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## THE SEALING AND WHALING INDUSTRY IN AUSTRALIA BEFORE 1850

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The sealing and whaling industry has been given a curious place in Australian history. Very rarely have any distinctions been made between the three branches of the industry, sealing, shore whaling, and deep-sea whaling, which had different methods of production, attracted different types of entrepreneurs and made different contributions to the growth of the Australian economy in different periods. Nor have the roles of the three major groups of participants, the English, the Americans, and the colonists, been clearly distinguished and compared, although their presence has often been noted. Geoffrey Blainey has partly reassessed the industry<sup>1</sup> and D. R. Hainsworth<sup>2</sup> has placed its early history in context as part of an indiscriminate search by ship-owners to find an export staple. Nevertheless the present popular view is of a uniformly adventure-packed and dangerous industry which, it is believed, was an important contributor to economic growth in Australia. In fact many of the published accounts of the Australian industry are written in terms of an adventure story about the period of stagnation, when the industry was no longer important for the then more prosperous colonies.

The economic history of Australia in the years immediately after 1788 was dominated by the penal colony's struggle to establish herself and become self-supporting. This struggle led to the emergence of energetic production and trading within a framework of governmental institutions and restraints as merchants sought products which could be exchanged for cargoes from China, India, or London. Sealing and whaling products were among them.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> G. Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance: how distance shaped Australia's history*, Melbourne 1966.

<sup>2</sup> D. R. Hainsworth, *Builders and Adventurers: the traders and the emergence of the colony 1788-1821*, Melbourne 1968.

<sup>3</sup> 'Among the disadvantages that this country at present labours under is the want of an exportable article for shipping that touch here, either for the India, China or Home Market. A few of the ships that have arrived have had some Home freight of whale oil and seal skins; but the latter trade is greatly on the decline, as the seals are all nearly destroy'd on the southern islands of this coast, or from the constant molestation they have suffer'd, have abandoned the islands. To get new cargo of skins, new and more distant islands must be discovered, and the consequent risk and expence must be so much increased that the amount of the cargoes will hardly pay the charges.' Surgeon Luttrell to Under-Secretary Sullivan, Sydney, 8 October 1807. *HRNSW*, VI, p. 293.

When Sydney was founded both the British and Americans were established in the sealing and whaling industry and ships from both countries were attracted to the South Seas fishery and subsequently to the new colony.<sup>4</sup> The industry exploited abundant natural resources using simple production techniques. The Australians were fortunate because seals abounded in the rocky islets in Bass Strait and whales visited the coast. The visiting ships brought the idea of developing exports from products of the fishery to the front of merchants' minds in the colony. Even with the limited capital and labour resources of the new colony it was possible to begin production of some fishery products at about the turn of the century.

By 1850 Australians had been established in all three branches of the industry but by then their activity was declining. The failure of sealing and whaling to secure an important place in Australian production and export has never seemed particularly surprising because the changing technology and investment opportunities of the nineteenth century precluded world-wide growth of the industry. Nevertheless, the Australians were withdrawing at a time when the Americans, the rival group with which the Australians would seem to have had most in common, were still building new vessels and dominating Pacific Ocean whaling.<sup>5</sup> The colonists still enjoyed some unique advantages and so it is necessary to find particular explanations for the decline of the industry in Australia.

## I

The reputed abundance of seals and whales close to the new settlement soon attracted visiting whaling and sealing ships; but at first the colonists themselves engaged in sealing only. It was the most easily developed branch of the industry making slighter demands on capital and labour and requiring less equipment than whaling.

The colonists hunted two types of seals: the elephant seal (or southern walrus) and the fur seal. The elephant seal was killed principally for its oil which was both consumed in the colony and exported. The hides could also be tanned for shoe leather. The fur seal was killed for its skin which was exported to England and to China.

<sup>4</sup> English and American ships were the most common visitors but French vessels are known from occasional references to have been whaling and visiting Australian ports, usually Hobart, during the 1830s and 1840s. J. R. Browne, *Etchings of a Whaling Cruise*, London 1846, estimated that there were about 70 French whalers in the Pacific. For the most recent statement of the reasons for American and British vessels see G. J. Abbott and N. B. Nairn, eds, *Economic Growth of Australia 1788-1821*, Melbourne 1969.

<sup>5</sup> The extent of American whaling is revealed in C. H. Townsend, 'The Distribution of Certain Whales as Shown by the Log Book Records of American Whaleships'. *Zoologica*, 1935, pp. 1-50.

The first necessary requirement for sealing was a small ship of between 40 and 90 tons which did not need any special fittings. The capital invested was small but even so it should not be considered as a capital sum invested uniquely in the industry. Sealing was a seasonal occupation and was usually confined to the spring and summer because the seals were then on their breeding grounds where they were hunted and the fairer weather permitted the sealing vessels to approach the rookeries. At other times of the year the ships were used for general mercantile purposes. In the 1800s they were often used for carrying coal and cedar from Newcastle and wheat and oil from Van Diemen's Land. For example, in 1805 the *Governor Hunter* and the *Raven* came in on 20 July from Bass Strait with skins and left for King's Town on 22 July to collect coals and cedar. Thus, it is difficult to determine how strong the stimulating effects on shipbuilding were from the sealing industry because sealing and general carrying were complementary activities in the early primitive economy.

