

# FROM SHIP'S COOK TO BARONET

Sir William Reardon Smith's  
Life in Shipping, 1856–1935

David Jenkins

University of Wales Press



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UNIVERSITY OF WALES PRESS

CARDIFF

2011

in association with

Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales



This book is dedicated to the memory of its subject

SIR WILLIAM REARDON SMITH, Bart

and to that of two friends and mentors

ROBIN CRAIG

(1924–2007)

who taught me so much about tramp shipping

and

J. GERAINT JENKINS

(1929–2009)

*a roddodd i mi'r cyfle cyntaf*

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## Foreword

EARLY IN 1921, my great-grandfather Sir William Reardon Smith launched an appeal amongst his fellow shipowners at Cardiff to fund the establishment, initially within Cardiff Technical College, of a department which would provide training for boys between the ages of thirteen and sixteen whose ambitions were set upon a career at sea. By the end of March he had collected the considerable sum of £18,000 and on 3 October that year, the Smith Junior Nautical School accepted its first pupils, or cadets as they were termed. From the outset, a formal class-taught syllabus was combined with practical training, and in 1925 the opportunities available to the cadets were broadened immeasurably when Sir William acquired the racing yacht *Margherita*, which came to serve as both training vessel and family yacht. Every summer, a score of young lads would join her on the Clyde for a voyage that would take them down the Irish Sea and up the Bristol Channel, later rounding Land's End to arrive in the Solent in time for Cowes week – and all under Sir William's critical eye! He was utterly convinced of the value of the experience, and stated:

Nothing can be a substitute for this. The knowledge of seamanship gained on a sailing vessel cannot be acquired any other way. I want them to experience the delights as well as the duties and hard work of sailing ship training, to train on and become first-class officers.

The Reardon Smith Nautical School (as it was later known) provided a seafaring education for generations of cadets until it closed in 1991, a victim of the sad decline of the British merchant fleet in the latter half of the twentieth century. However, its successor body, the Reardon Smith Nautical Trust, continues to provide encouragement and support for young people who wish to pursue a career in maritime or nautical affairs, ranging from sail training

to marine law, and in this way continues to emulate Sir William's original aims of facilitating young people to pursue careers related to the sea.

It is with much pleasure that members of the trust have also provided support for David Jenkins's exhaustively researched study of Sir William. This is the remarkable story of the youngest son of a widowed captain's wife, who went to sea as a teenage cabin boy and cook from his home village of Appledore in north Devon; he ended his days not only as Cardiff's foremost shipowner, but also an esteemed philanthropist whose generosity to many causes in his native Devon and his adopted south Wales – especially the National Museum – assumed a near-legendary status. It is to be hoped that this biography will not only appeal to those interested in maritime history, and the local history of north Devon and south Wales, but that it will also serve as an inspiration to young readers who have a hankering to respond to 'the call of the sea', as the young Reardon Smith did nearly a century and a half ago.

*John Reardon-Smith,*  
*Chairman,*  
*Reardon Smith Nautical Trust*  
2011

# *Acknowledgements*

SIR WILLIAM REARDON SMITH was probably the best known of all of Cardiff's great shipowners, and the shipping venture that he founded in 1905, which would eventually become known as the Reardon Smith Line, was likewise synonymous with shipowning at the port until its unfortunate demise in 1985. However, despite that fact that much has been written about the shipping ventures founded at Cardiff by Reardon Smith and his contemporaries, comparatively little is known about the actual shipowners themselves as individual human beings. What were their backgrounds? What had led them to become shipowners? What of their families? What were their religious or political affiliations? What did they think of the issues of the day? These are all themes about which we know surprisingly little, largely because the shipowners themselves – with a few exceptions – never bothered to commit such facts and thoughts to any form of record. What we know about them today comes chiefly from incidental documents which provide occasional tantalising insights behind those moustachioed and bearded faces which stare back impassively at us from a century and more ago. This is why the survival of Sir William's unfinished autobiography is a piece of wonderful good fortune for those who wish to know more about one of the giants of Cardiff's shipowning community and it is a privilege for the present author to bring this rare and fascinating piece of writing to the attention of a wider audience in the following pages.

