

CHRISTMAS AT SEA

Prepared for the Literary Club of Cincinnati Holiday Observance
by Jerry Kathman, Club Trustee
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*Snow Storm – Steam-
Boat off a Harbour’s
Mouth* by William
Turner



Herman Melville in *Moby Dick* asks, “Why is almost every robust healthy boy with a robust healthy soul in him, at some time or other crazy to go to sea? Why upon your first voyage as a passenger, did you yourself feel such a mystical vibration, when first told that you and your ship were now out of sight of land. Why did the old Persians hold the sea holy? Why did the Greeks give it a separate deity, own brother of Jove [Poseidon]? Surely all this is not without meaning. And still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all.”

Indeed, to be human is to be at times “all at sea.” Some would suggest our beloved Literary Club was a bit all at sea this year. The saying, a nautical phrase that dates from the days

of sailing when accurate navigational aids weren't available, is defined as "to be in a state of confusion or disorder." Any ship that was out of sight of land was in an uncertain position and in danger of becoming lost.

Many phrases and sayings that we use in everyday conversation have nautical origins. Most of these originated in the days of sail. These phrases are often metaphors and, more often than not, the original nautical meanings are now forgotten. The association of travel in many of these phrases is significant because the very word "metaphor" derives from ancient Greek for "to travel."

Words with obvious nautical origins include "a shot across the bows," "anchors aweigh," "batten down the hatches," "shipshape" and "walking the plank."

Phrases with less obvious nautical derivations include "close quarters," "cut and run," "slush fund," "the bitter end," and "getting under way."

I was in fact getting under way when Mike Kremzar, our club president, called this fall to ask if I would become a trustee, serving out Paul Franz's term. My wife Liz and I were getting under way at Logan Airport in Boston, boarding a shaky Cape Air flight to Nantucket. (Alas, a twin turboprop airplane, not a sailing ship.)

Arriving in Nantucket, I felt transported to the age of sail. Nantucket, you may recall, is the home of Starbuck, the chief mate on Ahab's Pequod.

The Seattle-based coffee conglomerate named their company

Starbucks, according to their website, because it conjured up the romance of the high seas and the seafaring tradition of the early coffee traders in the age of sail. Nantucket evokes these images as well, in part because this charming place does not suffer a single Starbucks Coffee shop on the entire island. But I am now far afield from my intended purpose here tonight, gentlemen. To put it in nautical terms, one might say I have “drifted off course.”

Mike and I talked about what would be expected of me as a trustee. I knew from my reading of *The Annotated Concordance of The Literary Club of Cincinnati* that a trustee puts the new ball valve in the toilet tank, cleans up after the plaster patchers and worries about beer. I felt eminently qualified to do that. Toward the end of our conversation, Mike added, “Oh yes, one more thing. It is a club tradition that trustees read a short paper at our Holiday Observance.”

This put me into a mild panic. Between year-end company obligations and the gathering of my family, I was not looking for one more complication in my overly committed December. Bah Humbug!

I am a bit of an obsessive planner, mocked by my family for always staying comically ahead of myself—arriving at airports way too early or spending misplaced energy toward contingency plans for every imaginable event in life. I was certainly in the mindset of getting out ahead of this paper almost as soon as my conversation with Mike ended. The task began to haunt me as I walked the cobblestone streets of Nantucket.

What do I have to say that is worthy of your time here tonight? Will the men and women of the Literary Club at some future date look back at this paper and approve of it? My ambition was not modest. I desired to construct a reading that is at

once in the spirit of the season, and also celebrates the brotherhood found in this clubhouse—a clubhouse inhabited by thoughtful men, grateful for the Monday evenings we spend in one another’s company. Further, for the most part, we are men of a certain age, well aware of the swift passage of time. Is there something to be said about that in my essay?



Visiting the Nantucket Whaling Museum, surrounded by the artifacts and the stories of men at sea, I immediately arrived at an idea—in what dear Robert Smith might suggest was a “eureka moment.” The romance of the sea, the fellowship of men and an awareness of the passage of time in this season of reflection are all perfectly expressed in a work, not by Herman Melville, but rather by another great writer of seafaring adventure, Robert Louis Stevenson. It is a poem titled *Christmas at Sea*.

A few years ago, I intended to suggest to Chris Miller that he consider including this poem in one of his marvelous holiday productions for our club. I never got around to it. In my mind, I imagined a more manly voice than mine providing the reading—perhaps Dale Flick or Chris himself. But here I am, sharing a poem I have loved for years—admittedly an odd choice for a landlubber in a clubhouse located in a landlocked city far from the sea.

