

'Light airs from the south': Whalers' Logs in Pacific History

Research for a thesis¹ completed in 1989 examining the trading contacts between islanders of the Bismarck Archipelago and whalers during the 19th century, using and analysing the logs of mainly American whalers, revealed that there was little published information about the whaling era in the Bismarcks and a similar lack of coverage of these contacts in other parts of the Pacific. It also became apparent that the reason for this lack of coverage had nothing to do with the availability of the logs.

Virtually every American whaling ship log was systematically catalogued and microfilmed in the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau Microfilming Project in the early 1970s and was widely available shortly after that date. Yet only a few historians have made use of these; examples are Judith Bennett (1988) and Barrie Macdonald (1982) in their work on the Solomons and Kiribati and Tuvalu,² and Francis Hezel (1983) and David Hanlon (1988) in their monographs on the Caroline and Marshall Islands.³ It seems that the main reason for their infrequent use is the question of their value. Historians looking for either quantity or quality in the logs have been disappointed. Harry Maude in the inaugural *Journal of Pacific History* noted that 'whaling logs are among the most unrewarding source materials for historians as their compilers possessed an understandable fixation on details of wind, weather, and the whales themselves and if they also had an interest in the people of the islands they visited, it was seldom placed on record'.⁴ That is an understatement. When faced with the prospect of spending hundreds of hours interpreting the at times illegible handwriting,⁵ and reading interminable and tedious details of the prevailing wind of the day, it is little wonder that the activities and the impact of the whalers have not been a priority for Pacific historians. As Maude concluded, 'the journals of the sandalwood and beche-de-mer traders are far more informative mainly because their relations with the islanders were necessarily closer'.⁶ Historians naturally have concentrated on these sources and their emphases and conclusions have reflected this tendency. While it took Herman Melville 200 lucid pages to describe the chase, death, cutting and boiling of a whale, most whaling log keepers recorded the same act as 'killed a whale'. But such brevity is nothing by comparison with the lack of interest in the islands or islanders they were visiting. For the most part, the whalers had things on their minds other than the significance of the contact they were having with islanders. They were preoccupied with whales, competition, carcasses, the wind direction, what was for breakfast and getting to Honolulu.

But these logs, tedious as they are in isolation,⁷ contain *en masse* a wealth of information and through intensive searching it is possible to form a sufficiently detailed picture of the history of trading and contact situations. Furthermore, by using them in conjunction with other historical and non-historical sources it is possible to form a picture of the significance of the whalers, their trading and the impact it had on island societies.

¹ A.C. Gray, 'From Windfall to Copra: Trading Contacts in the Bismarck Archipelago during the Whaling Era', BA Hons thesis, University of Otago (Dunedin 1989).

² J. Bennett, *Wealth of the Solomons* (Honolulu 1988); B. Macdonald, *Cinderellas of the Empire: towards a history of Kiribati and Tuvalu* (Canberra 1982).

³ F.X. Hezel, *First Taint of Civilization: a history of the Caroline and Marshall Islands in pre-colonial days, 1521-1885* (Honolulu 1983); D. Hanlon, *Upon a Stone Altar: a history of the Island of Pohnpei to 1890* (Honolulu 1988).

⁴ H.E. Maude, 'The cruise of the whaler *Gypsy*', *Journal of Pacific History*, 1 (1966), 193.

⁵ The *Addison* is a fine example of the translation skills required: 'Sterring west, sevel of the Cat rate island in site at in one Canoes Cam of and trade a litle in ployed men sails'. 18 Sept. 1871, Nicholson Whaling Collection, Providence Public Library (Pacific Manuscripts Bureau, PMB 571).

⁶ See Alastair C. Gray, 'Trading contacts in the Bismarck Archipelago during the whaling era, 1799-1884', *Journal of Pacific History*, 34 (1999), 35-42.

⁷ Maude, 'The cruise', 193.

Through the use of 54 of the logs, this writer was able to show that, contrary to previous assumptions, when the first American whalers arrived in the Bismarck Archipelago, their whaling was not seasonal and consequently they were an all-year-round presence there. Moreover, the most predominant ground that was used ran down the coast of New Ireland from New Hanover to Buka Bay. The New Guinea grounds were used in conjunction with those elsewhere in the Pacific. But while there were centres of whaling activity, contact with islanders centred mostly on Buka Bay, the Trobriand Islands, Gower's Harbour and Port Hunter. This naturally changed over time, and the whalers' focus shifted to the northern side of New Ireland, presumably owing to mounting inflation at other centres as traders established stations. Throughout, contact occurred mostly at sea, although some islands traded solely on the beach. Barter was predominantly in root crops and a growing industry of handicrafts in return for iron.

