The Anthropology of Choice, the History of Industry, and the Economics of Depletion:

Understanding Patterns of Behavior in New London’s 19th Century Whale Fishery

Introduction, Statement of Purpose, and Deliverables:

By 1860, the open-water American whaling industry, which rendered usable oil from whale blubber, was dying. As continuous hunting depleted whale stocks, capital-intensive voyages backed by managing owners hired seamen to sail further and further from New England shores in search of marine mammals to kill for profit.¹ In retrospect, this industry was moribund.

However, certain ports continued hunting whales and other large, oil-furnishing marine mammals like the southern elephant seal (*Mirounga leonina*). I will research how late nineteenth century (1850s – 1880s) whaling managers, masters, whalemen, and their families reshaped the whale fishery in its final years. How did they construct knowledge about hunting grounds in the context of the changing market? What choices did they make about where and what to hunt? This research is important because it explores how humans adapt, organize information, interact with their environments, and reproduce – or fail to reproduce – industries and identities.

Through my 2011 Holster Scholar paper I became interested in the role that whalemen’s knowledge of his marine environment played in establishing New London’s near monopoly of whaling and elephant sealing at the Kerguelen and Heard Islands in the Southern Indian Ocean (known as “Desolation Island”) after 1820.² For this University Scholar Project regarding the anthropology of choice and the economics of marine mammal depletion, I will explore why New Londoners chose to continue to invest in whaling and sealing at Desolation Island through the

---


1880s. The outcome will be a 60-page paper that will serve as my honors History thesis. This project is well suited for the University Scholars Program because it draws from a range of disciplines and requires that I start conducting research during the spring of my junior year.

**Literature Review**

As a student double majoring in History & Anthropology, I am interested in understanding the American whaling industry as a system, a set of interconnected practice and ideas that shaped pattern activity. I draw from Bourdieu’s theory of *habitus*, “…both a system of schemes of production of practices and a system of perception and appreciation of practices.” Social science theory is most appropriate for framing this type of project because questions of choice in the face of economic change ultimately relate back to questions of social and psychological positioning, questions that lie at the heart of anthropology and sociology.

My concerns with system also arise from a self-conscious effort to move maritime history beyond its influential foundational writings, which present maritime culture, class, and industries as shaped largely by what happened “on the boat.” According to Marcus Rediker (1987), working-class seamen were men “forcibly torn from the land and made to sell their labor power on an open market to keep body and soul together;” as such, his discussion focuses on the seamen disengaged from a land-based community. Though nineteenth-century whaling and sealing was “separate” and unique in many ways, its participants were shaped by knowledge systems, markets, and motivations that transcended land/sea boundaries making them, more appropriately, “working men who got wet.” This study will model Daniel Vickers’ (2005)

---


approach of using social interactions in home ports as central to analyzing activities at sea.

My interest in knowledge systems draws from both environmental and legal history. Karl Jacoby’s argument in *Crimes Against Nature* (2001) that the modern conservation movement is rooted in nineteenth century state-sanctioned conservation policies that devalued local knowledge about the environment has made me sensitive to heavily weighing “informal” knowledge about the environment in conjunction with scientific knowledge. D. Graham Burnett’s chapter about whalenmen as “Naturalists in the Crow’s Nest” in *Trying Leviathan* (2010) reflects Jacoby’s work, and confirms that whalenmen were valuable sources of information on the marine mammals they hunted.

Technological and business perspectives on whaling and sealing are also central to this project. Briton Cooper Busch’s *The War Against the Seals* (1985) discusses sealing methods and technology in conjunction with the biology of the animals they were used on, emphasizing the importance of biology to studies of tools and methods. Davis, Gallman, and Gleiter’s *In Pursuit of Leviathan* (1997), considers questions of risk, technology, and productivity in the whale fishery, which they refer to as an “ideal laboratory for a study of economic change.” 6 This focus informs the inquiries about business sensibility that I will be posing in this study, but my research is also a criticism of it; though nineteenth century sensibilities were rooted in the Westernized economic rationale from which Davis, Gallman, and Gleiter draw, economics comprised only a small part of the phenomenological experience of nineteenth century masters and managing owners, which I hope to convey through my multidisciplinary approach.

My project is situated between these works on labor, environmental, business, and the history of technology. It transcends myopic studies that relegate maritime history to only the

---


ocean by raising questions about New London’s social system, incorporates modern questions of environmental positioning and science, and hypothesizes that economic choices are socially constructed. This approach to history is not new, but it is new for whaling history.

