

**NINETY PERCENT  
OF EVERYTHING**



**INSIDE SHIPPING,**  
THE INVISIBLE INDUSTRY THAT PUTS CLOTHES ON  
YOUR BACK, GAS IN YOUR CAR, FOOD ON YOUR PLATE

**ROSE GEORGE**  
AUTHOR OF *THE BIG NECESSITY*

## INTRODUCTION

FRIDAY. NO SENSIBLE SAILOR GOES TO SEA ON THE DAY OF THE Crucifixion or the journey will be followed by ill-will and malice. So here I am on a Friday in June, looking up at a giant ship that will carry me from this southern English port of Felixstowe to Singapore, for five weeks and 9,288 nautical miles through the pillars of Hercules, pirate waters, and weather. I stop at the bottom of the ship's gangway, waiting for an escort and stilled and awed by the immensity of this thing, much of her the color of a summer-day sky, so blue; her bottom is painted dull red, her name—*Maersk Kendal*—written large on her side.

There is such busyness around me. Everything in a modern container port is enormous, overwhelming, crushing. *Kendal*, of course, but also the thundering trucks, the giant boxes in many colors, the massive gantry cranes that straddle the quay, reaching up ten stories and over to ships that stretch three football pitches in length. There are hardly any humans to be seen. When the journalist Henry Mayhew visited London's docks in 1849, he found

“decayed and bankrupt master butchers, master bakers, publicans, grocers, old soldiers, old sailors, Polish refugees, broken-down gentlemen, discharged lawyers’ clerks, suspended Government clerks, almsmen, pensioners, servants, thieves.” They have long since gone. This is a Terminator terminal, a place where humans are hidden in crane or truck cabs, where everything is clamorous machines.

It took me three train journeys to reach Felixstowe from my northern English home. On one train, where no seats were to be had, I swayed in the vestibule with two men wearing the uniform of a rail freight company. I’m about to leave on a freighter, I said, but a ship. They looked bewildered. A ship? they said. “Why on earth do you want to go to sea?”

Why on earth.

I am an islander who has never been maritime. I don’t sail or dive. I swim, although not in terrifying oceans. But standing here in the noise and industry, looking up almost two hundred feet—higher than Niagara Falls—to the top of *Kendal*, I feel the giddiness of a Christmas morning child. Some of this is the rush of escape, for which I had reasons. Some is the pull of the sea. And some comes from the knowledge that I am about to embark to a place and space that is usually off-limits and hidden. The public is not allowed on a ship like this, nor even on the dock. There are no ordinary citizens to witness the workings of an industry that is one of the most fundamental to their daily existence. These ships and boxes belong to a business that feeds, clothes, warms, and supplies us. They have fueled if not created globalization. They are the reason behind your cheap T-shirt and reasonably priced television. But who looks behind a television now and sees the ship that brought it? Who cares about the men who steered your breakfast cereal through winter storms? How ironic that the more ships have grown in size and consequence, the less space they take up in our imagination.

The Maritime Foundation, a charity that promotes seafarer matters, recently made a video called *Unreported Ocean*. It asked the residents of Southampton, a port city in England, how many goods are transported by sea. The answers were varied but uniformly wrong. They all had the interrogative upswing of the unsure.

“Thirty-five percent?”

“Not a lot?”

The answer is, nearly everything. Sometimes on trains I play a numbers game. A woman listening to headphones: 8. A man reading a book: 15. The child in the stroller: at least 4 including the stroller. The game is to reckon how many of our clothes and possessions and food products have been transported by ship. The beads around the woman’s neck; the man’s iPhone and Japanese-made headphones. Her Sri Lanka-made skirt and blouse; his printed-in-China book. I can always go wider, deeper, and in any direction. The fabric of the seats. The rolling stock. The fuel powering the train. The conductor’s uniform; the coffee in my cup; the fruit in my bag. Definitely the fruit, so frequently shipped in refrigerated containers that it has been given its own temperature. Two degrees Celsius is “chill” but 13 degrees is “banana.”

