LIFE ON THE OCEAN WAVE

James White

In a diary written 100 years ago my Scottish grandfather described the places and people he met at various ports of call made by his Royal Navy cruiser, HMS Lancaster. Over the past seven years I have explored many of the same places in various countries on the Mediterranean and contrasted my observations with his. During the course of my travels I have come to know and appreciate James McKay who died 23 years before I was born. The book I am writing integrates his descriptions with my own and tells the story of my getting to know grandfather through his writing and through his views on the navy and the politics of his day. This article consists of excerpts from the diary illustrating his trenchant opinions about serving on one of His Majesty’s ships and about political issues of his day.

Discovering the Diary

I emigrated from Britain to Canada in 1969. My parents, who then lived in London, were both from Scottish families. I journeyed to London when my mother died in 2000; after her funeral, my sisters gave me the job of clearing up her desk and her files. Mother was a pack rat. I found lecture notes from the 1940s, various reports on her work as a management consultant and, in one file, I discovered a stack of photocopies. The first page was entitled: HMS Lancaster,

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From 1910 to 1912, my mother’s father, James McKay, had written an account of his experiences during the commission of a Royal Navy cruiser, HMS Lancaster, in the Mediterranean. His description of life in the engine room and below decks is a vivid portrait of the class-ridden structure of the navy. Equally insightful are his accounts of the places he visited on shore leave—Gibraltar, Malta, Egypt, and Algeria, for example. He had a keen eye for the way people lived in those countries.

My mother deposited the original diary in the Maritime Museum at Greenwich after copying the entire manuscript. The diary is written in a 9 inch x 7 inch school exercise book with black covers and a faded maroon binding. Each page is ruled with 24 light blue spacing lines and a margin. In total there are 258 pages handwritten in ink in a clear flowing style. Editing the diary proved straightforward. He does not hold back in his opinions on the politics and politicians of the day nor on his activities ashore, although I did wonder whether he joined his shipmates in their “brining down” in the local brothels. Perhaps he is circumspect for the sake of his family. However, one mystery is who the diary was written for because he uses phrases such as “my readers” and ‘you will all understand….” I believe he is following the conventions of his hero, Sir Walter Scott, who frequently functions as an omniscient narrator. Another question for me was whether he made notes with dates during his journey and then wrote a final version based on them at home because the writing is neat and continuous rather than being broken up into separate entries as a diary would normally be. I concluded that this was likely. He does give significant dates such as entering and leaving ports, leaves ashore and trips inland and I have used these dates to head sections in this article.

My grandfather was born and raised in the Highlands. After apprenticing as an engine fitter he joined the navy in
1903 out of expediency. Scotland was economically depressed and he could not get work in his trade ashore. Yet he was not a lover of naval life:

“Much has been written about the glories and the mysteries of the sea. Poets and novelists have woven yards of romance around it but I am not writing this from any romantic point of view but from the standpoint of one who, driven by economic pressure, was forced to adopt it as a means of livelihood. My reader must excuse me if I fail to rhapsodize about the blue and green of the ocean, or its stately waves or mill-pond appearance.”

He served as Engine Room Artificer (ERA) in a number of vessels before his voyage to the Mediterranean. He introduces the diary with a poem expressing his longing for home and things Scottish:

Oh, lang may Scotia’s sturdy sons
In joy and mirth foregather
To sing the praises o’ their home,
The land of snuff and heather.
The land o’ porritch, brose, and kail,
O’ puddin’s fair and dusky,
The hame o’ haggis, tripe & spuds,
And the medicine ca’d whisky.
The land o’ Dukes, saut fish & flukes,
The lanky leggit partan
The haunts o’ potted head & jam
O’ marmalade and tartan.
Oh, Scotland mine, I’ll surely dine,
When back to thee I wander
On brose or kail and Younger’s ale,
To quench my thirst and hunger.
CONDITIONS IN THE ENGINE ROOM

July 13, 1910: Off Cape Finisterre
The scene in the stokehold when going full speed was worthy of note; Dante’s Inferno was nowhere in it. Above the roar of the furnaces and fan engines one could hear the shouts of the leading hands and the curses of the stokers as they drew the coals from the bunkers and deposited them on the plates, prior to their delivery into the miniature hells that yawned in front of them. The dust was blinding and the heat terrific.