It would have been impossible to produce this volume without the goodwill of present-day members of the Reardon-Smith family. The present baronet (Sir William's great-grandson) and his wife, Sir Antony and Lady Susan Reardon Smith, have been particularly enthusiastic about the project since its inception, welcoming me to their home to discuss their illustrious ancestor. Sir William's granddaughter, Mrs Mary Davies, similarly welcomed me to her home for a pleasant afternoon of reminiscence. Another great-grandson

and a friend of many years' standing – John Reardon-Smith – has also been of considerable assistance, as well as being ever ready with cheerful encouragement over an occasional lunch! And from the distaff side of the family, mere words are almost inadequate to express my thanks to Michael Tamlyn, Sir William's great-nephew, whose grandmother was one of Lady Ellen Smith's sisters. From his present home in Topsham near Exeter, he became to all intents and purposes my research assistant in Devon, ever willing to hunt down snippets of information and interview those who remembered Sir William, on my behalf. To Michael and his wife Mary, a huge and very special thank you!

I asked a number of people, some of them professional seafarers and others experts on the maritime history of north Devon, to read through Sir William's original script and offer comments and suggestions. I wish to thank Andrew Bell, Peter Ferguson, Prof. Alston Kennerley, the late Captain Gwyn Pari-Huws, Owain Roberts and my former colleague Donald Taylor for their valuable observations. Other portions of the text have been read by Dr Roy Fenton and Roger Gagg, whilst the whole work has also been read with consummate thoroughness by Emeritus Prof. Sarah Palmer of the Greenwich Maritime Institute and Captain Roy Jenkins. I am deeply grateful to them all for their encouraging comments and constructive criticisms.

I am also grateful to members of staff of the following organisations who have assisted me in my research: Bideford Community Hospital; Bideford Town Council; Bradford Museums, Galleries and Heritage; Bristol Industrial Museum; British Library (Newspapers), Colindale, London; Cardiff Central Reference Library (Local History section); Cardiff Registry Office; Cardiff University Library; Carlyle Society; Chamber of Shipping, London; Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry Regimental Museum, Bodmin; Glamorgan Record Office, Cardiff; Guildhall Library, City of London; Jersey Maritime Museum, St Helier; Library and Museum of Freemasonry, London; National Archives, Kew; National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth; National Maritime Museum, Greenwich; North Devon Maritime Museum, Appledore; North Devon Record Office, Barnstaple; Royal Northern & Clyde Yacht Club, Helensburgh; Swansea University Library; University of Exeter; West of England Steamship Owners' Protection and Indemnity Association Ltd, Luxembourg; West Glamorgan Record Office, Swansea; World Ship Society.

Amongst my colleagues within Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales, I wish to thank Peter Bennett, Dr Richard Bevins, Rebecca Brumbill, Carolyn Charles, Tony Daly, Tim Egan, Mark Etheridge, Oliver Fairclough, Mari Gordon, Lowri Jenkins, John Kenyon, Robert Protheroe Jones, Mark Lewis, Steph Mastoris, Judith Martin, Linda Norton, Mark Richards, Clare Smith, Ian Smith, Phil Smith, Kevin Thomas, Jim Wild, Dr Eurwyn Wiliam and John Williams-Davies.

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All photographs and illustrations, other than those from the collections of Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales, are individually acknowledged. All financial sums are given in the pre-decimal sterling currency of pounds, shillings and pence (£-s-d), where twelve pennies equalled one shilling, twenty shillings equalled one pound and twenty-one shillings equalled one guinea. The spelling of overseas place names in the manner current during Sir William's lifetime has been retained.

Any mistakes that may remain are my own; I am indebted to everyone who has been of assistance – *diolch yn fawr iawn i bawb*.

*David Jenkins*  
*Senior Curator,*  
National Waterfront Museum  
Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales  
2011



# INTRODUCTION

ON THE EVENING OF 23 DECEMBER 1935, the shipowner Sir William Reardon Smith died peacefully at his Cardiff home 'Cornborough', surrounded by his family. He was in his eightieth year and had enjoyed reasonably good health all his life; his final illness had been sudden and brief. News of his death naturally figured prominently in the newspapers of south Wales and his native north Devon, and in shipping journals, but his demise was also widely reported in the national and provincial press, ranging from *The Times* and the *Daily Telegraph* to the *Belfast News-letter*, the *East Anglian Daily Times* and the *Edinburgh Evening Dispatch*. All reports drew attention to his remarkable life story, 'a romance from whichever angle it is viewed', as it was described by the *South Wales Echo*. Having gone to sea from his home village of Appledore as a teenage ship's cook, he had died one of the UK's foremost tramp shipowners, a baronet and a revered philanthropist. His particular munificence to the National Museum of Wales, which he had served as both treasurer and president, was much remarked upon, as was his foundation of the Reardon Smith Nautical School in Cardiff.