Even cruising sealing vessels sought auxiliary cargoes. In 1809 Grono took the *Governor Bligh* on a cruise calling at southern New Zealand, Thompson's Sound, Dusky Bay and Foveaux Straits and returned with 10,000 seal skins after being away for nine months. He also brought back red and white pine logs from New Zealand. His cruise was in the nature of an exploratory venture to find commercial products.

Sealing entrepreneurs either dispatched their vessels on short trips to the islands to leave gangs of sealers or they sent them on longer cruises calling at several hunting grounds. The choice depended upon the remoteness of the sealing grounds, the prevalence of seals, and the anticipated regularity of visits from ships which could take stores to the gangs and collect the skins. Very little equipment was required in either case. The sealing vessels usually carried a number of small boats piled on the deck of the larger vessel which were used to ferry the men and sealing products from the island to the vessel. Cruising vessels, which usually carried about 20 sealers, had six small boats to use as tenders. A description of a semi-permanent establishment at Macquarie Island in 1820<sup>6</sup> makes it clear that the men were virtually self-sufficient and that their activities stimulated very little production in other sectors of the economy. They had built themselves a small hut about 20 feet long and 10 feet wide of sea elephant skins and grass. They burnt fat of sea elephants for fuel and lived on food hunted or gathered on the island.

Sealing activities were carried out at lonely spots and rarely led to

<sup>6</sup> K. Bowden, *Captain Kelly of Hobart Town*, Melbourne 1964, p. 14, quoting from McNab, *Murihuki and the Southern Islands*. The description is substantially the same as an earlier one of 1807 quoted in Hainsworth, *Builders and Adventurers*, p. 101.

the development of other types of settlement or industry on the sealing grounds. In the first decade of the century, with the near-exhaustion of seals in Bass Strait and the opening up of new grounds in New Zealand and on Macquarie and Campbell Islands, the organized groups of sealers were withdrawn from Bass Strait and adventurers took their place. The island dwellers formed small colonies: there were only eight or nine men with their families on Kangaroo Island which had the largest settlement, and they sold their seal skins to vessels passing from Hobart Town and Port Dalrymple for slop clothing and spirits. But they achieved only a subsistence standard of living and the fact that some of them were escaped convicts from Van Diemen's Land may explain why they were attracted to the islands.

The seals were clubbed or stabbed to death at their most vulnerable times while they were coming ashore or while they slept. The labour force did not need any particular skills, although it did need strength, and it did not work with complicated equipment. The skins were either salted or pegged out to dry (initially sealers experienced difficulties in obtaining adequate supplies of salt and this may have determined the method of treating the skins). The preparation of seal oil required a little more equipment because the blubber had to be removed from under the tough hide and melted down in large kettles and then stored in casks. But there is no evidence that these were made in Australia although coopers may have been employed to repair casks.

The only product which sealers required in the processing of skins was salt and it is difficult to see that their demand for it had strong stimulating effects on the economy. Salt was clearly an extractive product depending heavily upon natural processes for its manufacture. Moreover, it seems that colonial sealers often merely dried the skins and offered an inferior product, unsalted skins, on the market.<sup>7</sup>

The sealing entrepreneurs provided some working capital in that at the beginning of each season they provided slop clothing and stores for the gangs. These counted as advances and were deducted when the men were paid at the end of the season. The method of payment reduced the demand on an entrepreneur's liquid funds for, apart from advances, the men received their share only when they returned with the sealing products. It also acted as an incentive for hard work by the men. Sealers worked on a lay or share system: usually an inexperienced man received a one-seventy-fifth lay (i.e. 1 skin in every 75 taken by the gang, or one-seventy-fifth of the oil) and an experienced man worked for one-sixtieth of the catch. The men sold their share to their employer at

<sup>7</sup> Capt. W. Wilson (Campbell's agent) wrote to Sir Joseph Banks on 27 June 1806 that all except about 300 of the 14,000 seal skins in *Lady Barlow* were dry when they reached London for want of salt. *HRNSW*, VI, p. 101.

a price agreed before the start of the season, which was not necessarily the market price. Both entrepreneurs and sealers shared the gamble for high returns from sealing even if the division was in the entrepreneur's favour.

Sealing was first organized by Sydney men, who were later joined by entrepreneurs from Van Diemen's Land. But Sydney remained the entrepôt port for seal skins even after the collection of skins and oil was organized from Van Diemen's Land because of the larger volume of shipping calling there. It was this aspect of sealing which contributed most to the development of the early Australian economy. The extension of trading facilitated by exports of seal products helped to establish commercial relationships between Sydney and London and India. Expenditure by the Commissariat provided sterling income to the colonists, but it did not establish trading bonds between colonial and London commercial houses as transactions in sealing products did.

Sealing did not greatly encourage diversification and growth in the economy because its backward linkages were weak, except possibly to shipbuilding. It is difficult to be certain about how far sealing affected shipbuilding because the vessels were not used only for this purpose. Moreover some of them were built by sealers out of season in isolated areas and their construction would have little immediate and direct effect on growth. There were no forward linkages to manufacturing.

There were some minor benefits from sealing. It widened the employment spectrum and provided work for native-born men with little training and capital, many of whom would have found it difficult to establish themselves as farmers and tradesmen. It also resulted in knowledge being acquired about the coast and the opportunities for pursuing whaling operations. The way in which it enlarged shipping and improved communications between Sydney and Van Diemen's Land has already been observed. Nevertheless the ability of the sealing industry to sustain economic growth was limited.

