

The Shellback Song

I am a bold seafaring man, I come from everywhere;
Pick any point on the compass you like and you're sure to find me there.
I was born in the winds of the Roaring Forties, entered in the log -
Sent up aloft to the upper t'gan's'ls, and christened in navy grog.

All that I have are the clothes on me back and the tools of the sailor's trade;
Me fid and me palm, a few needles, a spike, and a knife with a good, keen blade.
I've a bunk in the fo'c'sle, a seat on the bench in the galley where I can feed,
And a hook to hang me old oilskins on. What more does a shellback need?

And I've sailed both Atlantics, doubled the Capes more times than I can tell;
I fought the big seas in a parish-rigged barque, I froze off Cape Farewell.
And I've cursed the calms in the Doldrums when you'd swear the winds was dead;
And laid to off Cape Horn in a westerly gale that could blow the hair off your head.

I've ate maggoty beef, weevily bread; I've added me words of abuse;
I've pounded hard biscuit to powder and mixed it with bug-fat and jaggery juice.
And with the galley awash for a week or more, I've gone hungry early and late;
And been served pea-soup that could stand on the poop deck and scare off a blue-nosed mate.

I've signed on short-handed Yankee ships with skippers that knew the score;
And I've sailed with the drinkers who can't navigate a course past the bar-room door.
And I've been with mates who were sailors and know how to treat a matelow well,
And some of them others, them miserable buggers, they made me life a hell.

And I've known all the boarding-house masters ashore from Cardiff to Tokyo;
And I've known all the crimps and the waterfront pimps from Riga to Callao.
I've spent me advance with Rasmussen the Dane, and I've lodged with Paddy West,
And I've known the slop-chest to take half me pay, while Big Nellie, she took the rest.

Goodbye, you square-riggers, your voyaging's done, farewell to the days of sail;
Farewell, you Cape-Horners and every tall ship that ever defied a gale;
And here's to the shellbacks that rode the wind between the sea and sky,
Your seafaring's ended, your voyaging's over; ye mariners all, goodbye.

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Ewan MacColl, made for the film *Before the Mast*.

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