Finally, blue whales have fared poorly almost everywhere; the only population which appears to be large and healthy is that which feeds off California in summer. Other blue whale stocks, including all of those in the Southern Ocean, remain small and highly endangered.

VI. An Uncertain Future and the Rise of Scientific Whaling

It is not clear what the future holds for whaling. With the Moratorium still in place, Japan continues to substantially increase its self-assigned quotas for scientific whaling in both the North Pacific and Antarctic, taking minke, Antarctic minke, sei, sperm, and Bryde’s whales. An expanded scientific whaling program in the Antarctic which began in 2005 doubled the catches of minke whales (to about 900 a year) and also added fin and humpback whales to the list of targeted species. The inclusion of the latter two species, considered threatened or endangered by many nations and conventions, has raised further international concern about the lack of control over scientific whaling programs.

All this has fueled arguments that scientific whaling has strayed far from its original purpose of research and is today being used to circumvent the Moratorium (Clapham et al., 2005; Clapham et al., 2006). Indeed, since 1987 (the year after the Moratorium came into effect), Japan has killed more than 10,000 whales in its two scientific whaling programs, a figure which is almost 5 times the total number killed for research (2100 whales) by all other nations combined (including Japan) since 1952.

Ultimately, the future of whaling depends upon the outcome of developing geopolitics: put simply, on whether the emerging world-view of commercial whaling as an anachronism prevails or, if it does not, on whether whaling can learn the lessons of its grim past. For now, the outcome remains hung in the balance.

See Also the Following Articles

Forensic Genetics ▪ International Whaling Commission ▪ Whaling, Illegal and Pirate

References


was cruising the Massachusetts coast [there were still right whales (*Eubalaena* spp.) to be caught at that time], when an unexpected storm blew him out to sea. When the clouds cleared, he saw the spouts of whales, but they were forward-angled blows, not the vertical, paired plumes of the right whales. Hussey managed to capture one of these unusual animals and towed it back to Nantucket. Instead of baleen plates, it had ivory teeth in its underslung lower jaw, and in its head was a great reservoir of clear amber oil, which solidified to wax when exposed to the air (Fig. 1).

The first industry practiced by the New England colonists was the export of beaver (*Castor* spp.) pelts and furs to England, but these commodities were quickly exhausted, and given the availability of the easily killed right whales close to their shores, they turned their attention from the forests to the sea. The earliest colonial whaling was practiced in the Indian manner; towers were erected along the shore to enable lookouts to watch for whales, and when one was sighted, the whalers took to the boats. As navigation improved, the whalers began to roam farther offshore, occasionally visiting the rich grounds of Georges Bank, and some vessels even ventured south into the vast oceanic river that would become known as the Gulf Stream. The Yankee whalers also headed north, toward the Gulf of St. Lawrence and the Grand Banks of Newfoundland. By the middle of the eighteenth century, there were some 50 ships bringing oil and bone to England and returning with such things as iron ore, hemp, cloth and other necessities for the burgeoning new colony. By 1775, Nantucket had a fleet of 150 whalers, which ranged in size from 90 to 180 tons.

The beginning of the sperm whale fishery in 1712 did not automatically spare the remaining right whales. Although sperm oil was enormously desirable for lubrication and candle-making, the need for whalebone had not abated. In the middle of the eighteenth century, European women of fashion still required tight-laced corsets, so the New England whalers captured whatever whales they could find and processed them accordingly. Scammon (1874) tells us that “shore-whaling continued for over fifty years, but eventually it was abandoned, for the same reason that the Spitsbergen and Smeerenburg fisheries were—the scarcity of whales near the coast.”

Regardless of the species being hunted, the primary product of the whale fishery was oil (Fig. 2). Earlier, however, the Dutch and English whalers of Spitsbergen and Greenland had concentrated on the whalebone, to the extent that they sometimes cut the slabs of baleen from the mouth of the whale and discarded the carcass. Much of the commerce of whaling was determined by fashion; by the amount of whalebone that would be required to girdle the ladies. In America, by contrast, there was no court, no royalty, and in the mid-eighteenth century Quaker colony of Nantucket, very little fancy dress.

As practiced in the Greenland fishery (and every other whaling operation until that time), the blubber of the whale was cut off in strips (a process known as “making oil”), and packed directly into

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**Figure 1** When a sperm whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*) beached itself at Katwijk in Holland in 1598, Hendrik Goltzius drew it for posterity. Credit: New Bedford Whaling Museum.
casks for transport to the home port. Scoresby (1820) noted that “in the early ages of the fishery [it was] performed on shore; and even so recently as the middle of the last century, it was customary for ships to proceed into a harbor, and there remain so long as this process was going on.” By the middle of the eighteenth century, an innovation that would change the nature of the entire industry had been introduced: iron caldrons set in a brick furnace enabled the whalers to render the oil from the blubber aboard the ship instead of on shore. This method seems to have evolved around the year 1750, but there is no individual whose name is associated with the invention. Although it is not possible to identify the father of the on-board tryworks, there were many mothers, all of whom had “necessity” as part of their names. Among the reasons for its introduction were the unpleasant odors associated with the onshore boiling of the blubber into oil, and the energetic protests of the people who lived downwind of a noisome blubberworks. (Even on board ship, blubber stored in casks tended to spoil quickly, and the stench was overpowering to the whalemen.) On the Spitsbergen and Greenland grounds, the cold climate kept the blubber from turning rancid until the ships could get back to a port, but in New England no such natural refrigeration existed, and the heat often “turned” the oil in the blubber before it could be processed. As long as the whales could be caught within sight—or at most, a couple of days’ sail—of shore, the blubber could be casked and stowed, but when the whales became scarcer in the home waters, and longer voyages were required, some other method of processing and stowage was called for. Scoresby (who never employed on-board tryworks, even though the idea existed during his whaling days) wrote that it was less efficient to carry home the blubber, since “blubber in bulk, notwithstanding every precaution ... generally loses much of its oil.”

Now that sperm whales were being processed with some regularity, another change was taking place in the whaling industry. Earlier, all whale oil, casked as blubber or tried-out at sea, was considered usable for lighting and lubrication. (It was often referred to as “train oil,” from the Dutch traan for “tear” or “drop”). It is a true fat, and impregnates every part of the whale, from the bones to the muscles, but most importantly it is found in the blubber. The fat of right whales and bowheads [and the occasional humpback (Megaptera novaeangliae)] provided the whale oil that was extensively used from the tenth century until the middle of the nineteenth for heating, lighting, manufacturing of soap and cosmetics, and lubrication of machinery.

