Chapter Four

"Traveling Palace" or "Floating Sweatshop"

The Experience of Women Seafarers

A career at sea has traditionally been viewed as a male preserve. When one thinks of ships, the image conjured up is decidedly masculine, from swashbuckling pirates and big, burly, menacing stokers to Captain Ahab types. Rarely does that image include a female presence.[1] Shipboard employment was seen as unseemly and unnatural for women for all of the reasons that went into constructing the "cult of domesticity" ideal of true womanhood in the nineteenth century. And yet, as we have seen, women seafarers were spotted on passenger liners on occasion; they constituted 4 percent of the crew on some ships. Their presence would increase in the interwar years. What made women desire a life at sea? Was it just another job or did they see it as a means of liberation from predictable lives ashore? Did it offer upward social mobility and high adventure? Was ship life a radical departure from their world at home or did it offer continuity with that life in providing women with a safe shelter, a substitute home? Was this yet another form of "sweated" labor—in this case, the sweatshop being

a "floating palace" on the high seas? These are some of the questions this chapter will address.

World War I has been described as a great social leveler which brought tremendous change to the lives of Europeans, specifically in their perceptions and expectations of their place in society. Among these changes was the notion of woman's "proper place." The war opened up opportunities for women in the workforce, which went beyond the traditional avenues of employment. Prior to 1914, European working-class women in search of an income were generally concentrated in those fields that closely resembled domestic work—textiles, confection of ready-made clothing, and alimentation. Although the variety of work remained constant, the locale in which the work was executed shifted. Work that had been performed in the home was now transferred to the factory setting. Another common occupation sought by young single women was domestic service, which was seen as an apprenticeship for marriage. With the coming of industrialization, married women were presented with a special challenge. Now that home and workplace were no longer under the same roof, they found it difficult to juggle successfully their dual responsibilities of wife/mother and co-breadwinner. Many took on piecework in the garment trades and became the "orphans" of the industry, untouched by unionization and consigned to sweatshop-like working conditions, which Charles Kingsley and others have graphically described.[2]

Educated women of the middle class fared no better than their working-class sisters. They were forced into the role of "angel of the house"[3] with their exclusive role in life being that of attentive wife and mother, making the house a safe haven for her husband and children—in short, the ideal Stepford wife. Those women who rebelled against the cult of domesticity ideal met with adversity and condemnation from society and were labeled "unnatural" women. People like Florence Nightingale were complete anomalies to their peers. Rather than accept the comfortable lifestyle awaiting her as a lady of the leisured class, Nightingale was deter-

mined to find her own serious work and in the end paved the way for the professionalization of nursing. Other middle-class women who had not been snatched up by some dashing, eligible beau were destined to fend for themselves. As society's "left-overs" or "odd women," they sought employment as teachers and governesses. Others became involved in social work—not the "lady bountiful" types castigated by Nightingale, but women committed to changing the social welfare system in their countries, the first social case workers.

World War I temporarily changed the status and variety of women's work. Now they began to infiltrate that masculine holy of holies—heavy industry—taking over the jobs the soldiers left behind in munitions factories and automotive plants, and working as riveters in shipbuilding and as streetcar conductors, work that before the war was deemed unsuitable for women and beyond their physical and intellectual grasp. After earlier being told "to go home and keep quiet," a Scottish woman finally persuaded the British War Office to allow her to organize fourteen hospital units staffed by female doctors by 1917.[4] Women working as nurses on the battlefield were both hailed as patriots for their heroism and castigated as "bitches" for the power they appeared to exert over the mutilated, emasculated soldiers. The oft-quoted verse of Nina MacDonald captures the sense of impending doom on the part of traditionalists who feared that gender roles were being dangerously blurred and that androgyny might be the drastic result of such unorthodox behavior: "Girls are doing things/They've never done before. . . . All the world is topsy-turvy/Since the War began."[5]

Where would it all end? Happily for the traditionalists, the conventional family of husband, wife, and children was reestablished after the war, and women were edged out of lucrative jobs back into traditional low-paying employment to make room for the returning veterans. Propaganda in 1919 was artfully used to bully women back into the home just as in 1914 it was used to bring them into the war effort. Posters with jingles like "Shells

made by a wife may save a husband's life" were replaced with advice to "Get a hold of pots and pan and broom and you'll sooner find a groom" or counseling that "A job will not bring happiness near. The home alone is your proper sphere!"[6] In his massive study of modern France, historian Theodore Zeldin wrote that "the war of 1914 did not produce any radical change in female attitudes, largely because it did not make all that much difference to the women."[7] Perhaps in the short term this was the case, but the effects of temporary liberation from routine domestic drudgery were to be felt for generations to come.

Women had long last disproved the masculine construct of female physical and intellectual inferiority—a myth created in the classical and early Judeo-Christian worlds and reinforced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by such noted intellectuals as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Joseph Pierre Proudhon, Jules Michelet, and others. Some women's attitudes toward work had, in fact, changed. Even among the middle and upper classes, there was a discernible perception that women had the right to fulfill themselves outside of the bounds of matrimony and motherhood. As a result, they eventually began to venture into the public sphere, armed with marketable skills gained from the possibilities presented by higher education, which was increasingly available to them. Mary Wollstonecraft's vision of an educated sisterhood was becoming a reality. However, women were going beyond Wollstonecraft's vision of the educated mother able to teach her children. There were no longer attempts to justify higher education for women. As Carrie Chapman Catt had once remarked about suffrage, she didn't know what it was, a right, a duty, or a privilege, but that "whatever it is, the women want it."[8]

No longer would women mask their desire for self-fulfillment through education by the argument that an educated woman made a better mother. They sought an education to become better individuals. Thus we see the creation of the "new woman" of the 1920s—the androgynous flapper who ventured into bars and cabarets once thought taboo for "proper" women.[9] Women infil-

trated the hallowed halls of such male bastions of higher education like Oxford and Cambridge. Women began to limit the size of their families by use of birth control and engaged in free unions with men. These actions were seen as assaults on the nuclear family. Freud's sexual revolution opened up the discussion of a woman's right to expect gratification as an active participant in sex rather than as a docile receptacle of a man's desires. Women actively sought employment in the public sector. In many countries, women gained the right to vote. Traditional society was nonplussed and saw nothing good coming from these changes and agreed with Oswald Spengler's prewar forecast that Western civilization was in decline.

Were their fears justified? Now that women had begun to assert themselves, was the patriarchal world coming to an end? The short answer to the question is "yes," but change would come about gradually. In countries like France, which had a strong women's movement in the nineteenth century, suffrage was granted only in 1944. Traditions die hard. The campaign for women's rights launched in earnest in the nineteenth century is still going on two centuries later and in some areas of the world may require another two centuries to be won. The interwar years were crucial ones for Western women's self-development. Many shared Nora Helmer's need to educate herself and recognized that there were duties "just as sacred" as motherhood—foremost among them a duty to oneself.[10] Nevertheless society was still caught between the traditional ideal of "true womanhood" and the modern concept of the "new woman." Though pioneers were breaking new ground, the majority of women continued to observe the dictates imposed upon them by patriarchal society.

