If Maritime Historians Are in Danger of "being left with their journals and not much else" (Lewis Fischer), What Can Those Journals Tell Us about Ourselves? A Ten-Year Study[1]

Mike Bender

This article examines the width and variety of contemporary maritime history - a concern of Skip Fischer in his later years, and which gives the article its title. Maritime history can provide a major template for understanding change, but it can only achieve this by actively investigating the multiple ways in which human beings relate to the sea. The author listed 30 categories that would reflect this possible diversity and then coded all the articles in the four major British maritime history journals for the period 2009-2018 (N=774 papers by 897 authors). The results were clearcut. Papers on nations' navies accounted for 43.3 percent and papers on mercantile matters 44.8 percent, highlighting a lack of diversity in research topics and leading the author to fear for the future of maritime history.

---

[1] Acknowledgements: Peter Davies, Professor Maria Fusaro, Roger Ryan, Peter Skidmore, and Peter Taylor for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper; and Mike Duffy for his patient attempts to point me in the right directions over the past few years. I must also thank Alison Bender and Kay Harding once again for their invaluable help in preparing this manuscript. Obviously the views expressed in this paper are my own.

This paper is a reworking and re-evaluation of two earlier papers of mine: "If Maritime Historians Are in Danger of 'being left with their journals and not much else' (Lewis Fischer), What Can Those Journals Tell Us about Ourselves? (The Ten Year Study)," *Maritime South West*, no. 32 (2019), 7-42; and "Who Sails the Seaway of Diamonds? The Ten Year Study Revisited," *Maritime South West*, no. 33 (2020), 199-213.

Cet article traite de l'ampleur et de la diversité de l'histoire maritime contemporaine, une des préoccupations de Skip Fischer au cours des dernières années de sa vie. L'histoire maritime peut servir de modèle permettant de comprendre le changement, mais elle ne peut y parvenir qu'en analysant avec diligence les maintes façons dont les êtres humains exploitent la mer. L'auteur a répertorié 30 catégories qui représentent cette diversité d'usage, puis il a codé tous les articles dans les quatre grandes revues d'histoire maritime de langue anglaise pour la période 2009-2018 (N = 774 articles par 897 auteurs). Les résultats sont clairs. Les articles sur les marines des nations représentent 43,3 pour cent, tandis que les articles sur les questions mercantiles représentent 44,8 pour cent du total. Ces résultats soulignent un manque de diversité au niveau des sujets de recherche, entraînant chez l'auteur des craintes à l'égard de l'avenir de l'histoire maritime.

For the sea represents all: beauty, power, quest, redemption, searching, life, healing, soothing, conquering.
- Cynthia Behrman, *Victorian Myths of the Sea*[2]

On 11 February 2018, Lewis "Skip" Fischer died at the early age of seventy-one. He was a pivotal figure in the development of the teaching and research of maritime history from the mid-1980s onwards. The present paper is dedicated to his memory and his unique contribution to the growth of maritime history.

Towards the end of his life, Fischer wrote two key papers on the future of maritime history.[3] The first article, published in *The Mariner's Mirror* in 2011, gives its title to the present paper: are maritime historians in danger of "being left with their journals and not much else?" To answer Fischer's question, I first offer a rationale for what components should be included in the study of maritime history. Next, I provide a statistical analysis that identifies the presence (or lack thereof) of these components across the four leading British maritime

---

[2] Cynthia Behrman, *Victorian Myths of the Sea* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1977), 22.

[3] Lewis R. Fischer, "Are We in Danger of Being Left with Our Journals and Not Much Else: The Future of Maritime History," *The Mariner's Mirror* 97, no. 1 (February 2011): 366-381, https://doi.org/10.1080/00253359.2011.10709050; and "The Future Course of Maritime History," *International Journal of Maritime History* 29, no. 2 (2017): 355-364, https://doi.org/10.1177/0843871417695493.

history journals between 2009 and 2018. Finally, I discuss what light this data can shed on the present state of academic maritime history.

Among his many achievements, Lewis "Skip" Fischer was also a founding editor of *The Northern Mariner / Le marin du nord.* (Photo courtesy Olaf Janzen)

What Should Maritime History Encompass?

This paper is based on a single, simple premise: that maritime history is one of the most important templates for understanding what has happened in the world since time began. The sea and the movement of people and goods on it and across it is such a central part of the dynamic of human change that maritime history should be one of the key ways that students, at whatever level, come to understand the meaning of "history" and "historical study."

We then must face the question: why has the centrality of maritime history not been recognised, or, to phrase it another way, why has maritime history not achieved this centrality?

The purpose of studying maritime history has to be the same as the purpose for studying history in general. Functionally, it is to uncover as much as we can about the past (archival research), and then make the best sense we can of it (analysis; theoretical constructions). Of course, this last purpose will be subject to change over time, since the assumptions and beliefs of the historian will be, to a significant extent, a product of the political, social, and economic context and times they were born and grew up in, as well as the context of their studies and of their career.

For history to play its part in the development of the young adult, or for students of any age, it must have relevance and explanatory power with regard to major events – such as political and social change, war, and population movement – that have determined the world we live in. The study of history, or any major branch of it, must help them acquire knowledge structures and methods of enquiry concerning the major dynamics of human change and

development – areas of activity that were relevant in the past and today.

So, if maritime history is just as useful and as important a way in which to view events as, say, a political or social history perspective, within what parameters must it show its utility?