Because spermaceti (from the head of the whale) is quite different from train oil, its processing and utilization were also different. Up to the middle of the nineteenth century, candles were the primary source of indoor light. They were usually made out of wax or tallow, and emitted a smelly black smoke as they burned. The head of the sperm whale contained the mysterious fluid which could be used to make a better kind of candle. This wax, which the whale maintains in a liquid form during its lifetime solidifies when exposed to air, and someone realized that it might be employed in the manufacture of candles. From sometime around 1750, it was used to manufacture smokeless, odorless candles, the best candles known before or since.
In addition to the liquid oil contained in the case, the sperm whale produced a spongy material also impregnated with oil, known to the whalemen as the “junk.” The liquid oil in the case and the oil that was squeezed from the junk were collectively known as “head matter,” and were used in the finest lamps and candles. The process of manufacture was a fairly complicated one. Upon delivery, the sludge-like substance was heated in a large copper vat and the impurities drawn off. It was left to congeal in casks and then bagged in woolen sacks, to be pressed later in a large screw press. The oil squeezed from the head matter was the highest quality, and was used in lamps. Further processing produced lower qualities of sperm oil, used for candles. Sperm oil candles were particularly popular in Africa and the Caribbean, but as articles of colonial manufacture they could not be imported into England. Both types of oil were considered superior to the train oil of the right whale and were priced accordingly. As the market developed for the finer qualities of oil, colonial entrepreneurs appeared. In 1751, one Benjamin Crabb of Rehoboth, Massachusetts, applied to the state house of representatives for a monopoly on the manufacture and sale of sperm oil candles, which was granted (Kugler, 1980).

As the right whales became scarcer, the tempo picked up for the sperm whale fishery. Starbuck (1878) called the period from 1750 to 1784 “the most eventful era to the whale fishery that it has ever passed through.” New England whalers were under constant threat of being captured by privateers (the various wars between France and England for control of the North American colonies were going on at the time), and ships that were not commandeered pursued the fishery as far from home as the Grand Banks and the Bahamas. There were also natural disasters attendant upon the nascent whaling industry: ships were lost to storms and occasionally to whales. For reasons of security and increased profitability, the small sloops that had been the mainstay of the fishery were being replaced by larger ships with tryworks aboard; now the whalers could pursue the sperm whale, “the haughty, elusive aristocrat of the high seas.” By this time, the method of lowering boats for whales and fastening to them with harpoons attached to the whale—boats that had evolved, and would remain the dominant practice for another century. It was this method of whaling—and the great sperm whale—that Melville would immortalize in Moby-Dick (Fig. 3). At this time, the fluctuations in the price of whale oil made for a most uneasy market. Good catches would overload the market and depress the price, while in a bad year, the scarcity of the oil would make it dearer.

The failure of the British whaling industry in the early decades of the nineteenth century left the field wide open to the New Englanders, and they were quick to capitalize on it. When the French and Indian War ended in 1763 and France conceded her claims to Canada, the New England whalers moved in. They sailed from Massachusetts and New York to the Gulf of St. Lawrence and the Strait of Belle Isle, and by 1776 they had discovered the whaling grounds off western Africa (Angola and Walvis Bay), the Falkland Islands, and the River Plate grounds of the South Atlantic. In many of these regions, the whalemen occasionally encountered a right whale, but the major object of the fishery by this time had become the sperm whale. These explorers in the name of oil were canvassing the world and perfecting their techniques, but instead of flourishing, they fell deeply into debt. The British government, still trying to support its own collapsing whaling industry, placed a duty on all oil and bone carried to England by colonials. Relations were becoming increasingly strained between the Crown and her rambunctious colony; in the years that followed, the infamous Stamp Act would be enacted and repealed; the Townshend Duties ditto, and finally, the Tea Act was passed in 1773, leading to the Boston Tea Party in the same year. (The East India Company, planning to sell its tea directly to America without having to first sell it to British merchants, shipped 1253 chests of tea from London to Boston on four whalers: Beaver, Dartmouth, Eleanor, and William and Anne. It was this tea that the rebels, led by John Hancock and Samuel Adams, dumped into Boston Harbor). The next 2 years saw the first shots fired at Concord Bridge, and for the ensuing decade, most Americans became preoccupied with things other than whaling. (In April 1775, the same time that the “shot heard round the world” was fired, the ship Amazon, Captain Uriah Bunker, was discovering the whaling grounds known as the Brazil Banks, some 500 miles off that country.)

At approximately the same time that British whalers were depositing their cargoes of convicts and finding themselves in the middle of the rich whaling grounds of Australia and New Zealand, Yankee whalers were cruising almost everywhere in search of sperm whales. It was dangerous work, and sometimes the voyages seemed to last forever, but there were those who saw it as pleasurable and even romantic, the epitome of the wholesome life.

III. Life Aboard a Whaler

In retrospect, however, the voyages were often less than romantic and the weather less than benign. There were indeed fresh breezes, tropical sun, and vast herds of sperm whales, or cachalots, but there was also the tedium of years of sailing (the record seems to be the 11 year voyage made by the ship Nile, out of New London: 1858–1869), as well as gales, blizzards, typhoons, hurricanes, mountainous seas, and howling winds. The crew’s quarters were stinking holes; their food was cheap, coarse, and maddeningly monotonous; the work itself was dirty and dangerous. A voyage aboard a New England whaler was not a luxury cruise.

In the nineteenth century, the hierarchy of officers and men, so important to the successful operation of a whaling vessel, was rigidly observed, and nowhere was the distinction more evident than in their respective living quarters. The captain lived in relative luxury; the ship’s officers had smaller cabins; the boatsteerers, the cooper, and the steward occupied the steerage, an irregular compartment fitted with

![Figure 3](image-url)
plain bunks. The crew was in the forward section just below the main deck, which followed the shape of the ship; it went from a fairly wide cross-section to a narrow, cramped, triangular warren, where the ship’s timbers formed the walls, and the pounding of the waves formed the ambiance. The lower portion of the foremost often kept the occupants of the fo’c’sle company, reducing even further their limited space, and the only light that entered this literal and figurative rat hole came from the hatchway cut in the deck for the purpose of giving access to the ladder that allowed the men to climb in and out of their quarters. When the weather turned foul, the hatch was closed, and there was no light but stubby candles, and no ventilation whatever. The number of men that occupied this wretched space often exceeded 20.

No whalesman was ever paid a wage, except in unusual circumstances. If, for instance, a full ship had to take on additional hands on the way home, their share of the profits would be zero (since they had not participated in the whaling), and they were paid a monthly wage. Ordinarily, each man, from the captain to the cabin boy, received a percentage of the profits—called a lay—at the end of the voyage.

The distribution differed from vessel to vessel—larger ships could carry more oil, and therefore the profits to the crew were likely to be proportionately higher—but while a successful voyage could be better for the captain and the officers, it meant precious little indeed to the foremost hands. (On an unsuccessful voyage, where the profits were low or nonexistent, the crew might receive nothing at all.) The captain might earn 1/8 or 1/10 of the net proceeds, whereas a mate could earn 1/15 and a harpooner 1/90. Ordinary seamen could hope at best for 1/150, and there are instances in the records where a green hand signed aboard for 1/350. What did this mean in terms of actual money? On board the Addison, First Mate Ebenezer Nickerson, whose lay was 1/18, earned $845. Robert Baxter, the second mate with 1/35, earned $554.83, and a boatsteerer named Narcisco Manuel, with 1/90, got $376.56. Compare these figures to those of the crew: John Martin, at 1/175, earned a total of $31.95, and Francis Finley, got $92.08. During six consecutive voyages totaling 1128 days at sea from 1845 to 1868, the average lay per voyage on the Salem whaler James Maury was $321.21, or about 26 cents a day. This compared unfavorably to wages then being paid to unskilled laborers ashore (an average of 90 cents a day), but landlubbers did not get to visit exotic Pacific islands where they might be eaten by cannibals or risk their lives fighting gigantic whales (Hohman, 1928).

