

# **From Pea Soup to Hors d'oeuvres: The Status of the Cook on British Merchant Ships**

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## **Introduction**

The sea-going cook has often been portrayed as a legendary figure by both contemporaries and writers of maritime fiction. For some, he was the most important — and the most interesting — figure on board: "Ship's cooks not only deserve our attention; they command it, dumbly yet imperiously."<sup>1</sup> Yet little historical research has been done on them, even though they were one of the most established groups in the maritime labour force. At their best, they were innovative, independent, creative and lucky. At worst, their destiny was to be the most hated member of the crew — after the captain, of course. To be called the "son of a sea cook" was, according to an article in *The Seaman*, "in nautical circles, even more grievous an insult than to be called a soldier. He is not the man whose services are valued and from whom much is expected who acquires the cognomen of Slushie."<sup>2</sup>

This essay focuses on the 1906 Merchant Shipping Act and its significance in increasing the status of the cook's profession at sea. The act made it compulsory for every British vessel of 1000 gross tons or more to carry a certificated cook. Cooks could obtain their certificates by examination or exemption due to long service, which was defined as two years. For the first time, it was now officially recognised that cooking at sea required specialised skills, even if such capabilities were obtained through only a few weeks of training plus one month's service at sea in some capacity.

As a consequence of the Act, the demand for cookery schools increased, and several new ones were established in the major port cities. This essay also examines the recruitment and training of the ships' cooks, their demographic background and daily tasks. It argues that even if the 1906 Act officially acknowledged the importance of cooking, there were other factors that came to make food preparation at sea more valued. Technological innovations, the development of passenger shipping and a concern over the quality of men recruited led to an improvement of seafarers' diets and made a cook's job more demanding but also more alluring. The paper also contends that ships' cooks were first and foremost seafarers and highlights the dissimilarities between them and their shore-based counterparts who worked in hotels, public houses or private households. Because of the domestic nature of the cooks' work, they were often regarded as real seafarers. This article pays attention to the gender and ethnic characteristics influencing their status and hierarchies in an all-male workplace.

Biographical material and anecdotal evidence are used to explain the early status of the cook. Preliminary results are derived from a database consisting of 19,000 entries of individual catering personnel, of which 3062 were cooks, butchers and bakers. These data have been collected from Crew Lists and Agreements for Cunard ships between 1861 and 1938. A complete record of the Register of Cook's Certificates from the years 1921 and 1922, comprising 1141 individuals, is also used. The other main sources include Parliamentary papers, Shipping Federation archives, sea cookery books, emigrant diaries and prospectuses from the various nautical cookery schools.

### Pea Soup and Dandyfunk<sup>3</sup>

Complaints about the quality of provisions were always constant, but bad cooking became a public issue at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> By that time, the contrast between living conditions onboard steam liners, sailing ships and tramps had become notorious. There was still no official scale of provisions, raw materials were of bad quality and the food was monotonous. Yet technological change had made it possible, at least in theory, to provide better living standards at sea. For the first time it was realised that it was practical, and even appropriate, to eat well onboard a ship. Until then, crew and passengers had commonly regarded sea travel as an experience requiring self-discipline and asceticism. When this demanding environment was combined with the presence of physical danger, seafaring life attained its mystic dimension, which became identified as masculine and heroic.

Food has always been important to seafarers, especially since it was regarded as a mark of social status. But the quality of food was also a matter of life and death, since it was impossible to obtain alternative nutrition during long voyages, apart from occasional fishing or hunting. Seafarers' yarns are full of legends and horror stories about the food served onboard, especially on sailing vessels. The cook was often described as a tragicomic or unpleasant character, and the cook's "extraordinary lack of skill" was the curse of almost everyone on the ship.'

On sailing vessels the cook was normally the oldest or the least skilled seaman. Alternatively, Simon P. Ville argues that an apprentice would do the cooking and receive a few pence more per week in return. He also suggests that little skill was required of a cook since the meals were simple.<sup>6</sup> But were the meals simple of necessity or because the cook lacked the skills to create variation and to ensure the proper preservation of the stores? Preparing meals that were simple ashore was not as easy in damp, unsteady and cramped conditions. Innovation was needed to conjure up a meal from a few ingredients without the use of fresh water. Starting a fire and keeping it going was also a difficult task in rough weather. Even preparing the infamous pea soup had its problems: sometimes the peas were so hard that however long they were soaked, they would not soften. Provisions were often of the lowest quality, and what was available was of insufficient quality.

Thomas Brassey recalled the training of the cooks in his famous book *British Seamen* in 1877:

It would be only fair for the crews if some certificate of competency were required before a man was allowed to ship as cook. The culinary processes on many merchant ships are of the rudest description, and the inexperience of the cooks is the more serious in a sanitary point of view. because the

dietary is of necessity unnatural. If the food is ill prepared it must have a most prejudicial effect on the health of crews.'

Conrad Dixon also notes that the quality of cooking became an issue in the middle of the nineteenth century. He explains that official interest in the scale of provisions and water originated from an outbreak of cholera and scurvy among merchant seamen.' It is not surprising that ship's cooks were ignorant of food preparation and preservation, since cookery as a discipline was still in its infancy. In *Cookery for Seamen*, published in 1894, it was explained that "food may be divided into three main sections: flesh-forming, heat-giving and bone-making."<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, Alan Villiers, who served aboard sailing ships, emphasised that good and sufficient food was very important at sea and that, if treated well, the crew was content even if the pay was low.<sup>10</sup> Seafarers, especially those under sail, needed a balanced diet to maintain their physiques when working from dawn until dusk. So why were no qualifications needed to be a cook, who was alone responsible for the preparation of meals? As a comparison, marine engineers needed certificates of competency from 1862, when they were only beginning to be employed at sea in significant numbers.