Frank Broeze, in his 1989 article, "From the Periphery to the Mainstream," gave a generally accepted definition of the field of maritime history, when he stated that it should be concerned with "the use of the sea by humans, but beyond that is concerned with everything related to that use of the sea, everything that leads to that use, and everything that derives from that use or is significantly influenced by it … [covering] all aspects of human endeavour and experience." Broeze incorporated this approach in his *Island Nation: A History of Australia*.[4] This paper seeks to investigate the width of research present in the major British maritime history journals to see to what extent Broeze's (and surely Fischer's) hope has been achieved.

We therefore need to outline the major aspects of the relationship between humanity and the sea. They surely include: gaining food from the sea; exploration; movement of goods and people; migration – forced such as slavery, or for religious, economic or political reasons; communities servicing maritime activities; the development of technology and science to seaborne movement (e.g.) the speed of the steam-powered ship and its ability to sail in straight lines (hence the term liner), independent of wind direction, combined with the telegram (through the laying of cables on the seabed) completely changed the nature and speed of communication and the nature and speed of political action.

These relationships of humankind to the sea should be studied from the earliest beginnings to as close to the present as is feasible. Concerning appropriate methodologies, it seems generally agreed that a rapprochement with marine archaeology is much to be desired. Susan Rose writes of "the way nautical archaeology can provide crucial evidence," while Martin Bellamy, the current editor of *The Mariner's Mirror*, wrote in 2017, "Only by marrying the two disciplines together can we hope to develop new understandings,"[5] particularly of how communities change and the dynamics of that change.

The maritime perspective was considered of sufficient importance by earlier civilisations that it consistently generated major artistic and cultural

---

[4] Frank Broeze, "From the Periphery to the Mainstream: The Challenge of Australia's Maritime History," *The Great Circle* 11, no. 1 (1989): 1-13 at 2 and 5. See also Broeze, *Island Nation: A History of Australia* (Melbourne: Allen & Unwin, 1998), 2

[5] Susan Rose, "Is the Study of Maritime History before 1550 Unjustifiably Neglected?" *Topmasts* (Special Issue 2017): 15; Martin Bellamy, "Editorial," *The Mariner's Mirror* 10, no. 2 (2017): 131.

artefacts. The maritime has provided incredible literary, artistic, and musical riches. The sea and sea travel have been a treasure trove of literary and artistic creativity from practically the beginning of the written word – witness Homer and the Norse sagas. These cultural products are often the only available means of gaining evidence about the past. As Lincoln Paine puts it, maritime history is unique in demonstrating:

> literature's potential for shedding light on corners of maritime history for which other written evidence is in short supply or altogether unavailable. This is particularly true of older periods, when stories told in epics, verse or dramatic works may offer the only written accounts of maritime history. It is likewise the case for more recent periods because authors of fiction and poetry give voice to the voiceless and the overlooked in ways that historians do not.[6]

Maritime history must also be able to explore and elucidate major aspects of identity, such as nationhood, regional identity, gender, and sexuality. For example, Fischer pointed out that, "Although women worked at sea, even in the age of sail … their roles have been largely ignored…. Maritime historians could make an important contribution to the debate about the role of gender in the larger historical profession if they had the will to do so."[7] Jo Stanley has pointed to "the missing 'minorities' in maritime history" – women, LGBTQ+ people, and non-white sailors.[8]

The Ten-Year Study

These aspects of the interaction of human beings with the sea can be defined into coding categories. By studying maritime history journals across a satisfactory time period, we can use empirical data to see how well maritime history has been fulfilling these criteria over the last ten years.

I analysed and categorised the content of the articles in the four major British maritime history journals in two five-year periods, 2009-2013 and 2014-2018. This allowed for the analysis of change across the two periods

---

[6] Lincoln Paine, "Beyond the Dead White Whales: Literature of the Sea and Maritime History," *International Journal of Maritime History* 22, no. 1 (June 2010): 225, https://doi.org/10.1177/084387141002200112. See also Marion Gibson, "Vikings and Victories; Sea-stories from 'The seafarer' to Skyfall and the future of British Maritime Culture," *Journal for Maritime Research* 17, no. 1 (2015): 1-15, https://doi.org/10.1080/21533369.2015.1024512. For personal accounts of sea travel, see Susann Liebich and Laurence Publicover, "Maritime Literary Culture," *Topmasts* (Special Issue 2017): 21-24.

[7] Fischer, "Are We in Danger," 372.

[8] Jo Stanley, "(Actively) Moving Missing 'Minorities' from the Margins to the Main in Maritime Museums," *Topmasts* (Special Issue 2017): 37-41.

and provided a large data set. From my training in statistics, I was aware that the allocation of articles into the various coding categories should ideally be done by three experienced maritime historians working independently, but that, given I had very little likelihood of getting the fair-sized research grant required for such an undertaking, this was not feasible. Fortunately, however, with clear-cut definitions, the codings for each article were fairly self-evident. The four journals are *The Mariner's Mirror (MM)*, *Maritime South West (MSW)*, the *International Journal of Maritime History (IJMH)*, and the *Journal for Maritime Research (JMR)*.

The Mariner's Mirror, the journal of the Society for Nautical Research (SNR) is of considerable vintage, the first volume being published in 1911. The *MM* is seen as being primarily concerned with the history of the Royal Navy. Hugh Murphy was the editor till 2013, when Martin Bellamy took over.

