THE SAGA
OF OCEAN CRUISING

THE CORK QUAYS
LEGACY OF A DOWNTOWN DOCKLAND

ST MARY'S
THE ADVENTURES OF THE SLOOP-OF-WAR
REGULARS

6 MARITIME LOG
by JOHN YOUNG
Contract in bid for rival to the Panama Canal

10 NAVAL FOCUS
by PATRICK BONIFACE
Guided missile destroyer collides with oil tanker

12 ASIA PACIFIC
by JUSTIN MERRIGAN
Intense fire claims tanker crew

14 FERRY WORLD
by ROBERT STRAUGHTON
Travelling on the coal fired paddler Kingswear’s Castle

18 COASTAL COMMENTARY
by ROBERT STRAUGHTON
The end for Stephenson Clarke

22 FROM THE LOOKOUT
by THE EDITOR
Holyhead Port transfer

29 SEA BREEZES CHRISTMAS BOOKSHOP

33 MYSTERY SHIP COMPETITION

33 SEA BREEZES ORDER FORM

53 SUBSCRIPTION FORM

54 LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

57 NOTICE BOARD / CLASSIFIEDS

REGULAR CONTRIBUTORS
Robert Straughton, John Young, Patrick Boniface, Justin Merrigan
FEATURES

11 FAREWELL TO JOE McKENDRICK
by RICHARD DANIELSON
An all round good guy

26 THE CORK QUAYS
by MAURICE O'BRIEN
Legacy of a downtown dockland

34 SHIPS WE FORGOT TO REMEMBER
by ANDREW BELL
Two Koolama's

42 THE SAGA OF OCEAN CRUISING
by RICHARD DANIELSON
A journey aboard three ocean cruises

38 HMS WORCESTER
by CAPT ALAN BRIDGER
The 150th Anniversary Reunion

46 ST MARY'S
by JOSEPH A WILLIAMS
The Adventures of the Sloop-Of-War

50 THE EARNSLAW’S ONE HUNDREDTH
by MURRAY ROBINSON
TSS Earnslaw's centenary

58 A CHANCE ENCOUNTER
by DAVID RUSSELL-SMITH
Fond memories of a teenage Radio Officer

Gatefold
SAIL ROYAL GREENWICH
by DAVID WALTER

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The adventures of the Sloop-of-War

St Mary's

by JOSEPH A WILLIAMS (USA)

The old ship creaked and groaned as it was towed to the Point of Pines. There was little joy in the vessel, as she was being dragged to a cremation rather than to her home on the open seas. In 1908, the sloop-of-war St Mary's was old and had seen 64 years of service before she was sold for $5,052 — far less than the $192,113 it cost to build her. The Thomas Butler Company was going to burn her and take from the charred bones her metal and fittings.

However, not all of the St Mary's complement would give up the ship as workmen, to their surprise, found a black cat that blinked and wailed allowing “no one to approach her.” The cat, which had “been aboard longer than any one can tell” refused “to be pacified.” Without sentiment, this last shipment was removed before the vessel was brought to the Point of Pines outside of Boston and set ablaze.

Still, the St Mary's was not forgotten, especially by the cadets of the New York Nautical School who trained on her. The year after she was destroyed, graduates of the school dedicated a poem to her memory:

Our Boat was beached on a Boston shoal
Where the junkman slings his sledge.
Where her ribs were rent, and only
Her soul
Was left for her boys to pledge.

But yearly this phantom ship shall sail
On the mystic mere of memories;
And what'er betide, no man can fail
In his love for old St Mary's.

The Mary's to-night is a love-feast craft -
Come aboard,
One and all!

Some climb for'ard and a bunch go aft;
Hear the call?
Have a ball!

We won't lower topsails till a good two

bells -
Come aboard,
Shake that gig!

Let the air reverberate with lusty sailor
yells!
Make 'em big!
Pipe the rig!

Everybody help now with the anchor chain;
We all know how the wild wind varies.
We'll soon be under way on
imagination's main,
Raising "Ned" again on the old
ST MARY'S.

"A Fine Sea Boat"
The St Mary's, built by Charles B Brodie, was commissioned for the US Navy in 1844 and at 948 tons and a length of 149 feet, she was not handsome. Historian Harold Underhill commented,

"She was not what I would call a good-looking ship; she had too little rake forward, while aft she had that extremely practical but most unlovely so-called elliptical stern, which enabled the ship to use her guns to the best advantage but which I think ugly in any ship, and completely eliminated any form of stern decoration."