July 30, 1911: Port Said
We received orders to get under weigh immediately and proceed at full speed to Port Said. We were in two watches part of the time and the heat in the engine rooms and stokeholds was simply awful and I am sure if we went to war for a lengthy period some better ventilating arrangements would have to be adopted or else there would be no need for wasting gun-powder as we would all be dead for want of air and food. I didn’t enjoy the full power trial a little bit and on Sunday morning I had to turn and work on a very hot job. About 11.30 a.m. I resolved that I would be as well dead and, with this intention, I returned my lamp and scraper and sat down in a corner to await the end. While waiting someone told me that the rum was up. I reasoned with myself that I might just as well have my tot as leave it behind. I had it. Ah! This was better; much better. I changed my mind about dying and felt so elated that I made up my mind to go to the canteen in the evening and have some beer.
NAVAL POLICIES ON ALCOHOL

June 7, 1910: Valetta, Malta
After the watch was relieved one could always find a crowd round the bar of the Fo’c’s’le Arms, as our lemonade shop was called. Most of my readers are aware that liquor of all kinds are denied to the lower deck (except the daily spirit ration of half a gill of rum) so that everyone from a Chief Petty Officer down becomes a compulsory teetotaler between the times of being allowed ashore. The Navy is years behind the Army in this respect, and no matter in what part of the world one meets a soldier, one can bet his bottom dollar he is not far from a good copious supply of beer. There is absolutely no reason why a sailor should be denied the privilege of having beer, except that of precedent. Nelson’s sailors had no beer allowed when they won the skirmish at Trafalgar. How dare sailors ask for or expect beer now? The Admiralty has been approached on several occasions on this subject but as usual have listened to the crank in preference to the voice of common-sense. Drunkenness, Crime, Mutiny, Horrors!!

INSPECTIONS

June 10, 1910: Valetta, Malta
The rounds of a ship on a Sunday morning is a very edifying spectacle. A water carnival is held on Saturday in preparation for the ordeal. Chaos reigns supreme on Sunday morning and such mundane things as breakfast or an extra hour in bed are taboo. Brooms and bucket and bucket and brooms are flourished in your face or tickle your ribs from early morning until about nine o’clock when, after boatswains mates have blown their
calls and shouted themselves hoarse, a mass of humanity struggles into pursers rigs and sort themselves out on deck. The cooks and sweepers remain behind to hide away anything that might offend the eagle eye of the Captain and train.

The rounds start at 9-30, the Captain leading the way and about fifty following behind. There is, however, very little originality displayed among Naval Captains and I often wonder the whole thing doesn’t strike them as a screaming farce, but I am afraid they are removed so far above the common herd that they have shed their sense of humour. Be this as it may they all say pretty much the same thing when going the rounds of a ship or divisions of men. They all have a howl about seamen’s bags. Bag tallies must be clean, numbers up and inboard. What an effort! Stokers and ERA’s baths not clean. Perdition! Mess shelves look as if recently used. Good God! A pair of boots stowed overhead! At this juncture a cold sweat breaks out on the brow of the No. 1 and the assembled mob looks guiltily from one to another and mutter about the empire being in imminent peril and the tension is only relieved by the jaunty (sergeant-at-arms) rushing up and taking the name of the criminal.

June 11, 1910: Valetta, Malta

No one outside the navy can ever understand what a fetish paintwork & brightwork is in the Navy. Officers have placed the worship of this idol on a higher plane than the devotion of the heathen to his favourite joss. Admirals have bowed to it and, by its scarcity or otherwise, so is a ship in their opinion efficient or morally decadent. A good way to deal with these paint & brightwork worshippers would be to have a special ship built for them carrying brass cannons. There would
be nothing for use, everything being reserved for show and she would be towed behind an ordinary ship in times of peace. Whenever an officer or man became tainted with paint or brightwork mania he would immediately be sent aboard and made to rub and scrub and feast and glut himself.

CLASS STRUCTURE

February 15, 1911: Algiers
Everyone I think knows that the Navy is officered by the sons of our middle and upper classes and this has been going on so long that people look upon it as perfectly natural. One must admit however that money cannot purchase brains and the wealthy classes have no monopoly of brain power so one day in this democratic age Jack might begin to inquire why he has not even a sporting chance to attain to the higher positions in his calling but is doomed to be a mere automaton, a unit to the end of his days though by a little development he might have been a Togo or a second Nelson.

