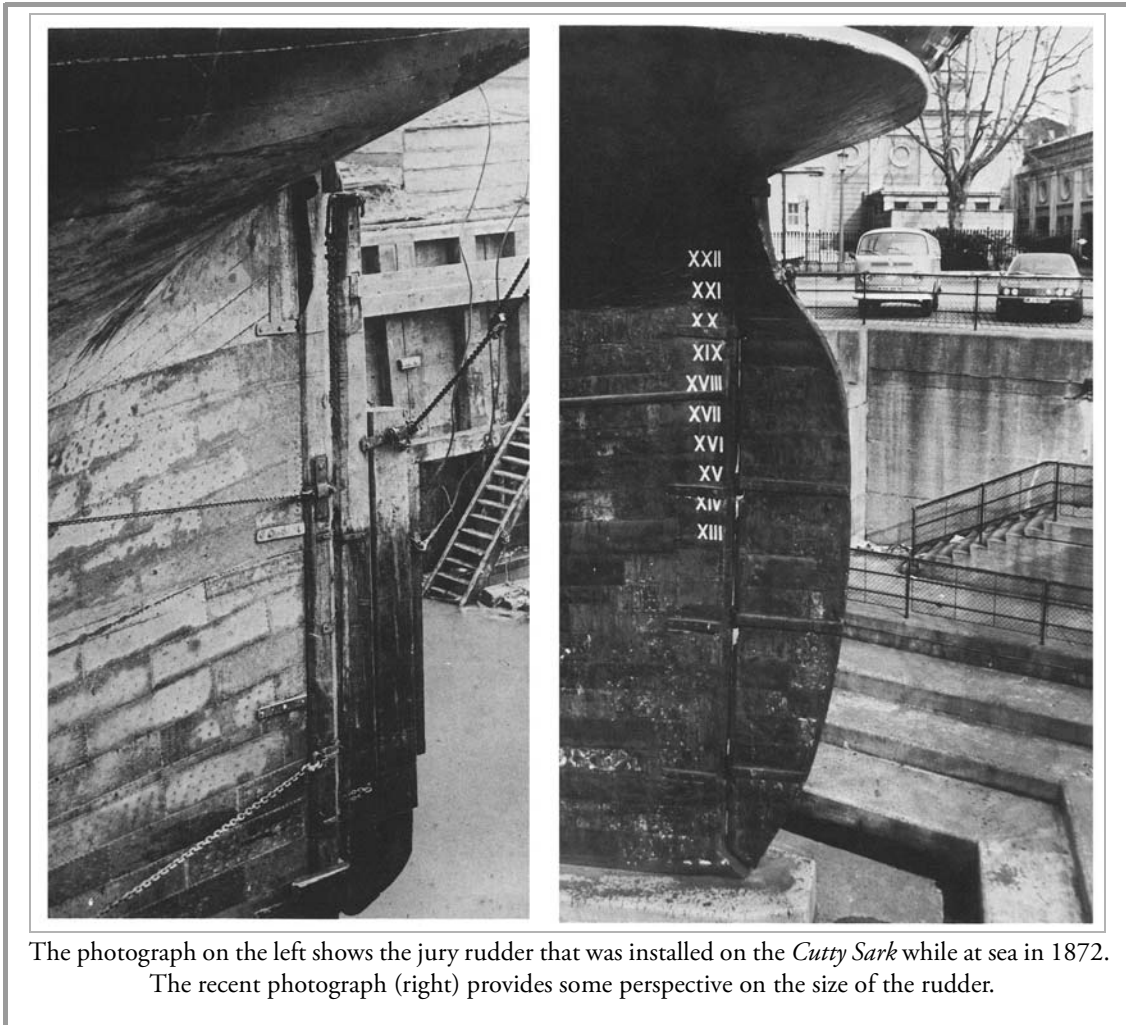


Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry

Part XXII: Captain Moodie's Ordeal



“The *Cutty Sark* was rolling heavily in the trough of the sea all the time, and as there was more water coming aboard on the lee roll than on the weather one, the forge was set up on the weather side of the deck, but, even so, it was constantly being upset and washed away.”

-- Basil Lubbock, *The Log of the Cutty Sark*

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Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry, Part XXII

In *Running Her Easting Down*, William F. Baker describes a life at sea as “a hard, dangerous life, [that] called for men with iron nerves and strong muscles.” A slightly more sardonic view from Samuel Johnson put it thusly:

No man will be a sailor who has contrivance enough to get himself into jail; for being in a ship is being in a jail with the chance of being drowned. A man in jail has more room, better food and commonly better company.

