marginal trades and less efficient ports. It is illustrative that as late as 1909-1912 the 1654-net ton iron ship *Lochee* spent no less than fifty-one percent of its time in ports (mainly in South America and the Gulf of Mexico) and its average visit exceeded fifty days.[7] Indeed, long port visits were also typical for the last windjammers in the 1920s and 1930s.

But for those sailors who shifted to steam — an increasing majority — life changed substantially during the last two or three decades of the century. At first, the growth of

steam shipping was virtually synonymous with the development of liner services. Ships sailed at regular intervals between their terminals and often called at a number of intermediate ports. Since schedules were tight, and time was money, these ships stayed in ports as short a time as possible. A good example of this may be seen in the turnaround times of the Finnish Steamship Company's ***Sinus*** (1003 gross registered tons) in August 1890:[8]

Hull	6 days
Bremerhaven	2 days
Turku	1 day
Hanko	1 day
Helsinki	2 days
Uuras	3 days
Helsinki	1 day
Hull	7 days

Longer turnaround times in Hull were planned as a margin of safety in the timetable. It also provided time to fill the coal bunkers and to perform necessary maintenance on the machinery.

Yet not all steamers were liners; indeed the proportion of tramp steamers carrying bulk cargoes must gradually have increased as steam replaced sail. Unfortunately, data on tramp steamers in the registers of the Finnish Maritime Insurance Association are scarce. During the winters, however, Finnish Steamship Company liners often engaged in pure tramping in ice-free waters. For example, the *Sirius* and its sister ship *Orion* did this during the winter of 1884-1885; their port visits were as follows:[9]

Sirius		*Orion*	
London	13 days	Cardiff	6 days
Swansea	3 days	Valencia	13 days
Venice	9 days	Montevideo	12 days
Trieste	11 days	Rio de Janeiro	13 days
Bordeaux	15 days		
Swansea	17 days		
Copenhagen	5 days		

While turnaround times were still shorter than those of typical large sailing vessels, they were much longer than the stopovers during liner operations. This is exactly what would be expected, since for tramps a port visit generally involved loading or discharging full cargoes while liners normally only handled limited amounts of goods in intermediate ports. Many times tramp steamers visited ports which were not as efficient as those of western Europe. Yet it is interesting that port times in both examples were quite similar to those in the 1930s.[10] Although the initial transition to steam generated a fairly rapid improvement in turnaround times, thereafter change was much slower until the advent of the "container revolution."

It is almost self-evident that waterfront communities will be affected if vessels remain in port for only a few days rather than a month. But the everyday lives of sailors appear not to have changed as much as might be expected. *If pott visits were shortened,* the same also happened to passage times, and on shorter routes the net result was that ships spent more time in ports than offshore. For example, Finnish liners such as *Sirius* and *Orion* sailing between Britain and Finnish south coast ports spent about twenty days per month in ports and only ten days at sea. Even tramp steamers had more port than sea time: only in cases like the *Orion's* South American voyage did the proportion of time at sea amount to as much as sixty percent. From the perspective of the common sailor the transition probably was not very dramatic. Instead of a few long stops, men on the steamers enjoyed several short ones. Moreover, it seems that their days in port increased rather than diminished.

For a common sailor, a vessel's proportion of shore to sea days was of purely academic interest. What mattered to him was the time he spent ashore, free from shipboard discipline. This was also what mattered to the publicans and other purveyors of personal services in sailortown. Unfortunately, seamen's shore liberties were too trivial a feature to men of business to be reflected in the sources we have used thus far. As a result it is mainly in descriptions from the "lower deck" that the necessary evidence must be sought. This means that problems of typicality will mount. Even if we assume that the frequency of shore liberties did not depend on the whims of individual masters rather than upon common norms and good practice, it is clear that such norms likely varied between different national fleets and across time.

