Although she is today director of the Seafarers International Research Centre at Cardiff University, in 1999 Helen Sampson stood on the quayside about to embark on a refrigerated cargo ship and was baffled by what she saw.

"There was certainly no doorway conveniently carved into the ship's side that one could step into from the quay," she writes in International Seafarers and Transnationalism in the Twenty-first Century, her award-winning book. "No, it looked very much as though I was going to have to climb the perilous-looking metal steps that descended at a steep angle from the decks...I mentally braced myself and began to walk towards the looming metal shape which looked to be both unseaworthy (to my unpractised eye) and unwelcoming."

Sampson, an industrial sociologist, had been asked by Tony Lane, who was then director of the SIRC, to take part in a research project on "transnationalism at sea", funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. As a result, seafaring went on to become her primary research interest, and since then she has spent much time - about nine months of her life - sailing on nine different ships. Many were notable for poor facilities such as "malfunctioning toilets" and "insufficient washing machines". In all but two cases, she was the only woman among crews of about 20 to 25 men.

"Transnationals", as the book defines them at one point, are people "having a foot in two cultures, two societies, two countries, at the same time". How far does this somewhat abstract ideal reflect the realities of seafarers' lives? To answer that question, Sampson took detailed field notes and carried out in-depth interviews while at sea, recording each crew member for about one to two hours over voyages of two to six weeks, although "one experienced and interesting, and also very garrulous, captain" provided her with seven hours' worth of material. She also interviewed Ghanaian and Cape Verdean men who spend long periods in Germany between voyages, and the Indian wives of seafarers.

Although the fundamental question addressed by the book is fairly theoretical, the argument is illustrated by much vivid, poignant and often amusing material from Sampson's observation and interviews. To cite one example, an Indian woman who was allowed to travel with her husband just after they were married describes how she was initially frightened on board and kept all the lights on in her cabin - only for the crew to present her with a huge electricity bill. They also tried to persuade her that the lifebuoy was "a big soap for washing the ship with".

"It's obviously an academic book," explains Sampson, "but I wanted it to be accessible to people in the industry, even if they skipped [the more theoretical] chapter 2. I hope the sort of rambling of what it's like to be at sea would be increased in the industry as well."

It is certainly full of the kind of richly textured detail only to be obtained from intensive ethnographic research.

So how did she manage to secure the confidence of the crews while also negotiating the inevitable issues raised by gender?

Life on ships, as the book makes clear, is highly hierarchical, with captains often controlling access to alcohol, email, launderettes and medicine. Once she had gained their confidence (in all but one case), Sampson recalls, "the ship took over the scheduling, and ratings [non-officers] were given times off to do interviews during working hours, so it became a kind of treat for them".

To further establish her credibility, Sampson made a point of "always keeping with the pattern of the vessel. If the ship was going into port at 4am and everybody had to get up at 3am, I'd get up and go to the bridge at 3am, so I kept the same kinds of hours as the seafarers. I'm tired when they're tired, less tired when they are less tired. This may have helped with the research in terms of timing the interviews, but it certainly helped in terms of getting people to feel I was not separate. I was someone willing to muck in, and they were more and more willing to talk to me."

She even "did a bit of painting" while on board, not so much to be useful as to "let the seafarers see you are really interested in the work and them. When you work with people you get a nice kind of relaxed feeling and the gentle chat that goes on because you're engaged with a task together. That really helps with relations on board as well."
Positive ratings: many seafarers interviewed for the project appeared more willing to talk to a woman.

Building rapport works both ways, of course, and Sampson discovered that she "wasn't generally frightened aboard ship because I came to trust the people running them, even when I was doing relatively dangerous things like going into ballast tanks or participating in lifeboat drills".

As for coping with any issues of gender, Sampson says cautiously that she "worked quite hard at trying to make them engage with me as a real person rather than a very gendered person...It's about seeing me as there to do a job, and not there to go beyond that boundary. It's a balance: you want them to feel you are genuinely interested in them, but not exclusively interested in them for some personal reason."

Well into one voyage, however, one interviewee admitted to Sampson that he had decided in advance that "he was going to pursue a female researcher, whatever she was like, as soon as she arrived on board". More disconcerting was "being asked questions I wouldn't expect to be asked in a work setting back home". Knowing that some seafarers "thought it was very odd that I didn't have children", she decided on one occasion to anticipate any intrusive questions by making a vague general statement on the lines of "God hasn't been willing to give me children yet" - only to be given a long lecture about fertility treatment options.

Although she stresses that she "had access to the field notes of (mostly male) co-researchers" and could see no difference in their fundamental findings, Sampson does suspect that "people were more willing to talk about personal things to a woman. They would say 'It's like talking to my sister' or 'It's like talking to my mum'. They sometimes talked to me about things they hadn't talked about with their fellow crew members - their family life and bereavements and so on. They were perhaps more interested in getting to know me and finding out who I was and what I was doing. So it can work to your advantage."- Matthew Reisz