Maritime South West is the journal of the South West Maritime History Society, published annually since the society's founding in 1984. From 1991, its editor was David Clement, the author of this article taking over in 2020. The "South West" indicates the area of its membership, rather than its content, since the previous editor defines that to mean "any vessel that passed or might have passed Land's End." In actual fact, articles are by no means restricted to the South West. The articles are not peer reviewed. After receipt of a paper, the editor's decision is transmitted to the writer(s) within five days. In fact, the editor invariably agrees to publish, but then may request changes and/or offer to help with a re-write. This means that there is much more permeable boundary between researcher and publication than with more formal publications.

The *International Journal of Maritime History* was founded in 1989 by the Maritime Economic History Group, which had been set up in 1986 to "serve as a vehicle in which the growing number of maritime social and economic historians could communicate the results of their research to colleagues," as *The Mariner's Mirror* was mainly concerned with naval matters. David Starkey took over from Lewis Fischer in 2014, when the journal's production moved from its original base in Memorial University of Newfoundland to Hull, at which point the journal went from two to four issues a year.

The *Journal for Maritime Research* was founded in 1999 by the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, originally as an e-journal. It "focuses on ... the intersections of maritime, British and global history … it seeks to champion a wide spectrum of innovative research." Ronald Blyth has been editor of *JMR* throughout the period of this research.

Categories and Codings

The unit of analysis: All journals had "articles" but then there was a

confusing mixture of "Notes," "Reports," "Documents," etc. I therefore decided, that, excluding book reviews and "Queries," I would include any document of five pages or more.

Authorship: I started by considering who wrote the papers: British or other nationalities. Affiliation is by institute, not the nationality of the author. So, the eminent Italian scholar, Maria Fusaro, who is at the University of Exeter, is coded as "British," as she gives her prestige to this British institution. For all these categories, again, where there were multiple authors, I used the features of the first author. Note that, in order to study the percentage of women authors, the denominator is N authors, not N papers.

Anglo-centrism: I examined what percentage of studies concerned the countries of the United Kingdom, excluding England. I included the Republic of Ireland in "outside England" since it only became independent in 1921.

Moving to content, the following categories were used:

War/Navy: Papers focussed on any state navy, including, of course, the Royal Navy, plus papers on wars from any nation. It does not include articles on privateering, or the East India Company, Dutch, or English.

Mercantile: The transporting of goods and people by sea, and the building of ships for that purpose, including the few articles on the transportation of goods to and from inland sites to the ports.

Fishing: Whether whaling, offshore, or coastal, or leisure.

Exploration

Migration: Included the Middle Passage of slave ships, as this was a forced migration.

Science and Technology: Naval and mercantile navies seek continuous improvement in their efficiency through research and development in science and technology.

Shipyards' activity: Included ship building and ship repair on any type of vessel.

Aquatic leisure: Included any form of recreational use of the sea or rivers.

Riverine: Inland ports, along with leisure pursuits on rivers.

Humankind's relationship with the sea as demonstrated by cultural products: I counted all articles with clear content on literary or artistic representations of the sea; also personal accounts of sea travels, and newspaper campaigns to alter perceptions of the sea and maritime activity. I included articles which made frequent or considerable reference to written material. So, ship's logs and reports to the Admiralty, detailed

Table 1: Totals and percentages for all four journals, 2009-2018

			Mariner's Mirror		Maritime South West		International Journal of Maritime History		Journal for Maritime Research		ALL	
			TOTAL	%	TOTAL	%	TOTAL	%	TOTAL	%		%
		N papers	**257**		**115**		**312**		**90**		**774**	
		N Authors	**304**		**119**		**378**		**96**		**897**	
AUTHORS	1	N British papers	155	60.3%	115	100%	78	25.0%	50	**55.5%**	398	**51.4%**
	2	N British Authors	177	58.2%	119	100%	86	22.7%	52	**54.1%**	434	48.4%
	3	Single-Authored papers	227	88.3%	111	96.5%	272	87.2%	85	**94.4%**	695	**89.8%**
	4	Female author -all	23	7.6%	18	15.1%	78	20.6%	30	**31.2%**	149	**16.6%**
	5	British female author	13	4.3%	18	15.1%	18	4.8%	18	**18.7%**	67	**7.4%**
	6	UK-not England	10	3.9%	2	1.7%	8	2.6%	0	**0%**	20	**2.6%**
CONTENT	7	War/ Navy	148	57.5%	28	24.3%	95	30.4%	64	**71.1%**	335	43.3%
	8	Mercantile	87	33.8%	51	44.3%	187	59.9%	22	**24.4%**	347	**44.8%**
	9	COMBINED	235	91.4%	79	68.7%	282	90.3%	86	**95.5%**	682	**88.1%**
	10	% Articles double coded	18/235	7.6%	1/79	0.69%	33/282	10.6%	4/86	**4.6%**	56/682	**8.2%**
	11	Fishing (including whaling)	11(5)	4.3% (1.9%)	8(2)	6.9% (1.7%)	33(11)	10.6% (3.5%)	2(0)	**2.2%**	54(18)	**7.0% (2.3%)**