With such potential for misunderstanding between islanders and whalers, it was shown that there were surprisingly few instances of violence, mainly because trade was so advantageous to the islanders and necessary for the whalers. It seems the islanders' dependence on iron grew, and this was highlighted by the tremendous distances they were prepared to travel to trade. From the use of ethnographical and anthropological works undertaken on the Bismarcks, in conjunction with the logs, it emerged that the introduction of iron had the effect of heightening inter-tribal jealousies and inflation, which manifested in cultural disorientation and alienation. Increased leisure time was spent vigorously pursuing traditional social expressions such as warfare and ritual. But even with such implications, whalers and the islanders they contacted developed a balanced system of trade that had benefits and stability for each side.⁸

Moreover, with the combination of these primary and secondary sources it was shown that the degree of economic symbiosis that whalers and islanders achieved was upset with the arrival of missionaries, traders and recruiters, and as the whalers' presence declined, their influence continued in the form of these other resident or semi-permanent Western groups. From 1870, in the period of more sustained contact, islanders chose to alter traditional economic practices and trading networks. New demands arose, from an initial interest in iron, to axes, knives, and eventually tobacco and muskets. The combined effects of land alienation, the beginnings of recruiting and the accumulation of power in 'big men' led to a general increase in tensions and violence between and within Island and European cultures. This was exacerbated by the fact that European governments could not or would not exercise any measure of control over their nationals.⁹

Some of the logs contain information of value beyond the Pacific historian. The log of the *Virginia* is filled with poems about New England, whalers and their wives, and while not of a quality to disturb any American literature textbook, they are true period pieces. Logs such as this reveal much about shipboard life,¹⁰ helping to modify the myth of the drunken, rapacious whaler.¹¹ Moreover, not all whalers were disinterested in the islanders, and some contain a treasure of social comment and humour. While in Guam, the log keeper of the *Virginia* noted:

⁸ Around 230 trading contacts that occurred in the archipelago were individually unexciting, and 48 other examples of contact as pieces of information were worthless. There is only so much the historian can do with 'light airs from the SE headed to SSW plenty of canoes along side'. *Massachusetts*, 13 Jan. 1851, off Bougainville, Kendall Whaling Museum, Sharon, Mass. (PMB 813).

⁹ See Gray, 'From Windfall to Copra'.

¹⁰ This is not to dispute the traditional view of shipboard life. The log of the *Sea Breeze* recorded William Johnson, the cook, who had previously tried to run away, was 'still in irons for setting fire to the ship'. A week later he freed himself, leapt overboard and was drowned. *Sea Breeze*, Sun. 24 Oct. 1858, Nicholson Whaling Collection (PMB 578).

¹¹ In the months between Jan. and Dec. 1859 the log keeper of the *Massachusetts* found God in the western Pacific: 'Light winds the first part. Headed to South & E. Long 154°32, Lat 1°20. Happy is the man whos stay and trust is in the Lord'. See Thur., 15 Nov. 1850, Kendall Whaling Museum (PMB 813).

I was much pleased with the appearance manners and customs of the people. It is quite a sight to see the people from the ship going on liberty with a roll of calico and a yard stick under their arm. Their yard sticks are apt to get quite short at the end of trade.

And when in Hawaii:

This is the only temperence port this side of the land. Its the still and quietest place that I ever saw there are 400 men going on shore on liberty every day and they have to come off sober. The duty on liquor is 5 dollars per gallon and this is the only way to put a stop to men drinking. There are some old toppers that have bought and drunked all the Cologne water in the place.¹²

Specifically the logs of the *A.R. Tucker*, *Virginia*, *Gay Head*, *Massachusetts* and *Palmetto* are particularly valuable mines of information.

But more than just a good read, or a passing comment on the state of the islands, a number of the logs have specific relevance to the historian looking at culture contact and impact. Logs and journals of whalers such as the *A.R. Tucker* throw doubt on their current reputation. This example highlights virtually every aspect of whaler and islander trading behaviour:

This morning we were quite near tao the island of New Hanover and before breakfast to canoe from the island full of natives had some coconute to trade so Daniel got up on the stern of the vessel traded with them gave a piece of iron hoop about a finger long for 3 or 4 coconuts. While he was trading they cried out from aloft 'there she blows' and Daniel dropped iron hoop & jumped into the rigging & went aloft the natives were very much frightened did not seem to know what it all meant. They soon left and went ashore. The natives of this island do not wear any clothing at all. They are a powerful set of men strong built but husband says he thinks they are a weak set. Our boats had not been long gone before the canoes came off again wanted us to trade but as we would not they soon left again, after dinner the canoes come off again some 15 or 20 of them loaded with coconuts & some few bananas wanted to trade very bad. There were so many of them and such a hard looking set and we had only 5 men aboard so he came down from aloft & tried to keep them from coming along side, he took a gun and pointed it at them, it was not loaded, one of them jumped into the water but he could not get them to go and the canoes were still coming from the beach so he had the ... and hoisted for the boats to come aboard for he did not know what kind of natives they were but they did not trouble us and after a while they left.¹³

