

Whaling Songs

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▼ Abstract

This survey article describes the history of the British whaling industry, as reflected in folk songs. It goes from the 17th through to the 20th centuries, giving examples of songs mainly from the 18th and 19th centuries. It describes the hardship and cruelty of the industry, as well as the money to be made from it. The article describes the singing of such songs in modern times, and the reasons why they are rarely sung in this century.

Whaling Songs

In Britain today whales are regarded by most people as highly intelligent animals that it would be quite wrong to kill. However, until quite recently — well within living memory — Britain had an important whaling industry. This industry gave rise to a considerable body of traditional song about whaling, reflecting the history, location and hardship of what was a brutal activity, both for men and whales. This article will examine some of those songs, choosing songs that are both among the most representative, and also available in recorded form. Some of the songs originated in North America, but they were sung by men from both sides of the Atlantic.

Northern Whaling

Europeans, notably the Basques, have been catching whales for about a thousand years. The problem was always processing the whale after killing it, which meant that for a long time people were limited to offshore whaling, so that the whale could quickly be brought ashore. Britain started long run whaling, to the Arctic, in the early seventeenth century, and the earliest whaling songs would seem to date from the early eighteenth century. Palmer (1988: 84-87) prints the broadside *The Greenland Voyage*, and says it was 'described as old in a collection published in the 1720s' (p 87). One of the better known ones is *The Greenland Whale Fishery* (Roud 347). (Roud numbers refer to song numbers given in the Roud Folksong Index, available at the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library (www.vwml.org.) Most versions start with the ship's departure from port, with a date varying to suit the singer: 1801 (Shuldham-Shaw & Lyle 1981 I: 10), 1824 (Vaughan Williams & Lloyd 2003: 28-29), 1901 (Shuldham-Shaw & Lyle 1981 I: 15) and so on. One version, however, starts with the reason for going on such expeditions:

No longer will we stay on shore
Since we are so deep in debt
And a voyage to Greenland we will go
Some money more to make, brave boys
Some money more to make
(ibid: 9)

Much is made of the cold and bad weather, but then follows the drama of the sighting of a whale, and the attempt to catch it. This involved lowering boats over the side of the ship and approaching right alongside the whale to harpoon it by hand, a dangerous undertaking:

Now the harpoon struck and the lines played out,
But she gave such a flourish with her tail,
She capsized our boat and we lost five men,
And we could not catch that whale, brave boys,
And we could not catch that whale.
(Vaughan Williams & Lloyd 2003: 29)

The reaction of the captain to this double disaster varies with versions of the song (as does the number of human deaths). Huntington (1970: 12) gives the following:

When this news to our captain came
It grieved his heart full sore

And for the loss of a 'prentice boy
It was half mast colors all brave boys
It was half mast colors all

On the other hand Kinsey (1989: 148) gives:

Now the losing of that 'prentice hand,
It grieved our skipper sore,
But the losing of that great big whale
Grieved him a damn sight more.

For a ship to return empty to port would of course be a great economic disaster.

Other songs of northern whaling give a strong impression of the hardships involved, as in *The Whale-Catchers* (Roud 3291):

And when we came to Greenland
Where the bitter winds did blow,
We tacked about all in the north
Among the frost and snow.
Our finger-tops were frozen off
And likewise our toe-nails
As we crawled on the deck, my boys
Looking out for the Greenland whale,
Looking out for the Greenland whale.
(Vaughan Williams & Lloyd 2003: 68)

The Scottish song *Greenland* (Roud 970) focusses almost entirely on leaving and returning to port in Scotland, generally with only one stanza about the actual whale hunt (Shuldham-Shaw & Lyle I: 16-23). It ends in celebration (ibid: 16):

When the ship's got moored and safe secured,
And all paid off on shore,
With plenty o'brass and a bonny lass,
We make the taverns roar.