Infrequently, the men were paid in the species of whaling; i.e., they received casks of oil that they were then able to sell at the prevailing prices in their port of disembarkation. The cooks often received an added benefit: in addition to their pays, they were permitted to save the grease (known as “slush”) from their galleys and sell it to soap-makers ashore.

The whalesman’s food and bunk space were generously provided without charge, but throughout the voyage he was docked for various items that he had to buy from the ship’s stores. Additional items of clothing, tobacco, knives, needles, and even thread were charged to each man’s account, and if he required spending money in a port of call, this too was deducted from the final reckoning. This was a period where the master’s voice was law, and if a man needed a new shirt or a pair of boots, he could “either pay up or go naked.” Although most of the whalesmen signed aboard voluntarily, they usually did not know of the dangers and hardships that lay ahead of them, and the “profit-sharing” which at the outset sounded so attractive often deteriorated into an enforced “risk-sharing,” which was invariably uncomfortable, inevitably dirty, and frequently dangerous.

Among the more unusual charges assessed to a whalesman was the cost of desertion. If a man jumped ship, his account included the cost of recapturing him, an expense that was obviously nullified if he remained at large. However, there were captains who rewarded the lookouts with bonuses for the sighting of whales. This exercise was glorified in Moby-Dick, where Ahab nails a gold doubloon to the mainmast and exhorts his crew: “Whosoever of ye raises me a white-headed whale with a wrinkled brow and a crooked jaw; whosoever of ye raises me that white-headed whale, with three holes punctured in his starboard fluke—look ye, whosoever of ye raises me that same white whale, he shall have this gold ounce, my boys!” The “Spanish ounce” that was offered to the crew was a 16-dollar gold piece.

On a 3- or 4-year voyage, a man might earn $100, but the items billed to him often exceeded this amount, so many hands returned to port not only with no spending money, but in debt. The only thing to do to work off this indebtedness was to sign on for another voyage, thus starting the insidious process all over again. If and when they made it—back to port, the whalesmen were set upon by all sorts of “land sharks,” eager to assist them in disposing of their wages by enticing them into taverns, brothels, and other iniquitous dens where they could make up for the pleasures they had been denied for the past several years. In an 1860 issue of Harper’s magazine, an observer describes the arrival of the whalesmen in New Bedford:

A cart rattles by, loaded with recently discharged whalesmen—a motley and a savage—looking crew, unkempt and unshaven, cuffed with the head-gear of various foreign climes and peoples—under the friendly guidance of a land shark, hastening to the sign of the “Mermaid,” the “Whale,” or the “Grampus,” where, in drunkenness and debauchery, they may soonest get rid of their hard-earned wages, and in the shortest space of time arrive at that condition of poverty and disgust of shore life that must induce them to ship for another four years’ cruise.

The system of wages aboard a whaler was obviously not conducive to enthusiasm or hard work. In response to the brutal discipline often administered by the captain, there was bound to be apathy, indifference and suspicion on the part of the foremost hands. There was also a profound class distinction between the officers and the men. Despite the abuses, hardships and low earnings which characterized the industry, however, the labor supply was somehow adequate to meet its needs. As Hohman (1928) put it, “The steady stream of men pouring into the forecastles proved sufficient to counteract the continuous labor leakage caused by death, illness, incapacity, discharge and desertion.” It was possible (although uncommon) for a dedicated seaman to work his way up through the ranks, and there are instances where a green hand, or even a cabin boy, raised his lay from 1/150 to 1/15, and after perhaps 20 years at sea (in 4- or 5-year increments), a man might even rise to command a whaling vessel.

The Benjamin Tucker, a New Bedford whaler, brought back 73,707 gallons of whale oil, 5348 gallons of sperm oil, and 30,012 pounds of whalebone in a voyage that ended in 1851. At the prevailing prices—43 cents a gallon for whale oil, $1.25 a gallon for sperm oil, and 31 cents a pound for bone—the gross value of this cargo was $47,682.73. From this, $2,362.73 was variously deducted, leaving a net of $45,320 to be distributed. But before the profits were divided, the owners took a substantial percentage off the top to compensate for their initial outlay and also because these flinty New Englanders were not in the business for the thrill of the chase. In general, the owners took between 60% and 70% of the profits. On the 1865–1867 cruise of the Lion, the various oils yielded a total of $37,661.02. Of this, $24,252.74 went directly to the owners, leaving $13,045.53 to be divided among the captain and the crew for 2 years of work (Hohman, 1928).
During its heyday, New Bedford was the richest municipality per capita in America, and Melville described it as “perhaps the dearest place to live in all New England . . . nowhere in America will you find more patrician-like houses, [or] parks and gardens more opulent.”

Of course, profits from the whaling industry were not restricted to the owners. They had to repair, refit, and re-provision their ships, which provided work and income for the shipwrights, chandlers, cooperers, rope-makers, carpenters, and blacksmiths, and ready markets for the farmers and greengrocers. The entire township of New Bedford benefited from the outfitting and victualing of the armada of ships that annually departed her wharves, loaded with food, clothing and supplies, most of which were bought from local merchants.

The captain had his own cabin, with a proper bunk, a washstand, a table, and perhaps even a sofa and some extra chairs. The captain's quarters of the whaleship Florida “opened off the after cabin on the starboard side and extended nearly to the end of the forward cabin. A small room and a toilet room were aft of the stateroom. A large swinging bed was in the captain's cabin instead of the usual fixed berth.” The gimballed bed was a special innovation designed by Captain Thomas Williams, because he was planning to bring Mrs. Williams along.

Occasionally a captain took his wife, and even more infrequently, he took his entire family. Captain Williams, of the ship Florida out of New Bedford, was accompanied by his wife for a voyage that lasted from September 1858 to October 1861. During the voyage, Eliza Azelia Williams gave birth to two children, who spent the first year of their lives at sea. She also kept a detailed journal of her adventures, which allows us a most unusual perspective of life aboard a whaleship. The voyage commenced on September 7, 1858, in New Bedford, and on January 12 of the next year, Mrs. Williams gave birth to a baby boy, whom they named William. (William's arrival might help to explain her seasickness early in the voyage, when she wrote, “it remains rugged and I remain sea sick. I call it a gale, but my Husband laughs at me and tells me I have not seen a gale yet. If this is not one I know I do not want to see one.”) On August 5, 1859, off the rugged coasts of Sakkalin in the Okhotsk Sea, the Florida spoke the Eliza F. Mason, and Mrs. Williams visited another “lady ship,” where the captain had brought his wife and child, “a Lady Companion, and a little Girl that they brought from the Bay of Islands, New Zealand.” On February 27, 1860, Mrs. Williams wrote, “We have had an addition to the Florida’s Crew in the form of our little daughter . . . .”