Here we look at this transformation from "odd" to "new" woman in the experiences of women seafarers in the interwar years. Since the eighteenth century, women had found employment on transatlantic steamers, mainly in the catering department—as stewardesses, conductresses, shop assistants, bath

attendants, and hairdressers.[11] In steamers carrying laundries on board, women were hired to fill such low-paying jobs. Most of the work women did on board ships corresponded to the traditional occupations of women on shore—domestic service. However, the locale they chose to pursue this variation of otherwise traditional domestic work was a ship on the high seas.

This investigation builds on an earlier study of women engaged in sweated labor in the Parisian garment industry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[12] Like the homeworkers in the Parisian garment trades, ships' crew members formed still another hidden labor force, left largely unprotected from company economic exploitation. The writer George Gissing noted that in Victorian society there were more than one half million superfluous women destined to be left alone to support themselves for lack of a husband—the so-called "odd women." Many of the women joining a ship's crew would fall into this category: the average profile of a stewardess in the early twentieth century was a middle-aged single or widowed "odd" woman. The latter group, the "company widows," were left destitute by the death of their husbands and had no other means of survival, and often no other recourse but to send their children away to convents. As there was no financial compensation given to widows whose husbands had died in service, the shipping company provided them with a safe shelter as well as a job on board one of their liners. One notable exception to the "odd woman" rule was Violet Jessop, the famous *Titanic* and *Britannic* survivor who joined Royal Mail Line's West Indian service in 1908 at the age of twenty-one and spent the next forty-two years at sea.[13] Her mother, a company widow, worked as a stewardess for a time but had to resign because of frail health. Violet interrupted her studies and assumed the role of principal breadwinner. During her interview, she was warned of the pitfalls of sea life for a woman—especially an attractive young woman. The warning issued from a mix of paternalism and self-interest: the righteous bureaucrats of the shipping lines feared that the stokers and mates would be too easily distracted in their work by

the presence of a young woman who would most certainly lose her virginity in the face of such temptation.

By the 1920s, as hemlines rose and women started doing daring things once frowned upon in polite society, the complexion of female personnel on board began to change. Younger women were now joining the ranks of stewardesses, conductresses, and so on. Besides, by this time, those menacing stokers had left the scene! Ship life was attracting even middle-class women who chose a life at sea. Their decisiveness stood in contrast to the company widows who continued to depend on the paternalism of the steamship company and resigned themselves to a life at sea as a means of survival.

Here we get a glimpse of the "new woman" of the modern age who defied convention and went to sea not only out of financial necessity but also increasingly by choice, lured by the prospect of independence and the possibility of seeing the world, of being the maker of her own destiny instead of assuming the expected role of "angel of the house" or "lady bountiful." The oral histories of these women are rich in detail and reveal a complex subculture that existed "below the decks" on the passenger liners of the interwar years. For some women, ship life continued to provide only a means of economic security, but for many others, it became a passport to liberation.

> I had a youthful dream of Empire—that British Empire on which the sun would never set! Or so we thought. I wished to see the wide, open spaces in our Dominions beyond the seas which offered great opportunities to those with a spirit of adventure.[14]

Edith Sowerbutts represents one such "new woman" who was lured by the sea's promise of distant shores and was ready for "adventure and pastures new."[15] Born into a working-class background and raised in a single-parent household, Edith very early on learned that she had to rely on herself. Although she completed commercial college, she was more drawn to social work and spent

several years in Australia working for the Commonwealth Migration and Settlement Office before joining Red Star/White Star Line in 1925 at age twenty-nine. She worked both as a conductress and stewardess for the ships of White Star Line and Cunard Line and spent twelve years at sea. Hers is the typical story of women seafarers in the interwar years.

Prior to joining Cunard White Star Line[16] as a stewardess at age twenty-five in 1937, Liverpudlian Dorothy Scobie had hotel experience and, like Sowerbutts, came from a working-class family with dreams of a life of adventure on the high seas. It was on the great passenger liners that she made her home for the next twenty-three years. She was lured by the call of the sea from a very early age, as she explains: "As a small girl I had often accompanied my mother on her visits to the office high up in the Cunard building on the waterfront. In the vast corridors I would gaze in wonder at the models in their glass showcases. I seem to have been, all my life, deeply stirred by the sea and men who sail on it. The glamourous trade of merchant shipping for what colour and life it conjours up of past history and glory."[17]

Shipboard employment was very competitive as indicated both by the many letters that companies received and inquiries in women's magazines asking for advice about how to apply for a post on board. Many shipping companies employed a "lady superintendent" to oversee the placement of female personnel on board their steamships. Oftentimes, people made direct appeals for work to the chairman or company secretary. Cunard files include many employment inquiries made by women or by male relatives speaking on their behalf. One man sought to secure a stewardess position for his sister as her husband was killed during the war while in the company's service. Another recommended his sister to the company on the basis of his family's long association with Cunard Line. His father worked for more than twenty years at sea. After his death, the company found a position for his mother, which she held for fourteen years. His sister, who had earlier given five years of service to the company, wished to return in 1922 as the brother

could no longer bear the financial burden of the family. Women often spoke up for themselves. One war widow, age twenty-eight, described herself as "thoroughly domesticated and energetic" for shipboard employment.[18]

The chairman received one request in September 1929 from a "company widow" whose husband had died at sea the previous year. After the lady superintendent rejected her application, she took the liberty of writing directly to Percy Bates. She appealed to Bates's sense of company loyalty explaining that her husband had served Cunard faithfully for twenty years. Learning that her neighbor recently secured a position without having any family connection with Cunard, the woman complained that she, as a company widow, should have been given preference, especially since she had two children to support. She had already written to Bates in 1920 on behalf of her husband, who sailed as chef on the *Carmania* during the seamen's strike and was later not permitted to sign on for the next voyage. Her husband had also sailed on a ship that was torpedoed in 1917. In the end, Bates upheld the decision of Mrs. Hatfield, the lady superintendent, who believed that the woman was not suited for the position of stewardess or bath attendant and added that her husband "was tolerated" only![19]

As early as 1904, company guidelines stressed that stewardesses must be physically up to the challenge of working at sea, and that preference would be given to those with hotel experience.[20] Women remained a tiny fraction of the crew of passenger liners through the 1930s. For example, French Lines' premiere ship *Normandie* employed 25 stewardesses and 686 stewards in 1935, and White Star Lines' *Olympic* carried 24 stewardesses and 562 stewards.[21]