#### **The Concern over the Deterioration of Seafarers and the 1906 Act**

Before 1906 becoming a cook at sea required no formal training." Cooking was not seen as needing any special skills and was considered menial work. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, however, desertions and the alleged deterioration in the quality of seafarers raised questions about conditions onboard. There was an enquiry into whether harsh conditions on ships, compared with improved living standards ashore, made British seafarers reluctant to obtain employment on tramps. In 1903, a Select Committee was established in Britain to investigate conditions at sea and the employment of Lascars. The issue of food and cooking became the main topic of discussion. It was thought that improving the living conditions would attract more young British men to sea, thus preventing seafaring from falling into foreign hands. David M. Williams has written of the depth of the concern: "That British vessels should be manned by 'a heterogeneous mixture of foreigners' with some vessels alleged to resemble 'Noah's Ark' in their crew composition and that British boys should be reluctant to go to sea, seemed outrageous and unacceptable."<sup>12</sup>

The Committee was of the opinion that "improved food and cooking is the most hopeful course to induce young men to take and remain at sea." It also stated that an "increase in the number of British seamen in the Mercantile Marine may be looked for rather in the improvement of their conditions than in the increase of facilities for training boys for the sea."<sup>13</sup> It is remarkable that the improvements in diet and cooking excluded foreigners and Lascars, but the Committee believed that foreigners were used to harsh lives and bad food and hence were more amenable to such a regime.

The Board of Trade's interest in the quality of food on board ships grew alongside concerns over the deterioration of seamen from the middle of the nineteenth century until the First World War. But making the certification of competency compulsory for cooks was only part of the reforms, for the 1906 Act created for the first time a compulsory minimum

scale of provisions in the British merchant navy and required inspection of provisions and water.

On passenger liners the food was alleged to be satisfactory, yet on tramps the provisions and preparation of food was said to be of appalling quality. In general, witnesses questioned by the Committee agreed that the food fell below any acceptable standards. There were, however, differing views on the necessity of making cooks' certificates compulsory and on why the standard of food was so bad. The Superintendent of the North Shields cookery school testified that "food, in many cases good of its kind, is rendered almost worthless when cooked, and very unappetising, owing to the incompetency of the cook."<sup>14</sup> She also appealed to shipowners, reasoning that certifying cooks would prove economical in the end since it would reduce the waste of meat. Havelock Wilson's view, on the contrary, was that "no cook can make a satisfactory meal out of the materials specified in the ordinary scale, even if a large number – not majority – of men are incompetent."<sup>15</sup> Shipowners did not agree with the trade union arguments about bad provisions and blamed the incompetence and lack of intelligence of the cooks.<sup>16</sup> But there is strong evidence that the system of provisioning provided lots of opportunities for fraud, since there were many middlemen to profit by it. Moreover, the captain who had to deal with the provisions may have made mistakes, since he was usually not an expert in dealing with rations and was unaware of going prices. He was also often busy while in port. The system of shipowners paying the money intended for provisions directly to the captain also invited misconduct. By properly training the cooks and stewards, the captain's purchasing power would be transferred to the cooks, as it was on the big passenger liners." The shipowners' representatives, although regarding the training of cooks as desirable, were against compulsory certification because they were reluctant to pay higher salaries to cooks.<sup>18</sup> Officially, their opinion was that even if the quality of cooking left much to be desired, ships' cooks had improved in recent years.<sup>19</sup> They probably wished to emphasise the efforts made in training of the cooks at the shipowners' expense. The general opinion, however, was that if food was improved on tramps, and if the cooking were better, better men would be drawn to the merchant marine.

The possibility of bad food contributing to desertion has usually been overlooked by historians. Desertion rates rose quickly at the end of the nineteenth century: in 1895 there were 14,502 desertions abroad, and in the year 1900, 57,861. Also, contemporaries explained the growing numbers of desertions by reference to bad conditions and inferior diet on British ships compared to foreign vessels.<sup>20</sup>

The National Sailors' and Firemen's Union was the most dedicated campaigner for the certification of cooks, since it saw this as a tool in bargaining for wages. J. Havelock Wilson, a former ship's cook, was a particularly devoted advocate of compulsory certification and played an active role in the 1906 Act as a Member of Parliament and as a witness. Although the Act was passed, shipowners used their influence to delay implementation until 1908. They also managed to dilute certification by using their leverage in the final passage of the law. As enacted, the bill stipulated that anyone with a few weeks' training and a month's service at sea in any capacity was regarded as a skilled cook, while the legislation introduced by Wilson had demanded a year's service at sea.

Despite compulsory certification and examination, the quality of cooking took a long time to improve. As *The Seaman* noted in 1925, "even when the Board of Trade began to take an interest in the quality and quantity of the rations the artist in the galley was too often

chosen by a process of unnatural selection. The man who was not good for anything else was the man to cook."<sup>21</sup>

**"Any Mon Can Cuik:" Ethnicity, Hierarchy and Gender** <sup>22</sup>

Why did the seafarers have to wait for so long before it was realised that cooking affected the quality of food and required special knowledge? In this section the answer is sought through gender analysis, and it suggests that the rationale lies in the fact that cooking was connected with both femininity and domesticity. This section will also analyse the gender and ethnic composition of cooks and ask whether they were seen as less masculine in the shipboard community. It also compares the gender composition of cooks ashore and onboard.

In the sea cooking profession, race and gender notions were factors in many ways. On American ships, for example, the cook was most likely to be African-American. According to Martha Putney, men of colour worked at shipboard jobs, like cooking, that whites disdained. African-American children, slave and free, were employed as waiting boys, cabin boys and cook's apprentices before the US Civil War.<sup>23</sup> W. Jeffrey Bolster has also shown that in times of increasing competition, work prospects for men of colour were restricted to cooks and stewards.<sup>24</sup> Especially from the mid-nineteenth century on, those of African extraction were increasingly classed in feminine roles by whites.<sup>25</sup> Laura Tabili pays attention to gender distinctions in all-male workplaces. At home, the personal services performed by wives went unpaid in favour of the male breadwinner, whose "skill" brought home the money. In a shipboard community this service work was done by very young, very old or disabled men and by the twentieth century, by the colonised. Men who did "women's" work were seen to be weak, effeminate or homosexual.<sup>26</sup> As Frank T. Bullen wrote of stewards that "[e]very seaman feels a certain kind of a disdainful sense of a superiority towards them. He can never get quite rid of the feeling that they are menials."<sup>27</sup> Judith Fingard has noted that stewards, cooks and black crew members in general were particularly vulnerable to mistreatment and violence at sea from other crew members and officers.<sup>28</sup>

