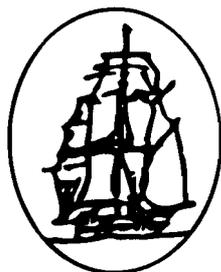


TASMANIAN HISTORICAL STUDIES
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Shiplover: Harry O'May and the Maritime History of Tasmania

Stefan Petrow

Introduction

When Harry O'May died in May 1962 the *Mercury* called him 'the "grand old man" of the Derwent'.¹ He captured 'forever the essence of Hobart's history in his books about Tasmanian ships and shipping'. This was a true and accurate assessment as far as it went but it underestimated O'May's contribution to the understanding of Tasmania's maritime past. Working through the Shiplovers' Society from 1931, O'May built models of famous Tasmanian ships and arranged exhibitions to show off the models of others. He encouraged the publication of a book written by Will Lawson illustrating Tasmania's maritime achievements. He urged the collection and preservation of log books, photographs and relics that illuminated the maritime past. He was involved in the commemoration of important men, ships and events and in the erection of memorials to men, ships and events too. He lectured widely and wrote many articles on maritime topics, and he compiled rather than wrote a series of books of anecdotes and tales. This paper concludes that, although O'May captured essential aspects of local maritime history, the accuracy and reliability of his books and lectures can be questioned.

O'May was not the only historian of the interwar period interested in Tasmania's maritime past. A colleague in the Shiplovers' Society, John Ernest Philp, a shipping agent, had already earned a reputation as an 'authority on shipping and whaling in the early days of Tasmania'.² He wrote many articles for Tasmanian newspapers under the name of 'Tahune' and wrote for Australian and New Zealand journals as well. He initiated and edited the short-lived journal *Sea Ways* and his book *Whaling Ways of Hobart Town* was well received locally and nationally, but he died in 1937.³ Leslie Norman was

1 *Mercury*, 16 May 1962.

2 *Mercury*, 18 June 1937, Press cuttings of the Shiplovers' Society of Tasmania (SST), Non State (NS) 543/185, p. 16, Archives Office of Tasmania (AOT); RA Herr and EA Rood (eds.), *A Solomons Sojourn: J.E. Philp's Log of the Makira, 1912-1913*, Hobart: Tasmanian Historical Research Association, 1978.

3 *Sea Ways* was published in 1931; JE Philp, *Whaling Ways of Hobart Town*, Hobart: Walch, 1936. See also JE Philp, *The Harriet McGregor: A Staunch Ship's Sea Story*, Hobart: Davies Brothers, 1934.

well known for his books *Pioneer Shipping in Tasmania* and *Sea Wolves and Bandits*, which dealt with similar themes to those taken up by O'May and in a similar anecdotal way.⁴ Another author of note was the Melbourne-born Alan Villiers, who wrote of past Tasmanian ships and much more.⁵ Despite the existence of these other contemporary writers and publicists on maritime history, no one individual contributed more to maritime history in Tasmania on so many fronts between 1931 and 1962 as did O'May as I will show in this paper. Even more amazing, he effectively started a new career of writing about and publicising maritime history in his sixties. Although Australia was the 'offspring of a mighty sea power', research into the maritime past was much slower to develop, than in Britain herself.⁶ As the English geographer J H Bird put in 1968, 'Australia is a maritime nation and scarcely knows it', obsessed as it was with its land-based pattern of development.⁷ As O'May's work shows, this was not true of Tasmania, where interest in maritime history flourished from the 1930s.

O'May's Early Life and Career

Henry O'May, known to all as Harry, was born into a sea-going family. His father Robert O'May came from Scotland in 1856 and nine years later formed with his brothers Thomas and James O'May a ferry service across the Derwent.⁸ This family concern developed steadily and the steamer *Enterprise*, built in Hobart, was introduced in 1872, the year Harry was born at Kangaroo Point, now Bellerive. O'May was educated at Bellerive State School and Scotch College, Hobart, but the call of the sea was too strong and at 11 he left school to become a wharf-boy. He remembered with excitement the waterfront of the 1880s as 'a colourful spectacle of masts and spars, sailing ships predominating'.⁹ Next to the port was 'a brawling, sprawling community with numerous waterfront taverns doing a roaring trade with

4 L Norman, *Pioneer Shipping of Tasmania: Whaling, Sealing, Piracy, Shipwrecks etc in Early Tasmania*, Hobart: OBM, 1938; L Norman, *Sea Wolves and Bandits: Sealing, Whaling, Smuggling, and Piracy, Wild Men of Van Diemen's Land, Bushrangers and Bandits, Wrecks and Wreckers*, Hobart: J Walch, 1946.

5 AJ Villiers, *Vanished Fleets: Ships and Men of Old Van Diemen's Land*, New York: Holt, c.1931.

6 John Bach, *A Maritime History of Australia*, Sydney: Pan Books, 1982, p. 2.

7 James Bird, *Seaport Gateways of Australia*, London: Oxford University Press, 1968, p. 234.

8 *The Tasmanian Cyclopedia*, Hobart: Service Publishing, 1931, p. 195; *Mercury*, 28 January 1943, Press cuttings SST, NS 543/185, p. 39; *Mercury*, 12 June 1952, 16 May 1962; D Dilger, 'Henry O'May (1872–1962)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2000, vol. 15, pp. 535–6.