Perhaps the most perceptive tribute to Sir William appeared in the shipping journal the *Syren & Shipping Illustrated* on New Year's Day, 1936. In this article, deft comparisons were drawn between the careers of Sir William and his slightly older contemporary, the Newcastle shipowner, Walter, first Baron Runciman (1847–1937). Both were natives of seafaring communities (Runciman came from Dunbar on the East Lothian coast), both had gone to sea in their youth, both became master mariners and, eventually, titled shipowners. Unlike Reardon Smith, however, Runciman went into politics, becoming a Liberal MP, and he also published a number of works of autobiography and maritime history, most notably the memoir *Before the mast – and after* (1924) and *Collier Brigs and their Sailors* (1926), a fascinating firsthand account of the east coast coal trade in the days of sail. Although he shared

Runciman's politics, Reardon Smith never showed any inclination to enter Parliament, and whilst he occasionally appeared in print in the south Wales press and shipping journals over the years, there was no evidence to suggest that he had harboured any further literary ambitions.

Only quite recently did it transpire that Reardon Smith had in fact emulated Runciman by embarking upon the writing of his memoirs in the mid-1930s, shortly before his death. At the end of May 1985, nearly fifty years after his death, the shipping company that had been his life's work went into liquidation, succumbing to one of the most profound periods of depression to hit the tramp shipping industry since the bleak days of the early 1930s. The company's last chairman, Mr Robert Chatterton, was most concerned to ensure that the chairman's personal archive relating to the history of the Reardon Smith Line should be secured for posterity, and therefore contacted Dr J. Geraint Jenkins, then curator of the former Welsh Industrial and Maritime Museum, to see if the museum would be interested in acquiring it. Having given an affirmative reply, Dr Jenkins duly dispatched the museum van to the Reardon Smith offices on Greyfriars Road, Cardiff, where the present author was one of the team that secured the archive and brought it back to the museum. The archive consisted chiefly of photographic albums of the many ships that had flown the Reardon Smith houseflag since 1906, together with copies of genealogical records relating to the family. However, also included was a file of forty-four numbered, typed foolscap sheets, from whose contents it became evident that Sir William had indeed made a start upon writing his life story, albeit never completed. Even more interesting was the fact that the archive also comprised copies of letters from Sir William's personal files which provide some indication as to how and why the elderly shipowner had been persuaded to set pen to paper.

From this correspondence, it would appear that a number of anonymous supplicants had already tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade Sir William to write his life story. However, the available evidence, though not conclusive, would appear to suggest that the person who managed to change Sir William's mind was a fellow native of north Devon, Vernon Boyle. Boyle came from an old Bideford seafaring family known to Sir William, and whilst he pursued a career as a teacher at the Perse School in Cambridge, he returned to north Devon whenever he could, eventually retiring to live in Westward Ho! in 1942. Keen yachtsman, talented watercolourist and knowledgeable local historian, in April 1932 Boyle had published an article entitled 'The Bideford Polackers' in the *Mariner's Mirror*, the journal of the Society for Nautical Research. This article dealt with the characteristics of the unique Bideford polacca brigantines, whose peculiar rig had been developed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries especially to cope with the vagaries of navigating the notorious bar at the mouth of the Taw and Torridge rivers. Boyle appears to have sent Sir William an offprint of his

article, and on 24 June, 1932, he received a reply from the Reardon Smith office in Merthyr House in Cardiff's dockland, in which Sir William noted that he, his grandfather and great-uncle had served in various 'polackers'. He went on to point out a number of shortcomings in the article, and included the pithy line, 'It is impossible for a landsman to write about these vessels'. It would also appear that Boyle had suggested that Sir William should write a book about the 'polackers', for the latter concluded his letter with the line, 'A book could be written on these vessels, but I have not the time'.