## II

Bay or shore whaling, the second distinguishable branch of the fishery in which colonists engaged, was organized in a more complex manner than sealing and it required more specialized and extensive equipment. Therefore it made greater demands for capital initially. But like sealing it depended upon the exploitation of locally abundant resources and it was also a seasonal occupation since the main species hunted, the black or right whale,<sup>8</sup> passed the southern coastline during two periods each winter.

<sup>8</sup> For a classification of whales found in Australian coastal waters see W. L. Crowther, *PP Roy Hist Soc Tas*, 1919, pp. 131-2, and for a description of the life cycle of the whales see Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance*, p. 102.

Once it was known that whales visited a bay the requirements for successful bay whaling were a high vantage point for the lookout, swift whaling boats organized in parties, shelter for the crews, facilities for cutting up the whales, preparing the oil and storing it, and a skilled team of whalers and workmen. These requirements could be met in two distinct ways: a permanent whaling station could be built on the shore or a whaling ship could visit the bay in the season. The bays in which permanent stations were established were also suitable for use as ports for the hinterland: Twofold Bay in New South Wales was an access port for the Bega and Monaro districts and Portland Bay in Victoria serviced the area behind it.

A permanent whaling station required substantial buildings to prepare and store the oil, and accommodation for about thirty men. The oil deteriorated unless it was suitably housed and this form of whaling, unlike sealing, did lead to some construction. A competitive station had at least three or four boats to make up a party and some maintained a double party of six boats. Each boat required a harpooner, a boat-steerer, and not less than four pulling hands. In case of sickness or casualties it was necessary to have three or four spare pulling hands at each station. Apart from the crews a station required at least one cook, one steward and one cooper. At some whaling stations a jetty was constructed to facilitate the cutting up of the whales and a lookout post was built at a high point. The accommodation sheds had to be close to the shore and the whale boats because boats had to be away immediately a whale was sighted. This also meant that the crews could not be employed on additional tasks during the season. Later when whaling declined and competition between rival parties disappeared crews were otherwise engaged as, for example, at Twofold Bay at the end of the nineteenth century.

The organization of the crew in the boats was similar for bay whaling and deep-sea whaling. The steersman or headsman directed the boat from the stern and instructed the harpooner to leave his rowing position and throw the harpoon when he considered the whale could be attacked. The steersman came forward at the appropriate time to lance and kill the whale. The harpoon acted as a barb in the blubber of the whale and it was attached to at least 300 feet of whale line because whales usually ran at high speed and dived to great depths after being harpooned. Only after the whale had tired (by which time the boat could be a long way from its station) did the steersman come forward to kill it. This could require several attacks before the whale died and at this time, as well as when the whale was being harpooned, the boat was in danger of an attack from it. The whale boats carried survival stores which included food and lighting.

The steersman and the harpooner needed to be highly skilled and experienced. In Australia problems occurred in finding adequately skilled men which resulted in the payment of higher shares and quicker advancement than for English whalers. Some men acquired their skill on deep-sea whaling vessels or in sealing and then became shore whalers. Companies engaged in whaling such as the South Australian Company found it particularly difficult to obtain skilled managers. At Twofold Bay in the 1830s the Imlays, and later Benjamin Boyd, solved the labour problem by employing Aboriginal labour as pulling hands because some unskilled pulling hands could be used in a boat.

Whaling was only one of the interests usually pursued by entrepreneurs and the establishment of permanent shore stations suited men who had other interests in the same area. They were able to have all their operations supervised and make more efficient use of buildings. Some shore stations were established by people with nearby grazing interests. The Hentys had a station at Portland Bay, the Imlays and Boyd had stations at Twofold Bay. There were clearly advantages in having a coastal base if it could be made to be an income-earning base. The combination of whaling and grazing activities also attracted more shipping or permitted the fuller use of an entrepreneur's own vessel. One attractive feature of whaling was the prospect of occasional high returns but even a modestly successful season would have greatly helped the liquidity position of an entrepreneur whether the oil went to a merchant in Sydney or in London. In 1837 it was expected that the South Australian Company could not hope for immediate monetary returns from any South Australian source other than sheep and whaling, and great hopes were falsely placed on the latter. Perhaps whaling activities were an attractive reassurance to British investors who could point to successful British pursuit of whaling and argue that the colonists must enjoy some advantages from being closer to the southern fishing grounds.

The second method of organizing bay whaling was to use whaling vessels which visited a bay that black whales were known to frequent each season. This method was often used by men with both mercantile and whaling interests, such as Robert Campbell (Junior), who sent the Sydney whaler, *Hind*, captained by Blenkinsop to Encounter Bay in 1837. The ships provided the same accommodation and facilities as shore stations did and used the same sort of equipment. On occasions gangs were put ashore and rough shelters for the men and the boats were constructed while the vessel remained in the bay. Whaling boats were dispatched after a whale had been sighted by a lookout from the masts of the ship and the whale was towed back to the ship by the boats for flensing and drying-out. The vessels could also be used for colonial

traffic in other cargoes during the rest of the year.