In addition to memoirs and other literary descriptions, there is a primary source which might yield additional information. Regular crew's accounts *(folkbok in Swedish)* were normally kept on large ships and some revealed the size and frequency of "advances" given to crew. Since advances typically were taken as "pocket money" to spend ashore, their frequency is a rough indication of how often sailors were allowed to enjoy the delights of ports.[11] More important, such sources tell us how much the men were able to spend. Unfortunately, since high-quality crew's accounts are fairly rare, the issue of typicality remains.[12]

The number of detailed crew's accounts I have been able to find has been quite small.[13] An example is found in table 1. The vessel in question was fairly large (about 1000 net tons) and engaged in long-distance trading. If these advances represented the minimum number of shore liberties, on average the men enjoyed one at least every third week in British ports but only once a month in East Asia (indeed, there is a case in which only about half a crew received advances in Rangoon). No one was allowed to leave the ship in ports-for-orders or during a short stay in Singapore, where a light general cargo was discharged. In general, the first shore liberties came only after the sails had been taken down and the ship was in all respects in good "port shape." This meant that normally men were allowed ashore only a week or ten days after arrival.

Normally Sunday was the day for liberties, but in Asian rice ports even these may have been working days (Chinese coolies who were frequently used as stevedores worked according to the Chinese calendar with no weekly holidays). The sums advanced normally were related to wages (for example, ABs received much more than boys) but overall were quite modest (which also suggests that advances were taken each time a liberty was

granted). Half a pound was regarded as sufficient to get a man drunk in a British port. Seldom did anyone receive more than one pound at one time, and it is possible that in such cases men planned to buy clothes or other necessities. The total amount granted was also modest, averaging about one-tenth of the ship's port expenses, excluding interest, agents' fees and commissions, and much less than stevedoring costs.

Table 1
Advances **Received by Seamen of the Finnish Ship *Toivo,* 1871-1875**

Port (days in port)	No. Advances/Man	Average Value
Copenhagen (2 days)	-	-
Liverpool (85 days)	3.8	sh. 12.6
Bombay (38 days)	0.9	Rp. 11 (sh. 22.0)
Moulmain (58 days)	2.0	Rp. 4.2 (sh. 8.3)
Queenstown (9 days)	-	-
Gillingham/Chatham (42 days)	2.9	sh. 27.0
Cardiff (62 days)	3.6	sh. 14.6
Hong Kong (38 days)	1.3	Mx$ 5.85 (sh. 23.9)
Singapore (11 days)	-	-
Rangoon (21 days)	1.0	Rp. 6.0 (sh. 12.0)
Falmouth (9 days)	-	-
Bremerhaven (40 days; new crew)	1.9	Rm. 12.7 (sh. 12.1)
Rangoon (34 days)	0.5	Rp. 3.6 (sh. 7.2)
Falmouth (4 days)	-	-

Note: Copenhagen, Queenstown and Falmouth were ports for orders. Mates, deserters and discharged men excluded. Sh = shilling; Rp =rupee; Mx$ = Mexican gold dollar; and Rm = reichsmark.

Source: Oulu Provincial Archives, J.W. Snellman Collection, *Toivo* accounts.

Toivo was not exceptional. On the contrary, it seems to represent fairly uniform practice. Indeed, on other Finnish ships seamen were given "pocket money" so seldom and in such small amounts that they clearly did not enjoy frequent liberties. The same tradition can also be traced in memoirs and descriptions such as the novels by Jalmari Nortamo (see note 11). In fact, the overall picture is much the same as that painted by Richard Henry Dana on conditions aboard the *Pilgrim* in the 1830s. After a 150-day voyage to California, the first shore liberties (comprising the whole larboard watch) were granted only on the fourth Sunday after arrival.[14]

Anyone who has read Herman Melville's *Redburn* will find a vast difference between these traditions and the lives of American sailors in Liverpool in the 1840s. According to Melville, the crew of the *Highlander* was allowed to go ashore each night and on Sundays.[15] One explanation for such liberal treatment may have been that in Melville's day cooking aboard was not allowed in Liverpool docks and American seamen

normally took their meals in nearby boarding houses. In any case, testimony shows that practices may have varied widely among ships.