June 15, 1910: Valetta
On my second visit ashore in Malta I found my way to the Sergeants mess of the Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders and met many old friends whom I had known when the regiment was stationed in Chatham. It is delightful to sit in a comfortable arm chair on a shady verandah with a few sergeants, each with a long cool glass of beer, leaning back among their cushions and talking about being overworked. There is no doubt that they are treated in quite a different manner from their corresponding ranks in the Navy. They are comfortably messed, have billiard, reading and smoking rooms and a bar where liquors of the finest quality are supplied at
the lowest possible cost. Apart from their material wants being well catered for they enjoy to a man the confidence and esteem of their superior officers.

In the Navy a Chief Petty Officer, notwithstanding the fact that he is the senior rating on the lower deck, is allowed practically no more privileges than the most junior rating carried. He is only allowed in his mess at certain times and in no way can he look upon it as a home. The Captain, commander or even some junior officer is always poking his nose inside and finding fault if everything is not as prison-like as Naval Custom can make it. He is not allowed to smoke in his mess, neither can he have refreshment there and twice a week the Captain has a look in the locker in which the C.P.O.’s private gear is stowed and if everything is not nicely laid out on top then as likely as not a turn of leave stopped is the result. The E.R.A.’s come in for special attention as they have a locker provided in their bath for stowing greasy clothing. The first commandment in the Naval catechism says “there shall be no dirty overalls stowed in an E.R.A.’s locker”, though where they should be stowed I have never heard from the autocrats who interpret these commandments.

**NAVAL ENGINEERS**

July 13, 1910: Falmouth

In books of fiction the Engineers are pictured as brave fearless men with long square jaws and nerves of steel, but I am sorry to say the Navy type as compared with these heroes of fiction are a sorry lot. They are generally nervous wrecks and the courage they possess is generally of the Dutch order and when anything happens in the way of a breakdown they stand with gloves on like the fabled cat which couldn’t catch mice
and shout at the E.R.A.’s and stokers who do the actual work. They receive a very expensive training. Mostly theoretical, and some ships carry as many as seven or eight and I am well within the mark in saying that they never touch a tool and even if you defend them from the specialist point of view they are sadly lacking, as they are prompted in nearly all cases by the working engineers, namely the E.R.A.’s. A good clerk could do all the book work in the department and one engineer well up in organising powers to supervise the department could do all that was necessary in that direction.

A man-of-war is the last place where there is room for a kid glove type. There are many defects develop on a modern ship in an incredible short space of time and everyone with any pretense to being called an engineer should bear a hand even if it was only to do some useful work such as clearing a bilge suction or carrying water to the men who are at work.

July 27, 1911: Torquay
There is much talk about engineering in the Navy being the most important branch of the service but it will always be subservient to the fads and customs of the old Nelsonian days which requires the new class of officer to be as efficient on the bridge as in the engine room. Such hoary traditions and ancient customs are ridiculous on a modern fighting ship.

SUNDAYS, CHRISTMAS AND SHORE LEAVE

June 3, 1910: Chatham
The eve of our departure slipped away quickly and, as we had previously been detailed in watches for steaming, we had counted up to see which would be the
lucky watch to have Sunday forenoon below. I found my watch would have to clean and attend divisions and divine service. This has developed into such a disagreeable way of spending Sunday forenoon that ninety nine out of every hundred in the engineer’s department would rather go and work below.

December 27, 1910: Valetta
Xmas day 1910 landed on a Sunday and was observed in the usual Naval fashion.

I need not enlarge upon how a ship is decorated or in what way Xmas is observed as anyone who has been to a workhouse at home can form a good idea of how things are carried out in the Navy. Hands are called at 5.30 am and the morning is spent scrubbing decks and polishing brightwork, until breakfast is piped. Division and Divine Service are attended as usual and, as a fair testimony to how happy a time can be had aboard ship on Xmas day, everyone who has any money and not required for duty pushes off ashore as soon as leave is granted. A few enthusiasts deck out the messes with colored papers and bits of green twigs and by piling a few oranges on a pusser’s plate a fair imitation of an English Xmas is obtained. In my opinion a much better way would be to let the ship’s company spend the day in whatever way they pleased. If they preferred to spend it in their hammock they would be at perfect liberty to do so; in short give them one day in the year on which they owed no master and could call the ship their home.