It was US maritime law that a logbook be maintained by the mate or the first officer. (The term “logbook” originated with the practice of casting a log overboard affixed to the ship by a knotted line. The speed at which the line played out—measured in knots—determined the speed of the ship, and the daily records were originally kept in a book reserved for that purpose. Later, the term “logbook” was used to designate the book used for the keeping of all the ship’s records). For the most part, logbooks and journals were kept by the masters. Although rarely educated in the classical sense, most of these men could read and write passably well, and their records have given us an enduring picture of life aboard a whaleship. Even though the maintenance of a logbook was mandatory, it obviously served the whalers particularly well, since the appearance of whales at a known latitude and longitude in one season might enable the whalers to predict their reappearance at the same location the following year and thereby avoid aimless wandering.

The more mundane entries consisted of the ship’s position, the number of whales caught, and illness and injury aboard ship, but additional dramatic possibilities were vast. In his introduction to the catalog of the logbook collection of Paul Nicholson, Sherman (1965) listed “castaways, mutinies, desertions, floggings, women stowaways, drunkenness, illicit shore leave experiences, scurvy, fever, collisions, fire at sea, stove boats, drownings, hurricanes, earthquakes, tidal waves, shipwrecks, ships struck by lightning, men falling from the masthead, hostile natives, barratry, brutal skippers, escape from Confederate raiders, hard luck voyages and ships crushed by ice.” That is not to say that all logbooks read like Moby-Dick; dramatic events occurred infrequently, and most of the daily entries—when the ship was not engaged in killing whales—consisted of a remark on the wind direction, the location, and whatever else the keeper of the logbook deemed pertinent.

It is not surprising that few of the foremost hands kept records; their quarters were not conducive to the literary life, and besides, many of them could not write. Francis Olmstead (1841) could. Of the literary aspirations of his fo’c’s’le companions, he wrote

The forecastle of the North America is much larger than those of most ships of her tonnage, and is scrubbed out regularly every morning. There is a table and a lamp, so that the men have conveniences for reading and writing if they choose to avail themselves of them; and many of them are practicing writing every day or learning how to write . . . . When not otherwise occupied, they draw books from the library in the cabin and read; or if they do not know how, get someone to teach them. We have a good library on board, consisting of about two hundred volumes . . . .

J. Ross Browne, a journalist who shipped aboard the New Bedford whaler Bruce in 1842, kept a journal of his experiences that was published, with major revisions, as Etchings of a Whaling Cruise in 1846. Browne wanted to do for whaling what Richard Henry Dana had done for merchant sailing in 1840, i.e., exaggerate the problems so that necessary changes would be implemented. Although his account may contain a certain amount of propaganda in the form of negative commentary, he was aboard a whaler for more than a year, and because he is regarded as a reporter and not a writer of fiction, much of the material contained in his book can be taken as fact. Here is Browne’s description of the place in which he lived:

The forecastle was black and slinky with filthy, very small and hot as an oven. It was filled with a compound of foul air, smoke, scathecists, soap-kegs, greasy pans, tainted meat, Portuguese ruffians and sea-sick Americans . . . . In wet weather, when most of the hands were below, cursing, smoking, singing and spinning yarns, it was a perfect Bedlam. Think of three or four Portuguese, a couple of Irishmen, and five or six tough Americans, in a hole about sixteen feet wide, and as many perhaps, from the bulkheads to the fore-peak; so low that a full-grown person could not stand upright in it, and so wedged with rubbish as to leave scarcely room for a foothold. It contained twelve small berths, and with fourteen chests in the little area around the ladder, seldom admitted of being cleaned. In warm weather it was insufferably close. It would seem like an exaggeration to say, that I have seen Kentucky pig-sties not half so filthy, and in every respect preferable to this miserable hole; such, however, is the fact.

Rats were more numerous on whaleships than on any other vessels, probably because of the profusion of blood and oil that soaked the decks, despite the regular scrubblings. They were more than any ship’s cat could cope with, and then as now, there was nothing that could cope with cockroaches. They were endemic aboard the whalers, and for many seamen, the roaches were a more predominant
aspect of a whaling voyage than whales. Olmstead wrote that they made “a noise like a flush of quails among the dry leaves of the forest.” They are extremely voracious, and destroy almost everything they can find: their teeth are so sharp, the sailors say, that they will eat the edge off a razor.”

In *Nimrod of the Sea* William Davis (1874) described roaches as serving a useful purpose: “His chief recommendation is his insane pursuit of the flea …,” but then goes on, “it is a horrible experience to awaken at night, in a climate so warm that a finger-ring is the utmost cover you can endure, with the wretched sensation of an army of cockroaches climbing up both legs in search of some Spanish unfortunate! It reminds me of how many times I have placed my tin plate in the overhead nettings of the forecastle, with a liberal lump of duff reserved from dinner, and on taking it down at supper, have found it scraped clean by the same guerrillas. They leave no food alone, and have a nasty odor, which hot water will scarcely remove. But one becomes philosophical at sea in matters of food.”

The crew’s rations aboard a whaleship ranged from bad to disgusting, but, Browne says, “a good appetite makes almost any kind of food palatable.” He describes the usual fare on board the *Bruce* (which he has, for culinary and other reasons, named the *Styx*) found it scraped clean by the same guerrillas. They leave no food plate in the overhead nettings of the forecastle, with a liberal lump of duff reserved from dinner, and on taking it down at supper, have found it scraped clean by the same guerrillas. They leave no food alone, and have a nasty odor, which hot water will scarcely remove. But one becomes philosophical at sea in matters of food.”

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When opened, the barrels of pork looked as if preserved in iron rust, and diffused an odor like a stale ragout. The beef was worse yet; a mahogany-colored fibrous substance, so tough and tasteless, that I almost believed the cook’s story of a horse’s hoof with the shoe on having been fished up out of the pickle of one of the casks.

Nordhoff (1856) described the duff made by a certain cook as “that potent breeder of heartburns, indigestion, and dyspepsia … the very acme of indigestibility,” and Ben-Ezra Ely (1849) wrote, “… no swine that gleans the gutters ever subsisted on viler meat and bread than did our crew.” The rare opportunity to eat something fresh was a blessing. The cook prepared sea birds, whatever fish they could catch, turtles, dolphins [off the African coast, Nordhoff describes the harpooning and subsequent eating of a hippopotamus (*Hippopotamus amphibius*)], and since they were engaged in the capture of 50- or 60-ton mammals whose carcasses they would otherwise leave for the sharks, they often ate the meat of the whales. On the eating of various parts of the whale, usually during the trying-out, Browne wrote:

About the middle of the watch they get up the bread kid [a kid was a wooden tub] and, after dipping a few biscuits in salt water, heave them into a strainer, and boil them in oil. It is difficult to form any idea of the luxury of this delicious mode of cooking on a long night-watch. Sometimes, when on friendly terms with the steward, they make fritters of the brains of the whale mixed with flour and cook them in the oil. These are considered a most sumptuous delicacy. Certain portions of the whale’s flesh are also eaten with relish, though, to my thinking not a very great luxury being coarse and strong …. It was a different world above decks. On December 28, 1856, the crew of the New Bedford whaler *Addison* caught a porpoise, and Mary Chipman Lawrence (the captain’s wife) wrote in her journal, “The meat looks very much like beef. The oil is contained in the skin, which they will boil out tomorrow. Had some of the meat fried for dinner and some made into sausage cakes for supper. They are as nice as pork sausages.” If a further demonstration of the disparity between the fare of the men and that of the officers is required, here is Mrs. Lawrence’s description of Christmas dinner for that same year: “roast chickens, stuffed potatoes, turnips, onions, stewed cranberries, pickled beets and cucumbers, and a plum duff. For tea I had a tin of preserved grape opened and cut a loaf of fruitcake.”