The cooks and stewards were also often of African extraction on British ships. Moreover, Lascar and Chinese seamen were used as cooks, especially on ships trading to the East. Racial segregation between the three main occupational groups (deck, engine and catering) was also very evident. Laura Tabili has revealed how each job carried a status as manly or menial, often following racial lines. The less a job was "man's work," the more likely men of colour were to perform that task. On most liners, whites dominated deck jobs, which were regarded as especially manly.<sup>29</sup> While different companies favoured various nationalities in catering, Cunard preferred British and other European individuals.<sup>30</sup> There is a heartbreaking note in an emigrant's diary: "The Steward, an African, went up aloft to look at it (the Stuart's Island). Some of the sailors followed him, tied him fast and left him there to lie looked and laughed at. Someone said he blanched out but did not say what colour."<sup>31</sup>

The complete record of the certificates of competency issued for the ship's cooks in 1922 shows that fifteen percent of the certificates were issued to men born outside Britain, of whom the majority came from Hong Kong and China (twenty-four cooks). The next largest groups were Europeans (eighteen) and Indians (nine).<sup>32</sup> In 1902, a quarter of the pupils of the North Shields Nautical Cookery School were foreigners. The Superintendent

of the school was "sorry to say we have so many foreigners, and they are so large a number of foreigners employed on British ships, that we must have them, and they make better pupils than a Britisher."<sup>33</sup> There were also many Asian students in the London Nautical Cookery School, which justified the high intake of foreigners in its reports by the large demand for certified cooks in 1908; in November 1908 nine of its twenty-four pupils were Asian.<sup>34</sup>

Women were hardly ever to be found as cooks on deep-sea British vessels, even if by 1901 the majority of non-domestic cooks ashore were women. In 1911 of 23,874 non-domestic cooks on land, 13,538 were women, who also did most of the cooking in households.<sup>35</sup> Sometimes, however, young girls were hired as cooks on small river and coasting vessels where only family members were employed.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, women were active in the training of sea cooks. For example, the superintendent of the North Shields Cookery School was Miss E.E. Bell. The London cookery school's examiner was also a woman, Miss Whitby.<sup>37</sup> In the absence of women, men who performed domestic duties were described in female metaphors and their masculinity was often questioned. The seafarer Jan de Hartog wrote about sea cooks that:

For some people, the cooks are the most unpleasant members of the ship. One could call them mothers of the ships or housewives; the feminine element is dominant. It is not only the messing around with pots and pans, the talking about menus while tossing back imaginary curls, it is the gossip and the superstition that give every sea-cook this touch of femininity. After some time the young sailor may even come to the conclusion that his cook is a pansy. This is rarely the case. It is just that the job has left its indelible imprint on the man.<sup>38</sup>

### **The Development of Passenger Shipping**

Before the era of increasing emigration, legislators were not concerned with regulating how cooking at sea was done. Shipping companies treated emigrants as human cargoes, and class-obsessed owners did not consider them worthy of services of any kind. Up to the 1850s no beds, bedding, cleaning utensils or water closets were supplied. Only transport, the minimum sleeping space, water and a place to cook were included in steerage fares. Intensifying foreign competition also made British ship owners reluctant to spend more than necessary in order to keep fares competitive. Cabin passengers, on the other hand, were provided with private staterooms, four meals a day and the services of stewards and stewardesses. But first-class passengers were a small minority and there was no need for politicians to get involved.<sup>39</sup>

Until the 1850s, steerage passengers provided their own food and the cook's only task was to maintain the fire and stove and keep order in the kitchen. If these people wanted their meals cooked, they had to bribe the cook, who often took cash, alcohol or tobacco.<sup>40</sup> Several complaints of overcrowding, unsanitary conditions and deaths in steerage brought conditions on emigrant ships to the public's attention.<sup>41</sup> A Parliamentary Committee, set up in 1851 to investigate such conditions, was concerned about the considerable abuses it found, including fraud, misconduct and inadequate inspection of provision. At that time provisions were served raw on sailing ships – if they were issued at all – and on steamers were usually

served in a cooked state. Most emigrants travelled with their own food and cooked it themselves. The Committee's suggestion to issue cooked provisions to all was a practical response: it would solve the problems of both food storage and fire. Previously there were difficulties with providing fire for everybody to cook their food separately. There was also the inconvenience of storing provisions, since the rations were issued weekly and emigrants had to store them individually, thus occupying valuable space. The scale set by the 1852 Passenger Act was very basic and was regarded as supplementary, since it was still expected that passengers would bring their own food and utensils. The Act did, however, mandate that items had to be served cooked, which meant that the passenger cook really had to prepare food for passengers. Still, the dietary scale was so basic that no complicated cooking was needed.<sup>42</sup>

The 1852 Passenger Act was the first to include any regulations concerning sea cooks. It required every passenger ship carrying more than 100 adults to have one or two "seafaring men" employed solely to cook for the passengers. The legislation also required shipping companies to set aside a designated cooking area, which was to be properly covered and arranged, with suitable cooking apparatus and the necessary fuel.<sup>43</sup> The Act therefore represented an initial attempt to provide basic cooking facilities for ordinary passengers. It had important consequences for the development of passenger shipping and stimulated a rapid expansion of catering personnel.

With the development of specialised passenger shipping, the quality and variety of food became a great asset in the competition between liners. When the flow of emigrants dried up, passenger shipping was transformed into a tourist industry for people who travelled for pleasure. Generally, the development of steam seriously changed the composition of the seafaring labour force and the numbers of stewards and cooks started to grow steadily. In 1871, the 2000-ton North Atlantic steamer *Abyssinia* normally carried five or six cooks plus a butcher and two bakers, all of whom catered for 1200 passengers and a crew of 120.<sup>44</sup> In 1921, *Saxonia* carried thirty-four cooks and bakers for 1400 passengers and 327 crew members.<sup>45</sup> The difference in numbers points to more ambitious and complicated cooking, often facilitated by the latest household technology, which had the added advantage of substantially reducing labour costs. Captain E.G. Diggle listed the most common domestic appliances in *Aquitania*: dough-machine, toaster, automatic egg-boiler, potato peeler, burnishing machine and a dishwashing machine that could clean 2000 plates per hour.<sup>46</sup>

### **The Training of Cooks**

The first sea cookery school in Britain opened in Glasgow but had to close because of the lack of pupils and funding.<sup>47</sup> Before the 1906 Act, there were several sea cookery schools in Britain: London (opened in 1893), Liverpool (1890s), North Shields (1890), Hull (1904) and Belfast (1904).<sup>48</sup> By the 1920s, schools also operated in ports such as Sunderland, Dublin (Dublin Command School of Cooking) and Edinburgh (Edinburgh School of School of Cookery and Domestic Economy).<sup>49</sup> In 1930, The Royal Air Force School of Cookery and Messing at Hatton was approved by the Board of Trade as a recognised school of cookery.<sup>50</sup> After the Second World War, National Sea Training Schools in Kent and Gloucestershire were established, offering eight-week courses for those interested in obtaining a berth in a catering department and twelve weeks pre-sea training for those intending to work on deck

