

Two Years Before the Mast: Reading Between the Lines

Jacob Posen

In 1834, a young Harvard student, Richard Henry Dana, Jr., made a bold decision to leave his privileged lifestyle and join the merchant marines.¹ Dana's decision was remarkable; he left behind a comfortable lifestyle in order to join the crew of the merchant ship, the *Pilgrim*. Dana was vastly overeducated for his sailing job, but his Harvard education was of little use on board the *Pilgrim*. During his time at sea Dana kept a journal which he later published as *Two Years Before the Mast: a Personal Narrative of Life at Sea*. Dana's book was very well received and Daniel Vickers and Vince Walsh, the renowned authors of *Young Men and the Sea: Yankee Seafarers in the Age of Sail*, pay tribute to his importance.² They place Dana in the company of other great American writers and maritime historians: "When the great American sea-authors of the nineteenth century – Cooper, Dana and Melville..."³ Throughout his book Dana explores many different aspects of the history of

¹ Richard Henry Dana, Jr., *Two Years before the Mast: A Personal Narrative of Life at Sea* (New York: Random House Inc., 2001), v.

² James Fennimore Cooper wrote the book *Ned Myers: A life before the Mast* and other non-seafaring related books. Herman Melville is the famous author of *Moby Dick*, among other things.

³ Daniel Vickers with Vince Walsh. *Young Men and the Sea: Yankee Seafarers in the Age of Sail* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), 250.

⁴ Living before the mast has a double meaning. On the one hand it refers to the sailors who slept in the hold that was in front of the mast on a ship; on the other hand being before the mast also meant that the sailor was not an officer, and would therefore not have his quarters located after the mast.

seafaring from the perspective of a crew member who lives before the mast.⁴ Analyzing Dana's book proves to be a difficult task because of his skillful writing and engrossing narrative, but a few major themes can be identified within his story. The importance of the masculine identity aboard a ship; the connection to land while aboard a ship; the interpersonal relationships aboard the ship; as well as the business-like aspect of the merchant marine.

One of the more prevalent themes that surfaces throughout the narrative is the nineteenth-century concept of masculine identity. On several occasions Dana nonchalantly risked his life and refused to show fear in order to retain the respect of his colleagues. In chapter eleven of *Two Years Before the Mast* Dana demonstrates this concern for mental and physical toughness, "A well man at sea has little sympathy with one who is sea-sick; he is too apt to be conscious of a comparison favourable to his own manhood."⁵ As Dana explains, sea-sickness would not garner sympathy from any of the crew members.

Masculinity applies to much more than just sea-sickness. In chapter six the crew are faced with a tragedy at sea, the death of George, one of their colleagues, who was apparently lost overboard. Death at sea is treated very specially. From Dana's account one notices a useful ritual which functions much as a funeral or wake would on land. Soon after the crew and officers have agreed that all the necessary precautions were taken to search for George's body, the Captain proceeds to auction off all of his belongings. While this may seem bizarre and even offensive, the redistribution of George's clothes grants the crew closure. While Dana is affected by George's death, careful analysis of his writing

⁵ Dana, Jr., *Two Years before the Mast*, 78.

⁶ Mortality becomes a serious issues again for Dana in chapter thirty-five, when some of the crew of the *Alert* developed scurvy. What is baffling about this is that by 1836 the causes and cures for scurvy were well known. Why then, did the crew not take adequate steps to ensure this sort of problem would not occur? Economic restrictions, cargo constraints and social hierarchies aboard the ship may explain this to an extent, but not entirely.

suggests that within a few days the crew has dealt with George's death, and normal daily activities resume.⁶

In contemporary society, it is assumed that during his time at sea, a sailor actually spends the duration of voyage on a ship, at sea. Dana illustrates that this is not the case. A large portion of Dana's time 'at sea' is spent either on land, in preparation for land, in harbour, or leaving harbour. Dana himself spends a significant amount of time off a ship completely when he is curing hides in California. This time ashore was accepted as being at sea, as illustrated by Dana's comment at the end of chapter eighteen: "I stood on the beach while the brig got under weigh [sic] and watched her until she rounded the point, and then went up to the hide-house to take up my quarters for a few months."⁷ In total Dana only spends two years at sea, and apparently he is going to spend a few months of that completely off of the ship. This is a significant amount of time, especially when one factors in the time spent in port, which is constant throughout his time in California.