In their publicity brochures, shipping companies spoke of their staffs as highly trained professionals whose families had a long maritime history. A Cunard White Star Line promotional brochure for the *Queen Mary* speaks about adherence to a "British tradition": "The way the stewardess lays out milady's clothes for dinner is an instance of it . . . well might she be an old retainer in

a British manor home. The mother, father and grand father of the stewardess have, in all probability, all served in the Cunard White Star Line . . . and think how much more welcome will be that forenoon cup of hot bouillon, when it is served by a steward who regards this service as a life-long career."[22] This, in fact, was Kathleen Smith's orientation to a life at sea. Although she was not excited by the prospect when she took a job with Cunard in 1937, she was continuing a long family tradition—her father and uncles had all gone to sea. She would follow in their footsteps and make the ships her home for the next thirty years.[23]

A TRANSAT brochure praises its crew as being "the soul of a ship." Among female personnel featured were the stewardess and governess-nurse, who were described as integral members of the crew. In addition to her many other fine attributes—"discriminating," "feminine," "courteous," and "efficient"—the stewardess also "possesses the valuable quality of human understanding," allowing her to assume the role of confidante and amateur psychiatrist to "Madame" as well. (See Figure # 11.) The governess-nurse was hailed as the "most important member of each shipboard personnel" and the ideal "little mother." In addition to her "sweet and understanding nature," which made her popular with the children, she was also a linguist who could converse with youngsters of many nationalities.[24] Such stereotypes reflect the mentality of the age, which the women used to their advantage.

The stewardess was becoming a more respected member of the ship's crew even before World War I. In 1913, R. A. Fletcher wrote that there was "a decided change for the better from the incompetent and lazy stewardess so common at one time, whose sole idea was to collect tips and do a minimum of service in return, to the clean energetic stewardess of the modern liner who takes charge of the weary travelers and makes them as comfortable as she can even in the democratic third class."[25] As stewardesses catered exclusively to the needs of female passengers traveling alone, stewards looked after cabins occupied by married couples.[26] While stewardesses on British liners served all classes,

French ships appear to have carried *femmes de chambre* only in first and second classes.[27] An article in the TRANSAT publicity magazine *Gangplank*, "Why Women Choose the French Line," speaks of the pampered service a female passenger receives at the hands of the *femme de chambre,* whose sole raison d'être is "to make her passage a happy present and future joyful memory."[28]

Other opportunities for women on board passenger liners included hairdressers, shop girls, bath attendants, and laundresses (on ships carrying laundries), but the majority were employed as stewardesses and/or nurses. Because nursing paid poorly on shore, many nurses took jobs at sea as stewardesses. In fact, the policy of Union Castle Line was to recruit only nurses as stewardesses on its South African run.[29]

A wage differential existed between male and female stewards aboard French liners, but British stewards and stewardesses earned roughly the same.[30] Roydon Freeman comments that on large luxury liners in 1930, women serving first-class passengers could earn up to £20 ($100) in tips per month.[31] Given the fragile economic state of many European countries at the time, this was a considerable wage, and crew members felt themselves to be part of a privileged class. Not all seafarers were so lucky, however. At the 1930 Annual General Meeting of the National Union of Seamen, General Secretary Robert Spence reported that there were 20,000 unemployed seafarers. By 1932, that number had doubled as the full effects of the Depression were felt.[32]

Once a woman had secured a position at sea, what was she to expect? Stewardesses' real responsibilities extended far beyond what Cunard Line's company guidelines indicated. According to the 1904 regulations, stewardesses were to be occupied with the care of women and children exclusively, and would be able to enjoy leisure time when the ship was in port and the passengers were off on tours as "no cleaning is required . . . very little work is done." That promise never matched the reality, and in time, the promises changed. The Cunard Line Rule Book for Crew in 1913 stipulated that "when the ship is lying at any foreign port, the

stewardesses are to be constantly employed, and every opportunity must be taken by them to keep the ship's linen in order."[33] To be sure, very few stewardesses ever found themselves in the position of having too much time on their hands and, as Freeman observed, although women took jobs "to see something of the world," very few were allowed to go ashore at foreign ports.[34] One stewardess whom Jo Stanley interviewed commented that there was "no freedom at all. You'd never even think to just go off and spend the night off the ship."[35] Stewardess Anne Smith's experience on the *Laconia*'s world cruise (1922/1923) was very different from passenger Joel Burdick's, whose account describes many exotic and enticing foreign ports. She was not permitted to go ashore in places where the ship had to use tender service, which was reserved exclusively for the use of passengers. "One gets positively fed up with being stowed on board so long altogether," she complained. Though ship life was far from being "rosy and fair" for her, she concedes that "hardly anyone's life is that so must not grumble and on the whole I must be pretty lucky."[36]

Most transatlantic steamers did not carry laundries on board. Only on special cruises would TRANSAT install a portable laundry for the duration of the voyage for the convenience of passengers. As early as the 1930s, French Line pursers made repeated appeals to the company to install a permanent laundry on board. Until then, passenger laundry, when not done by local women while the ship was in a foreign port, was left to the *femme de chambre,* who received little financial compensation for her effort. Smaller vessels, like the *Cuba* and the *Colombie,* carried only two stewardesses on board, and they were too busy with routine duties to handle the added burden of passenger laundry.[37] Nevertheless, as the *Cuba*'s purser reported, to keep passengers happy, one *femme de chambre* was given responsibility for all the washing and ironing of passenger laundry. Out of necessity, she paid a sailor 5 francs to do the washing while she was left with the task of pressing. To avoid disappointing the passenger, the *femme de chambre* was thus obliged to work overtime, in addition to her normal overtime

hours. *Ile de France* purser Roger A. Raulin, noted the great success of the temporary laundry installed on board for the Easter Caribbean cruise of 1938. With a staff of eight, the ship's laundry needs were met at a substantial financial savings to the company. Raulin recommended the permanent installation of a laundry on board, which could be run by a relatively small number of laundresses—a small financial investment that would yield great returns to TRANSAT.[38]

Passengers were often very demanding. Anne Smith once had nine passengers in her charge and resented the "one old lady still in bed" who kept her "hanging around" the ship all day, preventing her from going ashore in Naples to see Vesuvius.[39] Exacting passengers often rewarded stewardesses for their service with souvenirs from excursions ashore. Rose Stott, who served aboard the 1923 *Samaria* world cruise spoke of a gift from "one of my ladies." As she could not get ashore in Calcutta herself, a lady passenger brought her a small figurine of an Indian woman water-carrier.[40] Violet Jessop initially did not have a very complimentary view of American travelers and wrote that intermixed with their "subtle ingenuity and good nature is a streak of selfishness." She was to learn firsthand that people are not often what they seem. Far too often had she "trudged on aching feet and nerve-racked back up and down stairs . . . sweltering in unbelievable heat, to satisfy the gastronomic exactitude of some noted woman." Although described by the press as "an angel of benevolence," the passenger "never hesitated to demand of me what she wanted, no matter how her request upset my daily routine, and in spite of the fact that she liked me" and declared to all that Violet "was so sweet." One woman, who expressed concern that Violet looked exhausted and urged that she take a rest, added: "Before you go, I know you will leave me some cracked ice and some sandwiches in my room, and, oh yes, some oranges too." Violet concluded, however, that the "one thing that I had to keep reminding myself of was the fact that I should not be needed in my job if she and her kind did not travel" and she later acknowledged that generally, Americans,

