# Introduction

## *Sailing from Jamaica*

NOT MUCH IS KNOWN about the early life of Ferdinand Smith. He was born on 5 May 1893 in Sav-la-mar in the parish of Westmoreland, Jamaica—an island nation which he later described as possessing "great natural beauty. Its lofty mountains, deep seas and broad valleys, its fertile plains, many rivers and waterfalls."[1] But alongside this prepossessing physical beauty was an ugly Jamaica that W. E. B. Du Bois described as having a "tragedy of poverty almost uncomprehensible [*sic*]."[2]

This was particularly true of Westmoreland. This parish was formed in 1703 and quickly became a "name synonymous with the busy sugar industry with flat rice lands, with stately old architecture." In 1710 Thomas Mannings gave Westmoreland land and cattle to "endow a free school," which was incorporated in 1738. It was "one of the oldest secondary schools in Jamaica."[3] Partly because Smith's father was a teacher, Ferdinand Smith was able to receive a basic grounding in reading and writing—a literacy that was to follow him benevolently throughout his life. He was lucky. "The census of 1943 showed that of the population over ten years of age, only 2.76% had any secondary schooling."[4]

Smith also came from a mixed family background. His nephew, Earl Smith, claims that his grandmother—Ferdinand Smith's mother—was of European descent.[5] Certainly Westmoreland had one of the largest settlements of Europeans on the island, a result of a "bountied [*sic*] immigration scheme" designed after the abolition of slavery in 1834 to draw them there. In the late twentieth century there remained "300 descendants of German immigrants there." Westmoreland was one of the few areas in Jamaica where "most of the peasant farmers are fair-skinned, blue-eyed people of German stock."[6] In a Jamaica scarred by color stratification, Smith's brown skin and lighter skinned relatives may have given him an early advantage.[7]

The region was wracked with ferment and conflict.[8] "Major riots occurred in Falmouth and [Sav-la-mar] in 1859."[9] O. Nigel Bolland writes

of "at least 16 serious disturbances . . . between 1884 and 1905" in the British Caribbean, "most of them in Jamaica."[10] The historian and activist Walter Rodney was attracted by the "combativeness" of Jamaicans generally, to the point where "I always felt that there must be tremendous revolutionary potential in that island." Jamaica had risen from colonialism and slavery with a "more violent social history and rugged past than most of the other islands. [There were] large scale slave revolts in the eighteenth century." This pattern continued in the twentieth century. In short, there was fierce class, race, and color conflict in Jamaica; according to the Jamaican historian Rupert Lewis, "social differentiation in Jamaica was more marked than anywhere else in the English-speaking Caribbean."[11]

This volatile situation gave rise to sharp conflict. In neighboring St. Ann's parish, the "plantocracy" there was "once described as 'semi-feudal.' One of the estate owners always wore his [pajamas], even when he used a cattle whip on some unfortunate agricultural inspector."[12] Naturally, peasants were treated worse than bureaucrats. The former, according to Winston James, speaking of the time when Smith was departing his homeland, "are still beasts of burden . . . [and] live [like] savages in unfloored huts, huddled together like beasts of the field."[13]

These brutal lords of the land were not restrained by an alert electorate. In 1901 of a population of 756,000, there were only 16,256 voters, and even this skewed pattern was distorted by color.[14] And of course, whether Jamaicans accepted the British royal family as their sovereign was not subject to plebiscite. Government departments were "headed by white expatriates and all other senior positions were filled by whites or near-whites. It was the policy in the civil service that the few blacks and coloureds employed were not to be promoted above a certain level. In practice, the darker the complexion, the lower the category in which individuals were placed."[15]