The schools were controlled by a committee consisting of representatives from the Ministries of Transport and Education, as well as shipowners and seamen.<sup>51</sup>

In Liverpool, a major port for passenger traffic, there were several opportunities to acquire preliminary skills in sea cookery. Certain elementary schools prepared boys during their last two years at school in general principles of working in the kitchen. Classes in sea cookery started in Liverpool in the 1890s and at the beginning of the twentieth century the "Seamen's Cookery School" was opened in the Board of Trade Building in Canning Place with one instructor.<sup>52</sup> After the First World War the name was changed to the "Nautical Training School for Stewards and Cooks." In the interwar years the school moved to Myrtle Street and in 1946 to Oldham Street.<sup>53</sup> In 1960 it became the "Nautical Training College," which still awarded Certificates of Competency for Ship's Cooks.<sup>54</sup> The Liverpool Seacookery School operated under the control of the Education Committee of the Liverpool City Council. The Liverpool Ship Owners' Association, local Marine Board, Mercantile Marine Service Association and the Merchant Service Guild supervised its work.

The cookery school offered various courses for ship's cooks. The "ordinary course," which qualified for a Certificate of Competency under the 1906 Merchant Shipping Act, in the 1930s lasted for three weeks and included a final examination. The cost of attending was twenty-one shillings and instruction was provided by Mr. Richard Bond, who also had written several handbooks for cooks and stewards.<sup>55</sup> By the 1960s the same course lasted six weeks.<sup>56</sup> In the 1930s the basic course comprised lessons in the care of utensils, cleanliness and economy in the use of materials. It also offered instruction in the general principles of cookery involved in preparing the most common dishes (such as pea soup, fish and sea pie) and the use of tinned meats, baked beans and preserved vegetables. The making of pastries, puddings, bread and cakes was an important part of the curriculum.<sup>57</sup> In the 1930s the school also offered more advanced lessons. A three-month course for assistant cooks, which could be obtained while employed, was offered alongside a year's training course for apprentice cooks and stewards. Extra courses on cabin cookery, saloon cookery and higher-grade cookery were also offered to introduce candidates to more advanced modes of food preparation. These were obviously intended for cooks working on the passenger liners who wished to hold a Certificate of Proficiency in Higher-Grade Cooking.<sup>58</sup>

London was home to one of the largest nautical cookery schools at the Sailor's Home in Well Street with the financial support of London City Council and the Shipping Federation.<sup>59</sup> The London School of Nautical Cookery was opened in 1893 to train cooks "to make use of the minimum scale of victualling laid down by the Board of Trade."<sup>60</sup> Before 1906, when certification was not required, attendance was low. But in 1907 there were already twenty or thirty pupils attending each month. The cookery instructor complained how difficult it was to meet the demand for cooks. By 1910 there was a regular attendance of twelve to twenty students per month. An average of fifty-two hours of instruction per student was given to train ship's cooks, second cooks and mess room stewards. In 1926, the school also started offering courses in baking. The minutes of the school tell that notwithstanding active attendance, only a few certificates were issued each quarter. Yet every year participation was higher than the certificates awarded. This might have been because of work commitments or lack of motivation. Despite high attendance, the school complained in 1910 about the lack of money and attempted to supplement its income by selling food on the premises.<sup>61</sup> In 1915, in order to receive a larger grant from the London

City Council, troops were offered courses in camp cookery.<sup>62</sup> Due to the poor recruitment of seafaring cooks, the North Shields Sea Cookery School also offered classes for girls.<sup>o</sup>

The Shipping Federation, the main organisation for shipowners, was actively involved in the training of cooks. The Federation supported several nautical cookery schools and had its own school at Gravesend, where deckhands, cooks, and even stokers were trained. Even if the Federation supported training for cooks, it was opposed to making the certificate of competency compulsory.<sup>64</sup> On the one hand, it was the first to affirm that poor cooking, rather than the quantity and quality of victuals, was to blame for bad food. On the other, it was against the compulsory training of ship's cooks because it was aware that a sudden demand for certificated cooks would immediately lead to an increase wages. Even trade unions got into the act: the National Seamen's and Firemen's Union had already tried to make shipowners voluntarily employ trained and certificated cooks as early as 1886.

Apart from Liverpool, the schools trained men mainly for cargo ships and did not have enough men attending. The apparent reason for the lack of motivation was that no higher wages were offered to certificated men.<sup>65</sup>

### **Recruitment and Career Patterns of Ship's Cooks**

Passenger liners often hired cooks straight from school. Boys commonly learned their profession through an apprenticeship in the catering department, especially on the large liners. At the beginning of the twentieth century, schoolmaster's and teacher's were especially important, and it appears that a talent for cooking was not necessarily a requirement to get hired. For example, Edgar Hilton, an ex-Cunard cook, was recruited straight from school at the age of seventeen after his headmaster received a letter from Cunard offering vacancies for boys with a good knowledge of French to be trained as chefs.<sup>66</sup> Also, the Liverpool Education Committee advised young boys interested in the profession of ship's cook that:

Certain elementary schools prepare the boys during their last two years at school. By this means they learn the general principles which should guide them in working in the kitchen – the necessity of order, accuracy, and cleanliness. At the age of 14 the representative of a shipping firm inspects the boys, and the most suitable are signed on as cooks' boys. A system, amounting in effect to apprenticeship, is in vogue, whereby a boy remaining on the same ship has received an all-round training by the time he reaches the age of 20...Boys desiring to undertake this training should consult their headmasters as soon as possible.<sup>67</sup>

George Knill went to sea at the age of sixteen as a scullery boy. After a year he obtained a post as first assistant cook for two trips, then was promoted to fourth cook on a passenger liner and second cook on a cargo liner. After twelve years at sea he finally became a ship's cook." A common way to obtain the same post on sailing ships and tramps, at least before the 1906 Act, was to sign on as an assistant cook in the hope of rapid promotion. Davis Churney, a steward, explains recruitment as follows:

If anything occurs on board, for instance, if a cook gets drunk, or gets ill, the mess room boys are very often put in the galley to do the cooking for the passage home, and, of course, the people on board the ship make no trouble about it, because they know he is not a qualified man; they do not expect much; he is only a mess-room boy and he will be discharged at the end of the voyage with a cook's discharge, and the next voyage he gets employment as a full blown cook, and people have to suffer for it.<sup>69</sup>

Those who worked for companies that placed a priority on trained cooks worked and took lessons in turn. Since evidence suggests that cooks seldom came from prosperous families, most could not afford a long, expensive education. How they were able depended on the location of the nearest school and the cost. Some, but not all, shipowners helped with expenses.<sup>70</sup> Training was only taken when it was mandatory because staying off work was impossible for long. Cooks usually worked their way up, particularly on passenger liners, where career advancement was possible. The evidence also suggests that if a man really learned how to cook, he would not stay in a sailing ship or a tramp for long but would transfer to a passenger liner or go ashore.<sup>71</sup> Relatively low wages, long days and the lack of career advancement might have served as incentives for skilled cooks to transfer.

Data collected from the ship's cooks' certificates issued in 1921 show that the majority of British cooks came from Liverpool and other northern ports (see table 1). The source also reveals where the examination was taken. As the table 2 shows, apart from London and Sunderland, the percentage of examinations taken in the cook's hometown is quite high. The numbers taking examinations in South Shields, which hosted a well-established cookery school which was near Sunderland, could explain the lower figure of Sunderland cases. It is notable that even if Southampton was fast catching Liverpool as the premier passenger port, there were only six cooks from there, only one of whom was examined in the town. This further supports the assumption that the schools trained men mainly from cargo ships and this particular certification of competency mainly served cooks on cargo vessels. Moreover, the high percentages suggest that cooks took their exams locally and that in the large ports the demand for cooks was high. They did not have to move to obtain work. Finally, the low mobility of cooks might also be explained by the patterns of local recruitment or by youth. Figure 1 shows the prevalence of young men among ship's cooks.

The data indicate that the biggest group was men between the ages of twenty and twenty-four, and that sixty-eight percent of those examined were under thirty-five. The large number of men in the twenty to twenty-four year age cohort suggests that after taking a trip or two as mess boys or assistant cooks, men participated in lessons while they were in ports between voyages. The fact that the examination was not taken by the very young suggests that most men had some seafaring experience. They might also have taken the certificate "just in case" – in order to secure employment if offered a job as the sole cook on a cargo ship (only one cook per ship had to have a certificate at one time). The peak in the forty to forty-three cohort might be due to demobilised Royal Navy cooks. In fact, twenty-eight percent of the certificates given to men of that age were sent to Royal Navy barracks or to the Royal Navy School at Portsmouth or Devonport.<sup>72</sup>

**Table 1**  
**Most Common Birthplaces of the British Ship's Cooks Examined in 1921**

Place of Birth	Cases	
Liverpool, Bootle & Birkenhead	84	15.6
London	37	6.9
Aberdeen	30	5.6
N. and S. Shields	24	4.2
Cardiff	20	3.7
Sunderland	17	3.1
Other British	326	47.7
Born Overseas	82	13.2
Grand Total	620	100

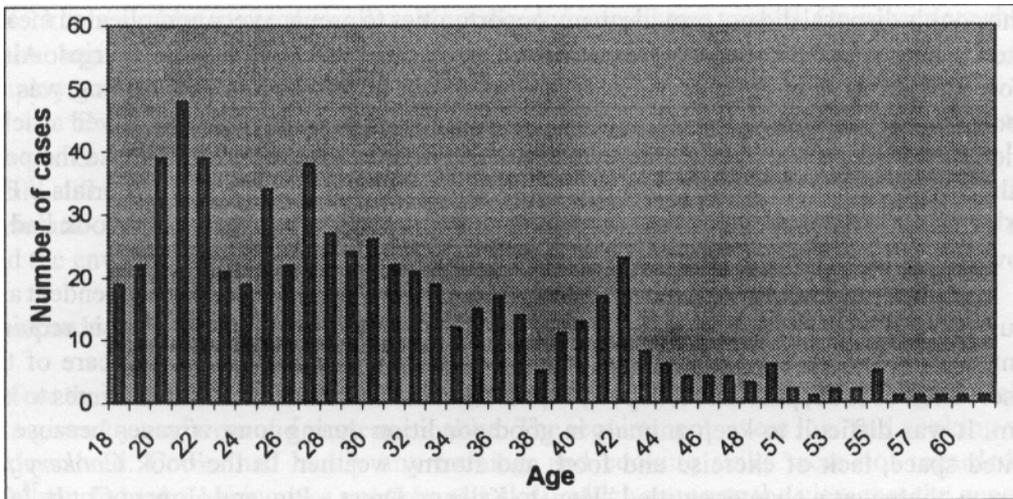
Source: National Maritime Museum (NMM), X97/052. "Ship's Cooks' Certificates," 7 vols., 1915-1958.

**Table 2**  
**Percentage of British Cooks Taking Their Examination in the City of Their Birth in 1921**

Place of Birth	Total Cases	% Examined in the Same City
Liverpool and environs	84	92
London	37	68
Aberdeen	30	97
N. and S. Shields	24	90
Cardiff	20	100
Sunderland	17	53

Source: See table 1.

**Figure 1**  
**Age of Ship's Cooks Examined in Britain in 1921**



Source: See table 1.

The height of the career ladder and the wages obtained varied between sailing vessels, cargo ships, and passenger liners. There was no formal manner of advancement on a sailing vessel. A cook might have started as a mess boy, occasionally helping in the kitchen. Later, a second cook might appear who had earlier been a steward or a mess boy and later became a ship's cook. The second cook helped with preparing the food and carried out the baking. On cargo ships the kitchen department remained very small. In Cunard cargo liners in 1921, there were no more than a ship's cook, a second cook, a boy and two stewards in the galley. A ship's cook could earn £18 a month, but the working day was long and no overtime was paid."