"however exacting, do consider you a person first, rather than a servant, and that makes a world of difference."[41]

Passenger appreciation was often expressed by letters the companies received praising the service rendered by particular crew members: "We, the undersigned, . . . are indebted to Mrs. Davies . . . for a very large share of the comfort we have experienced while we have been onboard. . . . She has done a great deal beyond her own particular duties to contribute to our comfort . . . and [we] wish to place . . . our appreciation of her services."[42]

As shipboard personnel were expected to project the proper image of the company to the passengers, much care and attention was given to the seafarer's appearance. Standard uniforms were worn by crew which differed according to rank, season, and the class of ship on which one sailed. Black shoes and stockings were to be worn by female staff regardless of the season. No jewelry was permitted, and skirts had to be no more than eight inches from the ground.[43] Cunard Line and White Star Line made no provision for uniforms. This often turned out to be a great obstacle to those seeking employment on board the passenger liners as a large expenditure was required before a crew member actually set sail. As job security did not exist on the high seas, there was no guarantee that a person would be signed on for the next voyage. French Line was more generous with its employees in this regard. Each seafarer had a *carte d'habillement* which recorded uniform requests. Application for new clothes was submitted to the secretary of the chief maitre d'hôtel for approval.[44]

Throughout the 1920s, new shipboard opportunities that carried more prestige than the position of stewardess became available for women. Edith Sowerbutts credits the lady superintendent for female seagoing personnel of Canadian Pacific Line, Mrs. Andrews, as being "a woman ahead of her time" who took the lead in 1925 to introduce female stenographers to the purser's office.[45] In fact, as early as 1924 Cunard Line's *Scythia* included mention of a typist on board, a Ms. Woodworth, and in 1926 a Ms. Harrison (formerly a typist on the *Carmania*) held the position of junior as-

sistant purser—Grade J on the *Berengaria.* By the late 1920s, typists were typically listed in the "miscellaneous" column. Since such women were clearly breaking new ground and remained outside of the traditional crew structure, no one knew where to place them on the crew manifest.[46] By 1932, Cunard Line advertisements for the *Aquitania*'s cruises to the Mediterranean boasted that "a thoroughly experienced Lady Stenographer and Typist is carried on the steamer," a particular selling point for passengers who sought to combine business with pleasure.[47] In her memoirs, Sowerbutts describes herself and other female seafarers as pioneers: "We, of my generation, comprised the thin edge of the wedge. Women would eventually be signed on for seagoing positions once considered to be male preserves."[48]

On particular chartered cruises, a cruise staff which included a social directress, an assistant social directress, and a bridge instructress (all of whom enjoyed passenger status), would be brought on board. Such was the case with the 1937 *Franconia* North Cape-Russia cruise planned by the American company Raymond Whitcomb.[49] Cruise staff, in fact, were seen as a selling point for Cunard White Star pleasure cruises. A publicity brochure, "Introducing the Staffs," announced the cruise staff for the upcoming 1938 season. Among the "Charming Social Directresses" introduced were Miss Dorothy Mason, a former dance and drama teacher at Cornell University, and Mrs. George Hawley, a graduate of Mount Holyoke College and prominent in Detroit social circles. Mrs. Edna J. Weeks, billed as a "bridge expert" on the *Georgic* cruise season, was a noted bridge teacher at a time when women experts on the game were "practically non-existent."[50] (See figure # 12.)

Clearly "new" women were emerging on the passenger liners in the interwar years. Evidence suggests that male crew were not totally supportive of their female colleagues and were, in fact, even threatened by each advance they made. In a voyage report of the *Normandie* crossing dated 7 June 1937, Captain Pierre Thoreux noted a conflict with the beauty salon personnel who threatened

to go on strike in protest of the replacement of the head coiffeur with a woman.[51]

A position that brought much more prestige and status (but less money than the position of stewardess) was that of conductress. Mr. Mitchell, personnel officer for the International Mercantile Marine Company,[52] made perfectly clear to Edith Sowerbutts that he would not tolerate a woman being promoted to the rank of officer on board. His objections, however, were silenced by the Canadian government, which insisted that all female immigrants be supervised by a female officer at the expense of the steamship company. That officer was a conductress, a new position that carried privileged officer status. As a conductress, Sowerbutts was entrusted with the welfare of unaccompanied women immigrating to Canada.[53] Her prior experience working with the Commonwealth Migration and Settlement Office in Australia made her especially suited for this position.

When Sowerbutts joined Red Star Line's *Zeeland* in 1925 (run by White Star Line and owned by the International Mercantile Marine Company of New York), she was given passenger status and was not required to wear a uniform. She enjoyed an idyllic life, dining and sipping champagne with passengers and playing bridge and deck tennis with them in the afternoons. Her name appeared on the cabin-class passenger list with a notice informing passengers that she was on board for the benefit of all ladies traveling alone. Conductresses reported to the purser on board. Their job description included interviewing and listing all unaccompanied women who were resettling in Canada. Canadian immigration authorities insisted that all ships carrying immigrants from Europe have in their employ permanent welfare officers. Most of the immigrants were single women, but some with children were joining their husbands in Canada, and all "seemed both surprised and delighted to see another woman dealing with them."[54] Conductresses often found that children traveling alone were placed in their charge. Shipping companies sought to assure parents that they could "put a girl in the care of a Conductress at the start, and

at the finish you may collect her with as much confidence as you yielded up the charge of her. The danger is that the young lady will have been so well looked after, that she will be reluctant to return to ordinary control."[55] In the end, however, this may have proved problematic to her perspective employer in Canada who was expecting a docile domestic servant.

Among her varied responsibilities, Sowerbutts helped the ship's doctor during his medical checks for all women and children in third class since Red Star Line ships did not carry female nurses on board until the 1930s. In her capacity as conductress, Sowerbutts looked after many foreign unaccompanied women including Poles, Ukrainians, Yugoslavs, Greeks, Italians, Romanians, and Germans. Many young women from south and central Europe were recruited for domestic service in Canada. There was, unfortunately, a great deal of racial and social prejudice against these women, even on the part of the crew. Sowerbutts recalls a third-class Belgian chief steward's remark that "They're only Polaks," when she objected to having two women share a shower. The officer dismissed Sowerbutts as "half-witted" although well-intentioned "to regard those emigrant girls as ordinary, decent human beings entitled to good standards."[56] To this officer, such women were examples of the *untermenschen* that Hitler's Nazis would later vow to exterminate.