Boyle did not give up that easily, however, for on 30 June 1932 Sir William was replying to a second letter from him in which Boyle, amongst other things, had obviously suggested that Sir William should write his memoirs. In his reply, Sir William provided Boyle with further details relating to the peculiar rigging of the 'polackers', but also stated, 'I have been offered large sums to write a story of my life and experiences, but much as I should like to do so, I have other things more serious to think about today – keeping our vessels running and people employed'.

It should be borne in mind that this correspondence was taking place against the background of the depths of the depression of the early 1930s, when nearly 2m. gross tons of British shipping (including some Reardon Smith vessels) were laid up on the Fal, in Milford Haven and in many Scottish sea lochs, so Sir William's preoccupation is totally understandable. Nevertheless their correspondence appears to have continued, for a letter to Boyle, dated 22 October 1932, also noted the amount of Sir William's time taken up by his presidency (1929–32) of the National Museum of Wales. At no point in this correspondence did Sir William commit himself to setting down his memoirs, but he did note in his letter of 22 October that his term as president of the museum was to come to an end in three days. Was this a hint that he might have more time in the future to devote to his memoirs?

As stated above, there is no conclusive evidence as to whether or not it was Boyle who successfully persuaded Sir William to set down his memoirs. In addition to the evidence already quoted, however, some clues lie in the 'Introduction' to Reardon Smith's autobiography, which certainly bears no resemblance stylistically to the remainder of the work; the former is effusive and flowing, in direct contrast with Sir William's plain, matter-of-fact prose. This would appear to be Boyle's work, for in 1952 there appeared a volume entitled *Devon Harbours*, written by Vernon Boyle and Donald Payne; the latter wrote on the county's south coast, whilst Boyle contributed the chapters on the north Devon coast between Hartland and Lynmouth. What is significant is that certain passages from the 'Introduction' are repeated almost word for word in Boyle's chapters on Bideford, Appledore and Barnstaple. Add to this Boyle's evident and understandable desire that one of north Devon's most noteworthy seafaring sons should set down his life story for posterity,

and on balance it would appear that it is to Vernon Boyle that we should be indebted for encouraging the genesis of this near-unique script.

Much has been written about Cardiff's shipowners, but chiefly from the point of view of the history of their companies and fleets. There has been only one substantial biography that looks at all aspects of a Cardiff shipowner's life, namely T. C. Wignall's *The Life of Commander Sir Edward Nicholl*, RNR, MP, published in 1921; cringingly obsequious in its tone, it nevertheless casts valuable light upon Nicholl's decision to enter into shipowning in 1903–4. Hardly any of his fellow shipowners bothered at any stage during their careers to set down their memoirs in their own words, but there have been just a few notable exceptions. In the early months of 1921, Charles Evans, the founder of the coal exporters and (later) shipowners Evans & Reid, published some of his wartime recollections in serialised form in the *Western Mail*; these were later consolidated into the prosaically titled *Memoirs of Lieutenant-Commander Charles E. Evans* (1946), a compendium of his own previously published recollections and sections written by an anonymous contributor about his naval career and business ventures. More recently, in 1989, the late Desmond Williams, then chairman of Graig Shipping plc, published *Seventy Years in Shipping*, a fascinating and absorbing personal account of the history of the company established by his father in 1919. A combination of biography, autobiography and company history, it provides countless illuminating insights into the varied facets of operating a family-managed tramp shipping firm during the twentieth century. The fact that Sir William's unfinished autobiography is so rare therefore adds considerably to its historical significance, though the story that it tells is in fact quite typical of the experiences of hundreds of young men from the West Country's coastal communities during the latter half of the nineteenth century. The purpose of this introduction, therefore, is not to retell Sir William's story, but to reflect upon the historical significance of certain aspects of his early life as recorded in this fascinating text.

Sir William's native place, the north Devon village of Appledore, can boast an old-established tradition of maritime activity reaching back to medieval times; it was noted as a centre of shipbuilding and maritime trade by John Leland in 1540, and by the early seventeenth century the village's seafarers were crossing the north Atlantic to participate in the Newfoundland cod fishery. In the mid-nineteenth century the port's trade was dominated by the Yeo family, who maintained transatlantic connections through their shipbuilding business on Prince Edward Island. The Cock brothers and John Westacott were the foremost shipbuilders at the port during the latter half of the nineteenth century, by which time a number of local families, through sheer hard work, had scraped together sufficient capital to own and operate modest fleets of coastal sailing vessels. It was on such vessels that Sir William had his first experiences of seafaring in the late 1860s.