9 *Express*, 19 March 1960, Biographical cuttings on Harry O'May, author, National Library of Australia. According to Day, 'most passengers from Britain to Australia still went by sail as late as the 1880s', David Day, *Coming South: Australia's Days of Sail*, Melbourne: Australia Post, 1998, p. 39.

the seafaring men and locals of the town'. The image of a harbour 'full of colour and romance' always remained close to O'May's heart.¹⁰

Before gaining his master's certificate O'May took command of the *Silver Crown* under permit in 1891.¹¹ He came to know the Derwent 'in all its different moods' and he 'loved every minute of it'. He once said that 'I love the river and I love Tasmania' and he named his son Robert Derwent O'May. In 1900 Harry, with his brother George, became a business partner in the ferry business and in 1903 became master of the twin hull paddle-steamer, *Kangaroo*, which was known as 'The Twins' or 'Old Double Guts'. In 1912 the O'May brothers merged with the Rosny Estates and the new company bought 668 acres between Kangaroo Bay and Lindisfarne Bay. They planned to sell the land cheaply and hoped that the increased residential population would use the ferries.¹²

In 1921 O'May took over the management of the Rosny Estates and Ferry Co. from his uncle James, but the land sales failed and forced the company into liquidation in 1926.¹³ It was taken over by the Reemere Steamship Co. Harry and George then established O'May Brothers Pty Ltd and in 1927 began a ferry service from Bellerive to Hobart. Two years later the O'Mays bought out the Reemere Co. In 1937 legislation gave the Hobart Bridge Co. Ltd 'sole right of transport across the River Derwent' and in May 1939 that company took over O'May Brothers. In January 1940 members of the Shiplovers' Society organised a special function on the SS *Rosny* to 'commemorate the long and faithful service to the community' of the O'May brothers in conducting their ferry service.¹⁴ At the function the brothers were each presented with a set of book-ends 'engraved with ornamental nautical designs'.

In retirement O'May devoted himself in various ways to maritime history and maritime bodies.¹⁵ Most of his time was spent in assisting the Shiplovers' Society of Tasmania from its foundation in 1931, as we will see, and he was a member of the Nautical Research Guild of America. He was also a life

10 *Mercury*, 28 February 1962.

11 *Tasmanian Cyclopaedia*, p. 195; *Mercury*, 28 January 1943, Press cuttings SST, NS 543/185, p. 39; *Mercury*, 12 June 1952, 28 February 1962, 16 May 1962; Dilger, 'Henry O'May (1872-1962)', pp. 535-6.

12 Dilger, 'Henry O'May (1872-1962)', pp. 535-6.

13 John Sargent, comp., *Mystery, History, and Intrigue: One Man's Account of Everyday Life and Unsolved Mysteries of Eastern Shore Settlement (1880's-1960's)*, Bellerive: John Sargent, 2006, pp. 105-20.

14 *Mercury*, 18 January 1940, Minute Book SST, NS 543/178, AOT.

15 *Mercury*, 28 January 1943, Press cuttings SST, NS 543/185, p. 39; *Mercury*, 12 June 1952, 16 May 1962; *Examiner*, 26 May 1962; R Sharman, 'The Tasmanian Historical Research Association: Notes on the Beginnings of the Association', *Tasmanian Historical Research Association Papers and Proceedings*, vol. 42, no. 4, 1995, p. 215.

member and patron of the Bellerive Regatta Association and foundation member of the Bellerive Yacht Club. A 'keen yachtsman', he derived much joy from yachting on the Derwent. O'May was the Bellerive Yacht Club representative on a sub-committee of the Nomenclature Board to consider 'the duplication and anomalies' in the nomenclature of the Tasmanian coastline and 'as affecting the Admiralty Charts in particular'.¹⁶ With WF Ferguson, O'May started the Bellerive District Dinghies competition and held races on most Saturdays.¹⁷ He became a member of the Royal Society of Tasmania in 1941. He attended the inaugural meeting of the Tasmanian Historical Research Association and was a member of the committee to draft a constitution, which was adopted in October 1951. He also participated in the establishment of the Narryna Folk Museum in 1957.

The Shiplovers' Society

Henry W Wilson, who worked for shipping firms, gained the idea of forming the Shiplovers' Society of Tasmania after reading in the *Nautical Magazine*, a report of the Shiplovers' League in London.¹⁸ Not long after, he heard Dr William Crowther advocate, in a lecture to the Royal Society of Tasmania on 'old Tasmanian shipping', the need for a maritime section of the museum and Wilson's suggestion to form a shiplovers' society in Hobart was warmly supported. Wilson later attended a meeting of the Shiplovers' Society of Victoria, the first formed in Australia in 1930, and on his return decided to form a Tasmanian branch. At a preliminary meeting in May 1931 Wilson explained the work of these other bodies and read a letter of support from 'the well-known maritime journalist and author' F C Bowen, 'the founder of the movement' in London in 1927.¹⁹ When Wilson decided to establish the Shiplovers' Society, he called first on O'May, who was already a member of the Victorian branch, for help and he gave his 'whole-hearted energy and enthusiasm'.²⁰ Edward B Bell, President of the Victorian Society, also gave advice.²¹

16 Secretary, Nomenclature Board of Tasmania to O'May, 6 July 1953, O'May Papers, NS 543/1/1, AOT; Nomenclature Board of Tasmania, Convention and Proceedings of Meetings, 24 September 1954, Sub-committee on Admiralty Charts Revision, FC5/1/2220, AOT.