Large passenger liners had developed a complicated hierarchy by 1910, when specialisation had also started to emerge in kitchen departments. Sauce cooks, vegetable cooks, larder cooks, fish cooks, grill cooks and special cooks for Jewish and Italian passengers had already appeared. There were also several assistant ratings, including scullery boys, porters and assistant cooks. The system was complicated further by dividing the cooks into different classes, with each class operating its own kitchen. On *Queen Mary*, for example, there were six kitchens and a large crew to feed.<sup>74</sup> Chefs, who were often recruited from continental Europe, mostly France and Switzerland, led the kitchen departments. They enjoyed a competitive salary of £23-29 a month plus bonuses, usually depending on the size of a ship. The Chef of the 52,226-ton *Berengaria* in 1921 earned a salary of £50 a month. A cook on a passenger liner could proceed from an apprentice or a scullery boy to an assistant cook or second cook or, if he was very talented or lucky, he might become a chef.

### Seafarer or Simply a Caterer?

The duties of the sea cook varied according to whether he worked on a sailing vessel, tramp steamer or passenger liner. The common characteristic, however, was that they all performed their duties on a ship, often out on the high seas. The sea cook, therefore, had to adapt to working conditions that were unknown to most cooks ashore.

Cooking at sea was not a tricky task before the nineteenth century, since the material at the cook's disposal did not provide many opportunities to prepare very complicated meals. Instead, careful planning and preservation of food were important on longer trips. Also, before the era of canning and compressing, space was often a problem. Baking was an important part of the cook's work, since flour was one of the most easily preserved articles on long voyages. The cook's popularity also depended on his ability to disguise the poor quality of his provisions or to create an impression of variety with limited materials.<sup>75</sup> For that quality, David Bullen calls him a "magician."<sup>76</sup> Among other things, the cook had to know how to preserve eggs for five months and how to boil old potatoes.<sup>77</sup>

Since the cook worked mostly by himself, his work was reasonably independent and required good organisational skills. The ability to organise time was also a basic requirement, as was the ability to be frugal with foodstuffs. The cook had to take care of the preservation of food, purchase it in port, tend to the animals embarked and sometimes to kill them. It was difficult to keep animals in good condition during long voyages because of limited space, lack of exercise and food, and stormy weather. In the book *Cookery for Seamen*, there was a chapter entitled "How to Kill and Dress a Pig, and How to Cut It."<sup>78</sup> On passenger liners, cows were often carried to provide fresh milk for the passengers.<sup>79</sup> In addition, there was often no fresh water available for cooking or for washing dishes.

At sea, poor weather conditions made cooking very demanding, especially since the galley often was flooded. Arthur Gollifer, a passenger on a ship to New Zealand, described how the galley was full of water in bad weather and how the cook "stands in about a foot of water to do his work."<sup>80</sup> Apart from harsh weather conditions and isolation, what made the cook's work different at sea was that he often had to participate in various tasks on deck.<sup>81</sup> On sailing ships, the positions of a cook and steward were often combined.<sup>82</sup> He could also act as a dispenser of medicine in the old sailing vessels.<sup>83</sup>

The cook's traditional position in the shipboard hierarchy also separated him from his counterparts ashore. He was in a difficult position between the shipowner and the crew, who often used food to protest poor conditions. The cook and steward belonged neither to the sailors nor the engineers, all of whom slept in their own forecastles and developed a sense of community. The cook was an outsider. Since the cook and steward were responsible for purchasing and measuring the food, the crew was often suspicious of them during times of conflict. For their part, shipowners often caused stress for cooks by blaming them for wasting food and for the poor quality of its preparation.<sup>84</sup>

Technological change, including refrigeration, better ovens and electricity, as well as the shortening of voyages, made cooking easier. Refrigeration and electricity first appeared on ocean-going passenger liners in the 1870s but only became common in the next decade.<sup>85</sup> *Servia* was the first Cunarder to be fitted with electric light.<sup>86</sup> But the more complicated hierarchy and its impact on the mess made a cook's work harder: officers and ratings increasingly were eating in separate places, had different menus and because of the watches ate at different hours.

When passenger shipping developed, a liner's reputation was based on the standards of service, and food was a very important part of the package. Menus came to resemble those at the finest restaurants on land. The transatlantic liners, and later the cruise ships, followed every trend in cooking and even the printed menus became an art form. Twelve-course meals were served in a range of restaurants with the finest selection of wines. The organisation of the kitchen department was also copied from the big hotels. Cooks on the larger liners were divided into classes comparable to hotels, and the duties were similar for each grade as in hotel kitchens. Moreover, the galleys were divided into classes as well. On passenger ships, technological change led to a high degree of specialisation, segregation of tasks and employment of extremely skilled cooking professionals.

Even if the work itself on big passenger liners started to resemble work in a hotel, sea cooks still remained vulnerable to the unstable working conditions. Their workplace could still roll twenty degrees in bad weather, and their working days were far longer than their land-based counterparts. Their living quarters were still cramped, the visits home short, and the environment still overwhelmingly male.

## Conclusion

Before the middle of the nineteenth century, the poor quality of food and cooking was taken as a given by seafarers and passengers alike. The requirements were low and cooking was undervalued. Cooks had hardly any training, and cooking skills were not regarded as relevant. Indeed, cooking was not seen as a skill, which supports the view that the concept of "skill" has gender undertones. Cooking and other household tasks were seen as women's work, which is unpaid – or at best underpaid – in households. On a ship, each task carried

a status according to racial and gender lines. The tasks regarded as feminine were allocated to those regarded as unfit to do the work of a "real seaman." In the absence of biological women, they performed the feminine roles in the shipboard community, roles that did not provide many chances before the age of technological change for career advancement. The failure to regard cooking as something that required skill led to major problems and economic losses for shipowners.

Fear over the deterioration of seamen, their growing desertion rates and the increasing numbers of foreigners constitutes the background to the 1906 Merchant Shipping Act. Even if it made certification of cooks compulsory, it still did not improve the cook's status. The required training period was too short to make a drastic difference in cooking skills. Moreover, pressure from shipowners watered down the Act which in the end required only basic skills. As a consequence of the Act, however, the inspection of food and the first national dietary scale for merchant ships were established and food at sea did improve. The Act was also significant in giving a boost to training for catering personnel, even if onboard experience remained an important route to the position of cook. The patterns of recruitment varied between cargo and passenger liners. The big liner companies provided apprenticeships for their employees, unlike tramps and sailing vessels, which recruited their cooks from cookery schools or straight from shipping offices in ports.