Another cheerful song of northern whaling is *The Diamond Ship* (Roud 2172), which tells of the tearful farewell as the ship sets off for the Davis Strait, between Greenland and Baffin Island, but looks forward more strongly to the whalers' return (ibid: 28-29):

O happy be the day when our Greenland lads come home
There is some men of honour belonging to this town
They'll make the cradles for to rock the blankets for to wear
And the girlies in to Aberdeen singing hush-a-ba my dear.
*So be cheerful my boys let your courage never fail
Since the pretty ship the Diamont goes a fishing for the whale.*

Lloyd (sleeve notes to Leviathan!) says that whalers had to travel so far because milder waters had been fished clean of catchable whales by the 1820s, and also that the Diamond, launched in 1825, was crushed by ice in 1830 along with many other whaling ships. The sleeve notes to Jock Duncan's *Tae The Green Woods Gaen* give different dates, but agree the ship was crushed by ice. There was great loss of (human) life. This is a sad background to a very cheerful and singable song.

Southern Whaling

Whaling was never carried out on a sustainable basis, and as catchable whales became scarce in northern waters, whalers turned south, to hunt sperm whales in the South Atlantic and round Cape Horn into the Pacific. A relatively early American song of Pacific whaling is *The Coast of Peru* (Roud 1997). As Huntington (1970: 4) points out, we can see it is early, or at least refers to early times, because the sailors sleep in hammocks, not bunks. The song has a startling opening (ibid: 3):

Come all you young fellows
That's bound after sperm

It goes on to describe the familiar hunt in small boats, with the use of harpoons, followed by the processing of the whale on board the ship. It is a cheerful song, celebrating the prosperity that whaling can bring (Doerflinger 1972: 152):

Now our ship she is laden, for home we will steer
Where there's plenty of rum, boys, and plenty strong beer!
We'll spend money freely with pretty girls ashore
And when it's all gone we'll go whaling for more

Moving south, towards Antarctica, another cheerful song, which seems to have been 'one of the best loved of the traditional whalemens songs' (Huntington: 32) is *Diego's Bold Shore* (Roud 2006). One thing it clearly is not is traditional: it has all the hallmarks of a broadside by a hack (Huntington 1970: 31):

Have you ever stood watch where Diego's bold shore
 Looms up from the Antarctic wave
 Where the snowy plumed albatross merrily soars
 O'er many a mariner's grave
 Have you heard the masthead'sman sing out there she blows
 Seen the boats gaily leave the ship's side
 Or the giant fish breach 'neath the harpooner's blows
 Till the blue sea with crimson was died [dyed]

The words 'merrily' and 'gaily' scarcely belong to whaling trips that could last for two years in dangerous waters. Still more, we would not expect to find this in an Antarctic whaling song (ibid):

Have you ever made love neath the coco's green shade
 To the sweet sunny maids that dwell there

Almost all the songs in Huntington are taken from whaling ship journals and logbooks (ibid: xviii), so we can accept its popularity. But not all songs are so cheerful: *The Whaleman's Lament* (or *The Bitter Whaling Ground*) (Roud 2000) tells of a landsman who reluctantly goes out on the stormy sea and is permanently homesick. Nor are conditions on board any too pleasant (ibid: 16):

They'll flog you for the least offense
 And that is frequent too
 And the best that you will get from them
 Is plenty more work to do
 So do it now or damn your eyes
 I will flog you till you're (blue)
 My boys I wouldn't say it all
 But it is all too true

The parentheses indicate a tentative reconstruction of an illegible word.

