

George Meredith's whaling and sealing operations on the east coast of Tasmania, 1824- ~1834

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Whaling historian and maritime archaeologist Michael Nash named George Meredith as one of the top four shore-based whalers in Van Diemen's Land (VDL) as at 1827, the others being Walter Bethune, Kemp and Company and Thomas Lucas. Being an agricultural settler, Meredith was an unusual participant in the industry, but his background gives a clear indication as to why he was attracted to it. This paper will detail Meredith's participation in the east coast shore-based whaling industry in the 1820s and 1830s, mainly sourced from a number of primary documents by Meredith and his family.

The east coast of Tasmania was well-known by Europeans as a whale habitat since they began traversing the area. Captain Eber Bunker, having seen many whales along the coast when sailing towards NSW on a convict transport in 1791, took the opportunity of hunting whales when en route to the Derwent in 1803 in support of Bowen's expedition. François Peron recorded abundant seals and whales in the vicinity of Maria Island during Baudin's voyage down the east coast of Tasmania in 1802 and Ile des Phoques ('Island of Seals') at the southern end of Great Oyster Bay was named at the same time. James Kelly took seals there shortly afterwards.

George Meredith settled at Great Swan Port, at the head of Great Oyster Bay in 1821. He was a former officer in the Royal Marines and served between 1797 and 1806 in the Atlantic and Mediterranean. After leaving the Marines, he farmed in Berkshire and then Wales until about 1819 and then, after some careful preparation, he co-chartered the *Emerald* to take his family and some paying passengers to Van Diemen's Land.

He obtained an initial 2,000 acre grant and steadily built that to about 10,000 acres over the following decade. Meredith is best known in the literature for his combative attitude to nearby fellow settlers (he wanted 'exclusive' use of the area for himself and the Amos clan) and also Lieutenant-Governor Arthur and his administration, which he fought in public meetings, letters and the press until Arthur was recalled in 1836.

George Meredith was well experienced on the sea. In his ten years as a Royal Marine, he sailed across the Atlantic several times, then down the east coast of North America and he would no doubt have observed and interacted with whalers and sealers operating there. He and his party sailed in small vessels twice up and back from Hobart to Great Swan Port in 1821 during the whale migration season and they would have seen and heard whales and probably saw the large number of seals on the rocks on the way, especially as they passed Ile des Phoques. The potential for this 'free resource' could not have been missed by the settler.

Early whaling in VDL was dominated by English vessels, in part due to a punitive duty paid in England by 'foreign' whalers - £26 12/- per tun of whale oil Vs 1/- for English whalers and £95 per ton of whale bone, Vs £1. After the Bigge Report was published in 1823, duties in England and locally were reduced, and as a result, the industry became less attractive for English whalers and more so for local enterprise.

The earliest record of Meredith entering the whaling industry is a note by him in May 1824 documenting that a Mr Bishop was late in delivering a whaling boat he was building. A 'Memo of outfit for whaling 1824' which included two boats 'average £30 each, one in hand' and two 'coils whale line 145 fathoms', for a total value or expenditure of £244 10/-, illustrated how the boats were to be fitted out. On the back were several lists of potential crew – ticket-of-leave men, some men who were known to Meredith's current employees and several off other vessels. Meredith had established his shore base at Coles Bay by 1824 (today still known as 'The Fisheries') and was granted the right to occupy this site in May 1828.

At the same time, Meredith was supplying boats for others to go sealing in Bass Strait. In September 1824 he agreed to supply Messrs Sharpe, Baker and 'Whishert' with the vessels *Experiment*, *Mary* (a 'new whale boat') and *Vixen*, with Meredith taking one-third of the seal skins, swan skins and feathers as his commission. In February 1825 he signed a similar agreement with Baker for the hire of the *Comet*.

In April 1826, Meredith wrote mentioning that another boat was to be launched in Hobart for him and that three boats were to be employed for the whole season; he expressed confidence in success. At least two whales were taken by June 1826 and in January 1827, Meredith sent ninety-nine casks of oil and over a ton of whale bone to Hobart. In mid-1827 he applied to purchase some Huon Pine to build two more whale boats. One of these was probably the *Black Swan*, which was wrecked in 1830 in the Furneaux Group where it had gone sealing during the whaling off-season. The newspapers reported that, notwithstanding the 'glut' of whale oil from Greenland in the English markets, the price for VDL oil during 1827 had held, or even improved a little. Meredith's crews had taken four whales by the end of June and was short of casks, which seemed a perennial problem. Their end-of-year tally was eleven 'fish'.

A report from 1832 noted that about sixty tuns of whale oil were shipped from Oyster Bay in 1830, valued at about £900. Most of this would have been Meredith's.

In 1831 George Meredith's eldest son George acquired a block at Windlass Bay near the entrance to Spring Bay and established a base there. Newspapers continued to report on Meredith's whale catches, but also on other operators around south-east Tasmania who, by numbers, were becoming more successful. In November 1832, Meredith shipped 174 casks of oil and 140 bundles of whale bone to London.

The Maria Island convict settlement was closed in 1832 and Meredith senior afterwards leased the island for a year for £11, to be operated by George junior, who wrote in 1833 that they had caught four 'good large whales' and were again in need of casks. Another son, Charles, also assisted in the enterprise.

In 1833 Meredith produced ninety tuns of whale oil, but that year marked the last time there were newspaper mentions of Meredith being involved in the whale industry, notwithstanding that the total VDL catch was still growing year-on-year. After giving up his lease of Maria Island in 1834, it is likely that Meredith exited the whaling industry either in that year or 1835. The reason for this is unclear; no report of it has been found. It may have been that competition from other whalers, perhaps with larger and better ships, made the industry unprofitable for him. A compilation of annual returns from whaling in the Great Swan Port area in the 1830s shows a dramatic decline from 1831 to 1833 in boats employed, whales taken and the value of oil. Meredith may have sensed the decline and decided to exit, and/or his hand may have been forced by his son George falling out with him and leaving the area.

Meredith's involvement in the whaling and sealing industries from 1824 to about 1834 was critical to his prosperity and ability to involve himself in activities beyond his farm. It almost certainly enabled him to clear most if not all his debts in England and Wales, and also those he incurred after several legal judgements went against him in his first few years in VDL. Whaling would have also brought him additional 'respectability' in Hobart Town and increased his network of business contacts.

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