

# **The masters of the eighteenth-century British Navy and the production of hydrographic knowledge**

Lena Moser  
University of Tübingen  
[lena.moser@uni-tuebingen.de](mailto:lena.moser@uni-tuebingen.de)

The masters (or sailing masters) of the British Royal Navy – that is, the navigating officers and nautical specialists of that institution in the long eighteenth century (c. 1660–1830) – have usually been overlooked in the context of the history of science. In older scholarship, they are often portrayed as craftsmen whose knowledge extended only to practical seamanship and the barest minimum of navigation; very rarely have they been credited with scientific zeal or achievements in the fields of hydrography and cartography.

In this paper, which draws on my research towards a doctoral thesis which I am planning to complete in about a year's time, I will attempt to demonstrate that, in stark contrast to this traditional conception of the masters' role, they did in fact take a very active part in Britain's project of 'measuring the world'. Within the British seafaring community, it was the masters who gathered the bulk of hydrographic material – in the shape of thousands of logs, remark books, sailing directions, views and, of course, charts – and made it available to the Admiralty, the Hydrographic Office, Trinity House, the Royal Society, and also to the public. While not claiming that all masters were scientifically inclined, I will show that many of them made a significant contribution – both in terms of quality and quantity – to the production and dissemination of hydrographic knowledge in a multitude of ways: masters conducted their own research, assisted in training the next generation of practitioners, published the results of their work widely and engaged in and formed their own learned networks. In this, I will use as examples famous masters such as James Cook as well as those who have not hitherto come to the historian's attention.