Children were not exempt from "racial" discrimination. Lady Bustamante—the longtime aide, then spouse to Jamaica's founding father Alexander Bustamante—was born in Westmoreland in 1912. As she recalled it, in schools "unruly children were chastised with the 'wild cane' or a strop. For small offences, such as speaking out of turn, the offender was made to stand for about an hour, face to the wall and with one finger on the lips." Such practices may have been designed to discourage education altogether since the British conceived of the Jamaicans as merely "hewers of wood and drawers of water." She recalled that "men

could only look forward to working on the estates, chopping cane or rising to the grade of foreman; carrying bananas hoping to be a tallyman at the banana ports. Women aspired to teaching, nursing or keeping house for others; and some had nothing to do." Before the upsurge of the 1930s, she could not "recall any serious or sustained newspaper writing that would have drawn attention to the plight of the poor." Color prejudice was so strong that "there was hardly a dark face to be seen amongst the workers in the stores or offices in the centre of the town. Certainly there was none in either of the two banks—Barclays and Nova Scotia. . . . Most of the lawyers and other professionals practising in Montego Bay were either white or of very light complexion. . . . Such was the prejudice that if a black person swam down the adjoining Cornwall Beach and happened to put foot on the sands of Doctor's Cave, some of the white members would come out of the water and quickly depart." In Jamaica, "there were more dogs than bones and . . . the meat was being distributed according to colour and class. . . . Even newspaper advertisements for jobs mentioned skin colour as a qualification."[16]

The economy of Jamaica, heavily dependent on sugar, was collapsing when Ferdinand Smith was an infant. A "long sugar crisis . . . began in the 1880s and [there was] overproduction on the world market, which had led to such low prices that West Indian sugar could only be produced at a loss."[17] This encouraged the trade union movement. After 1895 "several attempts were made to create trade unions, most of which had disappeared by the early 1920s."[18]

Smith was a laborer from his earliest years. His friend, Richard Hart, avers that "his first job after leaving primary school was pushing a hand truck on the Smithfield Wharf, Sav-la-mar for one shilling and sixpence a day."[19] He had managed to attend what was called a college for two years but the deteriorating Jamaican economy forced him to quit and find a job. Eventually he was to become a waiter in a hotel—good training for his post as a ship steward—then a clerk and later a haberdashery salesman.[20] Then, in the midst of this economic upheaval and dislocation, Sav-la-mar was hit by a devastating hurricane.[21]

The local economy collapsing around him, Ferdinand Smith walked from Sav-la-mar to the nearest port scores of miles away and caught a boat to Panama.[22] He was not to return to Jamaica until almost forty years later.

The noted Jamaican writer, Philip Sherlock, has observed that although Jamaicans are "island people," "they have no love for the sea. In their history ships were floating tombs and sails on the horizon, invaders or pirates. . . . The sea imprisoned them. . . . Their links are with the mountains. Half their island is a thousand feet and more above sea level."[23] It was the ship that had brought unwilling, enslaved Africans to the New World and it was the mountain that provided refuge. Yet economic distress can convert the most waterphobic people into confirmed mariners. Such was the case with Smith—and generations of Jamaicans. Like him, Panama was often their port of call and sailing the sea was the only way to get there. When he selected the isthmus as the meeting for his Pan American Congress in 1824, Simon Bolivar singled Panama out as the "veritable capital of the world, the center of the globe, with one face turned toward Asia and the other toward Africa and Europe." As early as 1850, fleeing the economic distress of postabolition Jamaica, residents of the island had begun streaming into this "capital."[24]

White workers were considered for canal construction but they "could not be paid enough to induce them to immigrate, nor could they be forced to accept the level of physical abuse that most of the construction tasks demanded."[25] As plans to build a canal went ahead, even more Jamaicans were attracted to what appeared to be a latter-day El Dorado. By the 1880s there were about nine thousand Jamaican laborers there.

Among these foreign laborers[26] was Ferdinand Smith, who stayed in Panama[27] for five years, working variously as a hotel steward and commissary salesman. He had married a woman from St. Elizabeth's parish in Jamaica and had fathered a daughter.[28] Marcus Garvey was also among the Jamaicans[29] who made it to Panama; the conditions he encountered in the region convinced him that Negroes needed to be better organized. Working conditions for these black workers ranged from difficult to abysmal.[30] This was Smith's first direct encounter with U.S.-style Jim Crow.[31] The Canal Zone was then under Washington's jurisdiction. As late as 1948, when Smith was on his way back to the Caribbean, an eviscerating racial segregation continued to persist.[32] Wages were nominal. Working conditions were harsh.