A third method used was a combination of the more or less permanent shore station and the cruising vessel. It was particularly suitable for the first years in which whaling was attempted in a particular bay and it was the method used by the South Australian Company in its first years at Encounter Bay. In 1840 they had some permanent buildings on the shore and they used a whaling vessel to provide the facilities for cutting up whale carcasses.

Bay whaling was developed in two distinct periods by Australian entrepreneurs. It was first begun on the Derwent in 1805 and it slowly spread to many bays in Van Diemen's Land. For nearly twenty years it was hardly extended but shortly after the Bigge Inquiry (where Robert Campbell had told Bigge that black whale oil was chiefly collected at the Derwent) it was revived and extended to New Zealand and to the bays close to the newly opened-up areas along the southern coast of Australia.

In the first period of whaling the entrepreneurs who engaged in whaling were most often commercial speculators and merchants whose activities centred on Sydney or Hobart. In the late-1820s and 1830s a new combination of grazier and whaler emerged. The extension of bay whaling in the second period may have been stimulated by increased profitability because of the reduction in the higher duties paid earlier on colonial produce (from 1823 these duties were reduced and by 1825 colonial and British oil paid the same duty). But it was probably affected more positively by changes in the supply of capital. First, whaling itself may have attracted capital from Britain, which made extension possible. Second, and perhaps more effectively, borrowers who used the larger part of their loan funds for comparatively long-run investment in grazing, may have established whaling in the hope of providing income to service their debt. For only comparatively small capital sums were needed to establish whaling which carried with it the chance that high returns might be earned.

Bay whaling required working capital for the season in that stores were needed for the stations, and clothing, and advances had to be provided for the men. These came from the entrepreneur who presumably could obtain credit from suppliers on the expectation of the sale of his future whaling products. As with sealing, the payment of wages as a share of the catch at the end of each season helped entrepreneurs to share the risk with their employees and also made less demands on their liquid cash positions than the regular payment of wages would have done.

Whaling did not lead to the establishment of manufactories in the colonies to provide whaling equipment. All bay whaling establishments



faced difficulties in obtaining equipment, and its high prices and the difficulty of obtaining supplies led to complaints about the higher costs of whaling in Australia.<sup>9</sup> The South Australian Company sought to solve these problems in 1836 by purchasing its equipment in England and sending it to the colony in the Company's own vessels.

The peak period of whaling came twenty years after the peak period of sealing and it is tempting to use the natural explanation for the development of the industry. It would then be argued that because the animals were killed at breeding and nursing times regeneration did not take place and sealing declined first and whaling took its place. In turn whaling declined because of a falling off in the number of whales visiting the coast. While it is true that there was a falling off in the number of whales it is not the only explanation that can be offered for the decline in bay whaling.

The depression of the 1840s dislocated the financial affairs of many whaling entrepreneurs and many of them were forced to withdraw from whaling. Kelly of Hobart<sup>10</sup> was an example: he was also a land speculator, he farmed, and he traded as a merchant with John Gore and Co. in London. At the onset of the depression he was running large bank overdrafts to meet his London accounts. He was ruined not so much by the failure of his whaling enterprises as by his other activities. However a poor whaling season failed to provide funds to compensate for his other difficulties and he was declared bankrupt and withdrew from whaling.

The investment opportunities and the expected income from them altered: wool-growing became established and whaling was no longer an attractive supplementary activity. In some cases the whaling stations were not deserted but they passed to men possessing smaller amounts of capital who ran them on a modified scale which was more suitable for the small number of whales then appearing. At Twofold Bay the Davidson family combined farming and whaling after the withdrawal of the Imlays and the Boyds, but they limited their whaling to those occasions when a whale entered the bay and they did not employ a regular lookout. The decline of bay whaling was affected by conditions outside the industry as well as by changes in the supply of the raw materials the industry depended upon.

Bay whaling in the first two decades of the nineteenth century helped economic development in much the same way as sealing: it provided export earnings and required the development of mercantile services, and it supported larger shipping and better communications. From the

<sup>9</sup> For complaints in the 1820s see *Bigge Report Appendix, Bonwick Transcript*, pp. 3867, 6147-8.

<sup>10</sup> K. Bowden, *Captain Kelly of Hobart Town*, pp. 90-3.

mid-1820s it had the additional effect of helping to sustain geographical expansion. Its own growth depended upon opening up new areas and by the middle of the century there were few new suitable areas left. Its impact on economic growth was limited because it made few demands on other sectors of the economy; it led to no processing of its products and it attracted only a small number of immigrants.

### III

Deep-sea or ocean whaling needed larger and better vessels, more experienced labour, larger sums of capital and more (if similar) equipment than the other two branches of the industry.<sup>11</sup> Usually only the sperm whale was hunted, and its habits meant that whaling was done well out to sea. Deep-sea whaling was operated separately from bay whaling for several reasons. Among these reasons were that the larger vessels would have been endangered if they had gone inshore to hunt black whales and that sperm oil fetched higher prices and entrepreneurs and crews with suitable equipment preferred the more valuable catch.<sup>12</sup> Further, oil was run down to casks in the hold and it would have been difficult to keep the two types of oil separate if whalers had gone after both types of whales indiscriminately.