Edith was not a typical conductress, most of whom were elderly and motherly women who sought out this position because it was considered an easy job. Restless with too much time on her hands, Sowerbutts took on extra work: "I have often in my long life been accused of having too much energy, mainly by male colleagues."[57] Because she was able to type, she assumed responsibility for the ship's daily newspaper. In her leisure time, Sowerbutts helped the purser, who was in charge of the social program, organize deck tournaments and sports events. She also served as "captain's hostess" as no social hostesses were employed on the transatlantic passenger liners at the time. Edith even passed the necessary examination to get certified as a "lifeboat man" and was able to

launch a lifeboat in an "abandon ship" situation. She was the third woman to gain a "lifeboat ticket." When she began her career at sea, Sowerbutts admits, "I was in love with life. I still had stars in my eyes. . . . I didn't realise it at the time, but I was about to crash against one of the bastions of well-entrenched masculinity—for the sea was still predominantly a man's world, and still is."[58]

Although her base salary paid more than that of a stewardess, £12 per month, she received no tips from her immigrant charges and, therefore, found herself broke at the beginning of each new voyage: "I liked to spend, needed clothes and enjoyed life in port . . . such is youth."[59] With the Depression came the end of Canada's open door policy on European immigration. Ship conductresses' services were dispensed with as soon as their ships arrived at the home port. Sowerbutts finally secured another position at sea in 1934 when she joined Cunard White Star's *Olympic* as a stewardess. Her sister, Dorothy, had begun service in 1927. "We were glad of our seagoing employment, my sister and I," Edith says. "We had never in all our lives seen so much money, nor had we been able to spend so freely."[60] Though the money was good, Sowerbutts admits that she never worked so physically hard in her life as she did during the next five years in service at sea as a stewardess, commonly putting in thirteen-hour days.

After the merger of Cunard and White Star lines in 1934, there was often friction between the two crews, who now had to work together and resented the extra responsibilities they were made to assume. On Cunard Line ships, stewardesses always handled chamber pots, a practice that appalled White Star's female crew. The phrase "Cunard chambermaids, White Star ladies" was coined at the time of the merger. Cunard insisted that its stewardesses wait on all ladies. It had always been customary for White Star stewards to take charge of cabins of married couples unless the wife expressly requested a stewardess. After 1934, Cunard rules were to apply, which meant extra work for the former White Star stewardesses, much to their dismay.

Shipboard employment for female crew members offered few advancement possibilities. Stewardesses on British liners started in third class and advanced their way into first-class cabins. While this might afford a boost in status, the base salary remained the same. The difference was in the tips, but there was never a guarantee that first-class passengers would be overly generous. Many commented that royals were worst in this regard. The general perception was that Americans, to quote stewardess Kathleen Smith, "were worth going for."[61] Many crew members' oral histories reveal a common concern: lack of job security. When one signed off, there was no guarantee that you would be reassigned to the same ship. Everyone sought to sail with the larger transatlantic liners like the *Queen Mary,* which was known to be "a good money maker."[62]

Cunard Line offered its female crew one possibility of advancement with the introduction of the position of "leading stewardess" on all their ships, a "leading lady" who was responsible for all female staff at sea, and who had the privileged position of taking care of first-class lady passengers. There were "perks" other than financial compensation that came with being assigned to first-class cabins—such as good food secured from the pantryman, who was tipped handsomely for his service.

Another coveted position that carried added incentives with it was that of "special stewardess." Cunard introduced a special rate of £20 ($100) for a passenger to engage a personal steward or stewardess for the duration of the voyage.[63] Cunard saw this primarily as a public relations strategy, and in a memo to pursers in 1931, the general manager advised that "while every effort will be made to collect on the above basis respecting the service of a special stewardess, it may be found necessary, at times, to accept a slightly lower figure rather than lose the business."[64] In this manner, stewardesses came into contact with a number of celebrities. One "special stewardess," Nora Roberts, was assigned to the Duke of Windsor and Mrs. Simpson aboard the *Queen Mary* as well as to Greta Garbo, who presented her with a doll in appreciation of

her service at the conclusion of the voyage.[65] Delia Callaghan, who worked at sea for thirty-five years as a stewardess, acted as a decoy on the *Queen Mary* for the nanny of the Lindbergh baby. Her friend was entrusted with the safekeeping of James Mason's Oscar.[66] Kathleen Smith, whose career at sea totaled thirty years, kept an autograph book of first-class passengers whom she served, including celebrities like James Stewart and Rita Hayworth, and commented that the Duke and Duchess of Windsor were "exceptionally nice."[67] Violet Jessop spoke fondly of her acquaintance with Anatole France, "who told me he was on a brain holiday. His magnetism and two-edged humor made it always a pleasure to pass the time of day with him; he would remind me that it was good for my French to talk with him."[68]

In interviewing numerous stewardesses who sailed on British liners in the interwar years, Jo Stanley concludes that these women regarded themselves as very much superior to ordinary crew members and that "these stewardesses saw their passengers as ladies and themselves as ladies. There is a sense that stewardesses were determined to believe that they were every bit as good as their passengers—even though they belonged to the group who mopped up the products of seasickness." In reality, however, stewardesses inhabited a vastly different world from the "ladies" whom they looked after, and as Stanley correctly observes, "stewardesses were really pushed to find enough time in the day, whereas the passengers' chief interest in time was to kill it."[69]

On board a ship, bonds of friendship develop much more quickly, with greater intensity, than on shore. Stewardesses often became confidantes and friends to their female passengers, an artificial friendship usually restricted to the duration of the voyage. Violet Jessop recalls one passenger with whom she believed she had formed a close bond who "clung to me during the entire voyage while she recovered from a personal calamity, glad of my sympathy and understanding." The woman invited Jessop to visit her in New York: "She could never, she said, do enough for me in return for the long hours of my off-duty time which I had spent at

her side, or for the moral support I had given her." As the woman left the ship looking "full of poise," she chatted with "some equally elegant women of her set." Violet could hardly believe that the "intimate and soul-revealing talks had taken place at all between them." Months later, Violet decided to take the woman at her word and visited her at her hotel in New York. The woman had no clue as to who this person was who had appeared on her doorstep: "In a flash, I saw that she had completely forgotten me," and though she attempted to make Violet feel welcome among her guests, "I knew she had not the faintest idea who I was."[70] On board ship, social barriers dissolved when this New York socialite needed Violet to get through a personal crisis. Back in New York, however, the social distance between the stewardess and the socialite was reestablished and Violet understood then that the two could never be friends as they inhabited vastly different worlds.