Unavoidably, this exploitative system gave rise to stiff organized resistance. Strikes were regular.[33] As early as July 1913—as Smith was just settling in—plans were made to deport approximately ten thousand workers of all nationalities.[34] U.S. military intelligence took note when

"ten thousand employees of the Panama Canal and the Panama Railway walked out. . . . The strike of all Negro employees of these companies having commenced today. This is about seventy percent of the entire Negro force."[35] A few months later a "confidential" memo reported that "Negro laborers on the Canal Zone are disorganized as a total failure of the strike . . . a strike which resulted only in many of them losing their positions permanently. . . . Canal Zone officials have the bridle hand on the Negroes due to the fact that the Panama Canal and the Panama Railroad control all stores on the Canal Zone and all employees' quarters. . . . Any strike attempted by them is bound to fail." It concluded, "There are radical elements in the Republic of Panama which have not as yet come to light."[36]

As World War I came to an end and Panama was convulsed in instability, Smith moved on to Cuba. He had become part of a roving band of Jamaican migrant workers who moved from island to island, job to job, in constant search of a livelihood. Between 1912 and 1924, 230,000 contract workers were imported into Cuba from Haiti and Jamaica—24,000 Jamaicans in 1919 alone.[37]

This was not the most propitious time for Smith's arrival in the "Pearl of the Antilles." In 1912 a "race war" took place when the pent-up grievances of Afro-Cubans exploded and "government troops massacred thousands of blacks in retaliation." As a result black migration from Jamaica was curbed in favor of immigrants from Spain. There was "much publicized financed expulsions of West Indians," combined with "racist attacks."[38] Smith spent a scant eleven months in Cuba before migrating to the United States. He arrived in Mobile on 19 November 1920, having traveled on the SS *Tuscan* as a steward.[39]

A Negro steward sailing into port was commonplace. The black cook was so ordinary that he became a "stereotype in nautical fiction."[40] Just as the Pullman sleeping-car porter was associated with the domestic vector of communication, the steward was his counterpart in the global arena.

Thus there was nothing particularly unusual about a Negro sailor arriving in a U.S. port. And it was no coincidence that in 1838 Frederick Douglass escaped northward to freedom dressed in sailors' clothes and armed with a free black sailor's pass. "You cannot write the bloody laws of slavery on those restless billows," he proclaimed. "The ocean, if not the land, is free."[41]

Negroes had long seen the ocean as the pathway to freedom. The NMU once "estimated" that in "1850 . . . more than half of the American seamen were colored men."[42] "The sea," said the NMU journal, "offered a haven to the most militant and aggressive slaves as an escape from bondage." Crispus Attucks, whose martyrdom on behalf of the "American Revolution" was inscribed in blood in 1770, was a seamen, as was the rebel leader Denmark Vesey.[43] As early as 1809 the Negro steward of the *Minerva* smuggled insurrectionary pamphlets into Charleston. Vesey read pamphlets like this aloud, thereby spurring the passage of the 1822 Negro Seaman Act, which permitted the sheriff to board any incoming vessel and to arrest any black sailor for the duration of the ship's stay in the port of Charleston.[44]

Because of the "threat of contagion" that West Indian, northern U.S., and Latin American sailors were said to pose, the port of Galveston also required captains to either deny their black sailors shore leave while in port or to place them in jail for the duration of the ship's visit.[45] This was a reflection of the fact that the slave-owning South correctly viewed Negro sailors as a clear and present danger to its way of life.[46] The importance of sailing to Negroes was confirmed further when the "New York African Free Schools . . . established to provide for Negro children . . . introduced in the 1820s the study of navigation, since many of the best pupils subsequently went to sea."[47]

Negro sailors with their steady incomes, "free" status, and worldliness were leaders in their communities. Sailors established contact with slaves in the British, French, Spanish, and Dutch ports of the Western Hemisphere, exchanging information about slave revolts, abolition, and revolution and "generating rumors that became material forces in their own right." Not surprisingly, slaves and masters alike came to see sailors as potential liberators.