The labour and capital requirements made early colonial participation in deep-sea whaling difficult, despite the advantage of closeness to the southern whaling grounds. Apart from some instances of management of English vessels, the colonists only engaged substantially in deep-sea whaling from the 1820s.<sup>13</sup> Even then, colonial whaling did not compare in scale with British and American. Colonists continued to find it difficult to obtain adequately skilled labour and complained of high costs, among other factors. They claimed that they paid higher shares to their crews than did the British.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> It has been estimated that Kable and Underwood had £12,500 invested in the sealing trade in 1805 when they owned four vessels (K. Bowden, *Captain Kelly of Hobart Town*, p. 5). At a later date it was estimated that the average cost of an ocean whaling vessel was £8,000 and that successive refits would have been £5,000 (C. Enderby, *Proposals for Re-Establishing the British Southern Whale Industry*, 1847, pp. 8-9).

<sup>12</sup> It was possible for ships to fill up with black whale oil in the Australian colonies if they had an incomplete cargo at the end of their cruise; for example in 1822 the *Seringapatam* filled up at the Derwent with black oil.

<sup>13</sup> 'I do not think that there were more than two vessels in the trade, out of Sydney, when I arrived in the colony for the first time in 1823. In the beginning of the year 1826 there were five or six, but in August 1830 there were twenty-six.' John Dunmore Lang, *An Historical and Statistical Account of New South Wales*, London 1834, Vol. I, pp. 307-8.

<sup>14</sup> Witnesses complained to Bigge about this although no mention was made of the price agreed between crew and owner. Robert Campbell provided a statement of shares on two voyages. *Bigge Report Appendix*, pp. 5228, 6151.

Thus, even after 1820 many vessels that operated from the colonies were in combination with British firms on part-ownership or management basis.<sup>15</sup> Richard Jones, who claimed to have founded Australian deep-sea whaling, was a part-owner in British vessels in the 1820s. Partly owned Australian vessels usually cruised for less than twelve months and returned to Sydney after each run to leave their cargoes. After several seasons they sailed to England with the products from the short trips. The system made limited demands for warehousing because oil had to be kept in a cool and damp environment or else the casks leaked and the quality deteriorated.

Both the colonists and the British benefited from shared ownership. The local entrepreneurs (who often also engaged in sealing) possessed knowledge and experience of conducting vessels in the southern fishery, and this supplemented the skills of the British captains.<sup>16</sup> They were able to organize fresh supplies profitably and crew replacements when necessary. The colonists obtained access to British capital. It was common for whaleships to carry out a cargo to the colonial part-owner (for example in 1820 *Woodlark*, in which Richard Jones had an interest, arrived with a general cargo for Jones, Riley, and Walker). There were wider benefits for the economy too because the whaleships increased the shipping services available and when they returned they carried exports. The greatest advantage for the British was that smaller vessels could be used for shorter cruises, which meant that less capital was tied up and that the crews suffered less primitive conditions. Also the ships could be fitted out in England and experienced crew initially engaged there.

Colonial whaleships travelled widely throughout the southern fishery but they were smaller (only about 200 tons) than the British and American ships (at least 300 tons) and they cruised for shorter periods; the independent British and American ships stayed out three or four years to get a full cargo. All whaleships carried all the equipment and provisions (save for fresh provisions) that they needed from their home ports. They also carried coopers and carpenters to do their own repair work, and it was the practice for crew to help the craftsmen during the

<sup>15</sup> At the Bigge Inquiry Hook, an employee of Campbell's, replied to a question about spermaceti oil being obtained off the coast: 'Never by any of the colonial vessels that I have heard of. But some English vessels in which Mr. Campbell was connected, after touching here, and landing their outward bound cargoes, and taking refreshments proceeded to the sperm whale industry.' *Bigge Report Appendix*, p. 3841. The first of these vessels would seem to be the *Spring Grove*, which sailed from England in 1810. The agent and part-owner in England was William Wilson.

<sup>16</sup> Logbooks of whaleships included carefully-kept records of the success of all ships and of the places and times of year whales had been taken.

trip.<sup>17</sup> The self-sufficient nature of whaling meant that it had little effect on manufacturing.

Australian deep-sea whaling expanded in the 1830s while British whaling declined,<sup>18</sup> and its expansion may have been facilitated by the availability of cheap vessels.<sup>19</sup> Also, the adverse profitability of operating vessels independently from Britain, which led to partnership arrangements, would have encouraged colonial activities. Colonial deep-sea whaling became possible because of the stage of development the economy had reached. Australia was attracting overseas capital and deep-sea whaling was one direction in which it flowed. Because the capital asset was physically transferred when the ship sailed to the colonies it was a form of foreign investment which produced little growth directly; nevertheless, it earned an overseas income, part of which accrued to Australians.

The decline of colonial deep-sea whaling in the 1840s cannot be conveniently blamed upon a falling off in supply of the animals hunted. It was more clearly derived from internal economic changes than the decline of sealing and bay whaling. In the short run, the dislocating effects of the depression affected the entrepreneurs. Many of them experienced credit difficulties from their mercantile and grazing concerns; some disappeared through bankruptcy, others sought to sell their ships in foreign ports to improve their cash position. In the long run, when the effects of the depression were over, changes in investment opportunities and expected returns operated against whaling. Thus in 1847, when Enderby considered re-establishing the British southern fishery in the Australian colonies, he noted that fishing was not the only source of profitable investment and that there were inducements to transfer capital from whaling.<sup>20</sup> In the more prosperous colonies, wool-growing appeared as a more certain and reliable source of income. After the gold discoveries prospecting provided the same sort of windfall gambling. By then the wool exports and the migrant flow to the gold-

<sup>17</sup> In 1832 the following work was done on the English whaleship *Elizabeth* on the voyage to New Zealand: 16 August, Got up casks from main hatch way to be repaired; 17-22 September, Employed variously in preparing Oakum for careening; 24-29 September, Carpenter caulking the decks; 31 October, Employed painting the ship inside and out; 1 November, Finished painting ship and masts. On the return trip via Cape Horn in 1834 the cooper made buckets and tubs, the carpenter repaired the boats, the chain cables were inspected and the armourer examined the shackles. H. Ransome, *Log-book of the Whaling Ship Elizabeth, 1831-34*, ms., Mitchell Library.