Despite Jessop's cynicism about friendships with passengers, lasting attachments were formed on board ship. Edith Sowerbutts recalls how the pianist Dame Myra Hess became genuinely fond of Janet Austin, her stewardess on board the *Queen Mary*. Upon her retirement from Cunard Line, Ms. Austin went to live with Dame Myra, who had made a small apartment for her in her home, "thus ensuring a continuation of their friendship" and of her services, no doubt. Several shipmates, she notes, were remembered generously in the wills of wealthy passengers.[71]

Generally, female seafarers enjoyed better accommodations than their male colleagues, usually sharing a cabin with one other woman rather than bunking in a "glory hole" with thirty-plus crew members. However, there were great restrictions on their freedom. They had very little public space to call their own. They inhabited a largely enclosed world "below the decks" and were not allowed in passenger space except when cleaning cabins. Even in crew quarters, space was limited. Since crew bars like the famous Pig & Whistle were off-limits to female seafarers, the women did most of their socializing in their tiny cabins. The chief diversion of stewardesses, whose day began at 7 A.M. and ended only at 10

P.M., notes Kathleen Smith, was to sleep when off duty. With no days off while the ship was at sea, the best one could hope for was two to three hours off in port.[72] Privileged governesses/nurses had meals in the passenger dining room but only with the children. Very little fraternization between male and female crew ever occurred as each had their separate mess. Still, stewardesses, who were often skilled nurses or trained teachers, had high social aspirations and preferred to socialize with the officers rather than the ordinary crew.

Stanley refers to a sisterhood that was sometimes formed on board ships between female seafarers who would look out for each other, helping a fellow mate through an ordeal such as sexual harassment, covering up for an addicted stewardess's alcoholism, and in one instance procuring an abortion for a friend in trouble. And yet we find evidence of bad blood between some women. Mme. Talbot, *femme de chambre* on the *Champlain,* in June 1938 made a formal complaint against her roommate, Mme. Rivoal, whom she charged with stealing a winning lottery ticket from her purse which was left in the cabin. She also cited an earlier instance in which Mme. Rivoal stole 200 francs from her pocketbook.[73] Stanley considers ways in which women seafarers could be viewed as a group/company but concludes that they were individuals with different attitudes to the job and that "these women were more united in other peoples' eyes than in the stewardess's subjective experience."[74] In fact, women often found themselves competing with each other for a higher status position. One angry woman wrote to Cunard's general secretary, Thomas Royden, that the lady superintendent demoted her to steerage class because she had complained that less capable women with less seniority were being promoted to cabin class. "I can see that influence is everything," she wrote, "even for a stewardess and those who have no need to go to sea at all such as sea captains' daughters with fathers [who] get the promotions."[75] Even among the crew, within the ranks of the stewardesses, a rigid social hierarchy was firmly in place.

Unions admitted women but were not overly enthusiastic about their competing for jobs with male seafarers. The first union to recruit women nationally was Joe Cotter's Liverpool-based Cooks and Stewards' Union, founded in 1909. Since unions primarily represented the interests of male workers, women interlopers were not taken seriously. Experiences were parallel on shore, where unions also generally excluded or were indifferent to women. Time often ran out at meetings when women had anything to say. Although the men pressed for equal pay for women in the catering department, they gave only lukewarm support to female colleagues. Dorothy Scobie was soured by the National Union of Seamen, which, she said, "didn't do us any good," and she complained that there were no special representatives for women. Although women were made to sign on as members, Scobie felt that the NUS was not pro women's rights, that it was designed specifically for men, and that its chief interest was in collecting dues.[76] Delia Callaghan's experience on board the *Queen Mary* in 1938 was somewhat different. She received two weeks' vacation, for which she credits the union that "stood up for us then."[77] And yet after thirty-five years of service at sea, Callaghan never received a pension from Cunard White Star Line and had no one to argue her case, even though the Royal Seamen's Pension Fund claimed that women workers were eligible after fifteen years of service.

Sailing without contracts, crew members had to "sign on" after each voyage. This gave the officers, who made such determinations, extraordinary and sometimes sinister power over the crew. Participation in strikes often met with immediate dismissal. In the blacklists of crew members kept by TRANSAT following a major strike in November/December 1938 are found the names of several *femmes de chambre* and nurses, the two important positions that French Line brochures earlier had boasted of as being "the soul of the ship." These women abandoned their posts on the *Paris, Ile de France, Champlain,* and *Normandie* in an act of solidarity with the male crew. Like many of their male colleagues, they received letters from French Line dismissing them. One

femme de chambre on board the *Ile de France,* Henriette Smeyers, was singled out among the women in an officer's report as "an agitator and promoter of disorder," in short, an anarchist![78]

Some female crew members were in a particularly vulnerable position when faced with an officer who sought to exert his power by making unwanted sexual advances. Sexual harassment was not recognized as such by company officials, and the officer's word always carried more weight than that of the female crew member. Violet Jessop describes one such experience with a new captain on the Royal Mail Line who was considered a philanderer and who made sexual overtures to her. Jessop understood her superior's power over her and knew that "because of his position, much that he did was ignored." To make matters worse, his wife was a shareholder in the company. When Jessop disregarded notes and chocolates left in her cabin and rejected his advances, the captain began to find fault with her work and made her life difficult. In another incident, the purser came into her cabin one night while she was recovering from malaria: "I lay awhile marveling at these men. The effrontery of them! The captain, the purser, many others who had positions to maintain, groveling and sniveling like dogs. Yet they would be my judges, should I or the likes of me make one false step on board; in their power lay our very existence. I was revolted." She concluded that "sea life was not the setting for a normal woman, however it might afford her a living. Assuming she was normal, it would be a terrible strain on her to remain so, and keep her personality."[79]

Shipping companies strictly regulated women's workplace behavior and were quick to terminate the services of stewardesses whose conduct was considered "unseemly" for women. Under that category fell insobriety, sexual "misconduct," and disobedience or rudeness to passengers. Termination of service because of "illness" sometimes implied that a woman did not have the sort of temperament suited to a competitive, stressful workplace. This, in fact, was the reason given for Ms. Emily Coleman's departure from Cunard in 1929. Having worked as a third-class

matron for nearly two years on board the *Antonia* and *Lancastria* and as a nurse in 1926 on the latter ship, she was now judged to be "too temperamental" by the surgeon. Her letter to the chairman of the board further indicates that Cunard thought her too demanding and believed that she had threatened to resign. As a result, the company decided to replace her. She denied these allegations and asked to be reinstated. In a memo to the chairman, the lady superintendent, Mrs. Hatfield, acknowledged that Coleman "was a conscientious worker" but said that she was not suited for life at sea and that the surgeon wanted no part of her. End of story![80]

A similar predicament befell Mary B. McNaught, a trained nurse who made one trip as matron of the *Aquitania* in 1926, when she came up against a male supervisor. The night before landing, the chief steward gave her a dressing down for committing a series of infractions against ship's policy—an accusation that she vehemently denied. He cast aspersions on her moral character, charging her with having "visitors" in her cabin and frequenting the cabins of men. When she appealed to the staff captain to intervene, the chief steward "suddenly discovered that my work was not satisfactory." She wrote to the people at the head office, she said, to make them aware of the harassment to which women crew members were subjected by their male overlords and requested to be reinstated on board the *Aquitania* "if only to prove Mr. Powell's insults groundless." Rather than hold the chief steward accountable for his inappropriate conduct, the company chose to find another position for her.[81]

In the P & O Steamship Company's *Stewards Registers* for the interwar years are found similar cases of such women, such as that of thirty-two-year-old stewardess Mrs. Edith Holdstock, who, although given a "very good" for conduct, was termed "unfit for the Company's service" by the chief steward. In passing this judgment, he cited the doctor's report describing Holdstock as having a "neurotic temperament aggravated no doubt by a recent operation performed a few months before joining the Company" and,

therefore, judged unable to perform her shipboard duties. Another P&O stewardess, Mrs. Mabel Evans, age thirty-nine, was dismissed on the grounds of being "very hysterical, bad tempered, not amenable to discipline." In short, her services "were not required here."[82] In each of these cases and in countless others, there is no record of union intervention on behalf of any of these women. All simply had their services dispensed with and were cast aside with no further comment.