Unlike their British counterparts, American whalers rarely carried any sort of medical man. It commonly fell to the captain to cope with whatever illness or accident befell his crew, and given the master’s experience, it was considerably safer to remain healthy. For internal maladies, whaleships were often equipped with medicine chests, which contained various potions and a manual for their dispensation. (Stories were told of masters who, having run out of medication Number 12, simply administered equal amounts of Numbers 5 and 7.)

Physical injuries were not uncommon, considering the number of sharp-edged tools, whistling whale lines, and hostile natives—not to mention shipboard arguments between men who were almost always armed with knives. Here again, the master served in the role of surgeon, with the same amount of training as he had as apothecary. In *Nimrod of the Sea* (1874), Davis tells the gory tale of a whaler who was yanked from his boat by a kinked line, and dragged some 125 fathoms from the boat. When he was finally picked up, “it was found that a portion of the hand, including four fingers, had been torn away, and the foot sawed through at the ankle, leaving only the great tendon and the heel suspended to the lacerated stump.” Equipped with “his carving knife, carpenter’s saw and a fish-hook,” the captain “amputated the leg and dressed the hand as best he could.”

**IV. Whaleships and Whaleboats**

As whaling voyages increased in distance and duration, it became expedient to enlarge the ships. In the early days of the fishery (around 1820), the ships averaged around 280-ton burthen, but within two decades, 400-ton vessels were not uncommon. The move toward bigger whaleships contributed to the decline of Nantucket whaling because there was a prominent sandbar across the harbor, and only the smaller, shallower-draft ships could enter. New Bedford, with its excellent harbor facilities, took up the slack. All whaling vessels were ships—as opposed to boats, which were the smaller vessels that the whalers rowed after their quarry. The literature
is replete, however, with references to ships, brigs, brigantines, barks, barkentines, and schooners. These differentiations have to do with the rigging of the masts, and not with the number of masts, although a three-masted, square-rigged vessel was always known as a ship. If the aftermost mast was rigged fore-and- aft, with the sail slung between a gaff and a boom, the vessel was known as a bark, the commonest plan, because fewer hands were required to handle the sails, and thus there were more men available for the boats. There were further variations, including the brig, where the upper courses of the aftermost mast were rigged with squaresails, but there was also a fore-and-aft sail known as a “spanker.” A barkentine was square-rigged only on the foremast; the rest fore-and-aft, and a brigantine had only two masts, the foremast square-rigged and the mainmast fore-and-aft. A schooner had two or more masts, rigged fore-and-aft.

Whaleships differed from merchantmen of the time in that they usually carried less sail. More canvas meant more men aloft, and the whalers needed as many hands as possible for the boats. One further characteristic of the whaler was the presence of masthead hoops, in which the lookouts stood during the daylight hours to watch for whales.

Square-rigged ships, which gave their name to an era of sailing, ran powerfully before the wind, but were not particularly handy in head- or cross-winds. The whalers did not have to perform any smart sailing maneuvers, nor did they have to sail with great speed. All they had to do was get from one location to another and then lower the boats after the whales. Because of the determined, plodding nature of their craft, the masters rarely sailed at night, preferring instead to furl their sails and wait till dawn before continuing.

It was during the heyday of New England whaling, from 1830 to 1860, that the fabulous clipper ships reached the zenith of sailing-ship design, with their graceful lines, sharply raked bows, and opulence of canvas. In marked contrast to these ocean-going greyhounds, the whalers were sturdy, bluff-bowed, flat-bottomed sailors, designed more for durability and storage than for speed. (The Lagoda sailed for 50 years, and the all-time record-holder, the Charles W. Morgan, sailed for more than 80 years, and earned over a million dollars for her owners. The Lagoda was copied at half-scale for the New Bedford Whaling Museum, and the Morgan, the last of her kind, is now the proud centerpiece of Mystic Seaport in Connecticut.)

A typical whaler was 100–150 ft long, and especially broad in the beam to accommodate the fixtures of whaling: heavy brick tryworks on deck, iron caldrons, cooling tanks, davits for the boats, and of course, the space required to perform the trying-out of the whale. Ordinary seamen, whose voyages did not take 4 or 5 years, belittled the whaleships as “built by the mile and cut off in lengths as you want ‘em.” They were usually painted black, and had mock gun ports painted along the sides, supposedly as a deterrent to pirates or hostile savages.

The naval historian Albert Cook Church (1938) wrote: “Whaleships differed materially from any other type of merchant ship or clipper in model and equipment, and in fact, both sides of a whaleship differed from each other above the waterline.” The larger ships were equipped with four boats, one on the starboard quarter, and three on the port (also known as the “larboard”) side. This allowed the cutting stages, which were always on the starboard, to be lowered without interference from davits.

When a whale or a group of whales was sighted, the lookout shouted “She blows!” or “Blow!” and when the captain had ascertained “where away,” the boats were lowered, and the chase began. All the boats might or might not be lowered, depending upon the number of whales sighted. If only a single whale was seen, the captain might designate one boat to chase it. The starboard boat was reserved for the captain (or the fourth mate, if the captain chose to stay aboard ship during the hunt); the larboard, waist, and bow boats were for the first, second, and third mates, respectively. Each boat contained a regular crew, consisting of five oarsmen, and a boats- teerer/harpooner. Whoever was in command of the whaleboat pulled the steering oar and gave the orders. The boats were double-enders; in case they got turned around in the frenzy of the hunt, they would be able to maneuver, and they were among the most graceful and utilitarian boats ever designed.

All the requisite equipment would be carefully stowed aboard the whaleboats, from the line, which was carefully coiled in a tub so it could be let out rapidly, to the knife that might be required to cut it if a man got his leg entangled. In addition to the six adult men who would be required to man the boat, Scammon lists the contents of a fully equipped whaleboat:

One mast and one yard, one to three sails, one steering oar, five paddles, three rowlocks, five harpoons, one or two line-tubs, three hand lances, three shortwarps, one boat-spayde, three lance-warps, one boat-warpe, one boat-hatchet, two boat knives, one boat-waif, one boatswain, one boat-hook, one drag, one grapnel, one boat-anchor, one sweeping-line, lead, buoy, etc., one boat-keg, one boat-bucket, one peggan, one lantern-keg (containing flint, steel, box of tinder, lantern, candles, bread, tobacco, and pipes), one boat-crotch, one tub-oar crotch, half a dozen chuck pins, a roll of canvas, a paper of tacks, two nippers, to which may he added a bomb-gun and four bomb-lances; in all, forty eight articles, and at least eighty-two pieces.