	12	**Exploration**	2	0.8%	0		6	1.9%	7	**7.7%**	15	**1.9%**
	13	**Migration**	6	2.3%	3	2.6%	16	5.1%	5	**5.5%**	30	**3.9%**
	14	**Science/ technology**	48	18.7%	5	4.3%	41	13.1%	10	**11.1%**	104	**13.4%**
	15	**Shipyards**	27	10.5%	18	15.6%	35	11.2%	3	**3.3%**	83	**10.7%**
	16	**Aquatic Leisure**	8	3.1%	15	13.0%	5	3.8%	3	**3.3%**	31	**4.0%**
	17	**Riverine**	3	1.1%	15	13.0%	3	1.0%	0	**0%**	21	**2.7%**
	18	**Cultural (Lit./Arts/ Music)**	58	22.5%	15	13.0%	45	14.4%	27	**30.0%**	145	**18.7%**
IDENTITY	19	**Religion**	3	1.1%	1	0.90%	3	1.0%	2	**2.2%**	9	**1.1%**
	20	**Community**	30	11.7%	35	30.4%	83	26.6%	3	**3.3%**	151	**19.5%**
	21	**Women**	2	0.8%	1	0.90%	4	1.3%	8	**8.8%**	15	**1.9%**
	22	**LGBTQ+**	2	0.8%	0		1	0.3%	1	**1.1%**	4	**0.5%**
	23	**Non-White Persons**	11	4.3%	2	1.7%	25	8.0%	18	**20.0%**	56	**7.2%**
	24	**NOT Euro centric**	3	1.1%	0		5	1.6%	3	**3.3%**	11	**1.4%**
	25	**Articles by all female authors on Navy**	12/148	8.0%	1/28	3.6%	18/95	18.9%	21/64	**32.8%**	52	**6.7%**
	26	**Articles by British female authors on Navy**	8/148	5.4%	1/28	3.6%	5/95	5.2%	14/64	**21.9%**	28	**3.6%**
PERIOD AND METHOD	27	**Before 1500**	22	8.6%	4	3.5%	26	8.3%	2	**2.2%**	54	**7.0%**
	28	**Archaeology used**	6	2.3%	3	2.6%	3	0.96%	1	**1.1%**	13	**1.7%**
	29	**Post 1945**	34	13.2%	22	19.1%	76	24.3%	16	**17.8%**	148	**19.1%**
	30	**Oral History used**	1	0.4%	1	0.69%	4	1.3%	0	**0%**	6	**0.7%**

written accounts of battles or court martials (rare) were included in this analysis.

Identity: maritime history should be able to shed light on the changing ways of understanding and acting out major categories of identity, such as:

- **Religious Affiliation**
- **Community:** Fishing, naval, and mercantile activity will be furthered by the study of particular communities, such as individual ports or harbours. This category concerned the study of activities centred on a defined geographical area. So, "Shipbuilding in Barbados" was included, even if it was solely concerned with British naval protocols.
- **National Identity:** Concerning national identity, I noted whether a non-white ethnic group was the focus of the article, and whether the events were described from that group's point of view, i.e. a non-Eurocentric (which, in few papers, concerned a North American) perspective.
- **Gender and Sexuality:** During the study, I became interested in the extent to which women wrote about War/Navy; and looked at the overall picture, and at British female researchers.

Periodization: Maritime history should be concerned with human endeavour from the dawn of time to the present. Therefore, I included a category where the paper concerned activities in the time period before 1500 and whether they considered archaeology, be it on land or sea. Concerning more recent history, I considered whether articles explored events that occurred after the end of the Second World War (post 1945), when oral history would be an appropriate methodology for "bottom up" history.

Articles that did not fall into the categories of interest were not coded. The most obvious omission was piracy. Generalist articles, where an eminent practitioner cast an eye over the whole field were not coded. Each article was coded for all the categories to which it paid attention. I acted as if I was working on behalf of a researcher in each of these twenty-five or so fields – my guiding question: would the article have been of use to them?

Articles were often coded as relevant to two or three fields, and on rarer occasions, five or six. So, "Convoys protecting merchant shipping in the 1914-18 war" would be coded **war/navy** and **mercantile** and not coded as **pre-1500** or **post-1945**. "The function of shanties in the age of commercial sail" would be coded as **cultural products** and **mercantile**; "Dartmouth at the time of the Crusades" as **community, religion**, and **pre-1500**. If a category received one entry, it was allocated one percent, however small the actual percentage.

I am aware that the categories "climate change/global meteorological instability" and "maritime pollution" are not included in the table that follow.

This is because there was not a single example of either type of article in any of the journals across the ten-year period.

Results

Table 1 gives the totals and percentages for all four journals across the ten years studied.

Discussion

I said that having more than one coder would increase the reliability of the findings, but even if we allow ten percent error either way, the major findings would not be affected.

The first conclusion from the data is very clear – across the ten-year period in the four journals, contemporary maritime history is dominated by only two ways of relating to the sea – **war/navy** (forty-three percent of all articles) and **mercantile** trade (forty-five percent). Together, eighty-eight percent of all articles were coded as relevant to one of these categories.

Of course, an article could discuss both naval and mercantile matters. It might be the case that this "double counting" exaggerated the dominance of these two fields. I therefore noted all articles which received such a double coding. Of 682 relevant articles, 56 or a mere 8.2 percent were double coded in this manner. So, the dominance of these two categories was not due to multiple double codings. Rather, the vast majority were either **war/navy** or **mercantile**, but not both.

Not only is maritime history defined by two topics, but it is further limited to the period of the British empire. Only seven percent of papers concerned the **period before 1500** and only two percent used **archaeological** data. Maritime historians are wont to mourn the separation from archaeology, but there seems little evidence of any attempt to change the situation.