Another gloomy song, perhaps only rather tangentially concerned with whaling, is *Davy Lowston* (no Roud number), a song from New Zealand drawing on real events around 1810. A very informative article by Fife, originally published in 1970 in the *Journal of New Zealand Folklore*, (<http://folksong.org.nz/davylows/lowstonfife.html>) recounts how a group of sealers was left on a remote island, while the mother ship went off whaling, intending to return and pick them up at the end of the season. That ship was never heard of again. In real life, the sealers were rescued, though in the song some or all of them die, depending on the version:

So come all you lads who venture far from home, far from home
Come all you lads who venture far from home
Where the icebergs tower high
That's a pitiful place to die
Never seal, never seal, never seal

Britain annexed New Zealand in 1840, following which American ships no longer had access to those waters. They moved up to the Kamchatka Sea, using Hawaii as a base, a phase of whaling described in the song *Rolling Down to Old Maui* (Roud 2005) (Huntington 1970: 27-28):

Once more we are waft by the northern gales
Bounding over the main
And now the hills of the tropic isles
We soon shall see again
Five sluggish moons have waxed and waned
Since from the shore sailed we
Now we are bound from the Arctic ground
Rolling down to old Mohee

The ship might unload its whale oil while passing Hawaii and continue south for the southern season. The sleeve notes to *Songs* by Spiers and Boden describe this song as 'a rather sentimental and self-consciously literary version of the song', and one would have to agree.

Comic Songs

Another example of a landsman going to sea can be found in the comic sea shanty *Reuben Ranzo* (Roud 3282) (Doerflinger 1972: 23, also Mackenzie 1956:265):

Oh, poor old Reuben Ranzo,
Ranzo, boys, Ranzo!
Oh, Ranzo was no sailor,
Ranzo, boys, Ranzo!

But he was a Boston tailor,
He went on a visit to New Bedford.

He was shanghaied on a whaler,
He could not do his duty.

The rhyming sailors, tailors and whaler turn up in a number of folk songs, such as *The Unfortunate Tailor* (Roud 1614) with the tailor always cutting a pitiful, unmanly figure, as here. An indication of the comedy is that Hugill (1994: 176) even suggests that in some versions he is thrown overboard and continues to have adventures at the bottom of the sea.

Finally, we have a very different song concerning whales, *Paddy and the Whale* (Roud 6342). Paddy O'Brien, sailing from Ireland to England, gets drunk, sees a whale, and panics (Greenleaf 1961: 138):

O, Paddy run forward and caught hold of the mast;
He grasped his arms round and there he held fast;
The boat gave a tip, and, losing his grip,
Down in the whale's belly poor Paddy did slip.

He was down in the whale six months and five days,
Till luck one day to his throat he did pop.
The whale give a snort and then give a blow,
And out on the land poor Paddy did go.

One does not expect Irish people to be impressed by the stereotypes in this version of the Jonah story. It is not a widespread song — Roud has only three entries for it — and there do not seem to be any recordings. Nonetheless, it is pleasant to have a whale that is not being hunted and that survives.

Later Whaling Songs

Before gas and electricity, whale oil was widely used in lamps, and of course many women were tortured by whalebone corsets. These uses of whale declined, but whale oil was later used in the manufacture of margarine, and whale meat was eaten during the Second World War. Steam power and the harpoon gun greatly increased the efficiency of whaling, as did the practice of processing whales in land-based factories. The British whaling station on South Georgia closed in 1965, bringing British whaling to an end. This later period of mechanized whaling seems not to have produced many songs. One non-traditional example is *The Ballina Whalers*, written by Harry Robertson in the 1960s, which starts (http://www.harryrobertson.net/?page_id=272):

In 'fifty-six I sailed on board a ship called Byron I
She carried trawler men on deck, and a harpoon whaling gun.
With a tractor as a whale winch, the ship an old Fairmile
Twin diesels turned the props aroon', we whaled the Aussie style.

The song also mentions that they processed 150 whales in the season, a truly industrial scale.