Trade carried by sea has grown fourfold since 1970 and is still growing. In 2011, the 360 commercial ports of the United States took in international goods worth \$1.73 trillion, or eighty times the value of all U.S. trade in 1960. There are more than one hundred thousand ships at sea carrying all the solids, liquids, and gases that we need to live. Only six thousand are container vessels like *Kendal*, but they make up for this small proportion by their dizzying capacity. The biggest container ship can carry fifteen thousand boxes. It can hold 746 million bananas, one for every European on one ship. If the containers of Maersk alone were lined up, they would stretch eleven thousand miles or nearly halfway around the planet. If they were stacked instead, they would be fifteen hundred miles high,

7,530 Eiffel Towers. If *Kendal* discharged her containers onto trucks, the line of traffic would be sixty miles long.

Trade has always traveled and the world has always traded. Ours, though, is the era of extreme interdependence. Hardly any nation is now self-sufficient. In 2011, the United Kingdom shipped in half of its gas. The United States relies on ships to bring in two-thirds of its oil supplies. Every day, thirty-eight million tons of crude oil sets off by sea somewhere, although you may not notice it. As in Los Angeles, New York, and other port cities, London has moved its working docks out of the city, away from residents. Ships are bigger now and need deeper harbors, so they call at Newark or Tilbury or Felixstowe, not Liverpool or South Street. Security concerns have hidden ports further, behind barbed wire and badge wearing and KEEP OUT signs. To reach this quayside in Felixstowe, I had to pass through several gatekeepers and passport controllers, and past radiation-detecting gates often triggered by naturally radioactive cargo such as cat litter and broccoli.

It is harder to wander into the world of shipping, now, so people don't. The chief of the British navy—who is known as the First Sea Lord, although the army chief is not a Land Lord—says we suffer from “sea blindness” now. We travel by cheap flights, not ocean liners. The sea is a distance to be flown over, a downward backdrop between takeoff and landing, a blue expanse that soothes on the moving flight map as the plane jerks over it. It is for leisure and beaches and fish and chips, not for use or work. Perhaps we believe that everything travels by air, or magically and instantaneously like information (which is actually anchored by cables on the seabed), not by hefty ships that travel more slowly than senior citizens drive.

You could trace the flight of the ocean from our consciousness in the pages of great newspapers. Fifty years ago, the shipping news was news. Cargo departures were reported daily. Now the most necessary business on the planet has mostly been shunted into the

pages of specialized trade papers such as *Lloyd's List* and the *Journal of Commerce*, fine publications but out of the reach of most, when an annual subscription to *Lloyd's List* costs more than \$2,000 a year. In 1965, shipping was so central to daily life in London that when Winston Churchill's funeral barge left Tower Pier to travel up the Thames, it embarked in front of dock cranes that dipped their jibs, movingly, with respect. The cranes are gone now or immobile, garden furniture for wharves that house costly apartments or indifferent restaurants.

Humans have sent goods by water for four thousand years. In the fifteenth century BC, Queen Hatshepsut of Egypt sent a fleet to the Land of Punt and brought back panther skins and ebony, frankincense and dancing pygmies. Perhaps Hatshepsut counts as the first shipping tycoon, before the Romans, Phoenicians, and Greeks took over (she was certainly the only Egyptian queen who preferred to be called king). Shipping history is full of such treats and treasures. Cardamom, silk, ginger, and gold, ivory and saffron. The Routes of Spice, Tea, and Salt, of Amber and Incense. There were trade winds, sailor towns and sails, chaos and color. Now there are freight routes, turnarounds, and boxes, and the cool mechanics of modern industry, but there is still intrigue and fortune. Maersk ships travel regular routes named Boomerang and Yo Yo (from Australia and Yokohama), or the Bossa Nova and Samba around South America. There are wealthy tycoons still, Norse, Greek, and Danish, belonging to family companies who maintain a level of privacy that makes a Swiss banker seem verbose. Publicly listed shipping companies are still a minority. Even shipping people admit that their industry is clubby, insular, difficult. In this business, it is considered normal that the official Greek shipowners' association refuses to say how many members it has, because it can.