The cook's work depended partly on diet and partly on the amount of food provided for seafarers. With technological change, a larger mixture of ingredients and kitchen equipment was provided for sea cooks, which made the work more demanding. Modern ways of preserving food, especially refrigeration, allowed a man to spend more time cooking and less on slaughtering animals. The use of fruit and vegetables allowed more variety in seafarers' diets. Technology also fostered the development of a more ambitious attitude towards cooking, especially on passenger liners.

More important factors in changing the cook's status were the 1852 Passenger Act and the development of passenger shipping. As note in the evidence supplied to the 1903 Committee, cooking was already much better on passenger liners than on sailing vessels or steam tramps. The cooks had completed long apprenticeships and made shorter and more regular voyages (which made planning the provisions easier). Most important, cooking improved because they were cooking for passengers who increasingly chose their ships on the basis of service. When emigrant traffic was brought to a standstill, those who travelled for pleasure insisted that the standard of service be high. The big passenger liners started to imitate international luxury hotels in their menus and systems of organisation. The senior members of the kitchen department were increasingly seen as professionals and were rewarded with career advancement, regular work, bonuses and competitive salaries.

## NOTES

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1. Frank T. Bullen, *The Men of the Merchant Service, being the Polity of the Mercantile Marine for Longshore Readers* (London, 1900), 192; and

Great Britain, Parliament, *Parliamentary Papers (BPP)* (1903), LXII, , "Report of the Committee Appointed by the Board of Trade to Inquire into Certain Questions Affecting the Mercantile Marine" ("Report"), q. 5,577. J. Havelock Wilson, in his turn, stated that "I look upon a cook as a most important man on board a ship. He is next to the captain in importance, because if there is bad cooking, there is dissatisfaction and grumbling and disturbance in all around the ship."

2. *The Seaman*, 28 August 1925.

3. "Dandyfunk" consists of powdered biscuit browned in a pan and covered with boiling water.

4. Conrad Dixon, "Pound and Pint: Diet in the Merchant Service, 1750-1980," in Sarah Palmer and Glyndwr. Williams (eds.), *Chartered and Uncharted Waters: Proceedings of a Conference on the Study of British Maritime History* (London, 1982), 169, notes that the Royal Commission on Labour established a committee to discuss the dietary imbalance at sea and called for a statutory national scale. The Seamen's Union made an identical demand. Even earlier, the Seamen's Parliamentary Committee had wanted a compulsory diet scale in 1868.

5. Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750* (Cambridge, 1987), 123.

6. Simon P. Ville, *English Shipowning during the Industrial Revolution: Michael Henley and Son, London Shipowners, 1770-1830* (Manchester, 1987), 109.

7. Thomas Brassey, *British Seamen as Described in Recent Parliamentary and Official Documents* (London, 1877), 287.

8. Dixon, "Pound and Pint," 167.

9. Alexander Quinlan and N.E. Mann, *Cookery for Seamen* (Liverpool, 1894), 4.

10. Alan Villiers, *The Way of a Ship: The Story of the Square-rigged Cape Homer* (New York, 1953), 182.

11. The Act was passed in 1906 but became effective on 13 June 1908

12. David M. Williams, "The Quality, Skill and

Supply of Maritime Labour: Causes of Concern in Britain, 1850-1914" in Lewis R. Fischer, *et al.* (eds.), *The North Sea: Twelve Essays on the Social History of Maritime Labour* (Stavanger, 1992), 52.

13. "Report," I, Cd. 1607.

14. *Ibid.*, evidence of Mrs. E.E. Bell, q. 15143.

15. *Ibid.*, evidence of J. Havelock Wilson, q. 5571-5577.

16. *Ibid.*, evidences of John William Squance, q. 17996; and Joseph Bellamy, q. 16892-16893.

17. *Ibid.*, evidence of David Henry Churney, q. 20754

18. *Ibid.*, evidence of John Hughes, q. 17388-17389 and 17547-175488.

19. *Ibid.*, evidence of Duncan Stewart, q. 14,161.

20. *Ibid.*, evidence of William Raeburn, q. 20,197; William Hooper, q. 22,487; James Coyle, q. 11,115 and 11,190-11,1905; J. Havelock Wilson, q. 5583-55844; Joseph Henry Longford, q. 2447-2448; and Villiers, *Way of a Ship*, 183.

21. *The Seaman*, 28 August 1925.

22. "Report," evidence of Mrs. E.E. Bell, q. 15143.

23. Martha S. Putney, *Black Sailors: Afro-American Merchant Seamen and Whalemens Prior to the Civil War* (New York, 1987), 31.

24. W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, MA, 1997), 176.

25. W. Jeffrey Bolster, "Every Inch a Man: Gender in the Lives of African American Seamen, 1800-1860," in Margaret S. Creighton and Lisa Norling (eds.), *Iron Men, Wooden Women: Gender and Seafaring in the Atlantic World, 1700-1920* (Baltimore, 1996), 168.

26. Laura Tabili, " 'A Maritime Race:' Masculinity and the Racial Division of Labour in Merchant Ships, 1900-1939," in Creighton and Norling (eds.), *Iron Men, Wooden Women*, 172-173.