Post-1945 papers comprised nineteen percent of the total. They were mainly concerned with the **mercantile** marine, and there was only one example of the use of **oral history**.[9]

The results also showed the remarkably England-centric nature of the research. Only 2.6 percent of the articles concerned regions of the UK other than England.

No other category came anywhere near the frequency of **war/navy** and

[9] Cybèle Locke, "Communist made at sea and in port: Maritime class relations during the Second World War," *International Journal of Maritime History* 28, no. 3 (2016): 532-549, https://doi.org/10.1177/0843871416647244.

mercantile. **Cultural products** were coded as present in nineteen percent of all articles, mainly due to their frequency in *The Mariner's Mirror* and the *Journal for Maritime Research*; as was the category of **community**. **Science and technology** were present in thirteen percent and **shipyards** (ship building and ship repairs) in eleven percent. Most of the other categories garnered less than five percent. Major themes such as **exploration** (two percent) and **migration** (four percent) were effectively ignored.

The lack of studies of migration is striking. Think of the hundreds of thousands of Scots forced off the land by the enclosures or of some 300,000 souls, mainly Irish, who left Liverpool in the single year of 1852. Add in the millions transported in the Middle Passage. These people, usually leaving their homelands under duress, created the nations we know today. Maritime history is central to the birth of nations and their history, but you would never know it from the literature.

And it is noteworthy how little research there was into **identity** categories – only two percent of the articles concerned women. LGBTQ+ persons appeared in only four articles, while only seven percent concerned non-white persons. These articles usually concerned their non-acceptance of British dominance and were almost never from the inhabitants' perspective (1.4 percent).

The analysis also allows us to see who was writing the papers. Ignoring *MSW*, where I assumed that all the authors were British, roughly half the authors in the other journals were British, excepting the *IJMH*, where the figure fell to around 20 percent. There is a large gender difference. Female authors make up only seventeen percent of all authors. Only six percent of all papers are contributed by UK-affiliated women. I checked whether this was because women were not writing about navies. There seems some evidence for this idea, because only 6.7 percent of all papers on navies were written by women, and only 3.6 percent of such papers were written by women affiliated to British institutions. Articles by female authors do not often get published in maritime history journals and even more rarely are those articles about war.

Articles with multiple authors were also very uncommon. In his "Blue Hole" address, Ingo Heidbrink argued for maritime historians to move from being lone researchers to becoming members of interdisciplinary teams.[10] But, such multiple authorships, let alone multi-disciplinary ones, are very rare – eighty-eight percent of papers in *MM*, ninety-seven percent in *MSW*, eighty-

[10] Ingo Heidbrink, "Closing the 'Blue Hole': Maritime History as a core element of historical research," *International Journal of Maritime History* 29, no. 2 (2017): 325-332, https://doi.org/10.1177/0843871417695474. Lewis Fischer, in the same issue, in "The Future Course of Maritime History," 355-364, was not sure that this was the way forward.

Table 2: Results for all four journals combined, divided into 2 five-year cohorts						
			All journals 2009-13		All journals 2014-18	
			TOTAL	%	TOTAL	%
		N papers	363		411	
		N Authors	408		489	
BRITISH AUTHORS	1	**N British papers**	217	**59.8%**	181	**44.0%**
AUTHORS	2	**N British Authors**	231	**56.6%**	203	**41.5**
	3	**Single-Authored Papers**	334	**92.0%**	361	**87.8%**
	4	**Female author** -all	47	**11.57%**	102	**20.8%**
	5	**British female author**	24	**5.9%**	43	**8.8%**
	6	**UK-not England**	9	**2.5%**	11	**2.7%**
CONTENT	7	**War/Navy**	145	**39.9%**	190	**46.2%**
	8	**Mercantile**	166	**45.7%**	181	**44.0%**
	9	**COMBINED**	311	**85.7%**	371	**90.3%**
	10	**%Articles double coded**	22/311	**7.1%**	34/371	**8.3%**
	11	**Fishing (including whaling)**	22	**6.1%**	32	7.8%
	12	**Exploration**	6	**1.6%**	9	**2.2%**
	13	**Migration**	12	**3.3%**	18	**4.4%**
	14	**Science/ technology**	50	13.8%	54	**13.1%**
	15	**Shipyards**	39	**9.1%**	44	**10.7%**
	16	**Aquatic Leisure**	14	**3.8%**	17	**4.1%**
	17	**Riverine**	11	**3.0%**	10	**2.4%**
	18	**Cultural (Lit./Arts/Music)**	47	**12.9%**	98	**23.8%**
IDENTITY	19	**Religion**	5	**1.4**	4	**9.7%**
	20	**Community**/Region	75	**20.7%**	76	**18.5%**
	21	**Women**	1	**0.3%**	14	**3.4%**
	22	**LGBTQ+**	0	**0%**	4	**1.0%**
	23	**Non-White Persons**	18	**4.9%**	38	**9.2%**
	24	**NOT Euro centric**	5	**1.4%**	6	**1.4%**
	25	**Articles by all female authors on Navy**	12/145	**8.3%**	40/190	**21.0%**
	26	**Articles by British female authors on Navy**	8/145	**5.5%**	20/190	**10.5%**
PERIOD AND METHOD	27	**Before 1500**	23	**6.3%**	31	**7.5%**
	28	**Archaeology used**	8	**2.2%**	5	**1.2%**
	29	**Post 1945**	65	**17.9%**	83	**20.1%**
	30	**Oral History used**	2	**0.5%**	4	**1.0%**

seven percent in *IJMH*, and ninety-four percent in *JMR* are by single authors. Maritime historians, perhaps like other types of historians, but in contrast to many other disciplines, hunt alone.