During the nineteenth century, therefore, Appledore was a community in which maritime activity was all-embracing, and the inhabitants' outlook set firmly towards the sea, so much so that the village earned itself a not altogether unjustified reputation for hostility to 'landsmen' who dared venture on to its streets. Indeed, a report of the proceedings of the Bideford Magistrates' Court that appeared in the *North Devon Journal* on 11 February 1869 records that the twelve-year-old William was found guilty, with two others, of throwing stones at a certain Philip Gregory, a stranger to the village who was undertaking some repair work on Appledore quay! A five shilling fine was imposed, though the chairman of the bench expressed the opinion that the young miscreants should have been whipped around the village at a cart's tail! Ironically, the young miscreant was destined to join the Cardiff magistrates' bench in 1923! Clearly it was time to find the young lad some gainful employment, but in Appledore, outside seafaring, shipbuilding or fishing, other opportunities were almost nonexistent. Thus, whilst Sir William states in the opening sentence of his autobiography that he had no overwhelming ambition to go to sea, there were in fact no options: 'Strange as it might seem to some, I did not want to go to sea, but there was nothing else to do at Appledore. So I shouldered my burden, conscious of what others had done before me, and started as cook on board the *Unity*.'

No one could be more conscious than the young William of 'what others had done before him', for he came from a long line of seafarers whose roots lay in both County Cork and north Devon. His Irish paternal grandfather, Daniel O'Riordan, had arrived in Appledore in 1796 as a crew member on board the brig-sloop HMS *Weazle*, stationed locally to combat smuggling in the Bristol Channel. William would have been only too aware of the dangers of the sea; his maternal grandfather, Captain Phillip Green, was lost at sea in 1829, whilst he himself – aged just three – had lost both his father and elder brother when the schooner *Hazard* (of which his father was master) was wrecked off Pembrey whilst bound from Llanelli to Appledore with a cargo of anthracite on 31 October 1859, one of over 300 vessels lost around the British Isles at that time in the so-called 'Royal Charter gale'. This tragic event left his disabled mother Elizabeth to earn a living as a dressmaker, employing a number of other women from the village (probably working from their homes) in her business; the future shipowner clearly inherited both a sense of determination and a degree of entrepreneurial skill from this remarkable woman, who died in 1906 having just lived long enough to see her son acquire his first ship. However, having spent a couple of years at sea, chiefly in the coastal trades of the Bristol Channel, and despite the legacy of his family background, the young William clearly overcame his initial reticence about seafaring. By the beginning of the second chapter, he recalls, 'It was my desire, as is undoubtedly in the breast of every boy associated with ships, to go to foreign lands'.

What becomes increasingly clear, therefore, is that even if William was, initially at least, 'pushed' to sea by economic factors, there gradually developed within him an undeniable 'pull' towards seafaring, prompted to a considerable degree by an eager curiosity about the wider world. Here again he was echoing Walter Runciman, who wrote in an early autobiographical work, *Windjammers and Steam Tramps*,

[the seamen] were usually the sons of poor parents, living for the most part in obscure villages and small towns bordering on the sea, which sea blazed into their minds aspirations to get aboard some of the vessels that passed their homes one way or the other all day long. The notion of becoming anything but sailors never entered their heads.

Both Walter Runciman and William Reardon Smith participated in a gradual change in patterns of seafaring that emerged during the nineteenth century, reflecting the growth of the British merchant fleet at that time. Between 1850 and 1900, Britain's foreign trade doubled in both value and bulk, and the British merchant fleet was the foremost in the world, controlling some 54 per cent of the globe's entire tonnage in 1870. As the century progressed, it came to be manned to an increasing degree by seafarers whose homes were not in the great port cities, but in some of the UK's most remote, non-industrialised coastal communities. Whether in the West Country, north and west Wales, north Yorkshire, East Lothian or the Western Isles, the same pattern could be identified, whereby seamen from those areas (whose local maritime economies were often in decline as the railway advanced its lines) were drawn instead to crew fleets based at the foremost ports of the British Isles, such as London, Bristol, Cardiff, Liverpool, Newcastle and Glasgow. And it was to one such port, Newport in south Wales, that Reardon Smith travelled in 1872 to undertake his first foreign passage, joining the wooden ship *Ocean Pearl* as an ordinary seaman (OS); she was bound for New Orleans with a cargo of railway rails, a major Welsh export at that time. By the end of his first deep-sea voyage, the young William had evidently acquired a taste for foreign lands and could not wait to go back to sea; he also tellingly mentions that life in Appledore in those days was not as pleasant as one might think whilst wandering its picturesque 'drangs' (narrow alleyways) nowadays: 'There were not the comforts that exist today and food was at that time poor. There was nothing else for me to do but go to sea.'