The average sailor began his career as a *fo'c'sle boy* (i.e., a forecabin/cabin boy), usually at a very young age. While most would be between twelve and fourteen years old, it was not uncommon for a youth of nine or ten to set sail for the first time. At this age, he might be a runaway orphan, or from an impoverished family where the alternative was starvation. To most of this lot, the modest wage of ten shillings per month seemed like a fortune, and might well have been a greater sum than any had seen in their brief lifetime.

After spending a decade at sea, a ship would be the only home they would know, and a ship's crew would be the only family they would have. Having little knowledge of anything but the sea, there would be no other trade for which the young man would qualify.

There was a future beyond *fo'c'sle boy*, and with a little wit and hard work, a promotion to *ordinary seaman* might be granted within a few years. The salary for an *ordinary seaman* was typically £2 per month, a rather good wage for someone with little chance to spend a *ha'penny* while at sea. The *ordinary seaman* was expected to be familiar with most of the fundamentals of sailing, to follow orders precisely, and to assist in any emergency.

The *ordinary seaman* was relieved of the most loathsome chores of the *fo'c'sle boy*, such as cleaning the head. Routine tasks included scrubbing the deck, mending sails, and shoveling ballast. Should an *ordinary seaman* prove incapable of performing at the expected level,

he would quickly be demoted to “boy”, with a corresponding cut in pay. Needless to say, there was significant motivation to perform.

The next step was *able seaman*, a position that required full knowledge of the most intricate aspects of sail rigging, steering, and basic navigation. A salary of £3 per month was not uncommon, and for that salary one worked twelve hours per day, seven days per week. Each work shift was four hours, followed by a four-hour break. It was impossible to get more than three and a half hours of solid sleep, and in the event of an emergency, the *able seaman* was expected to work through his break.

For most sailors who started as a *fo'c'sle boy*, the position of *able seaman* was the highest rank they could expect to achieve. According to William F. Baker:

For most of those who took to the sea, *able seaman* was the end of the line – a life style they were to follow for the rest of their days, till disease, fever, or the sea itself released them from their self-imposed bondage.

Two loftier career paths for a life at sea were open to those who had the means. In exchange for a fee of £50, one could sign on as an *apprentice seaman*, a position comparable to that of *ordinary seaman*, but that paid no salary. In exchange for the free labor and the up-front fee, the *apprentice seaman* was supposed to be taught all aspects of sailing, including navigation. Those who proved themselves to be worthy of the time and effort of the senior crew and officers on board would quickly learn the ropes. Those who did not would spend much of the voyage scrubbing the deck. Either way, shipowners came out ahead, for if an apprentice did not prove worthy of promotion, at least they provided free labor for the duration of a voyage.

An even faster path to the captain's table was open to those who could afford a formal education, along with the invaluable real world experience that came from an apprenticeship. This was the path that George Moodie, captain of the *Cutty Sark*, took.

In order to be considered for a position of *ship's captain*, candidates had to earn a *Master's Certificate*. This was no easy matter as, according to Baker, it required them to “rigidly condition themselves to go without sleep for days on end, while still maintaining at all times perfect judgement of wind, weather, gear, and seas.” Furthermore, “they would need to develop great leadership ability, steel nerves, a tremendous business sense, and above all, that certain, unique, and indefinable ability to command.”

Life at sea was a bit more pleasant for the officers and especially for the ship's captain. Not only was the pay considerably more (upwards from 100 times the pay of an ordinary sailor) but there was the added benefit of trading on one's own account. For the captain, especially, the financial benefit of private trading could easily exceed that of his impressive salary. Should he live to enjoy his retirement, a captain could look forward to some very comfortable years.

Moodie served as *mate* on the *Tweed* under Captain William Stuart in 1863. He proved to be a capable leader, using good judgement and an effective balance of firmness and fairness when in command. He was the sort of leader that could inspire a crew to exceptional performance in difficult situations. By 1867 he had earned his *Master's Certificate* and was ready to command a ship of his own.

Having gained the respect of both Captain Stuart and shipowner John Willis, Moodie was assigned as captain of the *Laurel*, and later, the *Lauderdale*. When John Willis selected Moodie to supervise the construction of the *Cutty Sark*, eventually to become its first captain, he did so because he believed Moodie was the most trustworthy and capable of his captains.

The *Cutty Sark* was one of the most famous of the great *Tea Clippers* of the nineteenth century. Whether or not she was *the* greatest has been debated for over a century, but when it comes to legendary lore of the

sea, *Cutty Sark* holds a unique place in maritime history. The most dramatic *Cutty Sark* story centers on the events of August, 1872.

What happened that month, when *Cutty Sark* lost her rudder during her long-anticipated race with *Thermopole*, is well documented. But there are aspects of the event that are still shrouded in mystery. We know that John Willis's brother, Robert, strongly protested any attempt to continue the voyage. Captain Moodie ardently insisted that the race would go on. We know that the dialogue between the two men was heated, but little is known about the ongoing dynamics between Willis and Moodie for the remainder of the voyage.