Yet what the St Mary's lost on looks, it gained in performance. Her raison d'être was to suppress the slave trade and was built for speed and endurance like other ships in her class, such as the Plymouth and Saratoga. In fact later sources, such as the New York Times, said that the ship was the fastest sailing vessel in the US Navy — a dubious, but impressive claim. While modest-sized, the ship was still able to sail for six months straight and packed a small but solid punch of 18 32-pounders and 4 8-inch guns. One commander wrote of the ship's performance, "...sails, steers, and works well; is very easy on her spars, rigging and cables." Another assessed, "Sails indifferently well; steers easily, but rolls and works badly, and stands up well under canvas." Another reported that the St Mary's was "...remarkably Weatherly, and a fine sea boat."

The St Mary's and the Mexican War
Before the St Mary's could chase slavers the Mexican War grew imminent and the ship was ordered to the Gulf of Mexico under the command of JL Saunders. Using Galveston as a base, she served as a troop and personnel transport and in one case brought the American Minister, John Slidell, on a failed diplomatic mission to Mexico. When fighting commenced in April 1846, the ship was reassigned to the dull work of blockading the Mexican port of Tampico.
The St Mary's under full sail.

Image courtesy of the Stephen B Luce Library Archives, SUNY Maritime College, Bronx, NY
Jackson flew into a rage and struck the officer. He was arrested and charged with assault as well as using “mutinous and seditious language”

In the ceaseless vigil of blockade duty, the St Mary’s did not make port and no fresh provisions were brought aboard. As a result, scurvy erupted and morale ebbed. Under the hot sun, a seaman named Samuel Jackson hid his boots under a gun. When the executive officer saw this violation of the rules, he questioned Jackson who claimed he only put them there momentarily. The officer took the boots and threw them overboard. Jackson flew into a rage and struck the officer. He was arrested and charged with assault as well as using “mutinous and seditious language.” He was tried on the ship and hung from a yard arm on September 17.

The situation had reached a bottom that was only broken when the St Mary’s caught its first prize, the Mexican schooner Pueblana, on November 14, 1846. It was a small prize - the schooner was renamed Tampico and sold for $1,000 after the war - but it was a god save for the vessel which turned its back on the Jackson incident to become a lucky ship.

The St Mary’s on the Pacific

After the war, the Navy moved the St Mary’s to the Pacific station. This became the ship’s playground. American Naval strength was on the rise and in Latin America the country flexed its muscles. The St Mary’s found itself entangled in a playground of gunboat diplomacy.

There are several examples of just how the commanders of the St Mary’s impacted Latin America. The first notable episode was in February 1857 when Commander Charles Henry Davis commanded the ship to Nicaragua where William Walker, an American freebooter, was attempting to carve out a private empire in Latin America. Walker’s efforts, stymied by an armed coalition of other countries and interests, forced him to surrender to Davis who returned him to the United States.

A more direct case of intervention occurred in 1856 when racial riots erupted in Panama (at that time a part of Columbia) over disputed elections. White residents of Panama received protection from the St Mary’s force of marines. Then in 1860, under similar circumstances, six whites were killed (the number of blacks dead was unreported). In the confusion, the HMS Clio under a captain named Miller planned to intervene. However, the St Mary’s commanded by William D Porter was in the area and moved in. Miller acted on his own recognizance and invoked the Monroe Doctrine to force a joint Anglo-American intervention. Captain Porter recounted in wordy 19th century prose:

“Captain Miller stated to me when I met him, that he came on shore to take charge of the town with Her Britannic Majesty’s forces. I informed him that on that point the United States Government was particularly jealous of the interference of any foreign Power in occupying alone any part of the continent and that he must withdraw his forces until invited on shore by the ‘intendente’ and Governor of the state, and that invitation and request must include the forces under my command. The ‘intendente’ stated to me, in the presence of the Consul of the United States... that Captain Miller of the Clio had landed without his request or authority or order.”

As a result, a joint occupation commenced from September 28 until October 7 when order was restored and both detachments withdrawn.

The St Mary’s was not just the big stick in American diplomacy. She was also an explorer and was sent out on missions for scientific studies or to secure resources for commerce. The most notable example was under Davis when the ship was sent to find bird droppings (ie guano). In the process, he claimed New Nantucket Island (now Baker Island) on August 18, 1856 for the United States. Perhaps Davis did not want to be immortalised for discovering vast reserves of guano, but he was at the service of the Navy and had little choice in the matter - guano was a valuable fertilizer and its nitrates used for gunpowder.