17 Alison Alexander, *The Eastern Shore: A History of Clarence*, Rosny Park: Clarence City Council, 2003, p. 228.

18 Anon., 'The Founding of the Shiplovers' Society of Tasmania', *The Annual Dog Watch*, no. 1, 1943, p. 34; F McLoughlin, *The Shiplovers' Society of Tasmania*, essay written for the society, O2/D/15, O'May papers, Maritime Museum of Tasmania.

19 Minutes of the SST, 18 May 1931, NS 543/178, AOT.

20 Annual Report of the SST 1942-43, NS 543/183, AOT; Minutes of the SST, 18 May 1931, NS 543/178, AOT; *Mercury*, 15 June 1931, Press cuttings of the SST, NS543/185, p. 2, AOT.

21 Minutes of the SST, 25 June 1931, NS 543/178, AOT.

At meetings in June and July 1931, the society decided on three aims. The first was 'to foster and promote an interest in the history and theory of ships and the sea'. This aim was furthered by giving numerous lectures and talks to schools, societies, and clubs on Tasmania's early maritime history and her 'shipbuilding pioneers'. The second aim was 'to assist in the study, collection, and preservation of maritime records, picture books, relics and models'. Here the society was strikingly successful and received so many donations that it quickly ran out of space to house them. The third aim was 'to promote periodical meetings of those interested in the above subjects'.²² Many of these were held in the first thirty years of its existence and talks, lantern slides, musical items and chauties kept members entertained. More broadly, the society sought 'to encourage in Australian minds and in the hearts of Australian youth the love of the sea and its famous old-time traditions'.²³ By June 1951 the society had 207 members and an average attendance at meetings of 75.²⁴

In all the society's activities O'May was pivotal. In July 1940 O'May was made a life member of the Shiplovers' Society in recognition of his good work.²⁵ From 1942 to 1944 O'May was elected President and members appreciated his 'energy and capable leadership' during the war.²⁶ In January 1943 a *Mercury* feature article described O'May as 'probably the best known figure on the Hobart waterfront'.²⁷ His wide knowledge of Hobart's early port history had been 'acknowledged by authors of sea stories and Australian shiplovers' societies'. In about February 1950 the then Secretary of the Shiplovers' Society wrote that no member had done more for 'the welfare of the Society' than O'May and it was 'largely due to his efforts that it occupies the position it does today'.²⁸ O'May devoted 'all his spare time' to 'searching out old and reliable information from old newspaper files, Government Records, and all sorts of sources'. His research had been of 'inestimable value to the Society, individual members and to other persons in search of information for he was at all times ready and willing to supply anything which he might have ... with pleasure' from his many volumes. He had always been 'the mainstay of the Society'.²⁹

22 Shiplovers' Society of Tasmania, *The History of the Society June 1931 to June 1951: 21 Years of Operation*, Hobart: The Society, 1951, p. 7. Notes for this history in the same format as the printed version appear in O'May's handwriting, O'May Papers, NS 543/60, AOT.

23 *The Trident*, August 1942, p. 781, Minutes of the SST, 19 August 1942, NS 543/179, AOT.

24 SST, *The History of the Society June 1931 to June 1951*, p. 10.

25 Annual Report of the SST 1940–41, NS 543/183, AOT; Minutes of the SST, 17 July 1940, NS 543/178, AOT.

26 Annual Report of the SST 1943–44, NS 543/183, AOT.

27 *Mercury*, 28 January 1943, Press cuttings, SST, NS 543/185, p. 39, AOT.

28 'Shiplovers' Society of Tasmania' by D Davidson, c February 1950, Correspondence File 1949–1950 NS 543/182, AOT.

29 'Shiplovers' Society of Tasmania' by D Davidson, c February 1950, Correspondence

Models

One of O'May's hobbies was to build models of the ferry boats owned by his company and built locally. These included the *Bluejacket*, the *Success*, the *Silver Crown* and the *Kangaroo*.³⁰ In October 1932 the society agreed to O'May's suggestion that a model club be formed 'to make Models of the vessels sailing from Tasmanian Ports'.³¹ The society would provide the materials and one of the members Lionel Rogers would provide expert instruction. The models would become the property of the society and be placed in the museum. At the Christmas gathering of December 1937 members exhibited models and O'May 'lucidly explained' to the audience of some 200 members and visitors 'all the important details and history of each model'.³² At the Antique and Historical Exhibition held by the Red Cross in 1945 O'May performed a similar service.³³ After Shiplovers' Clubs were formed at Bowen Road and Bellerive State Schools in 1944, O' May proposed that prizes of 10s 6d and 5s be offered for the best models.³⁴

The most ambitious exhibition was the Nautical Exhibition of 3–10 February 1936. As chairman of the Nautical Exhibition Committee, O'May hoped the venture would raise funds for the publication of 'a comprehensive history of the maritime achievement of Tasmania'.³⁵ He wrote letters to numerous individuals, organisations and companies to secure their support and involvement. Opened by the society's patron, Governor Ernest Clark, the exhibition displayed a large collection of 'historic ship models, pictures, and ... relics of sea-faring'. The exhibition was designed to be 'a tribute to the Tasmanian ships and men who had their business on great waters'. Affectionately remembering 'the great days of sail', the exhibition presented for those interested in tall ships 'a pictorial record of bygone years'. In all, the exhibition displayed 134 models, 193 pictures and photographs, 118 relics and records, 45 articles associated with sea-faring and 16 special exhibits loaned by shipping companies. Attracting 2650 visitors, the exhibition raised £90 18s 9d for the publication fund.³⁶

File 1949–1950 NS 543/182, AOT.