Sailors had played a major role in rebellions in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Though it "lasted only ten days, the revolt of Naples in July 1647 marked the first time that the proletariat of any European city seized power and governed alone," and sailors were important players in this rebellion.[48] The "very term 'strike' evolved from the decision of British seamen in 1768 to 'strike' the sails of their vessels and thereby to cripple the commerce of the empire's capital city."[49] Ships spawned radicals, a concentrated forcing house of internationalism and subversion.[50]

Sailing continued to be a stepping stone to better opportunities in the twentieth century. Decades after Frederick Douglass made his escape, William Monroe Trotter, after being "refused a passport . . . obtained in disguise a seaman's passport and took a job on a freighter bound for Le Havre, where he jumped ship" in 1919 in time to crash the Versailles peace conference, where he intended to press the cause of the Negro.[51] Langston Hughes,[52] Ralph Ellison,[53] and Kwame Nkrumah[54] were among the luminaries from the Pan-African world who went to sea in search of adventure—and a livelihood. In an era of circumscribed opportunity for Negroes, sailing provided not only jobs but also the possibility of escaping to a freer world.

This was very much the case for Ferdinand Smith as he made his way from Cuba to Mobile, a deep South entrepot dominated by Jim Crow and uncongenial to Negroes. J. Alexander Somerville, who migrated from Jamaica to Los Angeles as Smith was making his way to New York City, found it hard to believe that lynchings took place: "The whole affair was so ghastly that we simply could not believe it, so we attributed it to the mental aberration of a fiction writer."[55] But this was reality, not fiction, and after landing in Alabama, Smith quickly left for New York.

There he encountered a booming West Indian population.[56] As European emigration was curbed by war and as U.S. production heated up as the nation sold to both sides in the conflict, an economic boom ensued that lured many West Indians northward. Of course, there had been a lengthy intercourse between the Caribbean islands and the country that became the United States, as their common colonial master in London guaranteed frequent contact.[57] W. E. B. Du Bois was among those who pointed to the central role of West Indians in the Afro-American struggle.[58]

By the time Smith arrived in Harlem, West Indians[59] had also garnered a well-deserved reputation for radicalism. Smith was not unique in being a migrant laborer, inveterate traveler, Marxist, and proletarian intellectual. Otto Huiswood followed a similar trajectory: born in 1893 in Surinam, he was the first Negro to join the U.S. Communist Party, signing on in 1919.[60] He had "shipped out on a Dutch banana boat bound for Holland in January 1910." He wound up in Brooklyn where he "jumped ship" and by 1918 was working on a "pleasure boat on the Fall River Line."[61] During his years as a sailor, he "had made many trips

to the Caribbean islands including Jamaica, Trinidad, Haiti, Cuba, Curacao, Barbados and British and Dutch Guiana to make contact with labor leaders and report on conditions." Such travels made for a certain cosmopolitanism, a broadened outlook and an acute awareness of exploitation. Together, these traits were a ready recipe for radicalism.[62]

This migration process—not to mention the bracing encounter with Jim Crow—pushed many West Indians to the left and gave rise to a Pan-Caribbean or "West Indian" identity.[63] The stigma attached to being black in the United States caused some to defensively compensate by declaring that West Indian culture was superior to that of U.S. blacks, which led to conflict with native Negroes. That some Euro-American employers favored them over these Negroes did not help matters.[64]

Smith was able to transcend this ethnic divide, while anchoring himself firmly among the burgeoning left. He joined the Communist-led Marine Workers Industrial Union because he was impressed with their antiracism and progressivism.[65] "Soon after being in America," he recalled years later, "I had come face to face with the harsh realities of racial discrimination, of white men brutally trampling upon even the most elementary human rights of Negroes. I had been in the southern states of the USA, and tasted of this bitter fruit of degradation and segregation. I resented it." His attempt to fight back led him leftward—figuratively to the portside—and toward union organizing and radical politics. He kept his Communist "membership secret" for fear of jeopardizing "my job as Chief Steward, a privileged position"—though his "privilege" did not exempt him from "racial" bias. On board ship, he remembered later, "I have often rebelled at the infamous 'two-pot' system, whereby top-grade rations were prepared for officers while the crewmen were fed the meanest of rations. Many and bitter were the battles both verbal and physical waged between other officers and myself (as chief steward)."

Fortunately for him, "the life of a seaman affords a remarkable opportunity to study the life of people in various countries. Within a few years of seafaring," he noted, "I had known most of the world, had spoken to and intimately observed the modes of living of people in North, South and Central America, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Belgium, China and Africa among other places." He was notably struck by the "miserable, over-worked, underfed prisoners in their own country I saw in Africa." Like many sailors, Smith's voracious reading and incessant traveling had given him a depth of understanding of human ex-

perience that soared far beyond that of other Negroes, other labor leaders, and, quite frankly, many other intellectuals.