Singing Whaling Songs

In the 1950s and 1960s British folk singers sang whaling songs as a matter of course. In 1957 A. L. Lloyd and Ewan MacColl issued *Thar She Blows!*, a collection of whaling songs (mostly), including *Reuben Ranzo*, *The Bonny Ship The Diamond* and *Paddy And The Whale*, among others. Lloyd also issued *Leviathan!*, another collection devoted to whaling, in 1967, which included *The Coast Of Peru*, *Rolling Down To Old Maui* and *Greenland Bound*. The Watsons sang *The Greenland Whale Fishery* (1965, available on *Blow The Man Down* 1993 and *Early Days* 1994). Martin Carthy sang *Davy Lowston* (Byker Hill 1967). After that whaling songs seem to have largely disappeared from singers' repertoires. Chris Foster sang *The Coast of Peru* (Layers 1977), and June Tabor sang *Davy Lowston* (A Cut Above 1980). Nic Jones performed Harry Robertson's *Ballina Whalers*, giving it the title *The Humpback Whale* (Penguin Eggs 1980). Two traditional singers have recorded whaling songs: Jock Duncan (b 1925) has issued *The Diamond Ship* (Tae The Green Woods Gaen 2001) and *For Greenland We Are Bound* (Various Artists, Here's A Health To The Company 2003), and Gordon Hall (b 1932) issued *The Bitter Whaling Ground* (As I Went Down To Horsham 1985). They presumably learned these songs long before they recorded them. Indeed

Waterson-Carthy issued *Diego's Bold Shore* in 2002 (A Dark Light). The band includes Martin Carthy (b 1941), Norma Waterson (b 1939) and their daughter Eliza. Spiers and Boden issued *Old Maui* in 2005 (Songs), but it should be noted that Jon Boden devotes considerable energy to reintroducing songs from the repertoire of older revival singers. Martin Carthy and Dave Swarbrick (b 1941) performed *Whalecatchers* in 2006 (Straws In The Wind).

The *Pirates Of The Caribbean* film series gave Johnny Depp an interest in sea songs, leading to a series of concerts worldwide and two CDs, *Rogue's Gallery* (2006) and *Son Of Rogues Gallery* (2013). On the former Van Dyke Parks (b 1943) sings *Greenland Whale Fishery*, and on the latter Todd Rundgren (b 1948) sings *Rolling Down To Old Maui*.

Basically, younger people do not sing whaling songs. Whaling is no longer part of British culture and has been forgotten about, although it ended well within living memory. For example, in 2014 there was a BBC television documentary about the South Georgia whaling station (not available at the time of writing, September 2014, but see the accompanying article, (<http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-27734930>)), in the course of which a number of former whaling men were interviewed. Self-righteous preachers on the sanctity of whales, particularly in English-speaking countries, would do well to remember that. A.L. Lloyd himself worked on an Antarctic whaling ship, for Unilever, in 1937/8 (Arthur 2012: 79-90), and never apologized for whaling regarding it as 'just a job of work', though he did criticize the overfishing (p86).

The current British attitude to whaling is exemplified in the song *The Last Leviathan*,

written by Andy Barnes, and sung by Sheena Wellington (Kerelaw 1986). It is a song, as Lady Bracknell would say, 'of more than usually revolting sentimentality':

My soul has been torn from me and I am bleeding
My heart it has been rent and I am crying
All the beauty around me fades and I am screaming
I am the last of the great whales and I am dying

Such anthropomorphism is widespread in the anti-whaling movement.

One last point is that it is odd that Lush Cosmetics, who oppose animal testing, and whose products are 100% vegetarian (<https://www.lush.co.uk>), should issue a CD to accompany deep tissue massage that includes *Bonny Ship The Diamond*, adding new accompaniment to A. L. Lloyd's version from the 1960s (From Source To Sea 2010). It is a strange oversight, though the arrangement is very jolly.

Conclusion

As we have seen in our review of whaling songs, British whaling undoubtedly caused great suffering, both to the whales, which often died a slow death, and to the sailors, who suffered frostbite and flogging and constantly risked drowning. It is desirable for people to know that. On the other hand, it was conducted for economic reasons, and when it ceased to be profitable, it stopped. It was not conducted for spurious pseudo-scientific reasons, nor for false reasons of tradition, nor for nationalistic reasons. The whales were used.

Acknowledgement

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