

**14.—AN ACCOUNT OF THE WHALE FISHERY OF NANTUCKET, MASS.,  
ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO.\***

**By J. HECTOR ST. JOHN.**

The vessels most proper for whale fishing are brigs of about 150 tons burthen, particularly when they are intended for distant latitudes; they always man them with thirteen hands, in order that they may row two whale-boats, the crews of which must necessarily consist of six—four at the oars, one standing on the bows with the harpoon, and the other at the helm.

It is also necessary that there should be two of these boats, that if one should be destroyed in attacking the whale the other, which is never engaged at the same time, may be ready to save the hands. Five of the thirteen are always Indians; the last of the complement remains on board to steer the vessel during the action. They have no wages; each draws a certain established share in partnership with the proprietor of the vessel, by which economy they are all proportionally concerned in the success of the enterprise, and all equally alert and vigilant. None of these whalemens ever exceed the age of forty; they look on those who are past that period not to be possessed of all that vigor and agility which so adventurous a business requires. Indeed, if you attentively consider the immense disproportion between the object assailed and the assailants; if you think on the diminutive size and weakness of their frail vehicle; if you recollect the treachery of the element on which this scene is transacted, the sudden and unforeseen accidents of winds, &c., you will readily acknowledge that it must require the most consummate exertion of all the strength, agility, and judgment of which the bodies and the minds of men are capable, to undertake these adventurous encounters.

As soon as they arrive in those latitudes where they expect to meet with whales, a man is sent up to the mast-head; if he sees one he immediately cries out, "*Awaite Pawana*" ("Here is a whale"). They all remain still and silent until he repeats *Pawana* (a whale), when in less than six minutes the two boats are launched, filled with every implement necessary for the attack. They row toward the whale with astonishing velocity; and as the Indians early became their fellow-laborers in this new warfare, you can easily conceive how the Nattick expressions became familiar on board the whale-boats. Formerly it often happened that whale vessels were manned with none but Indians and the master; recollect, also, that the Nantucket people understand the Nattick, and that there are always five of these people on board.

There are various ways of approaching the whale, according to their

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peculiar species; and this previous knowledge is of the utmost consequence. When these boats are arrived at a reasonable distance, one of them rests on its oars and stands off as a witness of the approaching engagement; near the bows of the other the harpooner stands up, and on him principally depends the success of the enterprise. He wears a jacket closely buttoned, and round his head a handkerchief tightly bound; in his hands he holds the dreadful weapon, made of the best steel, marked sometimes with the name of their town, and sometimes with that of their vessel, to the shaft of which the end of a cord of due strength, coiled up with the utmost care in the middle of the boat, is firmly tied; the other end is fastened to the bottom of the boat. Thus prepared they row in profound silence, leaving the whole conduct of the enterprise to the harpooner and to the steersman, attentively following their directions. When the former judges himself to be near enough to the whale, that is, at the distance of about fifteen feet, he bids them stop; perhaps she has a calf, whose safety attracts all the attention of the dam, which is a favorable circumstance; perhaps she is of a dangerous species, and it is safest to retire, though their ardour will seldom permit them; perhaps she is asleep—in that case he balances high the harpoon, trying in this important moment to collect all the energy of which he is capable. He launches it forth—she is struck; from her first movement they judge of her temper, as well as of their future success. Sometimes in the immediate impulse of rage she will attack the boat and demolish it with one stroke of her tail; in an instant the frail vehicle disappears and the assailants are immersed in the dreadful element. Were the whale armed with the jaws of the shark, and as voracious, they never would return home to amuse their listening wives with the interesting tale of the adventure. At other times she will dive and disappear from human sight, and everything must then give way to her velocity, or else all is lost. Sometimes she will swim away as if untouched, and draw the cord with such swiftness that it will set the edge of the boat on fire by the friction. If she rises before she has run out the whole length, she is looked upon as a sure prey. The blood she has lost in her flight weakens her so much, that if she sinks again it is but for a short time; the boat follows her course with an almost equal speed. She soon reappears; tired at last with convulsing the element, which she tinges with her blood, she dies, and floats on the surface. At other times it may happen that she is not dangerously wounded, though she carries the harpoon fast in her body, when she will alternately dive and rise, and swim on with unabated vigor. She then soon reaches beyond the length of the cord and carries the boat along with amazing velocity; this sudden impediment sometimes will retard her speed, at other times it only serves to rouse her anger and to accelerate her progress. The harpooner, with the ax in his hands, stands ready. When he observes that the bows of the boat are greatly pulled down by the diving whale, and that it begins to sink deep and to take much water, he brings the

ax almost in contact with the cord; he pauses, still flattering himself that she will relax, but the moment grows critical, unavoidable danger approaches. Sometimes men more intent on gain than on the preservation of their lives will run great risks, and it is wonderful how far these people have carried their daring courage at this awful moment! But it is vain to hope; their lives must be saved, the cord is cut, the boat rises again. If after thus getting loose she reappears, they will attack and wound her a second time. She soon dies, and when dead she is towed alongside of their vessel, where she is fastened.