27. Bullen, *Men of the Merchant Service*, 179.

28. Judith Fingard, *Jack in Port: Sailortowns of Eastern Canada* (Toronto, 1982), 172.
29. Laura Tabili, *"We ask for British Justice: Workers and Racial Difference in Late Imperial Britain* (Ithaca, NY, 1994), 48.
30. "Data Set based on 19,000 Members of Catering Personnel, 1861-1938, on Cunard Liners," collected by the author. It shows that most of the catering staff were British and Europeans.
31. Merseyside Maritime Museum (MMM), DX/1071/R, "Voyage Diary of Emigrant Sarah Stephens from Montgomery, North Wales, to South Island, New Zealand on the *Cardigan Castle* of Liverpool, September 1876-January 1877."
32. Of 521 certificates issued in 1922, eighty-two of them were born overseas. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich (NMM), X97/052, Cooks' Certificates (7 vols., 1915-1958).
33. "Report," evidence of Mrs. E.E. Bell, q. 15,182.
34. NMM, London Nautical Cookery School Archives, SAH 63/1, "Visiting Comments and Notes."
35. England and Wales, Censuses, 1901 and 1911, occupation tables.
36. A ten-year-old girl was employed as a ship's cook in the 45-ton river vessel *Industry*. Only four people were employed, all of whom appear to be members of the same family. Liverpool Record Office (LRO), Mf. 7, No. 3618, Census, 1881, enumerator's books, shipping schedules.
37. NMM, SAH 63/2, London Nautical Cookery School, Minutes, 11 January 1917.
38. Jan de Hartog, *A Sailor's Life* (London, 1956), 54.
39. For example, there were a total of 200,801 emigrant passengers from Liverpool in 1853, of which only 2924 travelled first class. *BPP* (1854), XIII, "Second Report from the Select Committee on Emigrant Ships" ("Second Report, Emigrants").
40. William Cobbett, *The Emigrant's Guide; in Ten Letters, Addressed to the Taxpayers of England* (London, 1830), 112; and Vere Foster, *Work and Wages. The Pennv Emigrant's Guide to United States and Canada* (5th ed., London, 1855), 17.
41. *BPP* (1851), XIX, "Report from the Select Committee on the Passengers' Act;" "Second Report, Emigrants;" and *BPP* (1881), LXXXII, "Reports with Regard to Accommodation and Treatment of Emigrants on Atlantic Steamships."
42. The weekly dietary scale to be issued to the passengers was 2 1/2 lbs. of bread or biscuit, 1 lb. wheaten flour, 5 lbs. oatmeal, 2 lbs. rice, 1/2 lb. sugar 2 oz. tea (or 4 oz. of cocoa or roasted coffee), and 2 oz. salt. Passengers Act 1852, 15&16 Victoria, XXXII.
43. *Ibid.*, XXXVI.
44. Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN), Maritime History Archive (MHA), Board of Trade (BT) 99, Agreements and Accounts of Crew, *Abyssinia*, 4 February 1871; and Duncan Haws, *Cunard Line* (Hereford, 1987), 40.
45. MUN, MHA, BT 99, *Saxonia*, 4 January 1921.
46. E.G. Diggle, *The Romance of a Modern Liner* (London, 1930), 191-192.
47. "Report," evidence of Mrs. E.E. Bell, q. 15,166.
48. University of Warwick (UW), Modern Records Centre (MRC), Shipping Federation Archive (SFA), MSS 367/TSF/1/4/1, General Purposes Committee, Minutes 20 November 1903 and 19 February 1904.
49. NMM, X97/052, Cooks' Certificates, 1915-1958, I, 1
50. *Ibid.*, II, 1.
51. Alfred G. Course, *The Merchant Navy. A Social History* (London, 1963), 295.
52. F.J. Marquis (ed.), *Handbook of Employments in Liverpool* (Liverpool, 1916), 168.
53. MMM, DX/313, Nautical Catering College, *Prospectus* (Liverpool, [c. 1960s]); and NMM, MS/75/008, Nautical Training School for Ship's Stewards and Cooks, Richard Bond, *Classes for Stewards and Cooks* (Liverpool, 1936).
54. Nautical Catering College, *Prospectus*.

55. Bond, *Classes for Stewards and Cooks*, 3. Richard Bond was the author of several much acclaimed (and well-advertised) books intended for ships' catering personnel, including *The Ship's Steward's Handbook* (Glasgow, 1918), *The Ship's Baker and Confectioner* (Glasgow, 1917); and *Sea Cookery* (Glasgow, 1917).
56. Nautical Catering College, Prospectus.
57. Bond, *Classes for Steward and Cooks*, 3-4.
58. *Ibid.*, 6-8.
59. NMM, X97/052, Cooks' Certificates, 1915-1958, I, I; and UW, MRC, SFA, General Purposes Committee, Minutes, 7 February 1893.
60. NMM, SAH 63/1, Notebook of the London Nautical Cookery School; and SAH 63/2, London Nautical Cookery School, Minutes, 7 October 1909.
61. NMM, SAH 63/2, London Nautical Cookery School, Minutes, 13 January and 4 June 1910, 27 January 1926.
62. *Ibid.*, 14 January, 15 April and 8 July 1915.
63. "Report," evidence of Mrs. E.E. Bell, q. 15,209.
64. *Ibid.*, q. 15,196; and Course, *Merchant Navy*, 257.
65. "Report," evidence of Mrs. E.E. Bell, q. 15,144.
66. Edgar J. Hilton, "One of Cunard's Cooks Recalls the Glory Days," *Ocean Liner Gazette* (Fall/Winter 1996/1997), 10-12.
67. Marquis, *Handbook*, 168.
68. MMM, DX/1055e, Knill Collection, George Knill, Discharge book.
69. "Report," evidence of David Henry Churney, q. 20,756.
70. *Ibid.*, evidence of Mrs. E.E. Bell, q. 15,152.
71. *Ibid.*, evidence of David Henry Churney, q. 20,805; and Bullen, *Men of the Merchant Service*, 204.
72. I would like to thank Adrian Jarvis, the Curator of Port History of the Merseyside Maritime Museum, for this point.
73. Cunard Data Set.
74. Hilton, "Cunard's Cooks," 11.
75. Eric W. Sager, *Maritime Labour: The Merchant Marine of Atlantic Canada 1820-1914* (Montréal, 1989), 112.
76. Bullen, *Men of The Merchant Service*, 192.
77. Quinlan and Mann, *Cookery*, 16 and 30.
78. *Ibid.*, 8-9.
79. Diggle, *Romance*, 187.
80. MMM, DX/1046, Diary written by Arthur Gollifer, passenger on the ship *Nelson* from Liverpool to New Zealand in 1897.
81. *Ibid.*. He writes on 20 September 1897: "Even the cook participated in turning the ship around." Sager, *Maritime Labour*, 112, states that this also was one of the duties of the cook on Canadian merchant vessels.
82. Bullen, *Men of the Merchant Service*, 185. LRO, Census returns, Enumerators' Books, Shipping Schedules, Ships Enumerated in Liverpool, 1881, showed that on some Scandinavian sailing ships there was a crew member called the cook/steward.
83. Course, *Merchant Navy*, 214.
84. A good example of this is a "Captains' memorandum," 25 March 1848: Ship owner's instructions to the captain stating that "Give plenty - waste nothing. Remind the Head Steward in his being economical. Be very distinct in checking with a firm hand any appearance of waste." University of Liverpool, Special Collections, Cunard Archives, D 138/2/4.
85. Basil Greenhill and Ann Giffard, *Travelling by Sea in the Nineteenth Century - Interior Design in Victorian Passenger Ships* (London, 1972), 55 and 58.
86. Charles E. Lee, *The Blue Riband. The Romance of the Atlantic Liner* (London, 1930), 146.