V. Killing and Processing the Whale

The lowering of the boats took place as the ship was underway, the captain did not come about for the comfort or convenience of his crews. Often in high seas, the graceful whaleboats took off after the whales with the men facing the stern; the boatswester was the only man who could see the whales. When they had come within range, the harpooner threw the harpoon. It consisted of a wooden shaft, some 6 ft in length, with a forged iron head. The earliest harpoons had simple fluted arrowhead-shaped heads, but as the fishery developed, more sophisticated designs were introduced. Although the two-flued iron pierced the blubber effectively, its razor edges would occasionally pull out as smoothly as they went in. This led to the introduction of the single-flued iron which held much better. Harpooners and blacksmiths had plenty of time, on board the whalers and in port, to work on harpoon design, and all sorts of elaborate heads with toggles, bars, and swivels were tried. The most successful of these designs was the double-barbed “Temple” iron, invented in 1848 by a New Bedford blacksmith named Lewis Temple. A graceful, practical device, the Temple iron consisted of a pointed head that was held in the forward position by a wooden shear-pin that broke off when withdrawal forces were applied. This rotated the head 90° in the flesh of the whale, forming a T-shaped device that would not pull out, because the flattened surfaces were pulling against the meat or blubber. The iron was fastened to the shaft of the harpoon by a line which was bent to the heavy manila line. The line, which Melville calls the “magical, sometimes horrible whale line,” was originally fashioned of hemp, but was later superseded by manila rope, which was stronger and more elastic. “Hemp is a dusky, dark fellow,” Melville wrote, “a sort of Indian, but Manilla is as a golden haired Circassian to behold.”

Even though tradition demanded that the harpoon and the lance be thrown separately, some creative whalmen tried to design an iron that would fasten to and kill the whale simultaneously. A
Scottish toxicologist named Robert Christson invented a poison-headed harpoon, equipped with glass cylinders containing prussic acid, one drop of which is lethal enough to kill a man. There is no evidence that prussic-acid harpoons were used in the American fishery; but they were carried on some vessels. The likelihood is that the American harpooners felt that they had enough problems killing the whale without worrying about killing themselves.

If the iron was well placed—the ideal spot was in the flank, forward of the lump—the boat was fast to the whale, and the injured animal took off. Sometimes the whale sounded, taking out the line at such speed that the line smoked as it ran out, and the loggerhead had to be doused with water to keep it from bursting into flame. More often the whale swam at the surface, towing the boat through the waves at a violent clip. Sperm whales are prodigious divers, and no boat could hold enough line for a dive that could be measured in miles. If the whale sounded, another 200-fathom line might be bent to the first, and then another. Eventually, the wounded whale had to surface to breathe.

The lance, also known as the “killing iron,” was plunged into the “life” of the whale, a vital artery, the lungs, or the heart. The killing iron consisted of a wooden shaft like that of the harpoon, with a scalpel-sharp head. It was not thrown, but rather stabbed repeatedly into the body of the whale. Melville describes the death-throes of a whale:

The red tide now poured from all sides, off the monster like brooks down a hill. His tormented body rolled not in brine but in blood, which bubbled and seethed in furlongs behind in their wake. The slanting sun playing upon this crimson pond in the sea sent back its reflection into every face, so that they all glowed to each other like red men … Stubb slowly churned his long sharp lance into the fish and kept it there, carefully churning and churning, as if cautiously seeking to find some gold watch that the whale might have swallowed, and which he was fearful of breaking ere he could hook it out.

The victory did not always go to the whalers. Sperm whales are immensely powerful creatures, and do not take kindly to being stabbed with spears. The most frequent problem occurred when the whale took it into its 20-pound brain to retaliate. A 30-ft whaleboat was no match for an enraged, wounded, 60-ton whale, and the harpooned animal might rise up from the depths and grab the boat in its massive jaws, splintering it into so many matchsticks (Fig. 4). Both ends of a wounded whale are lethal; the triangular flukes, which might measure 20 ft across, could function as a formidable weapon, crashing down upon the whaleboat and dumping the men into the sea. Other perils faced the whalemen, where the whistling line might take a turn around a leg or an arm, surgically severing it, or yanking the man into the water. Even if the boat was not destroyed, it might be upended and its occupants dumped into the ocean. Many of them could not swim, so such a plunge often spelled death.

But more often than not, the world’s deadliest predator won the battle, and then faced the problem of bringing whale and ship together. If the conquering whaleboat was downwind of the ship, it was a relatively simple matter to sail the ship to the carcass, but if less propitious conditions prevailed, the tired whalemen might have to tow the whale back to the ship, often for miles. And then, after an exhausting chase and a laborious haul with a 50-ton deadweight in tow, the real work began. What had been a free-swimming, powerful sea mammal was effectively reduced to a disparate assortment of its parts, the reduction accomplished by literally tearing it apart.

As in virtually every other aspect of New England whaling, the cutting-in process was described better by Melville than anybody else. (In the Yankee whale fishery, the process of removing the whale from his outer integuments was known as “cutting-in,” and the rendering of the blubber into oil was known as “trying-out.” In the English fishery, these operations were known respectively as “flensing” and “making off”). In Moby-Dick there is one chapter devoted to the actual process, and several more to the byproducts, including the “blanket,” the “funeral,” and the “sphynx”—the last referring to the head of the whale after the body and blubber have been separated from it.

The whale was made fast to the ship by lashing heavy chains through its head and around its flukes. The first part of the whale to be brought aboard was the lower jaw, ripped from the head and laid aside to be dealt with later. Then the whale was decapitated, and if it was a small one, the head was brought aboard. But the head of a large whale, often one-third of its 60-ft, 60-ton body, could not be brought on deck (Melville wrote that “even by the immense tackles of the whaler, this was as vain a thing as to attempt weighing a Dutch barn in jeweler’s scales”), and had to be processed in the water. The “head matter” was saved for last, however, because the carcass of the whale alongside the ship was threatening to the ship by its weight, and the longer it remained unprocessed, the longer the sharks could wreak havoc on the very outer layer of blubber that was of so much interest to the whalers.

