

From London to the South Seas: the last three journals kept by James Choyce on the whalers *Asp* (1814-16), *Eliza Frances* (1818-20) and *Sarah Ann* (1820-23)

James Choyce, whose last three journals have survived, had an eventful life. Their survival is unusual, as is the fact that his extensive memoirs were edited and published as "The Log of a Jack Tar". I was fortunate to be given a copy of this book " (an abbreviated second edition published by T. Fisher Unwin in 1905) by the owner of the journals soon after he lent them to me. We had met through a mutual interest in scrimshaw and its various forgeries.

Choyce came from a family with seven children, with a farm in Finchley, long ago engulfed by London. After his father's death in 1793 he left home and apprenticed himself to the Southern whaler *London* (m. Herner), aged 16 years. It was an enterprising move and the new fleet was still young. It was not created until America declared independence from Britain in 1776 and Britain was deprived of its colonial sperm oil and spermaceti (superior for lubricating and lighting). British whaling was traditionally in the Arctic regions during the summer, hunting mainly Arctic Right/Greenland whales for their blubber (for soap and lubrication) and baleen/whalebone with its many uses. Sperm whales need warmer waters and deep oceans, so a new British Southern whaling fleet emerged. It was greatly enhanced by a few American whaling families, especially from New England, most of whom brought their vessels and expertise and settled in London. They and many other seafarers faced extra hardship in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: revolutions in the Americas and Europe affected trade and many countries were at war, including Britain, France, Spain and America.

I have made no attempt to correlate Choyce's memoirs with the journals, although it would be interesting. With my interest mainly in whaling and the seamanship and ship-handling involved, Choyce's book provided evidence of his intelligence and reliability. With no formal education he nevertheless had a good English vocabulary (apart from spelling, but perhaps he preferred variety) and literary sense. He taught himself navigation to a high standard and also learned Spanish - so he was dedicated and persistent. He was interested in and observant of his surroundings. With a very retentive memory, resourceful, practical and quick to make assessments, he made some successful escapes from captivity. An ability to refuse aguardiente was also an advantage. He was also able to accept authority and take responsibility, as shown by his promotion after impressments into H.M. Navy, and progressing on from Mate on the *Asp*, Chief Mate on the *Eliza Frances* and finally to Master of the *Sarah Ann*.

Choyce's journals are specially valuable because they are presented as the most competent of ships' official logs. During 'sea time' - when not anchored, hove-to or actively whaling - day begins at noon. Latitudes are given almost daily and longitude by dead reckoning or astronomical observation. On the *Asp* and *Eliza Frances* the calculations are tabulated.

Samples from several sets of data have been recalculated by a colleague and found almost always to be dependable within one or two degrees. A comparison between Choyce's figures and the GPS data for notable coastal features are similarly consistent. Such records almost daily show with unusual accuracy the ship's itinerary, where whales were taken, other vessels encountered, provisions and other supplies acquired, etc.

From the number of other whalers encountered, their speakings, gams (exchange visits of boats with captains and mates) and keeping in company, both British and Americans mixed amicably, providing or exchanging gear or provisions, and the positions given in the Logs established another part of their itinerary

The Logs also show that whaling on the "Coast of Peru" could include most of Chile, Ecuador both North and South of the equator, and also the Galapagos Islands.

The *Asp* and *Eliza Frances* journals also record at least daily changes in the ship's course and in sea from wind and weather and the response in working the ship. They range from taking in or letting out reefs in sails, unbending (removing) sails, even yards and masts. Also noted are the continual repairs and replacement of wood, canvas, cordage and metal by the tradesmen - eg: carpenter, sailmaker, blacksmith and cooper.

James Choyce's work is not well known, but the kind soul who has offered to present this paper for me knows it well and may agree to answer questions. I love Australia, especially Tasmania, and am sorry not to be with you all.

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