July 26, 1910: Torquay
Torquay is a beautifully situated town and is the mecca of the middle class who flock there to recuperate for a month or two after their arduous labours. I had not been ashore for some time and felt quite out of my element
when I stepped on the macadamized highway. However I soon got used to it and, finding I had almost forgotten the taste of liquor, I resolved to fill up my bunkers to the brim as it might be the last leave granted in England for all I knew. I found a shop where the whisky was good and after a few samplers I settled to it in earnest. (My companions had gone off after a bit of something else so I was free to follow my own devices.) I stayed where I had anchored until 11 o’clock and then returned with the help of a gentleman whom I had picked up during the evening to the hotel where I had booked a bed. He told me he was a music-hall manager from Manchester and he left me near my hotel vowing eternal friendship and I, not to be outdone in matters of felicitations, promptly fell on his neck; in token of friendship which nearly ended in disaster. I turned to enter my hotel and was rather surprised to find it going round and round at a terrifying speed and bumped myself rather heavily when stepping through what I took to be the door. I made one or two unsuccessful attempts to enter and then sailor-like I changed my tactics and, by carefully finding the speed at which the place was revolving and waiting until the door was nearly opposite, I side-stepped quickly, and with a Ho! Heave! Ho! and a breast stroke I was inside and holding on to the mat for all I knew. My mode of entry soon brought the landlord on the scene and knowing I was in capable hands I resigned myself to his charge and any subsequent events failed to interest me. I awoke next morning with my head much too large for my cap, swelled I expect where I had bumped it the previous evening, and a thirst that was honestly worth a quid. I had a few gin and gingers to cool my parched tongue and made a resolution to be a teetotaler for the future;
which resolution was promptly broken at seven bells when they served out the rum.

**POLITICAL AND SOCIAL OUTLOOK**

Grandfather was radical in his views. He had little time for organized religion or for capitalism and he rants against both at various points in his diary:

July 22, 1910: Falmouth
But we were working with a will now as we were going to be reviewed by no less a personage than King George V and his usual hangers on so aptly described in the House of Commons by one of the Labour Party as “the nest of parasites battenning on the nation under the shadow of a throne.”

June 13, 1910: Valetta
If the Maltese are not robbed by capitalism they are under the thumb of oppressors equally as powerful. I refer to the priests of the Roman Catholic religion. It is a well-known fact that wherever you find Roman Catholicism in a flourishing condition, just as certain are you to find the masses in poverty and ignorance.

June 15 1910: Valetta
It is unnecessary however to go to Malta to see broken images. There are thousands of them in England. I have seen many. I have studied the crowd on the embankment after midnight. I have seen the unemployed and the hunger marchers. I have been in some of our workhouses as a visitor. I have seen prostitutes plying for hire, endeavouring to earn a livelihood selling their soul for a piece of silver under the shadow of a church. Eighty thousand children in
London alone go to school every day badly clothed and hungry. Is it humanity to try and cram knowledge into their poor little heads when their stomachs are empty? I have seen those poor children marched round the playground with their toes sticking through their boots on Empire Day, carrying Union Jacks made in Germany and singing some doggerel concocted by Rosebery about the glorious flag and the Empire on which the sun never sets.

June 16, 1910: Valetta
There is however in England a cloud on the horizon; a cloud as yet no bigger than a man’s hand but one that threatens in the near future to spread across the civilized countries of the world and bind them together in the holy bounds of brotherhood and love. The golden cloud of socialism.

WAR

July 14, 1910: Bay of Biscay
Personally, I don’t like playing at war and sincerely hope I am a thousand leagues away when anything of a real nature comes along. I am not at all bloodthirsty and bear no grudge against my fellow workers, no matter what their colour or nationality, but being a hired assassin I must be an accessory whether I like it or not.

March 18, 1912: Souda Bay, Crete
Two Russian ships and one French ship lay with us at Souda Bay and a good deal of fraternizing took place among the officers and men, especially between the English and French. Well, well! Fraternizing today and probably cutting one another up for mincemeat tomorrow at the bidding of our respective capitalist
friends but, as I might have to take an active part in the next squabble, I refrain from following further such a painful subject.

His words about war were prophetic for, at the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914, James McKay was recalled from his shore job as an instructor to serve as Artificer Engineer on HMS Pathfinder. While patrolling off the Firth of Forth on 5 September 1914 the Pathfinder was torpedoes by a German submarine with a direct hit on the engine room and the magazine. The force of the combined explosion tore the ship in two and she sank in about five minutes taking my grandfather (who was 33 years old) and about 260 shipmates with her. This was the first torpedo in history to sink a warship. It happened in the second month of the war.