The connection to land is made more interesting by the fact that the ship is cleaned obsessively as it nears port. As Dana explains in chapter thirty five, "No merchant vessel looks better than an Indiaman, or a Cape Horner, after a long voyage; and many captains and mates will stake their reputation for seamanship upon the appearance of their ships when she hauls into the dock."⁸ This would seem rather peculiar, as the reader assumes that after a long, difficult voyage, the ship would return in very poor shape, and would need time for repairs. Dana shows that this is not the case, and explains that the reputations of the captains and mates rested upon the ship's cleanliness. This suggests an inter-ship competitiveness; the captain with the cleanest ship must be the best. Again the reader can see that issues of the masculine identity were prevalent in many areas of life at sea.

One of the most intriguing aspects of life at sea, as told by

⁷ Dana, Jr., *Two Years before the Mast*, 155.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 377.

Dana, is the love-hate relationship that the sailors, in particular the crew, have with their jobs. As the *Alert*, the second ship which Dana sails on, nears its final destination, Boston, one sees that not only is Dana extremely excited to be home, but that all the men are anxious to get to shore. In the following excerpt Dana discusses the men's preparations for shore: "We went below, and had a fine time overhauling our chests, laying aside the clothes we meant to go ashore in, and throwing overboard all that were worn out and good for nothing."⁹ This sorting of clothes is reminiscent of the excitement seen in a young child getting ready for his first day of school. What is contradictory about this is that all of the men, with the notable exception of Dana, will soon be back on another ship, working another job that Dana describes as their "evil fortune".¹⁰ This brings up important questions. For example, are the men doing their jobs because they have no choice, or do they actually find some fulfillment in their sailing life? The answer is beyond the scope of this essay, but it likely lies somewhere in the middle between enjoyment, and limited options. One issue with this section of Dana's narrative is whether his personal biases are clouding the reality. Dana himself understands that he will not be back on a ship; he is a Harvard student, from a privileged background, so his extreme excitement at leaving the ship may have been projected onto the other men by Dana.

Personal relationships play a large part in the sea life as Dana describes it. These relationships can be further broken down into two areas: relationships among the crew, and those between the officers and crew. Intra-crew relationships are dominated by the fraternal bond that is shared among the crew members. This fraternity among crew members is most evident in chapter seventeen when the demoted mate, Foster, runs away. In the preceding chapters Dana describes the problems with Foster: how he is despised among the crew, and how he deserves his demotion. Yet,

⁹ *Ibid.*, 383

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

when Foster runs away the crew protects him and makes no real effort to help find him. Dana had this to say on the events: "The next morning, when all hands were mustered, there was a great stir to find Foster. Of course, we would tell nothing, and all they could discover was that he had left an empty chest behind him, and that he went off in a boat".¹¹ Clearly the fraternity among the crew is stronger than personal feelings.

What makes the fraternity issue even more fascinating is that class divisions from land were still an underlying issue. In chapter twenty nine, Captain Thompson tries to force Dana back onto the *Pilgrim*, his former ship from which he had transferred. Dana knows that the captain cannot force him back on because of his connections in Boston and his upper-class background. The captain then chooses another man from the crew, Ben, who is not from the upper-class like Dana and has no connections in Boston, to take Dana's place on the *Pilgrim*. This move causes a real stir among the crew in the *Alert*, and they clearly side against Dana. They very quickly pick Ben's side and alienate Dana because of his background. Dana describes his situation in the following excerpt: "The notion that I was not 'one of them,' which, by a participation in all their labor and hardships, and having no favor shown me, had been laid asleep, was beginning to revive."¹² Clearly this fraternity has limits that are the deeply ingrained class divisions at home. In the end Dana finds another man whom he pays to take his and Ben's place aboard the *Pilgrim*, but the event still leaves the reader with a feeling of betrayal on Dana's behalf, although Dana himself is quick to forgive.