Maersk is different. It must be, because it is letting me onto a working ship, usually barred to ordinary citizens. Even Maersk



officers are no longer permitted to take family members to sea because of concerns about safety from pirates. But Maersk is known for risks, at least in the places where its name is known at all, which is in shipping and Denmark. I find Maersk fascinating. It is the Coca-Cola of freight with none of the fame. Its parent company A. P. Møller–Maersk is Denmark’s largest company, its sales equal to 20 percent of Denmark’s GDP; its ships use more oil than the entire nation. I like the fact that Maersk is not a household name outside the pages of *Lloyd’s List*; that it has an online store selling Maersk-branded T-shirts and cookie tins called Stargate, after the company symbol of a seven-point star, white on a background of Maersk Blue, a distinct color that can be created from a Pantone recipe. The star has seven points, goes an employee joke, because they work seven days a week. I like that Maersk is a first name. It’s like a massive global corporation named Derek. For much of recent history the company was run by Arnold Maersk Mc-Kinney Møller, son of the founder, a pleasingly eccentric patriarch who worked until he died in 2012 at age ninety-eight. Mr. Møller was known for his firm control of his firm; for walking up five flights of stairs to his office, although when he reached ninety-four he allowed his driver to carry his briefcase; for being one of only three commoners to receive Denmark’s Order of the Elephant; and for driving around Copenhagen in a modest car although he was one of the two richest people in Denmark. The other inherited Lego.

Reuters, in a profile of Maersk, describes it as “active primarily in the marine transportation sector.” Behind that “primarily” are multitudes. Founded in 1904 with one ship named *Svendborg*, Maersk—through its subsidiary Maersk Line—now operates the largest container shipping company in the world, with a fleet of six hundred vessels. It also has the vast and dizzying interests of a global corporation. It is active in 130 countries and has 117,000 employees. It is looking for and drilling for oil and gas in Denmark,

Angola, Brazil, Greenland, Qatar, Algeria, Norway, Iraq, the United States, and Kazakhstan. If you have visited Denmark, you have probably shopped in a Maersk-owned supermarket. You can save in a Maersk-owned bank. The list of its companies and subsidiaries is twelve pages long, double columns. Its revenues in 2011 were \$60.2 billion, only slightly less than Microsoft's. Microsoft provides the software that runs computers; Maersk brings us the computers. One is infamous. Somehow the other is mostly invisible.

This is remarkable, given the size of its ambition. Maersk is known for its experiments with economies of scale. Its E class ship (according to an internal classification system) *Emma Maersk*, built in 2005, excited the industry partly because she could carry at least fifteen thousand containers. Triple-E class ships, expected in 2014, will carry eighteen thousand and be able to fit a full-sized American football field, an ice-hockey arena, and a basketball court in their holds, if they care to. *Emma* was envied by naval architects and engineers, but her arrival in Felixstowe in December 2006 also caught the public imagination. With her 150 tons of New Zealand lamb and 138,000 tins of cat food, she carried 12,800 MP-3 players, 33,000 cocktail shakers, and 2 million Christmas decorations; she became SS *Santa*, come to call.

SS *Santa* demonstrated more than industrial hubris. She also proved how little an ordinary citizen understands about shipping. For two weeks afterward, Felixstowe received calls from people wanting to know if she was still in port. She had come and gone in twenty-four hours. I have met well-meaning men—and too few women—in boardrooms across London and New York who complain about this ignorance. They want a more visible image for an industry that in the UK alone employs 634,900 people, contributes £8.45 billion in taxes, and generates 2 percent of the national economy, more than restaurants, takeaway food, and civil engineering combined, and only just behind the construction industry.



They despair that shipping draws attention only with drama and disaster: a cruise ship sinking, or an oil spill and blackened birds. They would like people to know the names of the *Wec Vermeer*, arrived from Leixões and heading for Rotterdam, or the *Zim Genoa*, due in from Ashdod, not just *Exxon Valdez* and *Titanic*. They provide statistics showing that the dark days of oil spills are over. Between 1972 and 1981, there were 223 spills. Over the last decade there were 63. Each year, a shipping publicist told me, “More oil is poured down the drain by mechanics changing their engine oil than is spilled by the world’s fleet of oil tankers.”