<sup>18</sup> It has been estimated that in 1847 there were only 36 British whalers left. C. Enderby, *Proposals*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>19</sup> The South Australian Company bought the *Sarah and Elizabeth* after it had returned unsuccessfully from the northern whale fisheries; it was reported as arriving in the colony with rotten timbers.

<sup>20</sup> C. Enderby, *Proposals*, p. 25.

fields ensured adequate shipping, and that fringe benefit of whaling disappeared.

#### IV

Colonially organized sealing and whaling was most important for Australian economic growth because it contributed to the growth of national product and overseas earnings and permitted imports. But there were also some benefits from the independent British and foreign (particularly American) activities in the southern fishery.

First, the visiting whaleships and sealers demonstrated how the colonists could exploit their abundant natural resources. Some men left the visiting ships, to provide a nucleus of skilled men in the colonial industry, and from the visitors the colonial merchants learned about possible markets for their products.

Second, an important aspect of the early American visits (which declined and were rare after the 1800s) was that of trade. The ships often called at Sydney on the way to China and frequently carried cargoes of imports to sell. They also bought, to carry to China, some of the seal skins collected by the colonists. It is true that the threatened colonial competition from Americans sealing in the Bass Strait, and the competition to the British from American imports into the colony, were matters of official British concern and attempted regulation; so, too, was direct colonial trade with China and India which resulted. Nevertheless, American imports provided scarce goods in the early years, and the direct eastern trade permitted, in effect, cheaper imports.

Third, when few other vessels were regularly attracted to the run in the years after settlement, the visiting whale and seal ships provided general shipping services for the colony. They carried colonial imports and exports and correspondence, whaleships with incomplete cargoes, like returning transport ships, were able to take the small mixed bundles of goods making up colonial exports before the spectacular growth of wool exports in the 1830s. (In 1823 exports included wool, logs and planks of colonial timber, coconut oil, bullock horns, coal, bark and tree gum—anything which could be produced in the colonies or obtained by trade in the South Sea area, for which an overseas market could be found.)

The French whaleships probably had least impact on the Australian colonies, although in the 1850s their use of Hobart as a refreshing port provided a small export sale for that colony's farm produce. Generally, sales to visiting whaleships were limited to fresh supplies; this boosted local merchants' ready cash but did not encourage the establishment of supplementary industries.

Sydney did not attract all the ships working in the southern fishery

because it had certain disadvantages for the American and British visitors; some were effective only in the early years after settlement but other disadvantages continued to operate up to 1850. In the earlier years port duties were high and vessels were cleared slowly, and there was always the fear that crews might desert. Nevertheless some British whalers, as well as American, called at Sydney. In the early years some of them carried convicts and goods to Sydney, and used it as a refreshing port while cruising. It would seem that encouragement by the governors and commercial contacts, arrangements entered into, and the experiences and preferences of masters and owners, determined the use of Australian ports. Generally the Australian economy was not directly or greatly stimulated by visiting whaling and sealing ships, but there were some contributions to growth from their visits.

The volume and value of colonial fishery products is not easily available for the whole period discussed. The early records of shipping movements in New South Wales suggest that there were no exports of colonial products before 1800, although sealing and whaling products were taken from the South Seas by British and American vessels which called at Sydney. (Eight British or American vessels entered Sydney carrying sealing and whaling products before 1800).<sup>21</sup> For the period 1800-6, the report of the naval officer included quantitative records for Sydney of imports and exports of seal skins and whale oil.<sup>22</sup> These suggest that the colonists engaged primarily in sealing, modestly in bay whaling, and did not engage in deep-sea whaling. The British were mainly interested in deep-sea whaling (taking about 2,800 tuns of sperm oil out of Sydney); they made small catches of black whales (exporting 420 tuns of oil compared with the colonists' 520 tuns); and they were less active than the colonists in sealing (exporting 14,750 skins while the colonists exported 98,280 skins).

Colonial sea-based activity was limited to sealing by the small size and small number of colonial vessels. The production of black whale oil resulted from the establishment of a whaling station on the Derwent in 1805; this promptly attracted competition from other whaling entrepreneurs. More seal skins were taken by colonial vessels than were exported in British or colonial ships. Although the difference could be explained by some being used in the colony for shoe leather, it is more probable that the excess was carried away by American vessels and so did not find its way into this particular record.

There are no official annual records for the exports of New South

<sup>21</sup> J. S. Cumpston, *Shipping Arrivals and Departures, Sydney 1788-1825*, Canberra 1963.

<sup>22</sup> *HRA*, I, v, p. 769.