Such an entry tells us not only when but where trading took place, since the ship's latitude and longitude recorded in the log can pinpoint the site. Furthermore, it reveals what was available and demanded for barter and the rate of exchange, and how keen the islanders were to trade with the whalers. Most importantly, it shows a situation of potential violence. Moreover, it reveals that by 1872 the islanders of New Hanover, who before that date had only two previous recorded contacts with whalers, were nevertheless familiar with firearms, indicating that this was certainly not first, second or even third contact for these people. On the British whaler *Coronet*, the surgeon Eldred Fysh had much to report:

These natives do not trouble themselves with the least picce of dress of any kind but they paint themselves, every where and the most predominant colours are white and red. All the men and boys have the pendulous portion of one or both ears boted by putting plugs into the orifice when first made they extend to a great size. I have seen the portion of the ear resting on the shoulder of several of them. They appear to fancy making themsleves look like barn door locks. For this reason the hair is cut off on each side of the head and in the middle from the forehead to the nape of the neck. It is allowed to grow about 1 inch broad & 2 high this is thickly painted red & looks just like a cocks comb some had one side of the face painted while the other a dark blue they were very fond of ornamenting their persons with bracelets & ... The former are made out of shells the latter of leaves and the seeds strung together. I saw no women belonging to New Ireland. I think their canoes very great canoes, it is some of them will carry 12 or 14 men each

¹² *Virginia*, 31 Oct. and 8 Nov. 1846, Kendall Whaling Museum (PMB 853).

¹³ *A.R. Tucker*, 3 Oct. 1872 at New Hanover, Kendall Whaling Museum (PMB 802).

and the carving about them is beautiful, how they do it I cannot tell, but I have seen cocks, lizards, snakes cut out of the solid wood as perfect and as good as any work our artists at home. They seem to be of a friendly disposition and not at all suspicious and are certainly one of the finest race of being ever beheld. Mostly six feet high and handsome of a dark copper colour. I was highly amused at seeing them catch sharks it is a simple plan and one which they perform with great dexterity. They have a cane on which is strung several tops and bottoms of the cocoa nut shell, this they shake up and down in the water & if a shark is within a mile of them he will surely make his appearance close to the place. They then pass over the cane towards the shark on which is hung several fish as soon as he sees them he makes for them as fast as he can the fish are then hauled up and a snare is passed over and through which the fish are again put into the water. When the shark follows the fish they are ... in towards the canoes & Master shark gets his head in the noose and as soon as he is in far they haul tight & he is fast they then haul him up to the side of the canoes & while one holds his head tight another dives under him and rips him. At the same time that two are hammering him about the head with their clubs.¹⁴

Entries such as this are hardly 'unrewarding'.

In some cases the logs of the whalers directly dispute the assertions of historians and anthropologists. For example, Richard Salisbury argued that the only recorded European to go on shore on New Britain was the trader Powell in 1878,¹⁵ apparently unaware of the contacts that whalers had with the islanders in 1828, 1844 and 1869, which could have been significant.¹⁶

Nevertheless, logs should be used with caution, not only because of the tendency of the homesick log keeper to exaggerate,¹⁷ but also because of inaccuracies in latitude and longitude, and most importantly because of the general absence in them of any islanders. Some whalers spent months in the Bismarcks and logged the number of whales caught but not the instances of contact with islanders which they must have had.¹⁸ Some logs should be used with caution because they are simply not believable. An example is the log of the *Massachusetts* which was in the Bismarcks 'off and on' for two years but according to the log only ever had 'contact'. It seems unlikely that there were always canoes alongside the ship and no trade occurred. It is more likely that the log keeper considered it of no interest to record any. Another example is the *A.R. Tucker*, where a journal kept on board by a Mrs Rickerton had 34 contacts recorded in the Bismarck Archipelago in 1872, while the ship's log itself recorded only three contacts during the same period. Furthermore, the two records differ as to the actual location of that contact.