For Dana one of the most pressing issues aboard the ship was the separation between the officers and the crew. The division was not only a division of power but a physical division as well. The crew lived in the area before the mast, hence the title of the book, while the officers lived in the officers' quarters after the

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹² *Ibid.*, 291.

mast. This division even extended to food. Dana discusses food in great detail throughout his narrative, but he rarely mentions the officers' food. It is almost as if it were taboo for Dana to contemplate the food the officers were eating. In chapter thirty one the *Alert* is having difficulties getting around Cape Horn and everyone is getting slightly frustrated. Dana vents his frustration in the following excerpt where he explains the difference in food and drink quality between the captain and crew: "The Captain... can have his brandy and water in the cabin, and his hot coffee at the galley; while Jack, who had to stand through everything, and work in wet and cold, can have nothing to wet his lips or warm his stomach."¹³ As Dana says, the crew was forced to work through the poor weather facing the ship as it rounded Cape Horn, without warm food or drink, while the Captain enjoyed hot coffee and brandy. The hierarchal divisions on the ship are a constant issue aboard both the *Pilgrim* and the *Alert*, and from Dana's narrative one can assume that the divisions aboard ships were the cause of tensions on ships everywhere.

The hierarchal tensions were exacerbated with the flogging incident in chapter fifteen. In this chapter, Captain Thomson becomes extremely angry at Sam, one of the crew members. Dana explains that the Captain has been in a foul mood over the last few days and in particular has been picking on Sam. The Captain really loses his temper in this chapter and orders the mates to grab Sam so he can be flogged. At this time John the Swede, another one of the crew, intercedes on Sam's behalf. The Captain, who at this point is so angry that he is beyond reason, orders John flogged as well. This is the first incident of real hierarchal violence in the narrative and it clearly affects Dana very deeply. This entire chapter is written in extreme detail, which suggests that the event was so moving that it was burned into his memory like a nightmare. Dana describes the change in the mood after the incident in the following excerpt; "The flogging was seldom if ever alluded to by us in the fore-castle. If anyone was inclined to talk about it, the

¹³ *Ibid.*, 328.

others, with a delicacy which I hardly expected to find among

them, always stopped him.”¹⁴ Clearly Captain Thompson overstepped his bounds, at least in the minds of the men, when he flogged Sam and John the Swede. An interesting aspect of this is that flogging was legal on ship, and if one looks at the laws one might not have been surprised to see a flogging. Flogging was legal, but clearly it was not commonplace; had it been the norm the crew would have thought little of a flogging. Instead they were deeply affected by its occurrence.

The flogging incident also brings forward an interesting point regarding the crucial role of the mates on a ship. The mates were supposed to act as mediators between the Captain and the crew. In chapter twenty three Dana contrasts the chief mate from the *Alert* with the chief mate from the *Pilgrim* and points out that the chief mate in the *Alert* works much more effectively with Captain Thompson:

He was quite a contrast to the worthy, quiet, unobtrusive mate of the *Pilgrim*: not so estimable a man, perhaps, but a far better mate of a vessel; and the entire change in Captain Thompson’s conduct, since he took command of the ship was owing, no doubt, in a great measure, to this fact.¹⁵

While it appears Dana liked the mate aboard the *Pilgrim*, he also recognizes that his relaxed management style was completely ineffective, especially with Thompson’s complete lack of tact and diplomacy when dealing with the crew. The reader will also notice that aboard the *Alert* there is no flogging, and no serious violent incidents that can be attributed to the captain.

According to Dana this is due to the effectiveness of the chief mate. Clearly the hierarchal nature of the ships was a sensi-

¹⁴ Ibid., 118.

