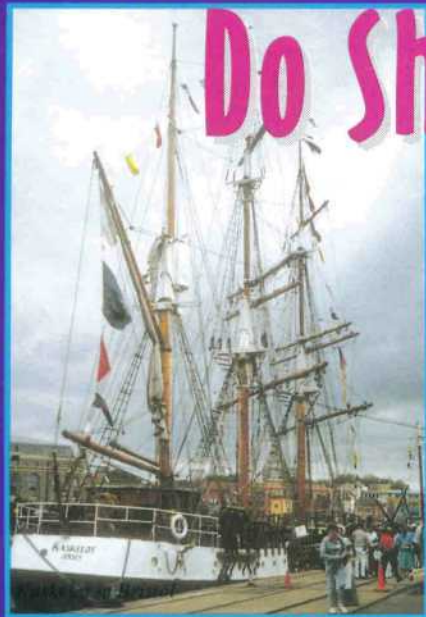


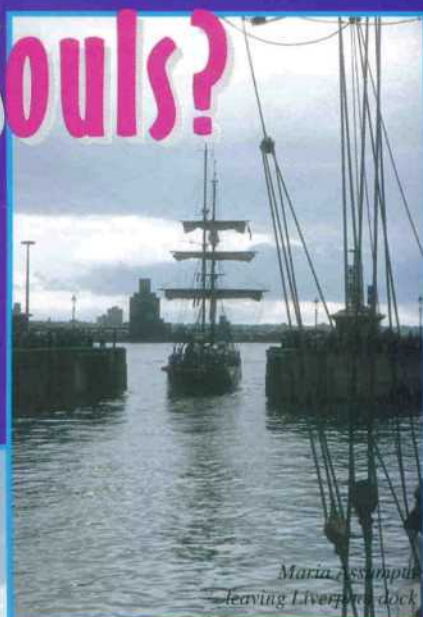
Do Ships Have Souls?

Text and photos
John Townley

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What wonderful yarns are being spun at Christmastime! So here's a true tale, told to me by folklorist Horace Beck a few years back, about an incident among the natives



Maria Assumpta leaving Liverpool dock



Dar Miodziury in Boston in 1992



Crew furling sail

of Bequia, a lovely island in the Caribbean Sea.

Beck lived in Bequia just after WWII, and he introduced the story as living proof of the ensoulment of ships. Of course, a ship having a soul is an ancient belief - it goes all the way back to ancient Rome and Greece, where they would grind a slave to death under the keel at launching to ensure a freshly-freed soul to be available to enter the ship. Champagne spilled across the bow at a ship's launching is a remnant of this custom... as are the eyes often painted on early ships - and even now the port and starboard for-

ward lookouts are called "pravo i levo oko" (right and left eye) aboard Polish ships. A fishing vessel was waiting to be launched - I'm not sure, but I recall her name was the *Mackie MacKay* - and she waited quite a while, because no one had died recently. Eventually, the owner gave up and decided to launch her anyway, and a throng gathered on the beach for the occasion.

Then someone noticed a mysterious object about a hundred yards down the beach. It was big, round and black, and it had spikes sticking out of it. Fascinating! Immediately everyone crowded around it. Curiously, at the base of each spike was a

very desirable brass fastening ring, which no one could pry off. Finally, in impatience, one man fetched a sledgehammer with the intent of driving a spike inside to free the ring, stood on top of the mine, and struck. Suddenly forty souls were at large, and the *Mackie*

MacKay was knocked by the blast off the ways and into the water.

Well, she became a legendary vessel, more successful than any other in the islands (she had plenty of souls!). So successful was she that her owner decided to sell her for a great profit. The new owner, from another island, came to take her away, but as she sailed down channel, she suddenly and inexplicably veered to starboard, hit a reef, and sank. Her souls had refused to leave their home...

And that's the truth!

Merry Christmas!

GLOSSARY

- yarns [jɑ:n] - sea stories
- tale [teɪl] - story
- bow [bəʊ] - front end of the ship
- port [pɔ:t] - left
- starboard ['stɑ:bɔ:d] - right
- ways [weɪz] - structure that holds up a ship being launched
- down channel [daʊn 'tʃænl] - out of the harbor to the sea
- veered [viə*d] - swerved