Stevenson was born in Edinburgh in 1850. A son of a lighthouse engineer, he was fascinated by the sea from his earliest days. Stevenson was a popular and successful writer during his lifetime, though many leading critics dismissed him as merely a contributor to children’s literature. Incredibly, for most of the twentieth century he was excluded from the Oxford and Norton anthologies of literature entirely. Since then, to express it in nautical terms, his tide has risen. In fact, according to an index kept by UNESCO, Stevenson is ranked the 25th-most-translated author in the world, ahead of fellow

Victorians Charles Dickens, Oscar Wilde and Edgar Allan Poe.

The poem *Christmas at Sea* first appeared in the *Scots Observer* in 1888, several years after the publication of Stevenson's first successful novel *Treasure Island*. Carol Rumens, in an excellent essay on the poem in the *The Guardian*, states, "Stevenson tacks and hoists the sails of the narrative with a timing that is truly elegant." The poem's narration is from the point of view of a crewmember vividly describing his life-and-death struggles aboard a sailing ship during a winter storm. Rumens praises the work's strong, tactile sense, describing sails frozen so hard their edges "cut the naked hand" and icy decks "like a slide, where a seaman scarce could stand." Rumens also notes that the meter is regular, relentless, even evoking the pitching movement and the lack of forward progress of the ship, and that one is overwhelmed with the sense that the story is about to end and not end well. As the wind and waves blow the ship closer to land, the sailor is reminded that nearby on shore is the very village of his childhood—and that it is, of all days of the year, "blessèd Christmas Day."

Rumens also describes how Stevenson successfully conjures up the domestic scene on shore with uncanny clarity. "O well I saw the pleasant room, the pleasant faces there." The ship eventually maneuvers to safety and the narrator notes that the crew "heaved a mighty breath, every soul on board but me." The danger has passed and the vessel points "handsome out to sea," but the narrator is stricken with guilt and a sense of his own mortality. Finally she observes that the sailor's voyage is now one of understanding. He understands that with the passage of time, his parents have grown old.

So gentlemen, whether you are metaphorically "all at sea" this holiday season or at peace with yourself and surrounded by those who love you, take comfort in knowing that you are part of this gallant crew of literarians. Here's wishing all a blessed and storm-free passage into the New Year.

I will now read *Christmas at Sea* by Robert Louis Stevenson.

Christmas at Sea

The sheets were frozen hard, and they cut the naked hand;
The decks were like a slide, where a seaman scarce could stand;
The wind was a nor'wester, blowing squally off the sea;
And cliffs and spouting breakers were the only things a-lee.

They heard the surf a-roaring before the break of day;
But 'twas only with the peep of light we saw how ill we lay.
We tumbled every hand on deck instanter, with a shout,
And we gave her the maintops'l, and stood by to go about.

All day we tacked and tacked between the South Head and the North;
All day we hauled the frozen sheets, and got no further forth;
All day as cold as charity, in bitter pain and dread,
For very life and nature we tacked from head to head.

We gave the South a wider berth, for there the tide-race roared;
But every tack we made we brought the North Head close aboard;
So's we saw the cliffs and houses, and the breakers running high,
And the coastguard in his garden, with his glass against his eye.

The frost was on the village roofs as white as ocean foam;
The good red fires were burning bright in every 'long-shore home;
The windows sparkled clear, and the chimneys volleyed out;
And I vow we sniffed the victuals as the vessel went about.

The bells upon the church were rung with a mighty jovial cheer;
For it's just that I should tell you how (of all days in the year)
This day of our adversity was blessèd Christmas morn,

And the house above the coastguard's was the house where I was born.

O well I saw the pleasant room, the pleasant faces there,
My mother's silver spectacles, my father's silver hair;
And well I saw the firelight, like a flight of homely elves,
Go dancing round the china-plates that stand upon the shelves.

And well I knew the talk they had, the talk that was of me.
Of the shadow on the household and the son that went to sea;
And O the wicked fool I seemed, in every kind of way,
To be here and hauling frozen ropes on blessed Christmas Day.

They lit the high sea-light, and the dark began to fall.
"All hands to loose topgallant sails," I heard the captain call.
"By the Lord, she'll never stand it," our first mate Jackson cried.
"...It's the one way or the other, Mr. Jackson," he replied.

She staggered to her bearings, but the sails were new and good,
And the ship smelt up to windward just as though she understood.
As the winter's day was ending, in the entry of the night,
We cleared the weary headland, and passed below the light.

And they heaved a mighty breath, every soul on board but me,
As they saw her nose again pointing handsome out to sea;
But all that I could think of, in the darkness and the cold,
Was just that I was leaving home and my folks were growing old.