Yet the invisibility is useful, too. There are few industries as defiantly opaque as shipping. Even offshore bankers have not developed a system as intricately elusive as the flag of convenience, under which ships can fly the flag of a state that has nothing to do with its owner, cargo, crew, or route. Look at the backside of boats and you will see home ports of Panama City and Monrovia, not Le Havre or Hamburg, but neither crew nor ship will have ever been to Liberia or Mongolia, a landlocked country that nonetheless has a shipping fleet. For the International Chamber of Shipping, which thinks “flags of convenience” too pejorative a term (it prefers the sanitized “open registries”), there is “nothing inherently wrong” with this system. A former U.S. Coast Guard commander preferred to call it “managed anarchy.”

Danish-owned *Kendal* has also flagged out, but to the national registry of the United Kingdom. On her monkey deck she flies the Red Ensign, the British maritime Union flag. This makes her a rarity. After the Second World War, the great powers in shipping were Britain and the United States. They had ships and supplied men to sail them. In 1961 the United Kingdom had 142,462 working seafarers. The United States owned 1,268 ships. Now British seafarers number around 24,000. There are fewer than one hundred oceangoing U.S.-flagged ships. Only 1 percent of trade at U.S. ports travels on an American-flagged ship, and the U.S. fleet has declined by 82 percent since 1951. Who in western

Europe or America now knows a working seafarer? At a nautical seminar held on a tall ship—a proper old sailing vessel—in Glasgow, a tanker captain told a story that got laughs, but it was sad. When online forms offer him drop-down options to describe his career, he selects “shipping” and is then given a choice. DHL or Fedex?

Two men have descended from *Kendal* to fetch me. They look Asian and exhausted, so they are typical crew. The benefits of flagging out vary according to registry, but there will always be lower taxes, more lenient labor laws, no requirement to pay expensive American or British crews who are protected by unions and legislation. Now the citizens of rich countries own ships—Greece has the most, then Japan and Germany—but they are sailed by the cheap labor of Filipinos, Bangladeshis, Chinese, Indonesians. They are the ones who clean your cruise cabin and work in the engine room, who bring your gas, your soybeans, your perfumes and medicine.

Seafaring can be a good life. And it can go wrong with the speed of a wave. On paper, the seas are tightly controlled. The Dutch scholar Grotius’s 1609 concept of *mare liberum* still mostly holds: a free sea that belongs to no state but in which each state has some rights. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is known as the umbrella convention. Its 320 articles, excluding annexes, aim to create “a legal order for the seas and oceans which will facilitate international communication, and will promote the peaceful uses of the seas and oceans, the equitable and efficient utilization of their resources, the conservation of their living resources, and the study, protection and preservation of the marine environment.” Nations that have ratified the convention (the United States has not, not liking its deep-sea mining stipulations) have a right to a twelve-mile boundary from their coastline and also to a two-hundred-mile “exclusive economic zone.” Beyond that is the high sea. The International Maritime Organization, a

UN agency, has passed dozens of regulations and amendments since the 1940s to regulate ships, crews, and safety, more than most other UN agencies. The International Labour Organization looks out for seafarers' rights. For boundary disputes there is an International Tribunal on Maritime Law.

But the sea dissolves paper. In practice, the ocean is the world's wildest place, because of both its fearsome natural danger and how easy it is out there to slip from the boundaries of law and civilization that seem so firm ashore. TV crime dramas now frequently use ports as a visual shorthand for places of criminal, suspicious activity. I don't know why they don't just go out to sea. If something goes wrong in international waters, there is no police force or union official to assist. Imagine you have a problem while on a ship. Who do you complain to, when you are employed by a Manila manning agency on a ship owned by an American, flagged by Panama, managed by a Cypriot, in international waters?

Imagine you are a nineteen-year-old South African woman named Akhona Geveza, fresh out of maritime college, the first in your family to reach higher education, the household earner and hope. In January 2010, you go to sea as a deck cadet—an apprentice navigator—on a good ship run by a good company, the *Safmarine Kariba*. Six months later, your shipmate reports to the captain that you have been raped by the Ukrainian first officer. He summons you and the officer to his cabin the next day, as if an alleged rape is a regular human resources matter. But you don't turn up, because you are already dead in the sea off Croatia. The Croatian police subsequently concluded Akhona had committed suicide. She had been in a relationship that was “consensual but rough.” An internal inquiry by Safmarine also concluded suicide and found no evidence of harassment or abuse. And that, according to sea law, was all that could be demanded.