Change across time?

A common method by which academics deal with unpleasant findings is to nod sagely and tell themselves and anyone else who is listening that things have changed since the study was conducted, making the results no longer valid. The present study runs practically up to the present with data from 2018. However, we can check for change across the ten years. I have analysed the data in two five-year cohorts and the results are shown in Table 2.

The picture is one of considerable stability. There are only three possibly significant changes – and with thirty categories you would expect some changes to occur by chance.

There was a decrease in British authorship from fifty-seven percent to forty-one percent;

There was an increase in the number of papers by female authors from abroad, who wrote more papers about war (British female authors show the same trend, but much weaker);

There was an increase in the wide category of **cultural**, which is a rather diverse group of articles.

Combining all journals, there was an actual increase in the number of articles concerned with **war/navy** (any state navy, not just the Royal Navy) from forty percent to forty-six percent across the two cohorts. This was particularly noticeable in *The Mariner's Mirror* (forty-two percent to sixty-five percent). Articles coded as **mercantile** stayed very stable across the cohorts, with forty-six percent and forty-four percent, with no major changes in any journal. These two groups increased their monopoly from eighty-six percent to ninety percent. There is little evidence to support the notion that maritime history is in a period of transition.

Conclusions

There was a period in the 1980s and into the 1990s when it seemed possible that maritime history might take its place among the major lenses or templates, such as political or social history, through which historians make sense of the past. It might also have provided an identity for them – an identity which then attracted the next generation of students and researchers into universities furthering maritime history, such as Exeter, Glasgow, Greenwich, and Liverpool. During this time, Skip Fischer had the ability to recognise

and promote talent, to create an international network of maritime historians (predominantly economic) based on talent but also on the ties of friendship, and to develop mercantile history as an area with at least as much validity as naval history.[11]

These were, of course, major achievements, but they were based on maritime history research now being concerned with two aspects, instead of just one. For the period 2014-2018, forty-three percent of the articles in *The Mariner's Mirror* concerned **war/navy**, and thirty-eight percent **mercantile** matters; for the *International Journal of Maritime History*, the equivalent figures were twenty-nine percent and fifty-two percent. Each journal has moved away from its specialist area to encompass the other dominant aspect of maritime history. These two aspects are so dominant – ninety percent of all articles – that, despite protestations to the contrary, little space (or interest) is left over for other approaches.

But defining maritime history by two aspects was its undoing. John Tosh, in the 2010 fifth edition of his classic introductory text, *The Pursuit of History*, does not index maritime history. In fact, he does not even mention it among the many varieties of historical approaches he discusses.[12]

The results are very clear cut. Maritime history journals may claim to be interested in all aspects of humankind's relationship to the sea, but, in actuality, only papers on naval and mercantile marines are published, with a flavouring of other approaches. The content and the time frame are limited to that of the British empire, on which the sun has set but nobody seems to have told maritime historians (or, more likely, they were told but chose not to hear). Alternative representations barely feature even though study of the many other ways in which people have related to the sea could so easily show how vast and fascinating the subject area is.

Fishing, other than whaling, and the leisure use of the sea are almost invisible – Blackpool and all the other major resorts around the coast of the British Isles do not exist; nor does Cowes, the world centre for yachting. All the attempts of inland manufacturers and mine owners to reach the sea are unrecorded in this sample of some 700 papers.

There is no light or shade in this canvas, as regional histories are not seen as worth recording. They can be left to the enthusiasm of the amateur local historian. With the exception of Clyde shipbuilding, obviously a research topic

---

[11] A memorial webpage described Skip Fischer as "a brilliant man, who once received this high praise from a Danish colleague [Poul Holm?] at a conference in Belgium: 'Before the Internet, Skip Fischer was the internet.'" See https://www.cauls.ca/obituary/4628643.

[12] John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, 5th ed. (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2010).

at Glasgow University, no other county in the UK features. Equally evident is the lack of regional research. Cornwall was a world centre for minerals for centuries, but had a poor transport infrastructure, so almost all its goods were moved around by sea. The huge fleets of colliers from South Wales and the North East and the hay barges from Essex down the Thames Estuary – all missing.

The perspective is yet further narrowed when we consider articles concerning major aspects of identity, particularly marginalized groups. The women doing marine work while their men were away cod fishing or in the whale ships; the herring girls; the Wrens, and also the canal bargees in the 1939 war – all missing.[13] The LBGTQ+ experience is all but invisible, excepting for two accounts of trials for homoerotic crimes. There are a number of accounts of non-white sailors, such as the Lascars, but they are always from the viewpoint of the hiring nation, and the perspective of the non-white sailors, as with women or LBGTQ+ people, is almost never taken.

This data has shown that maritime history foregrounds and valorises masculine endeavours and achievements – men lauding the exploits of other men, with little interest in the contribution of women. As Sarah Churchwell wrote: "If we [women] read, we must read about men; if we think, we must think about what men think."[14] Women's role in maritime communities has basically been ignored. The lack of one's historical existence is even more stark for the LBGTQ+ or non-white historian. Certainly, members of ethnic minorities seem very scarce at British maritime history conferences. If one function of studying history is that it provides a mirror in which to see one's identity more clearly, and perhaps in a different light, so that one is both engrossed and challenged, maritime history has failed marginalized groups badly.