Mme. Planteau du Maroussem, nurse on board the *Normandie*, was denied a promotion in 1936 despite recommendations from both the seamens union and the doctor. The request, which would have given her officer rank and an increase in salary, was denied on the grounds that Mme. du Maroussem was "incompetent," although she was acknowledged on board as a first-rate professional nurse.[83]

Ship life for crew was far from the glamorous picture painted in company advertisements and promotional brochures or concocted in the imaginations of working-class women who sought shipboard employment as a means of expanding their horizons. As Sowerbutts discovered, behind the romantic ideal lay a reality of hard work that required daily sacrifice. Yet many made a career at sea if afforded the opportunity. Two considerations weighed heavily in their decision to go to sea: economic earning potential and the ability to explore "distant shores." As Sowerbutts writes: "Most of us had one main interest: keeping our jobs, earning good money, looking after home commitments. We thought it an impertinence for anyone to enquire about our private lives, our behaviour ashore" as lady superintendents did.[84] Since female seafarers had little opportunity for a social life on board, they took advantage of shore leave, as in the case of Delia Callaghan and her mates, who would go out for a meal or catch a film at Radio City whenever the ship was in New York.[85]

From the memoirs of Sowerbutts, Jessop, and others, we see a decidedly "new woman" emerging on the passenger liners of the interwar years—a self-sufficient, independent individual who was

on her own with no male protector. Despite the rigorous work schedule, many women ventured off the ship during their free time in port and were intellectually curious and insightful observers of the many cultures and peoples they encountered. Sowerbutts speaks of café life in Antwerp, Brussels, and Paris and about her fascination with New York and the opera: "I was accustomed to getting around by myself, and well able to look after myself too," she proudly states.[86] Jessop was excited by the prospect of her first world cruise: "All those places that from childhood I had longed to see, Japan, China, Siam, Java, represented history, mystery and love."[87] Though some women were clearly interested in shopping and sipping tropical drinks on Caribbean beaches (a sharp contrast to the grim reality of life in Liverpool during the Depression),[88] others were true adventurers exploring the local culture and history. On the *Laconia* world cruise (1922–1923), Anne Smith and two female companions were so struck by Honolulu—"the most beautiful place I have ever seen"—that they nearly missed the ship, and "one woman did have to climb up a rope ladder." Smith lamented the fact that she did not have much time to explore Yokohama because of her work schedule but "beggars cannot be choosers and we are learning a little more geography each day." She complained that "we hear very little about the places we visit; that's the worst of not knowing one's history and geography well, the passengers have lectures before every place they visit, but we don't have that privilege." Anne Smith was an intelligent young woman who had the innate curiosity of a real traveler. Her letters make reference to the colorful flora and fauna she observed in India. She was impressed with Bombay, which she described as "a fine European city," and became interested in the burial customs of the Parsees in the Tower of Silence and Indoos.[89]

Rose Stott made good use of her time in port on the *Samaria* world cruise (1923) noting the customs of local peoples and the unique flora and fauna of areas she visited. She became acquainted with Eastern religions and thought of Buddhism as "a religion of

kindliness, of compassion and self-sacrifice—a tender, womanly faith." Stott greatly admired the Japanese people, their culture and society and especially the religious practice of Shintoism. "Of the malignity of religious hate, of the bitterness of religious persecution, the Shinto faith knows nothing," she wrote. "It has been to the people the familiar friend, and the comforter."[90]

On a 1937 North Cape cruise, Sowerbutts, after listening to a female Intourist guide who had been appointed to give a city tour of Leningrad, commented that Russia "sounded like a country without a soul." This is an insightful observation of a country that was then caught up in the craze of Stalin's purges.[91] No heart or soul was to be found there; only fear and suspicion in the eyes of a terrorized people.

New York made an indelible impression on Dorothy Scobie on her first trip there. She was overwhelmed by the Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building, Wall Street, and the Brooklyn Bridge as the ship sailed into New York harbor. She describes the magic of Broadway and Fifth Avenue, places about which she had long dreamt but never thought she would see. She writes with a child-like simplicity and sense of amazement about everything that New York had to offer: "I liked to eat at the Automat in Times Square and just watch the crowds . . . I liked to put my nickels in the slots and see the great boxes being filled with huckleberry pie . . . lemon meringue and strawberry shortcake. . . . Shells of roasted nuts and people chewing gum seemed to pervade the entire atmosphere. All the women were clothes conscious. . . . Mostly, how-ever, I was impressed by the smartness of the older women, who looked years younger than the same age group at home.[92] Home to most of these women were the industrial port towns of Liverpool, Birkenhead, and Southampton in England or LeHavre, Cherbourg, and Marseilles in France, where huckleberry pie and strawberry shortcake were luxuries out of their reach.

At sea, women could live out their dreams and forget the economic hardships faced by their peers at home for a while. Despite its many drawbacks, life at sea offered women an escape from the

mundane, grim reality of depressed port town existence and a glimpse into high society living on board the magical floating palaces. Regardless of all of the complaints about excessive discipline and hard work, "the sea gets to you," explained Scobie, who said that although she never liked her job, she would always return to "give it another whirl."[93] Despite Violet Jessop's cynicism about life at sea, she too came under its spell: "Though seamen crave leave at home, that steel beehive—as someone once described *Aquitania*—is their other home. Inside it, they are linked to their shipmates by profound bonds, inhabitants of a coherent, shipwide community into which no passenger, however esteemed or frequently booked, is ever admitted."[94]

Kathleen Smith and Edith Sowerbutts describe their experience on the *Queen Mary* on its last transatlantic voyage before war was declared in 1939. Sowerbutts notes that "every nook and cranny had been adapted for extra beds and bunks; she was crammed from stem to stern with over 2,300 passengers," many of whom were forced to make do with baggage alcoves as accommodations.[95] Regular passengers, who still occupied first-class staterooms and suites on Main Deck, refused to make any concessions in their demands regardless of the state of imminent war. To persuade passengers to vacate their cabins early on the morning of the ship's arrival in New York, Sowerbutts greeted them with the news that on 4 September, the first ship of war, the *Athenia,* had been sunk by an enemy U-boat on its Canadian run. "That news reduced the breakfast orders to a minimum," she recalls. "It got people moving."[96]