## *The Sealing and Whaling Industry in Australia Before 1850*

Wales again until the *Statistical Returns* begin in 1822.<sup>23</sup> Up to 1850 Sydney was the major whaling port of the Australian colonies, and its exports of whaling products exceeded those of Van Diemen's Land.<sup>24</sup> By 1850, however, when whaling was declining throughout the colonies, Van Diemen's Land was exporting more whaling products than New South Wales. The latter's whaling exports were then about 2 per cent of their declared value in the peak export year of 1840, while those from Van Diemen's Land were about 35 per cent of the declared value in the peak year of 1837.<sup>25</sup>

Some doubts have been raised about the legitimacy of colonial whaling export figures. It has been suggested that the colonial production figures are too high because the geographic origin of some oil was the New Zealand coast.<sup>26</sup> The production of whaling products was often carried out well out at sea and their source was rarely the territorial waters of the country from which the investment and labour came. The value was added as a result of the organization of the cruise and the coastal area in which the whales were taken was not relevant.

The figures for the colonial production of sperm whale oil may present a special problem. It is not known exactly how much colonial entrepreneurs contributed to the part-ownership. One piece of evidence, an invoice referring to the catch of a vessel for which Robert Campbell acted as agent in 1820, suggests that the British owner was paid his share in England by a private bill which was not drawn on the Australian agent according to a previously agreed set of prices.<sup>27</sup> In this discussion it has been assumed that the partly owned or colonially managed boats amounted to a form of foreign investment and that the share paid to the British owner was similar to remitted profits. When the ships returned permanently to Britain, the investment was withdrawn. It should not be

<sup>23</sup> The questions asked by Commissioner Bigge and the evidence of people in the sealing and whaling trade suggest that there were no official records then available. J. S. Cumpston, *Shipping Arrivals and Departures*, gives the cargoes leaving Sydney but there is no uniform record of quantities and it is impossible to know how much was a result of colonial production. After 1822, except for 1824, the quantities of exports from New South Wales are available. For most years the values are also given, but these values are specious and subsequently, in 1858, the Government Statistician warned against accepting them. There is no way of knowing if the values put on the exports in Sydney were proved optimistic or pessimistic when the products were sold in London.

<sup>24</sup> South Australia and Port Phillip never rivalled Sydney or Van Diemen's Land, although they both had bay whaling stations. The South Australian Company also had sea-going whaleships but they appear to have been managed from Sydney and their production may have been recorded as New South Wales production.

<sup>25</sup> Based on the declared values of the *Statistical Returns* of the two colonies.

<sup>26</sup> E. J. Tapp, *Early New Zealand: a dependency of New South Wales 1788-1841*, Melbourne 1958.

<sup>27</sup> *Bigge Report Appendix*, p. 6149.

considered that all the sales of the sperm oil recorded as colonially produced counted as a credit item in the balance of payments.

It has also been suggested that some oil exported as colonial had been taken by foreign ships whose captains sought to escape British duties. Doubtless some small quantities of oil were sold to make urgent purchases in the colonies but the prices of fishery products in Van Diemen's Land and Sydney were too low to attract captains and crew to sell there to escape British duties. Colonial prices were consistently lower than British prices for both types of oil and the difference was greater than the duty paid by foreign oil entering Britain. Between 1800 and 1842 the average British price for black whale oil was £35 per ton and the average price for sperm whale oil was £84 per ton.<sup>28</sup> In 1820 the price agreed to be paid in Sydney for black whale oil was £18 per ton to a British owner and £23 per ton to the crew.<sup>29</sup> These prices were probably below the prevailing market price for the oils in Sydney.<sup>30</sup> The best comparison of the British and colonial prices for sperm whale oil available is for 1832 when the British price was stated to be £83 per ton and the Sydney price £35 per ton.<sup>31</sup> Sydney merchants dealing in whaling products were in a fortunate position for neither their crews nor small whaling masters had an alternative buyer unless they could hold over their products until a visiting whaleship wished to purchase to complete a cargo. It is not surprising that merchants should offer a low price and so be within the price fluctuation which fishery products suffered in the international market. The low colonial prices do suggest that production costs were small, despite the complaints by whaling masters that they paid excessively for their supplies and their labour. The official records of the colonies suggest that there was only a small volume of purchases from foreign ships. The shipping records of New South Wales also suggest that its whaleships cruised and fished rather than sailed out to collect foreign oil.<sup>32</sup> It seems reasonable to accept the declared colonial production of fishery products and to attempt to assess their contribution to economic growth in the early Australian colony.

<sup>28</sup> Enderby, *Proposals*, p. 15.

<sup>29</sup> *Bigge Report Appendix*, p. 6149.

<sup>30</sup> The agreed price for whalebone on this occasion was £20 per ton. Admittedly the price for whalebone fluctuated widely but seventeen years later it was bought in Sydney for £70 (Alexander Brodie Spark, *Diary*, entry for 6 December 1837) and the average British price for the whole period was £90.

<sup>31</sup> H. Ransome, *Log-book of the Whaling Ship Elizabeth*, entry for 22 March 1832.

<sup>32</sup> The *Statistical Returns of Van Diemen's Land* in 1853 included a summary table of sales by foreign ships of oil and whalebone between 1844 and 1853. There was no regular pattern of sales: the lowest value was recorded in 1851 (£103) and the highest in 1853 (£3,840).