Reporters from South Africa's *Sunday Times* then interviewed other cadets from the same maritime school. They found two had

been made pregnant by senior officers, two male cadets raped, and a widespread atmosphere of intimidation. A female cadet said embarking on a ship was like being dropped in the middle of a game park. “When we arrived,” another said, “we were told that the captain is our god; he can marry you, baptize you, and even bury you without anybody’s permission. We were told that the sea is no-man’s-land and that what happens at sea stays at sea.”

Other workers and migrants have hard lives. But they have phone lines and Internet access, unlike seafarers. They have union representatives, a police force, all the safety nets of society. Even in space, astronauts are always connected to mission control. Only 12 percent of ship crew have freely available Internet access at sea. Two-thirds have no access at all. Cell phones don’t work either. Lawyers who fight for seafarers’ rights describe their clients as moving targets who work in no-man’s-lands. They describe an industry that is global but also uniquely mobile, and difficult to govern, police, or rule. They are careful to say that most owners are scrupulous, but for the unscrupulous ones there is no better place to be than at sea. For the International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF), a global union representing four million seafarers, the maritime and fishing industries “continue to allow astonishing abuses of human rights of those working in the sector. . . . Seafarers and fishers are routinely made to work in conditions that would not be acceptable in civilized society.” If that sounds like typically combative union rhetoric, ITF will point to, for a start, the \$30 million they recovered in 2010 of wages unpaid to seafarers who had earned them, and the year before was the same. The blankness of that blue sea on our maps applies to the people who work on it, too. Buy your fair-trade coffee beans by all means, but don’t assume fair-trade principles govern the conditions of the men who fetch it to you. You would be mistaken.

In 1904, the great Norwegian-American seafarer unionist Andrew Furuseth—known as Lincoln of the Sea for his cheekbones

and achievements—was threatened with prison for violating an injunction during a strike. “You can throw me in jail,” he responded, “but you can’t give me narrower quarters than, as a seaman, I’ve always lived in; or a coarser food than I’ve always eaten, or make me lonelier than I’ve always been.” More than a century on, seafarers still regularly joke that their job is like being in prison with a salary. That is not accurate. When the academic Erol Kahveci surveyed British prison literature while researching conditions at sea, he found that “the provision of leisure, recreation, religious service and communication facilities are better in U.K. prisons than . . . on many ships our respondents worked aboard.”

The International Maritime Organization once published a brochure about shipping entitled “A Safe and Friendly Business.” Shipping has certainly become safer, but not always friendlier to humans or the planet. This safe and friendly business emits as many greenhouses gases as airplanes but is only just being regulated, decades after gas became lead-free and short-haul flights an ethical issue. In this safe and friendly business, at the moment I embark, 544 seafarers are being held hostage by Somali pirates. I try to translate that into other transport industries; 544 bus drivers, or 544 cabdrivers, or nearly two jumbo jets of passengers, mutilated and tortured for years. When thirty-three Chilean miners were trapped underground for sixty-nine days in 2010, there was a media frenzy. Fifteen hundred journalists went to Chile and, even now, the BBC news website maintains a special page on their drama, long after its conclusion. The twenty-four men on *MV Iceberg* held captive for a thousand days were given no special page and nothing much more than silence and disregard.

The men from *Kendal* are ready to go. They advise me to hold the gangway rail tightly: One hand for you, Miss, and one for the ship. I have traveled plenty and strangely on land: to Saddam Hussein’s birthday party in Tikrit, to Bhutanese football matches blessed by

Buddhist monks, down sewers and through vast slums in great cities. I look at the gangway, leading up four stories of height, my portal to thirty-nine days at sea, six ports, two oceans, five seas, and the most compellingly foreign environment I'm ever likely to encounter. Lead on, able seamen. I will follow.

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