But not all his encounters on his travels were of misery. He also met those who "received me warmly . . . I soon learned that they were Communists." When he visited "Russia" he was "met by people rich in culture and material goods"—and, like his good friend to be Paul Robeson, he was won over completely. These struggles on behalf of "workers and especially for Negroes" led him to the "theory of the class struggle" which "has been more than demonstrated in my years of working. I know the class struggle to be true, because I have been an active leader and participant all my life." He "began a study of Political Economy as early as 1925" and rapidly became "satisfied with the theoretical justification of Marxism but this I had to check with practical experiences and observations."[66]

Life at sea provided plenty of opportunity for reading, which Smith pursued with determination. This gave him an intellectual edge over others that was not unique to himself; in fact, Negro sailors were in the vanguard of a trend that has since dissipated considerably—the rise of the proletarian intellectual, the powerful autodidact and cosmopolitan.[67] All this combined with the horrors of Jim Crow to drive Smith into the eagerly waiting arms of the Communist Party.

Workers in Hollywood were fond of saying that Walt Disney probably created more Communists than Karl Marx, because of his onerous and exploitative working conditions, not to mention the paltry wages.[68] Sailors, no doubt, would have viewed the film industry as paradise regained compared to what they faced at sea. From the time of the galley slaves, laborers at sea had faced particularly oppressive conditions. As Samuel Johnson once put it, "No man will be a sailor who has contrivance enough to get himself into a jail; for being in a ship is being in jail with the chance of being drowned. . . . A man in jail has more room, better food, and commonly better company."[69] Indeed, the sailing ship—"the characteristic machine of this period of globalization"—combined aspects of the jail and the Dickensian factory.[70]

The atrocious conditions on board pre-NMU ships led to "seamen [having] the highest death and suicide rate of any major industrial workers." Seamen were particularly "susceptible to venereal disease, tuberculosis and disorders of the digestive system."[71] Hoyt Haddock, an early NMU member, recounts an episode that sheds light on the un-

sanitary conditions they had to endure. He was with a "second engineer at lunch one day" who said, "'my god' and took something out of his soup and showed the captain what he had found. . . . The captain said, 'Oh, that's only half of a cockroach' and went on eating his soup."[72]

Gerald Reminick recalled these vessels as follows:

> If you don't mind sleeping in a narrow bunk on a dirty mattress crawling with bedbugs and have no objection to crowding into a dark hole deep in the after peak of a ship, over the screw, where the fumes from showers and toilets permeate the air; and if lack of ventilation or light has no terror for you and you like to take your meals in a smelly messroom just off a hot galley, sitting at a narrow bench covered with soiled oilcloth and facing a blank wall not too clean, with a slovenly mess boy shoving a plate of greasy stew over your shoulder—if these things please you and you are thankful for them and obedient, you are 100 percent American seamen, a credit to your flag and to the United States. On the other hand, if you kick about such things, if you take part in "inciting to riot," join sit down strikes and in that way interfere with the earnings of a run-down cargo steamer, you are a Communist. Living conditions, in brief, are the cause of much of the discontent and rioting we have had . . . along our waterfronts and on board ships.

Furthermore, as one captain put it, "Our ships are infested with thugs, thieves, gangsters, dope-runners, drunkards, racketeers of all descriptions."[73] A number of sailors were on board involuntarily, victims of "Shanghai-ing," kidnapped and placed on board a ship, often headed for China or points unknown. In nineteenth-century San Francisco, men found "guilty of petty larceny" were "given the choice of going to jail or of signing on a windjammer." Negroes were often the victims of such practices.[74]

Just as ships bred radicals, these unhealthy conditions bred illness and disease.[75] But if such a malady befell a sailor at sea, he was generally out of luck, for there were no doctors on merchant ships.[76] When an injury took place, someone had to open a first-aid manual—perhaps "take a stiff drink to steady his nerves" and give the patient a stiffer one—and plunge into the unknown.[77]

On top of it all, there was the mighty and majestic horror represented by Mother Nature, so awesome that it pushed seamen to flights of rhetorical fancy. One sailor recalled when "waves went over us. The

decks were solid ice. Whole tractor trailers were washed over the side. A forty-five ton truck crane was loose on the deck like a battering ram. House trailers on the second deck were completely demolished. . . . You cross from awe to terror." It was a "rogue wave, an overhanging freak wave . . . often described as a 'wall of water.'" In a photograph it would appear "to be a sheer cliff of much greater height than the ship from which the picture was taken." It could "break a ship in [two] in one lick."