Methods

I will evaluate four converging forces on the business decisions of nineteenth century managing owners, captains, and whalenmen in the whale oil market. These include: the social world of nineteenth century New London; patterns of social positioning within the New London whaling industry; knowledge about the geography, marine mammal populations, and weather conditions of the Southern Indian Ocean conveyed to New Englanders through eighteenth and nineteenth century explorers and whalenmen; and nineteenth century macroeconomics, including international participation in whaling in the Southern Indian Ocean. In accordance with my anthropological training, I will draw conclusions about choice by recreating the social and psychological positioning of a nineteenth century whaling master. I will do this by looking at written and scholarly sources on the wide variety of information (biological, economic, and social) that helped construct the whaling habitus. I will also position myself in the world of whalenmen by engaging in experiential learning on boats and amongst marine mammals.

During Spring 2013, I will take classes that focus intensively on environmental economics, ecology, social-cultural research, and environmental history to create a wide theoretical framework for the primary source archival research I will be completing during the summer. I will use “HIST 3540: American Environmental History” as an opportunity to begin reading published eighteenth and nineteenth century accounts of exploring and whaling in the Southern Seas in order to examine the natural knowledge about hunting grounds available in New London.

During Summer 2013, I will begin research at the Mystic Seaport Museum, the New London Historical Society, and the New Bedford Whaling Museum, all institutions with which I was
critically involved during my 2011 Holster Scholar research. At these archives, I will examine the personal and business papers of the Perkins and Lawrence families, both critically engaged in the Desolation Island industry as managing owners of vessels engaged in the fishery in order to begin researching New London society and nineteenth century business culture in the whaling industry. I will also use whaling accounts available in these archives to continue engaging questions of natural knowledge and circulation. My continued summer work at the Mystic Seaport as an interpreter will provide me access to schooners, ships, and whaling artifacts that will allow me to position myself in the technological environment of whalemen.

To situate the sensibility of nineteenth century whalemen in an international context, I will correspond with the National Tasmanian Archives in Tasmania, which contains extensive documents on Australian whaling in the region, and with the Australian Antarctic Division, which has conducted several expeditions to Heard Island and is home to whaling and sealing implements abandoned by New London whalemen. I am preparing applications for the Office of Undergraduate Research’s Summer Undergraduate Research Fund and the UCONN Humanities Institute’s Undergraduate Research Grant to fund a week-long trip to Australia during July 2013 to examine these materials, and learn more about Australia’s activity at Desolation Island.

During Fall 2013 and Spring 2014, I will continue the process begun during the Spring semester to situate my interests in anthropological, economic, and biological theory and to begin to compile my findings into an honors thesis. I will use the class progression of “EEB 2214. Biology of the Vertebrates” and “EEB 3254. Mammalogy” to gain a practical understanding of the animals that Desolation Island whalemen and sealers killed in order to physically conceptualize accounts of the behaviors of whales and seals. I will also use my Mystic

---

connections to engage with biologists at the Mystic Aquarium early in Spring 2013 to facilitate times for me to passively observe their animals during the summer and fall. If further interaction with these animals is approved, I will apply for appropriate compliance standards in the spring. Further reading of additional secondary source materials and the compiling of my findings into an honors thesis will be facilitated through the “HIST 4999”/“HIST 4997W” course progression.

Plan of Study

The plan of study laid out in my attached form will allow me to graduate in the Spring of 2014 with an Honors B.A. degree in History, a second major in Anthropology, and a concentration in Creative Writing. As described above, the courses selected in my plan of study, will be used to both construct a theoretical framework for my research project. Courses like ARE 4462 (Environmental and Resource Economics) and ENGL 3715 (Nature Writing Workshop) will be especially valuable in providing alternative approaches to conceptualizing human-environment interactions.

There are two important class progressions I’d like to explain: The first is the EEB 2202, 2214, and 3254 progression. EEB 3254 (Mammalology) and its required prerequisite (EEB 2214. Biology of the Vertebrates) will provide me the scientific understanding of mammals, with a specific interest in marine mammals, that I am seeking. EEB 2202 (General Ecology) will be used as a foundation in ecological thinking and to comply with the six-credits of 2000-level or above biology required to take EEB 3254 (Mammalology). Secondly, I am not enrolled in a history Senior Seminar (HIST 4994W), because, in completion of an Honors degree for history, I will complete the recommended HIST 4999/HIST 4997W thesis-writing track.
References


*Please see the attached addendum for the requested “Significant Works in the Field” for students in humanities and social sciences.*
Significant Works in the Field