It was another of the ports of industrial south Wales, Swansea, to which Reardon Smith turned to find a berth for his second foreign voyage, joining the Bideford-built barque *Scout* as an OS in August 1872. Owned by Henry Bath of Swansea, the *Scout* was one of the famed 'Swansea copper ore barques', bound for Chile with a cargo of coal and generals. This voyage

would have involved rounding Cape Horn deep-laden in both directions – coal out, copper ore home – but the *Scout's* passages through those infamous seas, which often figure so prominently in maritime writing, are barely mentioned by Reardon Smith; he simply mentions ‘making a very good passage’. This may be explained by the fact that the more difficult westward passage would have been undertaken when there was a far better chance of reasonably calm weather off the Horn during the southern hemisphere’s summer, for he later makes reference in some detail to a storm and the damage experienced during a subsequent voyage on board the *Viscount Canning*. Also notable is the relatively lengthy period that the *Scout* spent tramping along the Chilean and Peruvian coasts with cargoes of coal and copper ore before finally loading copper regulus for home; it was October 1873 before she passed Mumbles Head once more.

After such an extended absence, three months’ coasting in the Bristol Channel as an able-bodied seaman (AB) aboard the schooner *Caroline* provided a contrasting interlude for Reardon Smith before he sailed away deep-sea once more. After a transatlantic voyage from Bristol to Doboy on the Georgia coast on the ship *Viscount Canning* to load timber, he joined the barquentine *Jane* as an AB in August 1874; she was loading coal for Cadiz at Cardiff. Seamen from the West Country were prominent amongst the crews of both vessels, providing a further indication of the growing presence of seamen from the area in the British merchant service at that time; the master and a number of the crew of the *Viscount Canning* came from Appledore, whilst Reardon Smith’s surviving elder brother, John, was second mate of the *Jane*. Having discharged her coal cargo at Cadiz, the *Jane* then loaded salt for Newfoundland, destined to be used to salt cod caught on the Grand Banks. Cod – beheaded, cleaned, boned, salted and air-dried, and also known as stockfish – had long been an important element in the diet of many African, American and European countries prior to the advent of refrigeration, especially in warmer climates where the Catholic practice of abstaining from meat and eating fish on Fridays was observed; as stated above, Appledore mariners had been involved in the transportation of this commodity since the early seventeenth century. The fact that the fish had to be loaded in countless tiny creeks (known as ‘tickles’) on Canada’s north-eastern seaboard, and the time-consuming and labour-intensive stowage and discharge of this cargo meant that this trade had become the preserve of smaller wooden merchant sailing vessels from Scotland, north Wales, the West Country and Newfoundland itself by the late nineteenth century. At a mere 211 nett tons, the *Jane* was typical of the vessels employed in this trade.

Reardon Smith’s next deep-sea voyage saw him involved in the latter days of a remarkable transatlantic maritime business that also had strong connections with Appledore. During the second and third quarters of the

nineteenth century, the construction of wooden sailing vessels for the British market was an important business along the north-eastern seaboard of the USA and Canada, and one of the foremost shipbuilding centres was Prince Edward Island. It was to this island that James Yeo (1789–1868), a native of Kilkhampton near Bude, had emigrated in 1827, and by a combination of sheer hard work, ruthless determination and not a little subterfuge, he soon established himself as one of the island's foremost businessmen, combining the skills of timber-feller, farmer, fisherman, merchant, shipbuilder and shipowner. Yeo's three sons – William, James junior and John – joined their father to run his business empire, with William later returning to north Devon and settling in Appledore to act as his father's British agent. A man of single-minded application comparable to that of his father, William Yeo transformed, indeed came to dominate, the economic life of Appledore, building the substantial Richmond dry-dock at which roughly finished vessels from the Yeo enterprise on Prince Edward Island were completed before being sold on to British owners.