They stayed on the ship for three weeks in New York, packing up glasses, crockery, silver, and the like, which all went ashore to a warehouse on the dock. The *Queen Mary* went to Australia to take up its wartime role as troop carrier. As the ship sailed out of New York harbor with an all-male crew aboard, Smith could hear the men singing "There Will Always Be an England."[97] Female crew were transferred to the *Georgic.* Sowerbutts describes the tense journey back home: "Normal passengers, of whom there were a

few, seemed delighted to have the *Queen Mary*'s crew aboard; we seemed to inspire confidence. The blackout at sea was absolute. Gas masks were given to all." There were many lifeboat drills. Passengers wore their jewels in case the ship went down. Sailors were assigned to extra submarine watches. Sowerbutts was told to purchase a half bottle of whiskey at one of the ship's bars, in case they had to take to the lifeboats, just as a precaution—"under the heading of first aid." She carried along with her a "personal ditty bag" which contained bandages, cotton, safety pins, aspirin, and the like. No one was allowed to light a cigarette or smoke on the open decks. A gala concert was given in the tourist-class dining room by the male crew of the *Queen Mary* with the most popular act being "a really wicked impersonation of Hitler." The crew was "signed off" upon arrival in London, ending Sowerbutts's career as a merchant seaman: "I had swallowed the anchor for good this time."[98]

Other women sought to continue in service during the war years. In her World War II scrapbook, Dorothy Scobie, who worked during the war in the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS), included an undated article, "Women Want to Go to Sea Again." The author comments that "many of them came from long lines of seafarers, and feel more at home afloat than ashore." The article quotes Miss Edith Hughes, the only welfare worker for seafaring women at the Mersey Mission to Seamen, in an interview with the *Daily Mirror*. "These women are magnificent," she says. "Many nearing middle age have still a boy's love of adventure, and are upset at having to give up their old jobs. The few who still go to sea are heroines and the envy of them all."[99] Many of these women resumed their life at sea along with a new group of female seafarers once hostilities in Europe were brought to the end in 1945 and prewar "normalcy" was established. As the ships were updated and modernized, so too did the complexion of the female crew begin to change.

The world of women seafarers was still very much a closed one in the mid-1970s.[100] Women made up but a tiny fraction of the ship

personnel. There were new opportunities for women mainly in the cruise staff—as international hostesses, bridge lecturers, arts and crafts instructors, social directresses, youth counselors, entertainers, and aerobic instructors. Women worked in and managed shore excursion offices on board. There were a good number of hairdressers and shop attendants and nurses. One new nontraditional avenue of employment open to women was the position of croupier in ships' casinos. Stewardesses on the ships of Holland America Line were replaced by men from the former Dutch colony of Indonesia—a source of cheap labor. Female officers were as rare as the Hope Diamond! By the mid-1980s, that picture of limited possibilities for women at sea had dramatically changed. In 1989, we sailed with our first female cruise director and were introduced to a female chief purser whose staff included a number of female junior officers. Women have made their debut as dining room and wine stewards and are back cleaning cabins, but the average profile of the stewardess now is a young, often college-educated woman who is eager to explore the "distant shores" that her foresisters had earlier described.

Work on board is considered temporary for most young women today, who generally sign on for one or two contracts to do something different, for a change from their routine lives ashore. The average age of female crew is between twenty and thirty-five. One twenty-four-year-old aspiring dress designer signed on as a stewardess to get "inspiration for my work," she explained. In addition to exploring new cities, she was busy observing the colors, shapes, and designs of women's fashions worldwide, using the ship and its ports as a laboratory for her work.

Women are being promoted to chief cabin steward and are now to be found even on the bridge, as deck officers, the last bastion of masculine power at sea. On a recent trip on Cunard Line's *Caronia* (formerly the *Vistafjord*), we were cheered to see a female deck officer in training. Undeterred by hard and grimy work, this junior officer was immersed in all the details of deck maintenance and supervision. She, along with a small group of women engineers,

are paving new ground for women seafarers. The efforts of Edith Sowerbutts, Dorothy Scobie, and others are finally beginning to pay off. Victoria Drummond, goddaughter of Queen Victoria who realized her ambition of becoming a ship engineer in 1924, did not endure ridicule or sacrifice in vain.[101]

The "new" woman of the interwar years paved the way for the "modern" woman of the 1980s and 1990s. Women seafarers have finally broken the male monopoly of power on board the great passenger liners. Ships now carry female security officers on board, another non-traditional avenue of employment for women. Women today attend officers' meetings and hold important decision-making positions. They have even managed to secure a few stripes on their uniforms for their effort. One awaits (but, we hope, for not too long), the appointment of a woman to the master's helm. That truly will be woman's coming of age! (See figure # 13.)

Most women, however, are realistic about the limitations of making a career at sea. One Italian chief housekeeper said that she has advanced as far as is possible for a woman and doubts that women will be promoted to the prestigious position of hotel manager anytime soon. "It'll be a long time before shipping lines allow a woman to supervise a crew of three hundred or more," she says. And yet, on a recent voyage aboard a Scandinavian vessel, we discovered that at least a few women today have already secured that no. 3 top position on board some of that company's cruise ships. This, however, may be more a reflection of a society whose men have never felt threatened by the prospect of sharing power with female colleagues, thus making cultural differences and the accompanying notions of a woman's "proper place" central to the discussion of job possibilities.

And then there are tough choices to be made. As one junior assistant purser explained: "Even if you can get past the male bastion of power and secure coveted officer status, you must also give up the idea of having a personal life. Could you see a man taking care of the children and waiting on the pier for his officer wife to

return home?" And yet for centuries, women have been the ones left on shore with the children while their men went off to sea with no eyebrows raised at such a thought.

The prospect of making more money on board than any comparable position at home could pay is definitely an added incentive for many. The chief housekeeper, now in her seventh year with the same company, admits, "I'm still studying myself," and doubts that she will make a permanent home at sea. The assistant purser concurs. "For women who are still searching within themselves, ship life can be frightening," she explains. "There is that ever present fear that life will pass them by. If one develops a relationship on board, there is always a choice to be made." The consensus is that women cannot have it all, especially on a ship. But like Jessop, Scobie, Sowerbutts, and others before them, these women have a love/hate relationship with the sea. They are frustrated by the regimentation and restrictions of ship life, but as one admits, "when you return home, you feel disoriented and disconnected with people on shore from whom you have grown apart and gone separate ways." Working on board, says the twenty-five-year-old assistant purser, is like "entering another world that outsiders don't understand"—a world, perhaps, that seafarers themselves will never quite fully comprehend.