By the use of a complicated series of tackles—described by Melville as “ponderous things comprising a cluster of blocks generally painted green, and which no single man can possibly lift”—the cutting stages were lowered, and the process of removing the blubber commenced. Sitting or standing on the lowered cutting stages, men with razor-sharp cutting spades began to slice into the whale’s rubbery outer covering. A massive iron hook was inserted in the first piece to come off, and this was hoisted high into the air while the men on the scaffold sliced the blubber. The whale was rotated in the water, and its blubber “striped off front the body precisely as an orange is sometimes stripped by spiralizing it.” The power for this peeling and dismemberment came from the strong backs of the whalemen, who turned the windlass located forward of the foremost.
As the thick spiral of blubber was peeled from the whale, it was cut into sections approximately 15 ft long and a ton in weight (the “blanket pieces”). These were dropped through a hatch into the blubber room, where they were stored until the carcass of the whale was completely stripped. (With the removal of the blubber and the head, the remainder of the carcass was left for tile sharks.) Workers in the dark, bloody blubber room further reduced the blanket pieces to smaller, more manageable “horse pieces,” which were then sliced into “Bible leaves,” with cuts almost to the skin making them resemble the splayed pages of a thick-leaved book. (It was believed that the opening of the blubber into “pages” made the oil more accessible.) The Bible leaves were then forked back up through the forehatch to the men who would place them in the trypots.

Although the trypot fires were usually started with wood, the unmelted skin of the whale made a wonderful fuel, and the whale was therefore cooked in a fire of its own kindling. As the oil was separated from the blubber, it was carefully ladled into a copper cooling tank, where it rested before being casked. Aside from the obvious danger of a fire spreading, the process was—like almost every aspect of whaling—hard, messy, and dirty. Oil and blood covered the decks and the people, and the smell was often intolerable. J. Ross Browne called the trying-out process “the most stirring part of the whaling business, and certainly the most disagreeable.” He described the nighttime scene aboard the “Styx”:

Dense clouds of lurid smoke are curling up to the tops, shrouding the rigging from the view. The oil is hissing in the trypots. Half a dozen of the crew are sitting on the windlass, their rough, weather-beaten faces shining in the red glare of the fires, all clothed in greasy duck, and forming about as savage a looking group as ever was sketched by the pencil of Salvator Rosa. The cooper and one of the mates are raking up the fires with long bars of wood or iron. The decks, bulwarks, railing, try-works, and windlass are covered with oil and slime of black-skin, glistering with the red glare of the try-works. Slowly and doggedly the vessel is pitching her way through the rough seas, looking as if enveloped in flames.

At the end of this description, he wrote, “Of the unpleasant effects of the smoke I scarcely know how any idea can be formed, unless the curious inquirer choose to hold his nose over the smoking wick of a sperm oil lamp, and fancy the disagreeable experiment magnified a hundred, 100,000 fold. Such is the romance of life in the whale fishery.”

One of the least romantic aspects of the whale fishery was the prospect of fire. Oil-soaked wooden ships upon whose decks fires are being encouraged do not lend themselves to a feeling of security. Care was taken to avoid conflagrations—water was pumped over the decks to keep the planks wet and cool—but occasionally the sails or rigging were ignited by flying sparks, and sometimes the ships burned to the waterline.

When the oil had cooled, it was ladled into the casks that had been assembled by the cooper. Each barrel held 302 gallons, and the figures for the fishery were almost always recorded in barrels. Starbuck’s (1878) History of the Whale Fishery, which contains the records of every American whaling ship, from every American whaling port, “from its earliest inception to 1876” (insofar as these records were known), lists the result of every whaling voyage in sperm oil (barrels), whale oil (barrels), and whalebone (pounds).

A large female sperm whale might yield 35 barrels of oil, whereas the largest bulls gave up 75–90. As with the sometimes questionable lengths of large bulls, where there were reports of 90 footers. Ashley (1938) wrote, “If these whalemen’s records are accurate, it would appear that the 100-ft Sperm Whale is not an impossibility.” Because the reports were invariably made by men whose reputation would be enhanced by overstating the yield of individual whales, many of the whales in the 100–150 barrel range must be questioned.

The amount of oil that could be taken and stored was enormous, but it did not necessarily reflect the success of a voyage. The profits of a voyage could only be calculated when the ship reached port and sold the oil and bone at the prevailing prices. A 31-gallon cask was about 5 ft high and 4 ft in diameter at its bulging middle (Fig. 2). On her maiden whaling voyage, which lasted from October 1841 to September 1843, the Lagoda brought home 600 barrels of sperm oil, 2700 barrels of whale oil, and 17,000 pounds of baleen. (“Sperm oil” was the stuff that was ladled out of the whale’s “case,” and was of a finer quality than “whale oil,” which was rendered out of the blubber. Although they were not averse to taking an occasional right whale or humpback, most of the whales hunted by the Yankees were sperm whales. The Lagoda was 105 feet long, with a beam of 27 ft. Hunting concluded when there was no more room for the storage of oil, but the whales sometimes put into port, offloaded some of their greasy cargo, and set out again for the whaling grounds. Some of these sweaty, iron-bound vats were probably stored in the blubber room, but most were stored in the hold.

It was the mysterious “head matter” of the sperm whale that made it the primary object of this globe-girdling enterprise. Other whales were encased in blubber, and some of them had the long “fins” that could be converted into milady’s bodices. But the spermaceti was the ne plus ultra of this business, the pot of liquid gold that attracted the whalers to the Azores and the Galapagos, to Zanzibar and the Japan Grounds, to Kamchatka and the Okhotsk Sea. The stuff is as poorly understood today as it was when some early beachcomber presumed that this vast reservoir in the whale’s nose was its seminal fluid. Whatever its purpose to the whale (and it certainly is not its seminal fluid), the amber wax that hardened white as it was exposed to air was worth risking life and limb—and sometimes boat and ship—to the whaler. Kept free from contamination by other oils, spermaceti oil was worth from 3 to 5 times as much as whale oil. In Nimrod of the Sea, Davis recorded a whale that yielded 27 barrels of spermaceti from the case, and Ashley’s research indicated that the largest bulls gave up something on the order of 30 barrels. At 31.5 gallons per barrel, that works out to 945 gallons of the mysterious liquid wax in the nose of a single whale.

To extract the spermaceti from the head, a much more direct method was employed than the multi-step process of turning blubber into oil. Since the spermaceti already was oil, the whalers only had to remove it from the whale and cask it. A hole was cut in the outer fabric of the whale and a man lowered a bucket into it on a long pole, then turned it over to another man on deck who would

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1If only the whaler’s stories remained, we would have no way of verifying the size of the largest whales. There is something that they leave behind, however, and Ashley proposes a novel argument for the existence of gigantic bull sperm whales: he examines a particularly large pair of teeth, over 11 in. long, and suggests that “in the days before the Sperm Whale herds were depleted, there must have been exceptional whales, either larger or older than are found today.” Mitchell (1983) finds this argument “well taken, but not conclusive,” but a look at these teeth, which are on display in the New Bedford Whaling Museum, certainly gives one cause to wonder.
empty the bucket into a waiting tub—or as Melville put it, “Tashtego downward guides the bucket into the Tun, till it entirely disappears; then giving the word to the seamen at the whip, up comes the bucket again, all bubbling like a dairy-maid’s pail of new milk.”

When the oil had all been casked and the casks stowed, the decks were scrubbed down with lye, which had been leached from the cin-ders and ashes of the tryworks, and the oily, smoky clothes of the whalermen were also scrubbed down, but the pernicious odor of smoked blubber could never really be removed, and until they could exchange their work clothes for new garments, the whalermen usually smelled like disused tryworks.