In the period after 1822 the official records for New South Wales permit some comparisons to be made between the level of production of three branches of the fishery. Although the number of seal skins exported annually was not as high in the 1820s as it had been between 1800 and 1806, it was still in some years the most important or only export from the fishery. As the number of seal skins exported declined the exports of both types of whale oil increased. From the late 1820s there was a revival in black whale exports and the volume of its exports grew. Sperm whale exports grew after 1825 and in both volume and value the growth was faster than that of black oil exports. At no time after 1826 did the export income from black whale oil reach the level of income from sperm whale oil because although the prices of both fluctuated according to supply and demand sperm whale oil was always considerably more valuable.

While the income from sealing and whaling products grew throughout the 1830s and only fell noticeably after 1842, the industry's relative importance in the New South Wales economy declined in the 1830s.<sup>33</sup> The accompanying table gives the value of fishery exports, wool exports and total exports at five-yearly intervals after 1830.

NEW SOUTH WALES: EXPORTS, SELECTED YEARS, 1830-50

	Fishery products		Wool		Total Export Value (£)
	Value (£)	Per cent of total exports	Value (£)	Per cent of total exports	
1830	59,471	42	34,907	25	141,461
1835	180,349	26	299,587	44	682,193
1840	224,144	16	566,122	40	1,399,687
1845	96,804	6	1,009,242	65	1,555,986
1850	29,368	1	1,614,241	67	2,399,580

Source: *Statistical Returns* of New South Wales 1858. The summary table published in this *Return* differs from the annual records.

Broad changes in the composition of fishery production are indicated in the following summary:

	Sperm whale Oil (tuns)	Black whale Oil (tuns)
1830	983	98
1835	2,898	1,159
1840	1,854	4,297
1845	1,348	549
1850	576	16

These figures do conceal wide annual fluctuations in production.

<sup>33</sup> It declined in Van Diemen's Land to a lesser degree because wool exports did not increase as sharply as in New South Wales and whaling did not decrease so sharply.

Apart from affecting the rate of economic growth the export section of the economy could also affect the pattern of growth through the development of supplementary industries and the extent and pattern of settlement. But colonial whaling did not stimulate many supplementary industries before the 1820s. It has been asserted that:

The fisheries gave desperately needed employment to local labour and skills and encouraged the growth of small linked industries such as ship refitting, shipbuilding and the production of salt, barrels, iron-mongery and ships supplies.<sup>34</sup>

Against this must be put the fact that the colonial industry experienced many labour difficulties, the ships used during the period of greatest expansion in the 1820s and 1830s were frequently brought to the colonies and were not built there; in the first two decades seal skins were often exported unsalted; and at least in 1823 complaints were still being made that ships supplies for whaling were not being made in the colony.<sup>35</sup> Theoretically the fisheries could have stimulated the economy in these ways but it is very doubtful that throughout the whole period they stimulated economic growth as strongly as has been suggested.

It has also been argued that whaling contributed to centralized urbanization because it kept the families of whalers in the whaling towns.<sup>36</sup> This would have been the case if it had stimulated demand for housing and services. Not very much is known about the crews of whaleboats except that many experienced whalers working in colonial ships had left visiting whaleships and presumably had no dependents in the colonies. It is possible that colonial vessels also used some young and fairly inexperienced city-dwellers who did not leave dependents in the cities but who were attracted to whaling for a short while to acquire a lump sum of money to provide for their establishment as craftsmen.<sup>37</sup> They may have heard tales of windfall gains from visiting whalers and were then lured into whaling as a previous generation had been lured into sealing by the hope of a spectacular bonanza. An added

<sup>34</sup> M. J. E. Steven, 'Enterprise' in Abbott and Nairn, *Economic Growth of Australia*, p. 131.

<sup>35</sup> '... should the present Duties on Oil be repealed we will be only on a par with the English Whalers the outfit of which may be considered at a third less than the Colonial Vessels in the present state of the Colony as all the Articles (Provisions excepted) requisite for their equipment are imported from the Mother Country at an advance of at least 75 pr. Cent.' *Bigge Report Appendix*, pp. 6147-8, evidence of Robert Campbell.

<sup>36</sup> G. Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance*, p. 110.

<sup>37</sup> 'Their (respectable working people's) sons would be serving their time to shipwrights, coopers, and carpenters; and after their apprenticeship had been served, many of the young fellows would go out with the whalers for eighteen months.' 'Old Sydney in the Forties, Recollections of Lower George Street and "The Rocks" Dictated by Mrs. Walker, (in 1901)', *Roy Aust Hist Soc J & Proc*, 1930.

attraction of whaling and sealing employment may have been the fact that the earnings for the season depended upon the efforts of the crew who could count themselves as independent workmen.<sup>38</sup>

The sealing and whaling industry is a weak contender for the honours of a major contributor to long-run economic growth. In the short run it earned valuable export income, but its long-run efforts on the pattern and rate of economic growth were weaker than the wool industry, which was also expanding in the 1820s and 1830s, and weaker than gold mining which followed it.

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<sup>38</sup> It may be this aspect of sealing which explains the problem posed by D. R. Hainsworth in 'Iron Men in Wooden Ships: the Sydney Sealers 1800-1820', *Labour History*, November 1967, of why in a period of labour shortage in some sectors of the economy sealers continued to work although their earnings may have fallen short of ashore workers.

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