30 *Mercury*, 28 January 1943, Press cuttings, SST, NS 543/185, p. 39, AOT.

31 Minutes of the SST, 11 October 1932, NS 543/178, AOT.

32 Annual Report of the SST 1937–38, NS 543/183, AOT.

33 Press cuttings of SST, NS 543/185, p. 47, AOT.

34 Minutes of the SST, 31 July 1944, NS 543/179, AOT.

35 Annual Report of the SST 1935–36, NS 543/183, AOT; SST, Tasmanian Nautical Exhibition 3–10 February 1936; File with letters by O'May, O2/D/15, Maritime Museum of Tasmania.

36 Annual Report of the SST 1935–36, NS 543/183, AOT.

O'May was especially keen that the history be written and on 12 June 1936 he led a deputation to the Chief Secretary Tom D'Alton.³⁷ O'May pointed out that other ports around the world had their histories written and he had little doubt that 'when the present generation passes there will be no one interested enough and all the knowledge now available will be lost'. Anticipating government help, the society commissioned 'the well-known author' Will Lawson to write the history.³⁸ Lawson had written two shipping histories, *Steam in the Southern Pacific* and *Pacific Steamers* and some novels. He would be assisted by J E Philp, who had made 'a study of Tasmanian nautical history', and O'May.

O'May provided space at his home, gave Lawson access to his library and records, and provided photographs for the book.³⁹ Lawson was 'surprised at the wealth of material' that O'May put at his disposal.⁴⁰ Lawson wrote the book too quickly and O'May and the others who vetted his manuscript identified many errors. After a very prolonged gestation period, fruitless negotiations with publishers, and deteriorating relations with Lawson, the society finally persuaded Georgian House to publish the book as *Blue Gum Clippers and Whale Ships of Tasmania*.⁴¹ The book received a positive reaction from most reviewers and 'attracted favourable comment from many mariners in Australia and New Zealand'.⁴² By July 1952 1301 of the 1451 bound copies of Lawson's book had been sold.⁴³

Donations

As the Nautical Exhibition demonstrated, the society quickly accumulated numerous pictures, photographs, nautical books, relics and records, which were displayed in the nautical section of the Tasmanian Museum and at the society's room at Westella.⁴⁴ The society regularly received donations of charts, pictures, log books, ornaments, figureheads, flags, models, poles, swords, pistols, and telescopes.⁴⁵ In 1937 Sir Ernest Clark gave the society a box made from the convict ship *George III*.⁴⁶ Two years later O'May donated O'May Brothers' house flag, which was flown on the last voyage of their ferry steamer *Derwent*

37 Minutes of the SST, NS 543/181, p. 71.

38 *Mercury*, 4 February 1937, NS 543/181, pp. 77-78, AOT.

39 Minutes of SST, 19 April 1937, NS 543/181, p. 79, AOT.

40 Annual Report of SST 1936-37, NS 543/183, AOT.

41 Harris to O'May, 6 December 1949, O'May papers, NS 543/1/1, AOT.

42 For reviews see *Mercury*, 28 December 1949, Press cuttings SST, NS 543/185, p. 76, AOT; *Mercury*, 13 July 1950, Minutes of the SST, NS 543/180, AOT; Minutes of the SST, NS 543/181, pp. 106-7, 111, AOT.

43 *Mercury*, 17 July 1952, Minutes of the SST, NS 543/180, AOT.

44 Annual Report of the SST 1934-35, NS 543/183, AOT.

45 Minutes of the SST, 26 February, 13 May 1936, NS 543/178, AOT.

46 Minutes of the SST, 21 December 1937, NS 543/178, AOT.

on 30 April 1939.⁴⁷ O'May noted that the Tasmanian society was different from shiplovers' societies elsewhere. They did not seek 'merely to obtain details of a few of the old clipper type, but to collect all the history, logs, records and books of Tasmanian vessels' and place them in the museum.⁴⁸

As the donations grew, O'May urged the society to lobby for more space at the museum.⁴⁹ The museum director Dr Pearson was sympathetic and did his best to allocate more room, but said more permanent arrangements rested on government approval for an extension to the museum building.⁵⁰ In 1947 O'May played a key role in persuading Pearson to find space to display – not store – Alexander McGregor's 'valuable and unique collection of whaling implements' or risk it being lost to the state.⁵¹ The solution to the society's space problems did not come until December 1974 when the maritime museum was opened in the old stone building behind St George's Church, known as the Mariner's Church, in Battery Point.⁵² This was one the precursors to the current Maritime Museum of Tasmania.

Commemoration

O'May was involved in various aspects of commemorating Tasmania's maritime past. In 1932 he initiated the collection of old photographs of ships, masters and sailors after hearing that many had been burnt.⁵³ By mid-1935 a sizable number of photographs had been collected to form 'a valuable and unique record'.⁵⁴ His idea to present framed photographs of the early navigators' ships, namely the *Heemskerck*, *Lady Nelson*, and *Endeavour*, to the Hobart High School was carried out on 7 March 1940.⁵⁵ At the request of the headmaster of Albuera Street School, Gollan Lewis, O'May arranged the presentation of framed photographs of pioneering Hobart shipbuilders – John Watson, John Ross, John McGregor, and James MacKay – to place in each of the school's four rooms.⁵⁶

In 1936 O'May was appointed to the Centenary Regatta 1938 Committee to deal with marine issues over the four-day festival.⁵⁷ In November 1942

47 Minutes of the SST, 10 May 1939, NS 543/178, AOT.

48 *Mercury*, 21 August 1942, Minutes of SST, NS 543/179, AOT.

