

# AUSTRALIA AND ITS HISTORICAL RESPONSIBILITY: COMPARING APPROACHES TO WHALING IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES

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*HTANSW 2021, HSC History Extension Prize Winning Essay (as submitted)*  
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Figure 1. *South Sea Whale Fishery*, lithographic print painted by Garnerey, engraved by E. Duncan, published by Randolph Ackermann, London, 1835, State Library of NSW

*Only in the heart of quickest perils; only when within the eddyings of his angry flukes; only on the profound unbounded sea, can the fully invested whale be truly and livingly found out.*  
Herman Melville - *Moby Dick*<sup>1</sup>

The task of using history to its full extent as a constructive tool of the present is one which is still being puzzled out. Whaling was once a necessary industry that supplied products for everything from light to fashion: the remnants of infrastructure for processing oil, bone and other parts of whale carcasses can be seen up and down the coasts of countries across the globe. In the present day, this once pervasive industry still has a role to play, not only in local community identity, but also in debates with a larger scope and impact such as the economy, Indigenous reconciliation, tourism, film and media and the role of museums. Whaling was a primarily colonial industry for Australia, with its origins in the first convict ships from England. Until 1833, whaling was the largest export from the colony. As such, the primary focus will be on the 1912-1913 events that took place in Jervis Bay on the NSW South Coast. In conjunction, Twofold Bay at Eden on the NSW South Coast, Encounter Bay in SA, and the historic American port of Nantucket, Massachusetts will be investigated to gain a fuller understanding of the potential that whaling has to

be a tool for reconciliation and understanding in the 21st century. In this way, an investigation of Australia's historical responsibility can take place surrounding the preservation of history and the education of local communities, thereby allowing a greater understanding of the construction of local history narratives and their impact on the present.

Whaling in Jervis Bay was operational since the 1830s when William Kinghorne (for which Nowra's main street is named) established a shore-based whaling station on the north-eastern side of Jervis Bay near Cabbage Tree Point. By 1841, 14 men lived on Kinghorne's property and were responsible for whaling operations at the station, which continued until at least 1859. As such, Jervis Bay was already established as a profitable whaling site from which to extend operations into the Pacific. From 1912-13, the Norwegian whaling factory ship, the *Loch Tay*, with its chase ships the *Campbell*, *Lionell* and *Sorrell*, took 537 whales from Jervis Bay waters, causing mass pollution and significant economic and social

impacts for the local community simply as a result of the scale of the operation<sup>4</sup>. The fleet was manned by a crew of 130 men and the immense drain on Jervis Bay's whale stocks caused *'the shores [to be] strewn with large pieces of blubber and intestines'*<sup>5</sup> with north-easterly winds blowing the smell of rotting and cooked whale carcasses into the Jervis Bay township<sup>6</sup>. Oyster beds at Jervis Bay were *'ruined as a result of the whale boiling down business'*<sup>7</sup> as the *Loch Tay* collected around 3000 barrels of oil from 537 whales<sup>8</sup>. Adding to community frustration, the factory ship was mostly self-sufficient, causing outrage and dissatisfaction for the whole Shoalhaven community, with the Nowra Doctor telling newspapers, *'they are of no earthly use to us; will buy as little as possible from us; import everything from Norway; pay low wages and deplete our whaling industry'*<sup>9</sup>. Thus, the members of the community began a protest advocating for the economic rights of the local area<sup>10</sup>. Yet, by the time local protests had gained momentum, the *Loch Tay* had left for New Zealand to take advantage of the profitable sperm whale season. Community outrage had diminished by the time the *Loch Tay* returned in 1914<sup>11</sup>. Concurrently, the Australian Government had begun work on the Naval College at Jervis Bay and in 1913, workers complained about the smell coming from the whaleship. A high official objection was made to the NSW government resulting in the issuing of notices and the threat of an injunction<sup>12</sup>. The NSW government was hesitant to halt any foreign investment in the newly federated economy, particularly the whaling business that had contributed upwards of £11,500.0.0<sup>13</sup>. Moreover, in opposition to the aforementioned statement from the Nowra Doctor, Mr Norman Rossen, a Jervis Bay resident in 1912 testified that *'the whalers used to come ashore at Huskisson and stores for the ship were purchased from the local shopkeepers'*<sup>14</sup>, directly speaking to the strength of the Jervis Bay community.

