

of only 615sq.ft and depended on several special sails for really light conditions. Economical operation of lighters did not and still does not allow for such fancy rags and all the motive power is concentrated in the suit of two.

Some of the lighters set gunter mainsails but it is interesting to note how much more sail area is offered by a gaff rig on a mast of the same height: the 34' LOA *Sir William* (9'3" beam, 2'8" draught) carried a gaff mainsail of 557sq.ft and a jib of 152sq.ft. *Mermaid* at 33'6" LOA was rigged with a gunter main of only 410sq.ft and a jib of 150sq.ft, yet *Mermaid* was narrower at 8'2" and, usefully, slightly shallower at 2'6". Still, *Mermaid* worked to windward a good deal faster than the other boats, which, according to the lightermen, could be directly attributed to the more efficient shape of the gunter sail.

Customarily all lighters carried single rows of reef points in both mainsails and jibs. For good reasons these are regularly

used in even moderate conditions: a load of 7 tons of sand, or even 10 tons in the case of a larger boat, dramatically lowers the freeboard and only a few inches of decking separate a low hold coaming from the sea rushing by, so the angle of heel must be kept to a minimum. A cargo of sand can soak a tremendous amount of water before letting it seep into the bilge to be pumped out and all that extra weight could easily sink a boat. The sails would often be kept reefed after unloading since, without the cargo, the empty boats become tender. "Ticklish" was the word the skipper of *Sir William* used. Austin Dasson described how his boat was running downwind and capsized when the long boom dipped in the sea: the weight of water in the sail forced her on her beam ends and the sea simply poured into the open hold. Fortunately the un-ballasted hull floated so she was righted with the aid of a block and tackle rigged from the mast of another lighter.

Working a Lighter

I joined *Mermaid* as temporary crew for a working trip to San Pedro. Both her captain, Fred Mejia, and mate, Carlton Young, had seafaring fathers and I soon learned that the lightermen formed a close-knit group and are often related. *Mermaid*, *Sir William*, and *United* were owned by Fred's uncle, Collett Maheia, who also managed *Journey's End*. Collett's brother, Baros, owns and skips *Claudette*, named after Collett's daughter. Carlton's brother was a sailmaker, his uncle owned *Yvonne*, and so it went.

On *Mermaid*, sailed by a crew of two, the stress was on team-work but the customary division of duties was also in evidence. As mate, Carli was in charge of the cooking box – the bottom of a steel drum filled with sand and some wood smouldering under a grill. It was also his duty to tend the jib. As we approached Porto Stuck Channel, Fred called for a tack, put the tiller over, and hauled in the



Radio, the oldest working lighter in Belize, carrying ten tons of sand in the hold and her skiff on deck. *Radio* has been working for more than a century.