49 Minutes of the SST, 13 September 1938, NS 543/178, AOT.

50 Minutes of the SST, 12 December 1938, 24 October 1939, NS 543/178, AOT; *Mercury*, 6 November 1946, Press cuttings SST, NS 543/185, p. 57, AOT.

51 Minutes of the SST, 12 February, 9 April, 1 December 1947, NS 543/179, AOT.

52 J Miller, 'Maritime Museum of Tasmania', *The Dog Watch*, no. 34, 1977, pp. 34-5.

53 Minutes of the SST, 20 September 1932, NS 543/178, AOT; *Mercury*, 20 December 1932, Press cuttings of the SST, NS 543/185, p. 7, AOT.

54 Annual Report of the SST 1934-35, NS 543/183, AOT.

55 Minutes of the SST, 28 March 1940, NS 543/178, AOT.

56 Minutes of the SST, 1, 9 March 1949, NS 543/179, AOT.

57 Thirkell to O'May, 9 October 1936, O'May scrapbook, O3/letter H, University of

the Shiplovers' Society held the first function to commemorate the tercentenary of the discovery of Tasmania by the Dutch explorer Abel Tasman.⁵⁸ Using a chart, O'May gave the large audience 'a very comprehensive and well thought out talk' on Tasman's deeds as well as outlining 'the early history and incidents in the nautical careers of navigators in Australia'. He illustrated his talk with many lantern slides. With Lionel Rogers, O'May organised a collection of nautical books to be displayed during Book Week in August 1947.⁵⁹ Finally, O'May was the official representative of the Shiplovers' Society on the 150th Anniversary Celebrations Exhibition Committee. He was a member of the Art, Antique and Historical Exhibitions Committee and was charged with organising a shiplovers' section.⁶⁰

Memorials

The society was alert to the possibilities of securing and preserving 'relics'.⁶¹ In 1936 O'May arranged with the City Engineer Taylor for an anchor from the American Whaler *Whistler* – given to the society by the Marine Board of King Island – to be placed on the Morrison Street Island on the Hobart waterfront, where it attracted the attention of passers by. In 1938 O'May gained the support of the Clarence Municipal Council to erect a memorial to John Petchey, sometimes written Petchy, 'one of the pioneers of Bellerive and the eastern shore', on the site of Johnston's shipbuilding yard at Bellerive Esplanade.⁶² The memorial was unveiled on 16 October to mark the centenary of launching the 400-ton barque *Sir George Arthur*, which had been built for Petchey and was the first Tasmanian-built ship to take colonial produce to England. At the unveiling ceremony no one mentioned that Petchey, a labourer, had been transported for fourteen years in 1810 for receiving stolen goods.⁶³ He was 'a resourceful if not always a scrupulous individual', but was 'typical of the vigorous entrepreneurs who

Tasmania Archives.

58 Minutes of the SST, 19 November 1942, NS 543/179, AOT.

59 Annual Report of the SST 1947–48, NS 543/183, AOT.

60 Davidson to The Organiser, 150th Anniversary Celebrations, 26 October 1952, Correspondence File 1952–53, NS 543/182, AOT; Minutes of the SST, 13 August 1952, NS 543/180, AOT; in the end lack of interest meant the Historical and Antique Exhibition did not go ahead, Sesquicentenary Celebrations Report for the twelve months to 30 June 1954, pp. 4–5, CB 17/2, AOT.

61 'Shiplovers' Society of Tasmania' by D Davidson, c February 1950, Correspondence File 1949–1950 NS 543/182, AOT; Minutes of the SST, 27 April, 29 June 1936, NS 543/178, AOT; Sargent, *Mystery, History, and Intrigue*, pp. 69–72.

62 *Mercury*, 14 October, 17 October 1938, Press Cuttings SST, NS543/185, pp. 21, 23, AOT.

63 WE Goodhand, 'John Petchy (d. 1850)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1967, vol. 2, p. 525.

laid the firm economic foundations' of Van Diemen's Land. The council also agreed to change the name of Britannia Street back to Petchey Street.

But not all of O'May's ideas came to fruition. In 1941 the Marine Board declined to name its new harbour launch 'James Kelly' or 'Captain Kelly', 'the most colourful of our seafaring pioneers', who was once Port Officer and Pilot on the Derwent.⁶⁴ When he heard of plans to reclaim Constitution Dock and turn it into a car park in February 1950, O'May led the society's protest against the proposal. The dock had been opened for the use of small ships one hundred years ago and should continue to do so, as a memorial to that type of ship, he argued.⁶⁵ The protest succeeded and Constitution Dock today remains the welcome resting place for those entrants who cross the finishing line in the Sydney-Hobart Yacht Race.

Lectures and Articles

From about 1935 O'May began to spend much time at the Public Library 'searching old volumes for records of early shipping and regattas'.⁶⁶ This research supplied him with plenty of material for lectures, articles and books. The society's annual report of 1941–42 referred to his 'very valuable lectures', which 'largely contributed to the success of our meetings'.⁶⁷ Space precludes discussion of O'May's many talks to the society, but we can consider a few here.