The Civil War

When the American Civil War broke out in 1861, the St Mary’s remained in the Pacific and protected Union merchants and mail steamers while hunting Confederate raiders such as the Shenandoah. With most of the fleet fighting in the Atlantic, the St Mary’s made up almost all of the effective Union naval force in the Pacific. While the St Mary’s never found the Shenandoah, a curious incident happened in Chile. The ship, then under the command of Captain George Musalas Colvocoresa cruised along the South American coast to Valparaiso. As the ship came into the port he found that the city was being “menaced by a powerful Spanish squadron” of two steam frigates and one schooner commanded by Admiral Luis Hernandez Pinzon. The Spanish, who had lost their power in the region, were attempting to reassert their influence, and since the United States was distracted by its Civil War, it seemed a perfect time. Colvocoresa would have none of it. He sailed between the Spanish squadron...
and Valparaiso. Pinzon was furious and demanded that Colvocoresses move since the Spanish fleet was going to bombard the city and would not be responsible if the Americans were caught in the crossfire. This "roused the ire of the Greek" and Colvocoresses responded:

"In the event of a bombardment of the city, I beg you Sir, to have a care that none of your shot touch the hull of the St Mary's. I am perfectly aware of the weakness of my corvette in comparison with the powerful squadron of her most Catholic Majesty now blockading the port, but I beg, Sir, to remind you that the flag that floats at her peak represents 3,000 guns on the sea."

Pinzon backed off and the Chileans became enthusiastic about the presence of the St Mary's and the gutsy Colvocoresses.

After the war, the St Mary's was laid up at the naval shipyard on Mare Island from 1866 to 1870. By this point the vessel was outmoded, but the Navy decided to bring her back to active duty for one last tour; and quite a cruise it was. During this voyage, "...of three years and four months the vessel visited all the principal ports of the western coast of North and South America and islands of the South Sea, including Australia and New Zealand, and sailed over 65,000 miles."

At the end of the trip, the St Mary's returned to Norfolk and remained there until 1874. The Navy had no practical use for her so the nautical education reformer, Stephen B Luce suggested converting her to a schoolship for the State of New York. As a result, the old wooden vessel got a new lease on life. She was taken to Boston where she was given $15,500 worth of repairs. Then she was brought to New York on December 10, 1874. The next month, twenty-six boys enrolled and became the first class of New York City's Nautical School, a public school dedicated to training merchant mariners.

In her second career as a training ship, the St Mary's served as a schoolroom, dormitory, and mess hall for boys 15 years and older. In the two-year program, the students were taught a grammar school education of reading, writing, spelling, and history plus traditional seamanship. Among other things, students learned knot-making, sewing, boxing the compass, swimming, parts of the ship, and arrangement of lights. The most practical part of the training took place on annual cruises. These voyages, which started in the spring and lasted until the fall, were the defining experiences of the school. By the time the last commander of the St Mary's, Gustavus Charles Hanus, took the ship on her final cruises, he remarked, "...it is interesting to note that for thirty-three years this fine old sailing vessel has crossed the ocean nearly every year, sailing altogether between nine and ten thousand miles annually, and that all the work has been done by boys."

By the early 20th Century, the St Mary's was clearly obsolete, even for training purposes. Hanus wrote that the ship was "...so old that she may become unserviceable at any time, and besides, the Board of Education... are anxious to modernise this school so as to bring it up to date and to that end have added steam and electrical engineering to its regular curriculum." The Superintendent noted that the Navy inspected the ship and found over $40,000 in needed repairs.

The Nautical School acquired a new ship named the Newport, a sailsteam gunship. The school's curriculum modernised and the institution eventually acquired a shore base at Fort Schuyler, New York evolving into the State University of New York's Maritime College. However, the final fate of the St Mary's was in the balance. When the ship was struck off the Navy list on June 18, 1908, sentimental graduates attempted and failed to purchase the ship to convert her into a nautical museum. Therefore, that August, the Navy sold her to the Thomas Butler Company which brought the St Mary's on her final voyage, empty of all souls who cared for her, except for a lonely black cat.

**Painting of the USS St Mary's. Built in 1844, this ship was the first training ship of the New York State Maritime College from 1874 till 1907.**

SUNY Maritime College, Bronx, NY. With thanks to Mike Fitzpatrick for providing the picture

**Boys of the St Mary's cleaning the deck ca 1900-1907.**

Image courtesy of the Stephen B Luce Library Archives, SUNY Maritime College, Bronx, NY

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**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

3. "Cat Won't Leave Old Ship," *New York Times*, October 18, 1908
4. "Schoolship Alumni Dine," *New York Times*, February 14, 1909 — An excerpt of the full poem was published in the New York Times. The full version, shown here, was extracted from Alumni Bulletins in the Stephen B Luce Archives (clipping was received from 1911 and onward).
11. Emmons, 82.