

## Hobart's role in 20<sup>th</sup> century industrial whaling by Michael Stoddart

Whaling in Tasmania (Van Diemen's Land) started in 1804 from shore stations and continued for four decades. At its peak there were 47 shore stations located on Tasmania's east coast including Bruny Island and the state's far south-east. Pelagic whaling commenced in about 1840 and at its peak during the ten years from 1840 to 1850 Hobart's whale fleet numbered 34 vessels. The discovery of gold in Victoria in 1851 took many men away from sea forcing a cessation in whaling for several years. By mid-decade disillusioned miners returned from the goldfields to sign-up again on whale ships and the industry restarted. Hobart's port was used as a staging post by numbers of European and American whale ships, though the Civil War of 1861 - 1866 heralded a sharp decline in the number of American ships using the port. Hobart's last whaling vessel, HELEN, returned from a lengthy and ultimately unsuccessful voyage to the eastern grounds in 1899 marked the end of Tasmania's great industry; in the 50 years between 1830 and 1880 the whaling products exported from Hobart were worth about \$350 million, and in 1835 exports of whaling products exceeded all other primary industry products. By 1900 Hobart's whaling families put their vessels to interstate work and no further whale-hunts took place from Tasmania, though shore-based stations elsewhere in Australia continued to operate until as late as 1978.

By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century stocks of northern whales were in decline forcing Norwegian whaling interests to develop new ways to kill and render whales in pursuit of increased efficiency, and to look for new whaling grounds far from home. Early Antarctic expeditions (e.g. Otto Nordenskjöld's 1901-1904 expedition) reported high abundances of whales close to the continent – indeed, the Ross Sea's Bay of Whales was so named because Shackleton reported many whales there in 1908 during NIMROD's voyage of exploration, though it subsequently turned out the observation was made of killer whales and not blue whales; observed numbers of killer whales is inversely correlated with numbers of blue whales.

Nordenskjöld's Antarctic expedition was marred by the loss of his ship ANTARCTIC near the tip of the Antarctic Peninsula. Captain Carl Anton Larsen and his crew were forced to spend a winter on Paulet Island in a roughly built hut offering little protection against the elements. The following summer he was rescued by an Argentine ship and taken to Buenos Aires. There he persuaded his Argentinian rescuers to establish and fund a shore-based whaling station at Grytviken on South Georgia, as his earlier approaches to Norwegian financiers had met with only lukewarm support. For 10 years he ran the station and made a handsome profit from the venture. It is not widely known that as South Georgia was British, Norway's renowned father of whaling took out British nationality and paid British taxes. In 1914 he returned to Norway with the idea of retiring to his farm but his mind was never far from whaling. In 1921 with shipping magnate Magnus Konow he established the *Havlfangeratienselskapet Rosshavet* – the *Ross Sea Whaling Company* - and set about raising money for pelagic whaling expeditions to the Southern Ocean. It is reported the King of Norway personally bought shares in the company. Larsen and Konow found a steam ship with a big enough coal store for such a long journey, the Belfast-built MAHRONDA, which he renamed SIR JAMES CLARK ROSS in deference to the British claim of the Ross Sea.

It was clear to Larsen that, like the American whalers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century before him, he needed an Australian staging post for his push south to the Antarctic where he could pick up supplies, water, coal and a whaling crew. The undisputed Norwegian authority on Antarctica, Captain Roald Amundsen who had pipped Captain Robert Falcon Scott to the South Pole in 1912, advised Larsen on the matter. Amundsen was impressed with the young men who had worked on his ship during his sojourn in Hobart on his return from discovering the South Pole in 1912 and recommended Larsen use Hobart.

In August 1923 Captain Larsen set out from Sandefjord with five steam catchers purchased from the US Star whaling company. Working through the Norwegian consul in Hobart he advertised for 12

young men to join his ship. In the event many more volunteered requiring him to choose the twelve he thought would best endure four months in the Southern Ocean. In November 1923 his fleet departed from Hobart, returning to New Zealand in March 1924 after one of the worst northern passages on record and with enough blue whale oil to indicate that, even with the huge ocean traverses required, a Norwegian southern whaling industry could be profitable. He returned to Hobart a year later having made significant modifications to his ship, but died at sea on the journey south. His first officer, Oskar Nilsen, took command and in March 1925 dropped off his dozen young men at Port Chalmers with a ringing endorsement about their suitability. Significant difficulties with the Commonwealth's Lighthouses Act forced the company to reject Hobart for further expeditions, instead favouring Port Chalmers, though two young men travelled from Hobart to New Zealand to join ROSS for her 1925-1926 voyage.

This could have been the end of Southern Ocean whaling for Tasmania but for the establishment of the *Polaris Whaling Company* by the Melsom family of Larvik, which was established to take whales outside British Territorial waters to avoid paying licence fees. *Polaris* converted CUSTODIAN, a Glasgow-built steamship, into a whale factory ship renaming her N. T. NIELSEN-ALONSO in honour of a Norwegian whaling pioneer whose company the Melsom's bought. In 1926 at the start of the first of her five voyages to Antarctica she was Norway's largest merchant ship. In Australian waters she could be accommodated only in the ports of Sydney – where she filled up with cheap Hunter Valley coal – and Hobart. She carried capacious fuel reserves which when fully topped up in Hobart necessitated the recruitment of up to 30 young men to work as coal haulers and general whaling hands.

From the first *Ross Sea Whaling Company* expedition under Larsen (1923-1924) until the final *Polaris* voyage (1930-1931) over 130 young Hobart men participated in the slaughter of almost 5,000 blue whales, yielding 380,000 barrels of oil worth \$142 million. The young men signed up for a variety of reasons though most simply wanted an adventure for Hobart of the 1920s offered little excitement for young people. Some were unemployed and signed-on for the pittance the lay system offered. Even so, if carefully husbanded, the pittance could see a frugal young man through to the start of the next season. Some of the whale boys were just 16 or 17 years of age when they signed up; a minority had fought in WWI though many would go on to fight in WWII and some would lose their lives. The majority made only a single trip to the ice; a small percentage signed up for four voyages.

The diaries of the young men indicated that while the cruelty of the slaughter disgusted them they accepted that whale oil was needed as much for the margarine industry as it had been in the previous century for street lighting. As the world slowly turned against whaling over the ensuing decades culminating with the 1986 International Whaling Commission's moratorium against all whaling, many of Tassie's whale boys – by then in late middle age – wrote passionately of their support for whale conservation and disgust for the slaughter in which they'd played a part.

While the 1930-1931 expedition was the last in which Tasmanians were involved pelagic whaling continued for a further 50 years, though most occurred around South Georgia. The respite offered by WWII was quickly followed by multinational fleets pursuing species of whales smaller than blues. Today Japan and Norway continue to hunt minke whales; sperm whales are still pursued by Indonesian whalers using ancient artisanal methods.

Although almost a century has passed since the industrial slaughter of blue whales stocks show only the slightest signs of recovery. The 2016 declaration by the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources of the Ross Sea as a Marine Protected Area prohibits all commercial activity in the area for 35 years. This will give the marine ecosystem the best chance for recovery. Can we dare hope this bold international decision will hasten the recovery of the largest mammal ever to have graced the Earth?