Also effectively absent is the understanding that the sea is not a fixed given, but rather has many dramatic forms and representations, which have changed across time. There is little acknowledgement of the wealth of imagination which writers and artists have used to express their emotional relationship with, and understanding of, the sea: the colours of Turner; the recording of Shackleton's expedition in Frank Hurley's photographic plates; Mrs. Ramsay's exclamation, in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, "'Oh, how

---

[13] See, for instance, Rozelle Raynes, *Maid Matelot* (Lymington: Nautical, 1971); Nevil Shute, *Requiem for a Wren* (London: Heinemann, 1955); Jo Stanley, *Women and the Royal Navy* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017); Susan Woolfitt, *Idle Women* (London: Benn, 1947); Eily (Kit) Gayford, *The Amateur Boatwomen* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1973); and Emma Smith, *Maidens' Trip* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

[14] Sarah Churchwell, "Sign of the Times," *Guardian Review*, 17 February 2018, 11.

beautiful!' For the great plateful of water was before her"; the sea journey as a search for understanding from Homer to Conrad; the liminality of the sailing life – its marginality in terms of land-based laws and moral values – so brilliantly handled by Conrad and Golding; the sea shanty, the work song of commercial sail; the chorus of villagers telling *Peter Grimes* that he must go back out to sea and end his life there: such a wide river of diamonds with nobody on it.

If we return to Skip Fisher's question, I am not sure how secure the journals themselves are. There are two relevant reports concerning the quality of submissions to the journals under consideration. Fischer, the long-time editor of the *IJMH*, in his 2011 paper, expressed his concern at a rejection rate of sixty percent over the last five years. Postgraduate and junior scholars, defined as those who "completed their doctorates less than five years before submitting their paper," had a rejection rate of "a staggering 83 per cent."[15] Hugh Murphy, then editor of *The Mariner's Mirror*, made a similar point regarding "substandard submissions to this journal,"[16] requiring a rebuttal by the chairman, Richard Harding, in the next issue.[17]

Harding's explanation is worth examining – there's no crisis because canny maritime historians are sending "their excellent work" to other, more prestigious journals.[18] But, if that is the case, then no wonder the editors of maritime history journals are rejecting the articles being sent to them, which might have already been rejected by these other journals.

If Harding is right, maritime historians are now re-orientating and submitting much of their best work to journals utilising the major templates, such as economic or political history, with their work inevitably framed through that template. The identity of being "a maritime historian" will be lost. Ojala and Tenold looked at how contributors of articles to *IJMH* between 1989-2012 self-reported their position. Of 239 self-reports, twenty-six described themselves as maritime historians – a mere 8.3 percent.[19]

We have to accept that the universities no longer provide a context in which maritime history can flourish. And those post-graduates who would love to study and teach maritime history? Already by 2011, Fischer was very concerned about the "general lack of commitment to maritime history" in the university sector, and the situation, especially in British universities, has

---

15 Fischer, "Are We in Danger," 376.

16 Hugh Murphy, "Editorial," *The Mariner's Mirror* 95, no. 4 (2009): 388.

17 Richard Harding, "Chairman's Column," *The Mariner's Mirror* 96, no. 1 (2010): 7-8.

18 I have heard this argument from other eminent maritime historians.

19 Jari Ojala and Stig Tenold, "Maritime History: A Health Check," *International Journal of Maritime History* 29, no. 2 (2017): 344-354, https://doi.org/10.1177/0843871417695490.

deteriorated severely since then.[20] The present system produces far more post-graduates than there are posts, so few of the postgrads will be able to stay on and make a career in history.[21] They will be offered zero-hour contracts, rendering them members of the precariat – Guy Standing's term for the poorly paid in insecure jobs without benefits and with no job security.[22] The few that manage to reach more secure posts will, most likely, not be maintaining an identity as a maritime historian.

The problem is exacerbated by the fact that many of the scholars who made major contributions to maritime history are now reaching retirement age.[23] As they retire, we have seen that they are not replaced by maritime historians, and the structures of scholarship and research that they created are destroyed. Liverpool, Exeter, Greenwich, once powerhouses of developments in maritime history, are much weakened, living on their past reputations.[24] Glasgow, as Fischer pointed out in his 2011 article, is "diluted."[25]

The decline has not just been in Britain. Fischer also noted a decline in his own university: "Memorial University of Newfoundland, which has long promoted itself as a major centre of both research and teaching in maritime

---

20 Fischer, "Are We in Danger," 376.

21 Of course, the benefit to the university – short-sighted and callous as it is – is that this strategy provides a source of plentiful, cheap, labour, grateful for paid employment, compliant because fearful of the future, quite often doing two or more jobs, conditions hardly conducive to creative research. Heidbrink in his "Closing the 'Blue Hole'" paper, writes that he would not advise a person with several career options to follow maritime history, "But if the person was more interested in maritime research than in career prospects, I would say a loud and enthusiastic 'aye'" (332). It is unlikely that Heidbrink means they become amateur historians, so presumably, a career in maritime history is only for those with private means. For a literary equivalent of the present situation, consult George Gissing, *New Grub Street* (London: Smith, Elder and Company, 1891).