William Yeo had died in 1872, but the high freight rates prevailing in the early 1870s saw a rush of orders for new tonnage, leading to what would prove to be the last flourish of large-scale wooden shipbuilding on the island. There was no shortage of timber on Prince Edward Island, but the metal fittings and rigging with which wooden vessels were typically being fitted from the mid-nineteenth century onwards had to be imported to the island from the UK. In April 1875, therefore, the eighteen-year-old Reardon Smith joined the Yeo-owned brig *Lucille* as an AB at Bristol. Fully laden with a cargo of anchors, blocks, cables, castings, fixtures and wire rigging, she also carried a larger crew than would normally have been the case, both to provide gangs to rig the vessels to be completed for Yeo interests on the island that summer and to provide the skilled core of the crews that would sail them on their maiden voyages back across the Atlantic. There were seven Yeo-built vessels awaiting completion on Prince Edward Island in the summer of 1875, all at various locations scattered around Cascumpec Bay and Malpeque Bay at the western end of the island. Living in a bunkhouse near the Yeo homestead at Port Hill, Reardon Smith and his fellow riggers travelled to each vessel in turn, carrying all the fittings required in horse-drawn wagons. He eventually returned across the Atlantic in the barque *Milo*, the last of the seven Yeo vessels to leave the island that year before winter truly set in. Although typically terse and matter of fact, Reardon Smith's firsthand description of shipbuilding on nineteenth century Prince Edward Island is nevertheless a truly unique account of the Indian summer of a once-great enterprise.

Reardon Smith returned to sea as an AB in the barque *Souvenir*, but the voyage merits little attention in his autobiography, despite the fact that the vessel had apparently been given up for lost in a storm in the English

Channel. Upon his return to the UK (discharging sugar from the West Indies at Leith), Reardon Smith took the first step in the progression of his seafaring career when he applied to take his examination as second mate. Compulsory examinations for foreign-going officers in the British merchant fleet had been introduced on 1 January 1851 under the terms of the previous year's Mercantile Marine Act, and sailors applying to be examined also had to submit a certified record of their voyages to that date to prove their sea-going experience. Although it is not made explicit in the autobiography, it seems likely that Reardon Smith probably spent about a fortnight attending a navigational school at Leith, where he consolidated the knowledge gained from both his practical sea-going experience and detailed study of his prized copy of James Inman's *Navigational and Nautical Astronomy for the Use of British Seamen*. His application brought him success, and by October 1876 he was second mate of the large wooden ship *Vermont*, sailing from Appledore to Cardiff in ballast to load coal for Singapore. Unlike his previous voyage in the *Souvenir*, he describes the eventful sixteen-month passage on the *Vermont* in great detail – the rumours about the Greek crew, running aground in the Bangka Straits and the resulting extensive repair work, sails rotting in the humidity of the Siamese monsoon season and the painfully slow passage home, when his ship was once more given up as lost. Little wonder that he left the *Vermont* at the first opportunity and went to Plymouth to study for his first mate's certificate.

The Plymouth School of Navigation had opened in 1863, and was generally known as 'the Merrifield school' after its remarkable first principal, John Merrifield. Most of its students would have been preparing for masters' and mates' certificates and would have spent just a few weeks at the school, 'cramming' for the all-important examinations. Once again Reardon Smith was successful in his examinations, and in April 1878 he was invited to join the wooden barque *Mary Hogarth*, then loading coal at Penarth dock, as chief officer; 'after a short holiday, I was sent for by a friend to join the *Mary Hogarth* of the firm of Hugh Hogarth and Sons'.

He was destined to remain with this company for the next eighteen years, but it is unfortunate that Reardon Smith is rather vague in his explanation of how he came to obtain a post with Hugh Hogarth of Ardrossan on the Clyde, whose company's traditional preference was for Scottish masters and officers. One can but conjecture as to the identity of the 'friend' who had recommended the young Devonian officer to the hard-headed Scots Presbyterian chandler-turned-shipowner, but it was the beginning of a professional relationship that would last into the 1890s. Over the ensuing years, Reardon Smith would be entrusted with the command, and overseeing the construction, of a number of Hogarth vessels, both sail and steam, an experience which would prove to be an invaluable training for him in his future career as a shipowner. He also appears to have introduced