The first attempt to steer the crippled *Cutty Sark* was to trail a spare 70-ft. spar over the stern. As one would imagine, this proved ineffective. Moodie then decided to construct a jury rudder, using hewn sections of the spare 70-ft. spar for the rudder, and fabricating braces and mounting hardware from spare metal and an awning stanchion. Fortunately, an English carpenter and a Scottish blacksmith were on board; they were stowaways according to Basil Lubbock.

The sea was still rough as a make-shift forge was fired. Manning the bellows was Moodie's son, Alexander, who was an apprentice seaman. It took four days to craft the jury rudder, from August 15 until August 19. Adding to the daunting task was the often-severe weather. According to Lubbock (*The Log of the Cutty Sark*):

At one point the whole fire upset into the shirt of young Moodie, and he carried the scars for the rest of his life. At the same time the water took the feet from under the blacksmith, who was hanging on to a red hot bar. As the sea washed him away, the unfortunate man went sailing past the end of the house, still grimly clutching the bar, but holding it as far from his own nose as possible. Its hissing end just missed the sailmaker's face as he sat on his door-sill.

But such difficulties were treated in regular sailor fashion. The sailmaker remarked grimly that at any rate the blacksmith had a good match to light his pipe. The blacksmith swore at young Moodie for not saving the fire; and the

apprentice retorted that he was in just as much a hurry to get the red hot cinders off his chest as the blacksmith was to keep the red hot bar off his nose.

And so the work went on.

As Captain Moodie later recounted, the crafting of the jury rudder proved to be the easy part of the project; attaching it to the ship proved to be a greater challenge. The massive jury rudder was lowered in place and stabilized with a six hundred pound anchor attached to the end. This provided enough ballast to keep the rudder from tossing about in the choppy seas. But somehow the massive weight of the anchor and the stress from turbulence caused the rope to fail, and the anchor sank to the bottom of the ocean.

The freed rudder could no longer be managed without the ballast, and it floated to the surface. Ropes, chains, and rudder were all tossed about, endangering every sailor within a swipe of the debris. According to Lubbock, "at this juncture, we may well conclude that the skipper's language kept all hands from catching cold.... Nevertheless, at last the rudder was fixed to the old man's satisfaction." This was achieved on August 20 at 2:00 p.m.

Heavy weather continued on through the month of August, putting constant stress on the rudder's mounting hardware. It lasted almost exactly one month, finally giving out on September 20. But, with the experience gained from the first exercise, Captain Moodie and his crew ("all hands worked with a will") managed to refasten the jury rudder with new hardware within a single day. The ill-fated voyage continued until ship, captain, and complete crew finally reached Gravesend on October 16, 122 days from its Shanghai departure.

Moodie's prowess circulated throughout the maritime community, as every crewman on that fateful voyage proudly repeated the story of his "great piece of work". A weaker man like Robert Willis would have given up and sailed for the closest port. But Moodie

exemplified the ideal of the *Stewardship of a Sea Captain*. He hardly slept at all during the last two months of the voyage. He later said that, had it lasted another week, the ordeal would probably have killed him.

To the consternation of "Old White Hat", George Moodie resigned his command of the *Cutty Sark* and signed on with a steamship company shortly thereafter. Such a hasty move, with no prior notice, was very disturbing to Willis. When he pressured Moodie for his reasons for quitting, he explained the cause and extent of his "row with Robert Willis." Details of this discussion seem to have been kept between the two, so it is difficult to determine if his discord with Robert Willis was the sole catalyst for Moodie's resignation. Some speculate that Moodie recognized that the *Era of The Tea Clipper* had ended, and that he wanted to exit at the peak of his game rather than be part of its decline.

To be sure, John Willis did not take lightly the revelation of his brother's role in the resignation of Moodie. According to Lubbock:

... old Jock waxed mightily indignant and declared that as long as he lived his brother should never have another voyage on any of his ships.

And he tried his best to get Moodie to alter his decision, even offering to build him the finest ... ship which could be produced. But Moodie was firm, and left the sea for steam, taking a command in the State Line of Glasgow, which finished by swallowing up a good part of his savings.

Moodie retired in 1891 at the age of 62. For the next 32 years he enjoyed an active and comfortable retirement, with meteorology among his favorite pastimes.

Cutty Sark was only three years old when Moodie left her for steam. In the next few years she would have a few lackluster captains, before being paired with a captain that finally unleashed her true spirit.

Our series on *Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry* will continue this topic in the next issue of the *Upton Tea Quarterly*.