

## ***Collecting Leviathan: curiosity, exchange and the British Southern Whale Fishery (1775-1860)***

'Collecting Leviathan' is a three-year PhD project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council of Great Britain. This study is the first substantial research project to tackle the subject of British whalers as collectors in the Southern Hemisphere. It investigates the culture of collecting onboard the whaling vessels of the British Southern Whale Fishery during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and considers the circulation of artefacts, specimens and imagery through formal and informal networks such as auction houses, curiosity shops, gentlemen's clubs, major museums and private collections.

The British Southern Whale Fishery was active between 1775-1860 and for a brief period was the largest whaling fleet in the world. The average voyage of a London-based whaler could last in excess of three years. This required regular stops at ports of call across the Indian and Pacific Oceans in order to collect fresh food, water and wood. Whaling logs and private journals (particularly those kept by whaling surgeons), indicate that during these island layovers, whalers interacted in various ways with local inhabitants, acquiring indigenous artefacts and specimens of natural history retained for personal interest, exchange or sale as curiosities.

These 'curios' then moved in myriad ways – for example through informal exchange, commercial networks, family inheritance or formal donation - into personal and public museum collections around the world. Historical studies of sites and spaces of collecting have been extended in recent years to groups such as missionaries and naval surgeons, but traders in general and whalers in particular have been neglected. The reasons for this neglect have less to do with their historical significance, I would argue, than with the lack of documentation of collections deriving from whalers (in comparison for example with missionaries or naval personnel). By analyzing these moments of exchange and encounter through sources such as whaling logs, journals, museum collections and public and private correspondence I am creating an understanding of the role played by the whalers in supplying the trade in curios, and the networks of exchange within which they operated. This project aims to enhance our knowledge and understanding of early British collecting practices and highlight the agency of the whalers of the British Southern Whale Fishery within this.

Within the presentation, to be given on the second day of the Inaugural Colonial Whaling Conference 2019, I aim to give an overview of the project, explain my methodology and findings so far. I will highlight some key case studies and discuss the themes emerging within the project.

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