A comment must be made regarding the indexing of the logs of the whalers. These are indexed in three publications edited by Robert Langdon, *American Whalers and Traders in the Pacific* (1978), *Thar She Went* (1979), and *Where the Whalers Went* (1984). As the titles suggest, these are invaluable in locating where the whalers went, but there are specific areas where they are lacking. In the introduction to the last mentioned, Langdon wrote, 'As in *Thar She Went* this volume gives the precise dates on which the ships indexed were in a Pacific port or at an island or in sight of them'.¹⁹ While being a necessary and invaluable resource, the indexes certainly cannot claim this. The experience of using them to trace the progress of American whalers in the Bismarck Archipelago reveals mistakes and omissions.

For example, and contrary to the information given in the indexes:

¹⁴ *Coronet*, Feb. 1838, Whaling Museum, Nantucket, Mass. (PMB 375).

¹⁵ R. Salisbury, *Vunani: economic transformation in a traditional society* (Melbourne 1970), 19.

¹⁶ See the logs of the *Lusitania*, 1828, Wellington, Alexander Turnbull Library; the *Clarice*, 1844, New Bedford Free Public Library, New Bedford, Mass. (PMB 319); and the *Avola*, 1869, Kendall Whaling Museum (PMB 803).

¹⁷ It is more likely, however, that embroidering stories happened afterwards in whalers' memoirs and novels rather than in the logs.

¹⁸ E.g., the *Peruvian* worked off Buka Bay, one of the epicentres of contact for whalers, but had only sporadic contact. The *Lion* spent a full month in the archipelago with no landings or sightings, the *Stephania* spent two weeks in Buka Bay but mentioned no contact, as did the *Olympia*.

¹⁹ R. Langdon (ed.), *Where the Whalers Went* (Canberra 1984), iv.

- The *Montezuma* (PMB 351) sighted Buka on 17 November 1853, and was at New Ireland until the middle of February 1854.
- The *Peruvian* (PMB 382) was in Bougainville on Tuesday 27 November 1855 and Buka Bay 29 November 1855.
- The *Lion* (PMB 875) was at Green Island on 9 September, at Buka on 10 September, and the Admiralties on 28 September.
- The *Eugenia* (PMB 785) actually sighted Bougainville on 26 September, Green Island on 8 October, and Feni on 12 October 1860.
- The *Mohawk* (PMB 390) was in the Archipelago in 1860–61 but the indexes missed that she was at St Matthus on 4 January 1861, Tabar on 5 January and the rest of that month along the coast of New Ireland and cruising to Buka.
- The *Sun* (PMB 894) made it to the Woodlark Islands on 18 not 23 October 1861.
- The *Massachusetts* (PMB 349) was actually at Buka on 16 February 1863.
- The *Avola* (PMB 803) had three full months of trading contacts in the archipelago which are not mentioned. This ship in January 1869 went to the Duke of Yorks, up the east coast of New Ireland to Tabar, the Admiralties and Lavongai (New Hanover). In February she went to Buka then back to Green Island and Feni. March was spent in Tanga, New Ireland, New Britain, the Duke of Yorks and back to New Britain before she spent April in the Ninigo group and finally sailed to western New Guinea for six months. The *Avola* returned in late 1869 to spend November in the Hermits, Admiralties, New Hanover and New Ireland and December at Tabar and Tanga, none of which is mentioned in the indexes.
- The *Avola* (PMB 803) in a later voyage spent from October 1875 to February 1876 cruising throughout the whole Archipelago. August 1876 was spent in the Admiralties and New Ireland, and December in New Ireland and Buka.
- The *Aurora* (PMB 310 and 311) was at Bougainville on 30 January 1870 and 21 February, Nuguria on 6 February, Green Island on 7 and 17 February, Feni on 8 February, Lihir on 9 February, Tanga on 13 and 16 February, and Buka on 18–19 February 1870.
- The *A.R. Tucker* (PMB 274) spent October 1872 in New Hanover, the south side of New Ireland and Duke of Yorks. It cruised between New Ireland, Green Island, Lihir, Tanga, and Buka in November 1872, and was at New Hanover from 3 to 8 December 1872.
- The *Arnolda* (PMB 721) was actually at New Ireland on 15 February 1874.
- The *Palmetto* (PMB 250) was in the Bismarcks for two months after the last entry in the indexes in early 1882, especially off Lihir, Tabar and Buka.

All of these examples contributed in some way to the material that was used for this writer's research. The fact that these instances are not mentioned, and that there may well exist a number of other omissions, should be kept in mind when using Langdon's indexes as a guide to where the whalers went in the Pacific.

For the Pacific historian, the records of a number of New England whalers are a much underused and invaluable resource, especially when used in conjunction with other primary and secondary material. With the logs of the whalers, it is not as much their fixation with wind and weather that is the problem, but the fact that they may have been embroidered and contain some geographic inaccuracies. As with all historical sources it is vital to keep their inherent limitations in mind.

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