By 1914, the Australia Whaling Company Norway had moved to Western Australia to pursue more economically viable ventures and the Naval College was established, stripping Jervis Bay of its whaling operations<sup>15</sup>. Australian entrepreneurs attempted to revive the industry in 1917 and 1929, specifically to build a shore-based whaling factory<sup>16</sup>. Sidney Moore, a Wool Broker in 1917, wrote a letter detailing the careful process that would be taken to use all parts of the whale in a *'very different proposition to the recent style of whaling'* that would *'prove revenue producing, both for the country and ourselves'*<sup>17</sup>. However, Moore was ultimately refused and any other attempts at re-establishing whaling in Jervis Bay were pushed back by various Commonwealth agencies. By the 1980s, the Jervis Bay community was becoming increasingly involved in conservation efforts including those such as the *Save Jervis Bay Committee*<sup>18</sup> and today is one of the most important tourist destinations of the NSW economy. In the present day, residents also recognise the importance of historical responsibility and an understanding of how the past should shape the

future. In the South Coast Register in 2019 in reference to the enduring legacy of Jervis Bay, Mrs Liz Tooley said, *'We need to know what is the legacy we share responsibility for, from the first Australians to present-day residents; from the unexploited environs to today's surviving remnants'*<sup>19</sup>.

An exemplar comparison to the whaling legacy left in Jervis Bay is Twofold Bay, located just four hours south in Eden. The economic viability of Eden as a profitable whaling venture was recognised in discussions for an alternative to Jervis Bay in 1917 which stated, *'encouragement should be given in the direction of establishing the industry on this coast...[at] Port Stephens or Twofold Bay'*<sup>20</sup>. This recommendation was an obvious one considering whaling in Australia was established at Eden's Twofold Bay in 1828 with a shore-based station<sup>21</sup>. Yet, Twofold Bay also holds importance as a place where significant Indigenous connection to whaling was maintained. From the late 1800s to c. 1920, the Imlay, Davidson and Boyd companies, the main whaling companies in Twofold Bay, relied heavily on Indigenous crews, and significantly from 1900-1920, whalers of Aboriginal descent formed near entire crews of George Davidson<sup>22</sup>. This was of particular importance to the whaling companies as Indigenous peoples had been whaling in the area as part of cultural practice for thousands of years. In what was known as the Law of the Tongue, a pod of killer whales would trap larger whales (such as humpback or sperm whales) in the Bay to allow whaling boats to harpoon the whale<sup>23</sup>. In 1843, businessman Oswald Brierly recorded that, *'the natives of Twofold Bay regard the killers as incarnate spirits of their own departed ancestors'*<sup>24</sup>, in reference to the seemingly special relationship between the killer whales that entered Twofold Bay every season and the whaling craft. The harpooned whale was left overnight whilst the killer whales feasted on the lips and tongue of the larger whale and after, crews would come and collect the valuable body parts such as its blubber and baleen<sup>25</sup>.



Image 01: Photograph of my trip to Eden to investigate local whaling (Davidson Whaling Station site - 2020)

Similarly, at Encounter Bay in South Australia, the Indigenous Peoples, the Ngarrindjeri, also had a significant relationship with whaling. The Ngarrindjeri held the Dreaming story of Kondoli, a large and strong man whose ability to make fire was envied so much that others speared him in the back of the neck to make flames. The whale's blowhole is Kondoli's wound, still cooling from when he jumped into the ocean. This story's significance is denoted by a powerful totem (Ngatji) of the whale. This intrinsic connection was represented in the traditional harvesting of beached whales. Every body part was used including using the fat for pigment binding, ribs for shelters and ear bones to carry water<sup>26</sup>. The Ngarrindjeri viewed the immense waste of European whaling practises as disrespectful and potentially dangerous, as it risked bringing the anger or misfortune down on the people from the spirits<sup>27</sup>. This Indigenous relationship with whaling is particularly important, especially in the context of post-colonial Australia. While at Jervis Bay there was minimal Indigenous involvement surrounding the Norwegian Factory Ship in the 1912-1913 season, local historians suspect that during the 1840s large numbers of William Kinghorne's crew were Indigenous. According to Greg Jackson, a researcher into whaling in the Jervis Bay area, this 'may be the result of aboriginals moving to this area... for employment' in conjunction with the prevalence of employment in nearby Twofold Bay<sup>28</sup>.



Image 02: Photograph from investigation in Eden - Traditional whaling bay near Seahorse Inn (2020)

Whaling in Twofold Bay and Encounter Bay meant a certain amount of freedom for Indigenous men, unattainable in regular Australian society. The 'transitive space of the ship and their time at sea offered the opportunity to be assessed on the basis of their skills and expertise'<sup>29</sup>. Because of the dangerous nature of a whaler's work, where 'death was an ever present shipmate'<sup>30</sup>, there was no room for discrimination and racism. Moreover, many of the Indigenous whalers were more powerful than the Europeans or Americans with better knowledge of the

