

Verifying the Claims of the Popular Histories of Tasmanian Colonial Whaling

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Introduction

The popular view of the whaling industry in colonial Tasmania and its contribution to the colony's economy is largely based on seven books published between 1931 and 1957 that deal solely or partly with it. In recent years the accuracy and completeness of this "received history" has been questioned: does it overstate the assertion that the colonial industry was of an international scale and of great economic significance? A study of more recent works as well as official records and statistics show that although the popular history is incomplete and contains some detail unverifiable from official sources, it provides an excellent overview on the industry and in some respects understates its scope and significance.

The Popular Histories

- Alan Villiers, *Vanished Fleets* (1931)
- J. E. Philp, *Whaling Ways of Hobart Town* (1936)
- Leslie Norman, *Pioneer Shipping* (1938).
- Will Lawson, *Harpoons Ahoy!* (1938)
- Will Lawson, *Blue Gum Clippers and Whale Ships of Tasmania* (1949) compiled in 1938.
- Leslie Norman, *Sea Wolves and Bandits* (1946)
- Harry O'May, *Whalers out of Van Diemens Land*, (1957).

All of these books were based on combinations of research mostly from newspaper sources and oral history collected mostly from the whaling veterans still living in the 1930s. The most comprehensive and reliable works based on research are those of Philp and O'May. Although both men apologise (with some justification) for their lack of ability as 'writers', the stories and data they present give a good overview of the timeline, individual ships, personalities and events, and some official statistical support to justify their contention that the industry was an important one. Sufficient primary research material survives to show that O'May conducted a fairly rigorous trawl through the Tasmanian press over many years and created a card index from which he was able to construct public talks, newspaper articles and books. Transcription errors result in many errors of detail in *Whalers out of Van Diemens Land*.

Lawson's *Harpoons Ahoy!* is a semi-fictionalised description of the colonial whaling industry in its two final decades, based almost solely on the memoirs of Captain William McKillop, a crewman on many New Zealand and Tasmania sealers and whalers from the early 1880s and chief mate of the last Tasmanian whaler *Helen* in 1898-1900. With the publication of McKillop's original memoirs as part of this conference, the significance of his contribution to understanding the minutia of a whaler's day to day life can be even better understood.

Lawson's other book was based almost entirely on the research of O'May as the result of a contract between Lawson and the Shiplovers Society of Tasmania in 1937 to write a popular history of maritime Tasmania. Contretemps between the parties and Lawson's meeting with and preoccupation with the memoirs of McKillop resulted in the project stalling until 1948. O'May (1957) essentially provides a somewhat better presentation of much the same material.

Both Villiers and Norman use a combination of newspaper-based research (Villiers it would appear largely from twentieth-century newspaper articles) and oral history collected from a wide range of sources of very variable accuracy (especially Norman) and are useful only in that

they reinforce the overall concept that whaling was an important industry to colonial Tasmania.

Recent Work

Interest in Tasmania's colonial whaling over the past half-century has resulted in several major works by skilled amateur and professional historians reviewing aspects of the industry. These include annotated memoirs of individual whaling masters and officers E. P. Tregurtha, Richard Copping, J. W. Robinson and William McKillop, a detailed history of the bay whaling industry by Michael Nash and a book about the whaling master and whaleship owner Captain Charles Bayley. The period up to 1850 has also been comprehensively documented by the *Shipping Arrivals and Departures* series for Tasmania.

These books have been greatly enhanced since 2010 by the introduction of the National Library of Australia's TROVE database that allows easy verification of their content from contemporary newspapers. Many official sources are accessible at least at the State Library of Tasmania in Hobart and in many cases elsewhere. The most important of these are:

- Tasmanian Government's *Statistical Reports* record quantities that include catch and export quantities with estimated value.
- Ship registration details, that record the technical details and ownership of vessels known to be in the trade. Transcriptions for many of these has also been published, mostly in a series of books for individual ports by Ron Parsons.
- Crew lists for a substantial proportion of Tasmanian whalers from the 1850s onwards.

Statistical Analysis

Overall, between 1825 and 1900 some 130 different colonially-owned vessels conducted one or more coastal or pelagic whaling voyages out of Tasmanian ports. In the peak year of 1847 there were 37 vessels engaged in the trade, employing 1035 men. Throughout the 1830s whaling contributed over 20% of total export income to the colony and although quantities and value of oil and bone taken in the 1840s were even greater, the proportional contribution was diluted somewhat by an economy expanding with agricultural exports to growing Australian colonies. After severe disruption to the availability of both men and ships during the Gold Rush period of the early 1850s, the industry recovered to the extent that it contributed about 5% to the total exports in the 1860s and early 1870s. It was then completely swamped, as a contributor to the colony's overall economy, by rapid growth in mining and agricultural produce from the mid-1870s. Finally killed off by a fall in the British value of whale oil in the late 1890s, the industry came to a complete end in 1900.

Conclusions

Although neither sufficiently complete nor accurate to be the basis for a comprehensive study of the importance of whaling to colonial Tasmania, the popular works of the 1930s to the 1950s give a good picture of the nature and scope of the industry that is reinforced with the information readily available from later studies and the original records. They prove that in the 1830s and 1840s the industry made a major contribution to the Tasmanian economy and continued to be a useful contributor to that economy until the mid-1870s.

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