Although I am in no position to estimate what was typical in the late nineteenth century or to identify the "liberal" or the "disciplined" merchant navies, it may be useful to remember that things did not change very fast. The "hard" Finnish tradition was living reality even in 1939 when Eric Newby visited Australia on the *Moshulu* before "the last grain race." But after waiting six days for their first shore leave the men (excluding a small anchor watch) were subsequently allowed ashore each weekend the vessel was loading in Port Victoria.[16]

It must be reiterated in conclusion that this article is merely a preliminary excursion into the topic. Much additional work is needed to produce a more reliable and generally applicable picture. Yet the questions seem worth pondering. Shore liberties were certainly central to the everyday lives of seamen, as Dana testified so eloquently. It may even be asked how many men deserted because they were allowed shore leaves judged too infrequent in comparison either to their personal desires or with practices on other ships. Knowing more of the seamen's everyday life in ports is also necessary to understand the development of port cities and their infrastructures. In this respect, however, it is possible that further studies will diminish the importance of seamen to port communities. My examples suggest that the sums spent by visiting sailors were quite small and only a fraction of what masters laid out for bosun's stores and provisions. Indeed, it is tempting to claim that seamen's demand was rather marginal to a typical port economy. The study of sailors thus paradoxically stresses the importance of looking at other relevant professional groups and sub-elements in port towns.

NOTES

* Yrjô Kaukiainen is Professor of Economic History at the University of Helsinki. He has published on maritime, demographic, social and economic topics, mainly about the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. His recent books include *Sailing into Twilight* (Jyvàskylâ, 1991) and *A History of Finnish Shipping* (London, 1993).

1. Judith Fingard, *Jack in Port: Sailortowns of Eastern Canada* (Toronto, 1982), 4-5.

2. The source has been described in some detail in Yrjô Kaukiainen, *Sailing into Twilight. Finnish Shipping in an Age of Transport Revolution, 1860-1914* (Jyvàskylâ, 1991), 131-132.

3. In total tonnage Raahe was the leading port in Finland in the 1860s and early 1870s. An additional advantage is that there is a typescript databank of the voyages of Raahe ships: Kai Snellman, "Raahen purjelaivat ja niiden paâllystôt 1800-luvulla" (Unpublished manuscript, 1995).

4. After turnaround times had been calculated for the first ten vessels they changed only marginally thereafter.

5. In North American grain ports such as Baltimore and Philadelphia, turnaround times often were less than twenty days (the shortest in the sample was six), but the variance was large because many vessels had to wait for loading berths.

6. Eric W. Sager with Gerald E. Panting, *Maritime Capital: The Shipping Industry of Atlantic Canada, 1820-1914* (Montréal, 1990), 140-141.

7. Georg Kâhre, *Under Gustaf Eriksons flagga* (Mariehamn, 1948), 55-56.

8. Registers of the Finnish Mutual Maritime Insurance Association. The examples are representative, for the mean turnaround time of seventeen or eighteen days was the norm for ships sailing between the south coast of Finland and Hull between the 1880s and 1920s. In 1891, the Finnish Steamship Co. inaugurated an "express" line from Hanko to Hull with more powerful ships and managed to shorten turnaround times to fourteen days, a schedule it maintained into the 1930s.

9. See note 7.

10. This comparison was with the ships of the Finnish Steamship Company in the mid-1930s taken from Abo Akademi, Maritime Archives, Archives of the FÀA, "Resebok for direktionen."

11. This is exactly what sailors' memoirs tell us. See, for example, Jalmari Nortamo, *Valtamerillâ* (Porvoo, 1930); and Eric Newby, *The Last Grain Race* (Reading, 1990).

12. This is exacerbated by the fact that the totals of advances in different ports can be found much more easily that the dates and amounts of individual advances.

13. Oulu Provincial Archives, Archives of Sovelius (Raahe) and Snellman (Oulu).

14. Richard Henry Dana, *Two Years before the Mast* (reprint, Harrisonburg, VA, 1981), 120, 135, 139-141, 157 and 166.

15. Herman Melville, *Redburn* (reprint, Reading, 1986), 200-202.

16. Newby, *Last Grain Race,* 150 ff.