VI. The “Romance” of Whaling

In the nineteenth century, when so much of the world was still unexplored, the whalermen faced even greater hazards than an occasional angry whale. The US Exploring Expedition under Wilkes had visited many of the island groups in the Central Pacific and found that some of the stories of hostile savages, often cannibals, were true. The Fiji Islands were known—more or less accurately—as The Cannibal Isles, and whenever possible the whalers avoided them. In 1835, the whaler Aetashanks, out of Falmouth, was attacked by the natives of Namari in the Marshall Islands, and the captain, the first and second mates, and four crew members were killed before an enterprising whaleman dynamited the deck where the would-be conquerors were standing, and the ship was retaken. The Siren was recaptured from Paluan natives only after a box of tacks was scattered on deck, driving the barefoot raiders howling overboard.

The need for fresh vegetables and water often outweighed the threat of being attacked, and even though many of the captains knew or had heard stories of cannibalism and “cutoffs” (a whaleship captured by natives and its crew massacred), they could not resist the temptations of cheap provisioning. Whaleships hardly ever carried provisions for the whole voyage; they often offered to trade for provisions, and then sail away without giving anything in return, and it is likely that trigger-happy sailors took the lives of many natives without having to worry about punishment so far from any law but the captain’s. In Nimrod of the Sea (1874), Davis recounts the story of three “kanakas” (probably Maoris from New Zealand) who deserted on a tropical island. After demanding their return from the local natives, “the captain double shorted his 9-pound guns, sent a round into the crowded grass huts of the village, and carried off three natives.” From their home ports and pestilent fo’c’l’s, the whalemen brought every conceivable communicable disease to the natives, including yaws, influenza, tuberculosis, cholera, syphilis, and the greatest scourge of the unresistant, measles. Before exploration, the population of Tahiti was estimated at some 40,000; by 1830, there were only 9000 Tahitians left. A single measles epidemic in 1875 killed nearly 30,000 Fijians.

There was only so much eating, drinking, holystoning of decks, repairing of sails, and rigging and yarn spinning to occupy the sailors on these seemingly endless voyages. To pass the time, some of them created what Ashley called “the only important indigenous folk art, except for that of the Indians, we have ever had in America; the Art of Scrimshaw.” Although there are very few contemporaneous records of scrimshanders at work—probably because the craft was too insignificant to mention—we assume that the whale teeth were carved during periods of sailing or waiting in port for provisions or repairs. The baleen of the right and bowhead whales was packed into bundles for commerce at home, but occasionally a piece would be shaped into a bush and decorated with contemporary designs. Baleen was colloquially known to the whalers and merchants of the time as whalebone, but it is not bone at all; it is made of keratin, the substance of human hair and fingernails. Whale bones have teeth like any other mammals, but with the exception of the lower jaw—known as the “pan bone”—and the teeth, whale bones are too porous for carving. (Other cultures recognized the attractive nature of whale ivory. Certain Polynesian natives made necklaces of dolphin teeth, and the pre-missionary Hawaiians crafted the beautiful le niho palaaoa, a gracefully carved sperm whale tooth that was worn by roy-alty on a necklace of braided human hair.)

Despite their discomfort, low wages, and even occasional flogg-ings, the crews of whaleships were remarkably docile. The master’s word was law, and when the crew became obstreperous, a “taste of the cat” was not unheard of. Only infrequently did they become so desperate that they rebelled. Since harsh treatment, long hours, uncomfortable quarters, and bad food were expected, the whalemen generally endured these indignities in stoic silence. Also, as with any uprising, a leader is required to galvanize men into action, and on the whaleships, these troublemakers were rare. The story of the Bounty’s mutiny, which had occurred in 1789—and had nothing whatever to do with whales or whaling—was probably known to every seaman and landlubber on either side of the Atlantic. The fate of Fletcher Christian and the mutineers was not known until 1808, when Captain Mayhew Folger of the Nantucket sealer Topaz landed at Pitcairn Island and found the survivors.
On Nantucket Island there lived a young man named Samuel Comstock, who may or may not have heard the tale told by Captain Folger. At the age of 19, after three previous cruises, he shipped out aboard the Nantucket whaler Globe, departing from Edgartown on the neighboring island of Martha’s Vineyard on December 15, 1822. The ship rounded the Horn on March 5, and stopped briefly at Hawaii before headed for the newly discovered Japan Grounds. Despite the reports of plentiful whales off Japan, Captain Worth was unable to locate them, and as they sailed in fruitless circles, the crew became increasingly discontented. Rotten meat was an issue, and conditions were so bad that the captain turned back and headed for Hawaii to re-provision. There several members of the crew deserted, and the Globe’s depleted crew was replenished with beach combers and drunkards. Repeated conflicts between officers and crew increased the tension, and when the captain had one of the men flogged, Comstock decided to initiate a mutiny.

On January 26, 1824, Samuel Comstock led his followers in one of the bloodiest mutinies in American naval history. They murdered Captain Worth with an axe, slaughtered First Mate Beetle with a boarding knife, shot Second Mate Lombard in the mouth and then bayoneted him, and shot Third Mate Fisher in the back of the head. They heaved the bodies overboard, and with Comstock at the helm, looked for a place where they could land. En route, Comstock decided that one of his crew members was plotting against him, held a “trial” and sentenced him to hang. For 2 weeks they wandered around, uncertain of their location or destination, until they decided to land at tiny Mili Atoll, in what was then known as the Mulgrave Islands and is now known as the Batak chain of the Marshall Islands. It appears that Comstock’s original plan was to arrange things so that he was the only survivor, but the natives and his fellow mutineers conspired against his plan for the perfect mutiny. As Comstock began to give the ship’s stores to the natives (to ensure their support), the crew members who had signed on in Hawaii realized that they were in for trouble either from their leader or from the natives, and they shot Comstock dead (Hoyt, 1975).

Those members of the crew of the Globe who had not participated in the mutiny managed to gain control of the ship and sailed away, leaving the mutineers stranded on the island. They would not last long. A bloody conflict between the natives and the whalemen resulted in the death of all the latter but two: William Lay, of Saybrook, Connecticut, and Cyrus Hussey, of Nantucket. The Globe was sailed to Valparaiso, where the news of the mutiny was made known, and then returned to Nantucket. Her crew was cleared of complicity in the mutiny, and the Dolphin, under the command of Lieutenant John (“Mad Jack”) Percival, was dispatched to the Pacific to find and bring back the mutineers. Hussey and Lay (1828) had been with the natives for almost a year and a half by the time the Dolphin arrived, and they looked more like natives than American whalemen. After considerable tension—the Marshallsean chiefs were prepared to kill the newly arrived Americans and take their ship—and confusion about who they were, the last of the Globe’s crew were transported home. Thus ended the story that Starbuck called “the most horrible mutiny that is recounted in the annals of the whalefishery from any port or nation.”

**See Also the Following Articles**

Azorean Whaling • Scrimshaw • Whaling, Aboriginal • Whaling, Modern

**References**


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