If this happened to huge ships, the fate that befell the smaller ones was a lot worse. The latter could be thoroughly destroyed by icing. Ocean sprays could freeze and thicken on the deck, with freezing rains adding to the mix. The ice could become so heavy that the ship "almost disappears within it before the toppling weight rolls her over and sinks her" without a trace.[78] This was the difficult environment in which Smith and other sailors toiled and that fueled their protest.[79]

Smith's job as steward was particularly challenging. As he recounted it, "After a couple of months at sea, even the best-cooked food gets monotonous. Someone in the deck gang starts treating the stewards department like 'flunkies.' The cook [or] messman may have gone through this enough times so he starts with a chip on his shoulder anyway, and he gets sore at the deck and black gang. The black gang may be setting themselves apart from both stewards and deck because they think that their work is more technical and therefore more important." Smith saw this as petty divisiveness that ultimately undercut the interests of sailors. "To my way of thinking," he insisted, "it's high time all such attitudes were given the deep six . . . the time is long passed when we can drift along and tolerate the luxury of petty differences."[80]

Smith himself recalled that on pre-NMU passenger ships, the "steward's department" was at work at 5 A.M. and worked without a break until 10 P.M. or midnight, seven days a week, rain or shine. Quarters were "unbelievably crowded, unventilated and filthy. Pay was pitifully small. . . . Conditions under outright slavery could be little worse. . . . As usual, under such conditions, the Negroes in the industry got the worst of everything—inferior jobs in those departments where they were permitted to work, discrimination in hiring, segregated quarters, and even worse abuse than was handed out to the white crew members. They not only got the worst jobs but the worst ships. A Negro couldn't even go on the gangplank of a decent ship. . . . Anyone who tried to take up a grievance with the union agent was called a Commu-

nist trouble maker. . . . There was no union organization aboard the ships. Ship's meetings were unknown. . . . What job security there was could only be realized by working continuously, keeping your mouth shut about abuses and never objecting to any form of exploitation, no matter how flagrant the injustice."[81]

A ship's steward had a hard life. Even though he had the crucial job of making sure that the crew was fed, Smith recalled ruefully that the "chief steward is practically a nonentity on board ship." Since stewards were often Negroes, there may have been "racial" reasons for his low status. Then there was the ever-present problem of finding adequate food abroad at reasonable prices. "Most of these countries where the ship puts into port," Smith recalled, "have very little for themselves in the line of any ship of food. . . . When he cannot procure these provisions, they believe that he is [in] cahoots with the captain or somebody, to keep them from getting their just demands." Then, after managing to procure food, the next problem was getting it on board. Because of the endemic problem of smuggling by sailors—even stewards—they had to submit to an intrusive regime of searching and filching by certain authorities. The steward generally "has to see the mate, who in turn wants an O.K. from the skipper (who most of the time is not on board). . . . In the meantime that milk is getting hot on the dock, the longshoremen are using the bread for their lunch, and also rifling the rest of the stuff."

"At most of the meetings on board the ship, both going and coming, the steward is generally the first to be harassed at the beginning, during the voyage and at the end of the voyage." The steward's department "is like no other," Smith thought.

> It is their failure to realize this situation that often makes the steward bitter, antagonistic, and the object of charges when the ship arrives in port. . . . Many voyages, especially lengthy ones, are rife with bitterness, animosity, name calling, which winds up with charges and counter-charges against this and that fellow upon arrival in port.

Moreover,

> where the voyage is long and tedious, and where the majority of the men get sick of looking at one another, nerves get frayed, and the least little touch of spoken word is liable to start an explosion. All of this

> stuff generally bounces back on the grade of grub they have been getting lately, which is generally, of course, the harassed chief steward.