One of the first fruits of his research was a lecture entitled 'Seafaring and Shipbuilding Pioneers of Tasmania' given to the society in September 1935. He spoke of vessels, which in 1935 would not have been certified as seaworthy. Yet they were 'sailed anywhere, under the command of men who could not read or write, but who took them round the world and put Tasmania in the position she occupies today'.⁶⁸ Ships like the *Emma Kemp* and the *Royal William* sailed to New Zealand, the South Sea Islands, and Rio de Janeiro. Other ships of small tonnage took to the Californian gold diggings frame houses and shipments of potatoes and onions to sell at £70 a ton. O'May recalled the feats of men like Thomas Florence, shipwright of one of the early Tasmanian schooners the *Liberty*, launched from Kangaroo Point in 1822 and John Watson, who built the *Flying Childers* in 1846. Two famous barques were the *Free Trader*, which once took a cargo worth £160,000 to England – incredible if true – and the

64 O'May to Hobart Marine Board, 12 May 1941, NS 543/185, p. 139, AOT; A Hudspeth and L Scripps, *Capital Port: A History of the Marine Board of Hobart 1858–1997*, Hobart: Hobart Ports Corporation, 2000, p. 223.

65 Minutes of the SST, 22 February 1950, NS 543/180, AOT.

66 *Mercury*, 28 January 1943, Press cuttings Shiplovers' Society, NS 543/185, p. 39.

67 Annual Report of the SST 1941–42, NS 543/183, AOT.

68 *Mercury*, 12 September 1935, Minutes of the SST, 11 September 1935, NS 543/178, AOT.

Victoria, which brought the first German settlers to live at Bismarck in 1870. In a later lecture O'May attributed the improvement in the type of vessel built to the encouragement given by Sir John Franklin.⁶⁹ His inauguration of the Hobart Town Regatta in 1838 'created a spirit of rivalry, which resulted in the building of a better class of boat on the Derwent'. By the late 1860s some fifty vessels had been built on the Derwent and gained such a 'reputation' for quality that they were sold throughout Australia, New Zealand and Fiji. Other lectures dealt with absorbing subjects such as the early hulks, whaling ships, barges and steamers.⁷⁰

O'May was keenly interested in shipwrecks and in 1939 he spoke about the wreck of the *Hope* near Betsy Island in 1827 and the *Britomart* on Preservation Island in 1829.⁷¹ He dismissed the popular idea that these ships were carrying gold, but did seem to believe that the sealers on Preservation Island 'had lured the *Britomart* to her doom and that her crew had been murdered', even though the crew and their ship were never found. Another subject that captured O'May's attention was the vessels of the East Coast Steam Navigation Company and the Tasmanian Steam Navigation Company.⁷² He noted that the Shiplovers' Society had an oil painting of the *Tasmania*, the first vessel built for the latter company.⁷³ This ship worked the Bass Strait trade and then was converted to a collier before being broken up in 1904. The Tasmanian Steam Navigation Company was taken over by the Union Steam Ship Company in 1902. According to the newspaper report of O'May's lecture, the company could have continued operating, but the shareholders were too interested in sailing craft and did not take the opportunity to develop the Bluff-Melbourne-Hobart trade. If the newspaper report was correct, O'May's reliability can be questioned here. Recent research by Henning shows that the Tasmanian Steam Navigation Company was in 'financial difficulty' in the mid-1880s and thereafter 'increasing competition' from both Union Shipping and Huddart Parker and 'a worsening of maritime industrial relations' contributed to the Company's takeover by Union Shipping in 1891.⁷⁴

69 *Mercury*, 16 June 1938, Minutes of the SST, 15 June 1938, NS 543/178, AOT, *Mercury*, 24 May 1945, Minutes of the SST, NS543/179, AOT.

70 Minutes of the SST, 26 March, 21 May 1941, 17 November 1948, 9 March 1949, NS 543/179, AOT.

71 *Mercury*, 11 May 1939, Minutes of the SSL, 10 May 1939, NS 543/178, AOT.

72 Minutes of the SST, 11 October, 8 November 1939, NS 543/178, AOT.

73 *Mercury*, 9 November 1939, Press cuttings of the SST, NS 543/185, p. 25.

74 GR Henning, 'The Demise of the Tasmanian Steam Navigation Company, 1888/1891', *Australian Economic History Review*, vol. 32, no. 2, 1992, pp. 114, 121, 127; see also G McLean, *The Southern Octopus: The Rise of a Shipping Empire*, Wellington: New Zealand Ship and Marine Society and the Wellington Harbour Board Maritime Museum, 1990.

O'May was also interested in the social history of the Derwent. In 1938 he lectured on 'The early aquatic events on the River Derwent'.⁷⁵ He noted that in the early days of yachting 'many lives were lost' due to the yachts being made of unsuitable material such as stringy bark. He related the first trans-Derwent swimming race for girls held in June 1824 between 'Carrotty Kit' and 'Fat Caroline', who competed for rum and tobacco. He was fascinated by the early regattas held at Hobart and on its hundredth anniversary spoke about the 1841 regatta.⁷⁶ He spoke about the history of Kangaroo Point and the port of Hobart as well as sealers and Antarctic explorers.⁷⁷