¹⁵ Ibid., 203.

tive subject. The captains had to be wary of being too oppressive and risk alienating the crew, but due to the social divisions aboard a ship between the crew and the officers, the captain's might appear overbearing. The role of the mates was integral in balancing the divisions between the captain and the crew- a skilful mate could off-set a tactless captain. A timid mate might cause more problems by being overly relaxed towards to the crew, while a tougher mate would allow the captain to focus on other things, and not interfere with the goings- on before the mast.

Throughout the narrative Dana also touches on another important theme, the enormous role played by cargo within the merchant marine ships. The merchant marines only make money by having a full ship both to their destination and on the return voyage. This can be seen in Dana's narrative when he is forced to spend months on the California coast curing and storing hides. Dana says early in this part that to leave California the *Alert* needs to have forty-thousand hides, an enormous number! So the men stay in California trading for and collecting hides until they have enough to fill the ship and go back to Boston. This reveals two important things. First, the merchant marines functioned rather like trucking companies today; unless they are full they do not make money. Second, this means that the sailor's wages were set before they left. They were contractors; they were not paid hourly or daily, but solely on the completion of the job. This is apparent because while in California no one, not even the agents of the company, urges the sailors to work any faster collecting hides for any reason other than getting home to Boston and getting away from California as soon as possible. Throughout the narrative one sees that economics played a very large role in sea life, and Dana's time in California reminds the reader that the merchant marine was a business, and was organized accordingly.

Dana also describes California in great detail. Particularly striking are Dana's description of Monterey society in chapter eleven, and his description of Californian society in chapter twenty one. His persistent, if somewhat prejudiced, view that

California has great economic potential if only the locals, Mexicans, would develop a stronger work ethic is, is particularly resonant in light of the wealth evident in today's Californian lifestyle. Dana also makes an almost prophetic remark in chapter twenty-six; when describing the potential for a port in the San Francisco Bay, he says "If California ever becomes a prosperous country, this bay will be the center of its prosperity."¹⁶ What Dana did not know at the time is that Oakland, which is on the San Francisco Bay, would eventually have one of the largest ports on the Pacific Coast of the United States. Dana also makes some interest comments in his appendix, titled "Twenty-Four Years After." Dana notes that San Francisco has become a bustling metropolis and California has changed drastically. This is of course a result of the famous 1849 California Gold Rush. Dana was originally in California around 1836; by the time he returns in 1860 the economy had grown exponentially.

Dana's work can also function as a study in leadership and power, similar to Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Dana's book is obviously a memoir, which *The Prince* is not, but Dana's astute notes on the power structure within a ship, as well as his description of the social hierarchy within a ship could function as an educational tool for aspiring leaders in contemporary society.

In conclusion, *Two Years Before the Mast* is both a gripping narrative and a useful historical database. It can be looked at as a story about a young man going through an extremely difficult journey on the route to adulthood. In the course of that journey, he learns about the basis of his own masculine identity, comes to grips with the realities and limits of social relations among individuals from different social groups, and develops an understanding and appreciation for the fundamental economic realities which underlie the romantic notions of seafaring. The book is also a historical document. Contemporary historians can derive a plethora of historical knowledge about social and economic conditions both at sea and on land, as well as interesting first-hand information

¹⁶ Ibid., 249.

regarding the frontier orientation of nineteenth century California. Particularly striking is Dana's description of Monterey society in chapter eight, and his description of Californian society in chapter twenty-one. His prescient, if somewhat prejudiced, view that California has great economic potential if only the locals, Mexicans, would develop a stronger work ethic, is particularly resonant in light of the wealth evident in today's Californian lifestyle. Dana's careful notes regarding the power structure, social divisions and the interaction between the crew and the officers, as well as his observations on the power structure and relations among locals in California, provide a useful guideline on how to successfully lead a socially stratified conglomeration of people, be it a ship or a kingdom.