The next operation is to cut with axes and spades every part of her body which yields oil; the kettles are set a boiling; they fill their barrels as fast as it is made; but this operation is much slower than that of cutting up; they fill the hold of their ship with those fragments, lest a storm should arise and oblige them to abandon their prize.

It is astonishing what a quantity of oil some of these fish will yield, and what profit it affords to those who are fortunate enough to overtake them. The river Saint Lawrence whale, which is the only one I am well acquainted with, is 75 feet long, 16 deep, 12 in the length of its bone—which commonly weighs 3,000 pounds—20 in the breadth of the tails, and produces 180 barrels of oil. I once saw 16 barrels boiled out of the tongue only.

After having once vanquished this leviathan, there are two enemies to be dreaded besides the wind, the first of which is the shark. That fierce, voracious fish, to which nature has given such dreadful offensive weapons, often comes alongside, and in spite of the people's endeavors will share with them in their prey, at night particularly. They are very mischievous, but the second enemy is much more terrible and irresistible; it is the killer, sometimes called the thrasher, a species of whales about 30 feet long. They are possessed of such a degree of agility and fierceness as often to attack the largest spermaceti whales, and not seldom to rob the fishermen of their prey; nor is there any means of defense against so potent an adversary.

When all their barrels are full, for everything is done at sea, or when their limited time is expired and their stores almost expended, they return home freighted with their valuable cargo, unless they have put it on board a vessel for the European market. Such are, as briefly as I can relate them, the different branches of the œconomy practiced by these bold navigators, and the method with which they go such a distance from their island to catch this huge game.

The following are the names and principal characteristics of the various species of whales known to these people:

The river Saint Lawrence whale, just described; the disko, or Greenland, ditto; the right whale, or seven-foot bone, common on the coasts of this country, about 60 feet long; the spermaceti whale, found all over the world, and of all sizes—the largest are 60 feet and yield about 100 barrels of oil; the hump-backs, on the coast of Newfoundland, from 40

to 70 feet in length; the fin-back, an American whale—never killed, as being too swift; the sulphur-bottom, river Saint Lawrence, 90 feet long—they are but seldom killed, as being extremely swift; the grampus, 30 feet long—never killed, on the same account; the killer or thrasher, about 30 feet—they often kill the other whales, with which they are at perpetual war; the black-fish whale, 20 feet—yields from 8 to 10 barrels; the porpoise, weighing about 160 pounds.

In 1769 they fitted out 125 whalers; the first 50 that returned brought with them 11,000 barrels of oil. In 1770 they fitted out 135 vessels for the fisheries, at thirteen hands each; 4 West Indiamen, twelve hands; 25 wood vessels, four hands; 18 coasters, five hands; 15 London traders, eleven hands. All these amount to 2,158 hands, employed in 197 vessels. Trace their progressive steps between the possession of a few whale-boats and that of such a fleet.

The moral conduct, prejudices, and customs of a people who live two-thirds of their time at sea must naturally be very different from those of their neighbors, who live by cultivating the earth. That long abstemiousness to which the former are exposed, the breathing of saline air, the frequent repetitions of danger, the boldness acquired in surmounting them, the very impulse of the winds, to which they are exposed; all these, one would imagine, must lead them, when ashore, to no small desire of inebriation, and a more eager pursuit of those pleasures of which they have been so long deprived, and which they must soon forego. There are many appetites that may be gratified on shore, even by the poorest man, but which must remain unsatisfied at sea. Yet, notwithstanding the powerful effects of all these causes, I observed here, at the return of their fleets, no material irregularities; no tumultuous drinking assemblies; whereas in our continental towns the thoughtless seaman indulges himself in the coarsest pleasures; and, vainly thinking that a week of debauchery can compensate for months of abstinence, foolishly lavishes in a few days of intoxication the fruits of half a year's labor. On the contrary, all was peace here, and a general decency prevailed throughout; the reason, I believe, is that most everybody here is married, for they get wives very young; and the pleasure of returning to their families absorbs every other desire. The motives that lead them to the sea are very different from those of most other sea-faring men; it is neither idleness nor profligacy that sends them to that element; it is a settled plan of life, a well-founded hope of earning a livelihood; it is because their soil is bad that they are early initiated to this profession, and were they to stay at home, what could they do? The sea, therefore, becomes to them a kind of patrimony; they go to whaling with as much pleasure and tranquil indifference, with as strong an expectation of success, as a landman undertakes to clear a piece of swamp.