In addition he gave talks on the history of shipping to other groups. In 1938 he spoke to Hobart Rotary.⁷⁸ In the 1940s he spoke to the Royal Society and Hobart Rotary.⁷⁹ In the 1950s he related aspects of maritime history to the Hobart Walking Club and the Adult Education Board.⁸⁰ In the 1940s and 1950s he also gave many radio talks to 7ZR and 7NT.⁸¹ Further afield O'May lectured in Adelaide, Melbourne and Launceston in 1936.⁸² As well as his talks, O'May regularly contributed to the Shiplovers' Society of Victoria's publication *The Annual Dog Watch* from its first issue in 1943. He chalked up seventeen short articles by 1961, which covered much the same ground as his lectures.⁸³

Books

O'May spent much time compiling book length manuscripts replete with stories of ships, men and events. In 1951 the manuscript of O'May's book *Wrecks in Tasmanian Waters*, which originated in a talk to the

75 *Mercury*, 25 February 1938, Minutes of the SST, 23 February 1938, NS 543/178, AOT.

76 Minutes of the SST, 12 February 1941, NS 543/179, AOT.

77 Minutes of the SST, 11 May 1949, NS 543/179, 12 April 1950, 28 May 1952, NS 543/180

78 *Mercury*, 3 February 1938, NS 543/185, p. 19, AOT.

79 *Mercury*, 12 March 1940, Press cuttings, SST, NS 543/185, p. 29, AOT; *Mercury*, 29 June 1945, Press cuttings, SST, NS 543/185, p. 49, AOT; H O'May, 'Blue Gums', ABC Radio 7ZL and 7NT talk, 8 October 1948, Correspondence File 1948-49, SST, NS 543/182, AOT.

80 Williams to O'May, 31 August 1953, Brooks to O'May, 25 September 1959, O'May papers, NS 543/1/1, AOT.

81 Transcripts of some of O'May's radio talks can be found in O2/D/15, O'May papers, Maritime Museum of Tasmania.

82 Annual Report of the SST 1935-36, O'May Papers, NS 543/183.

83 See *The Annual Dog Watch*, no. 1, 1943, pp. 40-41, 64, no. 2, 1944, pp. 103-4, no. 3, 1945, pp. 103-4, no. 5, 1948, pp. 106-7, no. 6, 1949, pp. 101-2, no. 8, 1951, pp. 60-63, no. 9, 1952, pp. 54-8, no. 10, 1953, pp. 24, 83-88, no. 11, 1954, pp. 43-44, 46, no. 12, 1955, pp. 129-33, no. 13, 1956, pp. 124-26, no. 14, 1957, pp. 68-9, no. 15, 1958, pp. 50-51, no. 16, 1959, pp. 134-36, no. 17, 1960, pp. 122-23, no. 18, 1961, pp. 112-13.

society in November 1941, was submitted to the Tourist Department for an assessment.⁸⁴ WD Nolan presumed that this year-by-year account of shipwrecks was factually accurate and thought it 'competently compiled'.⁸⁵ He considered it 'an important historical document', but predicted its appeal would be 'limited' to Tasmanian historians, antiquarians, and seafarers. He suggested the work could be improved by adding an introductory chapter giving an outline of Tasmania's history and geography and by incorporating notes on Tasmanian lighthouses. Nolan rightly described the book as 'a work of reference, lacking "story" value and continuity of narrative'. It was 'difficult' to read it as a book, but O'May noted that he preferred it to be 'a record of the actual wrecks with no frills or stuffing'. Nolan thought the published work would be a 'long term' financial success with 'consistent' sales for many years, which would be attractive to a government but not to a commercial publisher. He concluded that the book should be published because of 'the prime importance of preserving this valuable record of Tasmania's maritime history'.⁸⁶

In June 1952 a *Mercury* reporter gave publicity to the work. Calling O'May 'the State's foremost authority on Tasmania's maritime history', the reporter noted that he was seeking government support to publish the manuscript, which took fifteen years of 'painstaking research to complete'.⁸⁷ O'May checked the details of over 400 wrecks with 'meticulous care' and, if there was any doubt, left the information out. Although O'May modestly admitted that 'he was no scholar, and had no University education', the reporter described his writing as 'clear, concise and simple', which was 'a hallmark of all men of the sea', and found the book 'absorbing reading'. O'May's study was 'lined with photographs and drawings of old sailing ships'. The reporter supported publication of the book, which would be bought by 'sea-minded persons, adventure lovers and historians'.

After receiving 'representations' from the Shiplovers' Society, in February 1953 the Chief Secretary Alfred White agreed to provide £1000 towards the publication of 2000 copies of O'May's history of shipwrecks.⁸⁸ The book would be printed by the Government Printer, the Treasury would be reimbursed from profits and any other funds raised would be allocated to the Museum for 'developing the shiplovers' section'. It seems that on

84 Minutes of the SST, 11 November 1941, NS 543/179, AOT.

85 Notes by WD Nolan, Tourist Department, on the manuscript of 'Wrecks in Tasmanian Waters' with annotations by O'May 1951, O'May Papers, NS 543/1/1.

86 Notes by WD Nolan, Tourist Department, on the manuscript of 'Wrecks in Tasmanian Waters' with annotations by O'May 1951, O'May Papers, NS 543/1/1.

87 *Mercury*, 12 June 1952.

88 Minutes of the SST, 24 November 1952, NS 543/180, AOT; White to Davidson, 20 February 1953, Correspondence File 1952-53, NS 543/182, AOT.