22 See Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011). Fifty-three percent of academics teaching or doing research in British universities are on some form of insecure, non-permanent contract; and three quarters of junior academics are on such contracts. It is almost certain that the figures will continue to increase. See Aditya Chakrabortty and Sally Weale, "Universities accused of 'importing Sports Direct model' for lecturers' pay," *The Guardian*, 16 November 2016.

23 I asked Mike Duffy, retired head of the Centre for Maritime Historical Studies, Exeter University, if there was a register of British maritime historians, so that I could offer an accurate estimate, but he did not think there was.

24 For Liverpool, see Peter N. Davies, "The Liverpool School of Maritime History," *International Journal of Maritime History* 17, no. 2 (2005): 249-260, https://doi.org/10.1177/084387140501700214, with his professional obituary: "I was replaced by a fine scholar, but, sadly, not a maritime historian but one who specialized in aspects of football hooliganism" (258).

25 Fischer, "The Future Course of Maritime History," 361.

history, has allowed its programmes to wither somewhat." Already at the time of his 2011 article, Fischer knew that "Memorial has made it clear that it will not support the *IJMH* once I retire."[26] The *IJMH* subsequently undertook a reverse migration to Hull.

Regarding the teaching of undergraduates, at the Greenwich conference on "The State of Maritime Research," in September 2017, Susan Rose lamented that "There is little formal teaching of any early period [of maritime history]." Likewise, Benjamin Redding could find very little undergraduate teaching on the subject. Mark D. Matthews and James G. Davies, surveying the Welsh scene, found only one PhD and two MPhils concerning Welsh maritime history between 1995 and 2014, and noted the demise of the MA in Maritime and Imperial History at Swansea University.[27] This suggests a decline in the amount of maritime history taught in British universities over the past ten years. The impact of this must surely be that there are fewer academics working in the field and therefore fewer articles will be produced by British authors.

Also concerning is the absence of female authors, especially British female authors. The figure of around fifteen to twenty percent is surely not healthy. And they would seem to be absent in other countries as well. Thirty-one academics contributed their appreciations of Skip in the November 2018 issue of the *IJMH*. Three were women. Can a historical genre that is so male dominated realistically expect to survive? And has this lack of gender balance contributed to the narrowness of maritime history? Would a better-balanced academic base develop more of the many other ways of representing and relating to the sea?

And I point out again that I did not include "climate change and the sea" or "pollution" as categories, as there was no point. There were no such articles to be coded**.** These absolutely key relationships that will shape humankind's future, possibly even its survival, certainly the degree of harmony on this planet, have been totally ignored.

After a mere thirty years, maritime history is fading away without exploring so many of the fascinating relationships between us and the sea. There is a line from Bob Dylan's first LP: "It looks like it's dying and it's hardly been born." Maybe that is too pessimistic, but the results of this analysis hardly give

---

[26] Fischer, "Are We in Danger," 380.

[27] See, Rose, "Is the Study of Maritime History before 1550 Unjustifiably Neglected?"; Benjamin W.D. Redding, "Making Early Modern Naval History Relevant: Discussing warship design in the undergraduate classroom," *Topmasts* (Special Issue 2017): 17-20; and Mark D. Matthews and James G. Davies, "Maritime Historical Research in Wales: A peripheral view," *Topmasts* (Special Issue 2017): 47-50.

grounds for optimism.

If we return to Fischer's original question, we have to reply that maritime history could be a celebration of the kaleidoscope of the ways different groups of people relate to the sea. In 2018, there were three new translations of *The Odyssey* being reviewed.[28] Stand on Etruria Locks in Stoke-on-Trent and consider how James Brindley helped Josiah Wedgwood solve the problem of getting his chinaware across the North Sea to Europe or across the Atlantic to the Americas and the West Indies, by building the Trent-Mersey canal. If maritime history had had the wit to embrace canal and river trade, as manufacturers sought to export their products, then maritime history would have become the key template for understanding the Industrial Revolution. Instead, what is left in our journals is an obsession with the times and ways of the British naval and mercantile empire and painfully little else.

Maritime history is like a café with a long list of choices on the board outside, but when you get in, the server patiently explains that everything is "off," except naval and mercantile. Mike Duffy, who was the Head of the Centre for Maritime Historical Studies at Exeter University (personal communication), has suggested to me that it may be the case that the unit of prestige, and perhaps advancement, in maritime history, is now the publication of a book. What is interesting is, as Fischer observed, the large amount of space all the formal journals dedicate to book reviews, as if maritime history books are now the only means of maintaining our identity and the reviews a method of maintaining group cohesion. He proudly boasted of the *IMJH*'s key position in this process.[29] When maritime historians refer to these sections, they speak with affection, suggesting identification.

This would suggest that, sadly, we need to rephrase Fischer's question to read "Are we in danger of being left with the book review sections of our journals and not much else?"

Dr. Mike Bender is an Honorary Research Fellow in the History Department of the University of Exeter and a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society. He is the author of A New History of Yachting *and the editor of the journal* Maritime South West*. (Contact: m.bender@exeter.ac.uk)*

---

[28] It is probably very old-fashioned to note that "the question that reverberates through The Odyssey 'Who are you and where do you come from?'" (See Colin Burrow, "Light through the Fog," *London Review of Books*, 26 April 2018, 5) is perhaps the central purpose of many students attending university.

[29] Fischer, "Are We in Danger," 380.