The steward, Smith reminded his readers, "is a human being and should be treated as such. Stewards are getting fed up with this problem being referred to as a laughing matter and the butt of corny jokes from a lot of our officials."

So how did Smith handle this thankless job? "I make it my business to tell the membership at the beginning of the voyage, just what we are in for, and what we might be up against, and then ask for and demand cooperation." The problem was that a steward—often a Negro—was in a sensitive position and represented a difficult confluence of "race" and class. Thus, even after the founding of the NMU, Smith found that "too many delegates approach the steward in a commanding and disrespectful manner in presenting their beefs." Fortunately, an avowedly antiracist union like the NMU did not automatically oppose the steward. For Smith acknowledged that "this union has a certain amount of fakers who are lazy, incompetent, overtime hungry and are general nuisances aboard any ship. We, as members" he told the rank and file, "should take immediate steps to weed out, with special emphasis on the OUT . . . these characters before they put this union into serious trouble."[82] The chief steward was part chef and part counselor. His job represented one of the highest rungs on the socioeconomic ladder that Negro men could reach during the era of Jim Crow.

The bad working conditions were not the only factor that helped to create seafaring radicals. As Marcus Rediker has observed, the ship

> was not only a self-contained world but very much a world apart. . . . The absence of family, church and state—the primary institutions that organized social life—created a power vacuum within the wooden world. . . . The isolation of life at sea produced within the tar intensified awareness of actual and symbolic uses of power and a powerful need for self-defense.

The "ethic of egalitarianism both grew from and was nourished by the manifold vulnerabilities of life at sea."[83]

In short, sailors' work conditions were a far cry from those of their fellow workers and proletarians. Bertha Reynolds, a social worker who

worked closely with the NMU, recalled that seafaring forges a "sense of group association" because "a ship's crew has to live with one another twenty four hours a day. They must tolerate each other's queerness [*sic*]. . . . They can never ignore the effect on others of what they do, or not do." The rough conditions that sailors faced at sea and on land in dangerous foreign ports steeled them. "Walking the streets all night to keep warm, going without food and sleep. . . . A man who has done that, and knows he can do it again if he must, has an independence that is not frightened by minor catastrophes, nor easily forced to accept conditions for help that seem to him degrading."[84]

In addition, the rolling oceans themselves had a strange impact on the very marrow of sailors. Herman Ferguson, a former sailor, says that men would get on board ship with their hands shaking violently from the ravages of alcohol abuse and the like; some could not pick up a fork and had to eat from a plate like a dog. They would "sit down to eat and take a towel to put around . . . their neck to pull their head down" into the plate as they shook "like a leaf" buffeted by a strong gale. But after a few weeks of fresh sea air, he said, this condition would clear up magically. Ferguson used to wear glasses until he went to sea; after a few voyages and the soothing effects of "salt spray" and "sea air," he was able to toss them overboard.[85] This meant he could read more of the leftist literature routinely found in the small libraries on board.

The group solidarity, the severe setting, the absence of intervening institutions such as the church, perhaps even the bracing sea air, made the sea a happy hunting ground for Communists. Sailors were also notoriously irreligious.[86] As one old salt put it, "a ship's course is not determined by religious beliefs, race worship, personal inclinations or utopian dreams. A ship's course is determined by the navigator's scientific knowledge of nature."[87] The constant challenges presented by nature further reinforced a materialist outlook; when challenged, there were "no prayers until all was lost, because praying was, in a sense, an admission that human effort had failed. The sailor's perspective was formed by "the nature and setting of their work and was based upon [an] essentially materialistic view of nature, a desire to make an omnipotent nature seem orderly and comprehensible, and a need to entrust [to] each other their prospects for survival."

And just as a mutiny could succeed in the claustrophobic environs of a ship "with the support of only 20–30 percent of the crew so long as the majority of the seamen could be counted upon to remain neutral or

to join up once the seizure of power was underway," so too the Marxist and materialist ideas of Communists could prevail with a similar level of support—or perhaps less.[88] The atheism, the austere setting, and the travels to all manner of climes made seafarers notably susceptible to radical appeals. Certainly this was true for Ferdinand Smith, coming as he did from an island with a history of volatile militancy and arriving on another island, Manhattan, where a West Indian population was beginning to make a similar mark.