area and the seasonal migration of the whales. For the Ngarrindjeri people, because of the significance of the whale for their cultural and spiritual practises, their people held intimate knowledge of whale behaviour which was learned through the traditional art of song. This was often mistaken for magical powers by white settlers<sup>31</sup>. Whilst these misconceptions define many past interactions between the Indigenous peoples and white settlers, according to Paterson and Wilson, 'histories such as these provide a bridge to the present and a useful contextual lens for understanding current practices'<sup>32</sup> and further understanding of traditional practices will allow the slow process of reconciliation to begin. The community of Eden has worked to commemorate and investigate the impact of Indigenous people on the whaling legacy that is integral to the local community. This is particularly evident in the Eden Killer Whale Museum, which has a large representation of Indigenous relations in the area and particularly the importance of the Indigenous communities' connection with the killer whales and its exploitation used by significant whaling companies in the Eden area. As Mark McKenna puts it, the 'whaling industry barely registers in the history of human habitation in the area'<sup>33</sup> (Twofold Bay). Internationally, historian Nathaniel Philbrick concludes that the significant American port of Nantucket and the port setting for Moby Dick would have 'without the islands native inhabitants...never become a successful whaling port'<sup>34</sup>. The significant involvement of various Indigenous peoples in the trade means that in the present, the process of reconciliation can be facilitated and whaling can be a space for constructive historical dialogue.

Furthermore, approaches to whaling in local communities have been significantly impacted by published media. This is especially true for the American whaling port of Nantucket. The sinking of the whaleship *Essex* and the consequent struggle for survival by her crew is a significant and defining moment of Nantucket history, and has been explored not only in Herman Melville's classic novel *Moby Dick* but also in more recent fiction such as the 2015 film *In the Heart of the Sea* (based on the non-fiction popular history by Nathaniel Philbrick). However, as Philbrick puts it, 'It is not whaling, of course, that brings the tourists to the island, but the romantic glorification of whaling - the same kind of myths that historically important places all over America have learned to shine and polish to their economic advantage'<sup>35</sup>. Through film and media, the true story of Nantucket and its peoples, Indigenous, whalers or otherwise, has been lost to a 'thriving summer resort' and 'cargoes of day-trippers from Cape Cod'<sup>36</sup>. In the same way, Herman Melville's 1851 fictional portrayal of the typical Nantucket whaleship crew, while somewhat accurate, was stereotyped for the purpose of literary suspense. As said at the Nantucket Whaling Museum, 'to honor the actual men who worked in island whaling, we need to look beyond Melville's literary creations and celebrate the real men who sailed Nantucket's whalers'<sup>37</sup>. In comparison, the

Australian lens of history is more compassionate to whaling in the sense that it has been spared from the treatment given to industries such as the goldfields or pastoral agriculture. Up until 1833, Australia's largest industry was whaling, supported by the transportation of British convicts to the new colony. As a result, whaling has never been viewed by the Australian population as romantic as, when it came to reflection, it did not and still does not capture the Australian identity we want to be known for.

But, this is a gross misunderstanding of the Australian whaling venture. In Jervis Bay, not only does whaling represent a claiming of the Australian spirit through protest and community support it also captures the unceasing entrepreneurial spirit of early Australia, even if the goal was never fully realised. Today, the Jervis Bay Maritime museum holds a small case dedicated to whaling as part of its Halloren collection of mostly British and American objects donated by the Eden Killer Whale museum<sup>38</sup>. This display speaks to the aim of local history in informing both residents of the area and tourists about the historical nature of the community. A further investigation into the significant industry of whaling in Jervis Bay could reveal not only important historical information, but also contribute to reconciliation for local Indigenous people and spark conversation around a larger narrative of community identity and belonging. Thus, whilst research and representation of whaling in Jervis Bay is satisfactory, more research is needed to fulfil not only the local communities obligations of historical responsibility but also the historical responsibility of Australia as a whole community.

To conclude, because of the varied nature of the whaling industry and the contributing factors to a communities identity such as Indigenous involvement or published media, whaling as a facet of Jervis Bay's local history is significant. However, for Jervis Bay, whaling doesn't capture the community's identity. Even in a wider Australian context, while the wild men of Nantucket revel in the noble glory it was to be a whaleman, the diverse cast of Australian whaling crews is sidelined to make way for the Romantic elements of our history such as gold and agriculture. For the community of Jervis Bay and many others in Australia, a deeper understanding of whaling has the potential to act as a starting point for new relationships across cultural and societal divides. Local communities have a responsibility to defy Australian trends and take ownership of their history, no matter how blunt it might be, and to make the best of it however they can. As such, Australia is called to acknowledge its historical responsibility, to discover, *'not which stories we choose to tell, but why we choose the stories we do, to tell about ourselves at this particular moment in time'*<sup>39</sup>.

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Alongside documentary research I undertook a thorough investigation of my topic. This included a Zoom interview with Michael Harrison (Obad Macy Research Chair at the *Nantucket Historical Association*), a trip to Eden where I visited the Eden Killer Whale museum as well as important sites on the *Killer Whale Trail*, communication and interviews with the *Jervis Bay Maritime Museum* and many emails to historians whose research was in whaling including Martin Gibbs (*University of New England*).

## Endnotes

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