O'May's prompting White sent the manuscript to Melbourne University Press, but that press declined to publish because the manuscript was 'a chronological catalogue and not a narrative story'.⁸⁹ This did not stop America's *Nautical Research Journal* from praising O'May's inclusion of 'considerable local colour', which gave 'life and meaning to what otherwise might have been a dull statistical review'.⁹⁰

O'May's second book was called *Wooden Hookers of Hobart Town and Whalers Out of Van Diemen's Land*. A *Mercury* staff writer described the book as 'a fascinating and valuable compilation' of sailing ships and whaling ships from early settlement.⁹¹ The book should appeal to shiplovers and anyone interested in Tasmania's early history. O'May listed 'an amazing number of vessels' and 'a vast amount of information' on the ships and 'the people who sailed in or were otherwise associated with them'.

In 1959 O'May published his last book *Hobart River Craft and Sealers of Bass Strait*.⁹² The first part dealt with small ships, both sail and steam, which had been built in and around the Derwent River. As much of the book was based on O'May's 'own recollections' and he knew well many of the men who sailed these boats, one reviewer thought it had 'a more intimate atmosphere' than his previous books and lost 'nothing because of that'.⁹³ Another reviewer marvelled at the 'vast research and personal knowledge' that enabled O'May to record 'some of the remarkable stories of early Tasmanian seafaring'.⁹⁴ But 'engrossing' as was his account of boat-building, sailing and steaming, this reviewer felt that it had the weakness of his other work: 'so much is crammed into the story that individual incidents which could make outstanding books in their own account are measured in paragraphs and not chapters'. That said, O'May's redeeming feature was that he left 'plenty of scope for imagination to play'. O'May's legacy lived on after his death when his nephew Dave O'May used much of the information he had collected to write his own book *Song of Steam*.⁹⁵

90 *Nautical Research Journal*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1956, p. 25.

91 *Mercury*, 29 November 1957.

92 H O'May, *Hobart River Craft and Sealers of Bass Strait*, Hobart: Government Printer, 1959.

93 Anon., Review of *Hobart River Craft and Sealers of Bass Strait*, by Captain Harry O'May, *The Annual Dog Watch*, no. 17, 1960, p. 143.

94 Anon., Review of *Hobart River Craft and Sealers of Bass Strait*, by Captain Harry O'May, *Saturday Evening Mercury*, 18 July 1959, p. 8.

95 DG O'May, *Song of Steam: A Chronicle of Paddle Steamers and Screw Steamers in Tasmanian Waters 1832-1939*, Hobart: Government Printer, 1976, Acknowledgements.

Conclusion

One way to assess the value of an historian's work is to examine the sources he used to write his books or articles. From a perusal of his old notebooks and exercise books, it is hard to say with certainty what sources O'May used for particular parts of his own publications. Anecdotally, local historians remember him in the archives burying himself in the primary sources, but he did not include a bibliography in his books and did not use footnotes in his books or articles. His notes on particular topics in the Archives Office of Tasmania refer to log books of ships and newspapers, but there is no system to his notetaking and no consistent indication of where he found his information.⁹⁶ From time to time he mentions a source in the text. For example, in *Hobart River Craft* he refers to the *Hobart Town Courier's* 'very vague description' of the second steam driven vessel on the Derwent the *Governor Arthur*.⁹⁷ But he did not discuss in depth the 'reliability and representativeness' of his sources and much of the time he appears to have related stories he had been told or heard over his long associations with seafaring men and shipbuilders.⁹⁸ He did not systematically comb every possible newspaper from start to finish or exploit archival records as fully as he should have.⁹⁹

Many names were mentioned in passing by O'May and so he identified individuals who otherwise might have been lost to history. At times he went a little further to tell stories of various identities or key individuals.¹⁰⁰ About as numerous as the individuals were the number of ships mentioned by O'May. Here he often went into much more detail about the first kind of ship built or sailed in Tasmanian waters or some of the more famous ships. Collectively, O'May added greatly to the sum total of knowledge of Tasmania's maritime past, but he has been superseded in some respects by recent work.¹⁰¹ As there are legitimate doubts about the reliability of the stories he relates in his books, they should be seen as starting points for research, not the last word on their subjects.

When Harry O'May died in 1962 his funeral was attended by representatives of business, shipping and aquatic organisations. The Reverend

96 For example see Notes on Steamers, NS 543/105, 109, AOT.

97 O'May, *Hobart River Craft*, pp. 61-2.

98 O Hasslöf, 'Sources of Maritime History and Methods of Research', *Mariner's Mirror*, vol. 52, no. 2, 1966, p. 127

99 G Broxam and M Nash, *Tasmanian Shipwrecks. Volume One 1797-1899*, Woden: Navarine Publishing, 1998, p. x.

100 O'May, *Hobart River Craft*, pp. 55-60.

101 See Broxam and Nash, *Tasmanian Shipwrecks*, and M. Nash, *The Bay Whalers: Tasmania's Shore-Based Whaling Industry*, Woden: Navarine Publishing, 2003; see also Michael Roe, *An Imperial Disaster: The Wreck of George III*, Sandy Bay: Blubber Head Press, 2006.

TA Cloudsdale described O'May as 'a man greatly loved and respected by all who knew the Australian seas and beyond'.¹⁰² Whatever the deficiencies of his published work, there is no doubt that Cloudsdale was right to say that O'May had 'enriched the community and the State by his research and writings' and, we can add, his efforts to preserve the objects of our maritime past.

¹⁰² *Mercury*, 18 May 1962.