

NON-FICTION

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A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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THE AMERICANS IN THE SOUTH SEAS

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By Louis Becke

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Perhaps the proper title of this article should be "The Influence of American Enterprise upon the Maritime Development of the first Colony in Australia," but as such a long-winded phrase would convey, at the outset, no clearer conception of the subject-matter than that of "The Americans in the South Seas," we trust our readers will be satisfied with the simpler title.

It is curious, when delving into some of the dry-as-dust early Australian and South Sea official records, or reading the more interesting old newspapers and books of "Voyages," to note how soon the Americans "took a hand" in the South Sea trade, and how quickly they practically monopolised the whaling industry in the Pacific, from the Antipodes to Behring Straits.

The English Government which had despatched the famous "First Fleet" of convict transports to the then unknown shores of Botany Bay, had not counted upon an American intrusion into the Australian Seas, and when it came, Cousin Jonathan did not receive a warm welcome from the English officials stationed in the newly founded settlement on the shore of Sydney Cove, as the first settlement in Australia was then called. This was scarcely to be wondered at, for many of those officers who formed part of the "First Fleet" expedition had fought in the war of the rebellion, and most of them knew, what was a fact, that the English Government only a few years earlier had seriously considered proposals for colonising New South Wales with American loyalists, who would have, in their opinion, made better settlers than convicts. And it is probable that if the crowded state of the English gaols and prison hulks had not forced the Government into quickly finding penal settlements for their prisoners, the plan would have been carried out.

When his Majesty's ship *Guardian* under the command of Nelson's "brave captain, Riou," was wrecked off the Cape of Good Hope, and her cargo of stores, badly needed by the starving colonists of New South Wales, were lying at Cape Town without means of transport, an American merchant skipper saw his chance and offered to convey them to Sydney Cove. But the English officers, although they knew that the colony was starving, were afraid to take the responsibility of chartering a "foreign" ship. Lieutenant King—afterwards to become famous in Australian history—wrote to the almost heartbroken and expectant Governor Phillip from the Cape as follows: "There is here a Whitehaven man who, on his own head, intends going immediately to America and carrying out two vessels, one of 100 or 120 tons—a Marble Head schooner—and the other a brig of 150 tons, both of which he means to load with salt beef and pork which he can afford to sell in the colony at 7d. a pound. He wished encouragement from me, but anything of that kind being out of my power to give him, he has taken a decided part and means to run the risque. I mention this so that you may know what is meant."

This "risque," undertaken by the adventurous "Whitehaven man" was the genesis of the American trading and whaling industry in the Southern Seas, and American enterprise had much to do with the development of the infant colony of New South Wales, inasmuch as American ships not only brought cargoes of food to the starving colonists, but American whalers showed the unskilled British seamen (in this respect) how to

kill the sperm whale and make a profit of the pursuit of the leviathan of the Southern Seas.

In 1791 some returning convict transports, whose captains had provided themselves with whaling gear, engaged in the whale fishing in the South Pacific on their way home to England. Whales in plenty were seen, but the men who manned the boats were not the right sort of men to kill them-they knew nothing of sperm-whaling, although some of them had had experience of right whaling in the Arctic Seas-a very different and tame business indeed to the capture of the mighty cachalot. Consequently, they were not very successful, but the Enderby Brothers, a firm of London shipowners, were not to be easily discouraged, and they sent out vessel after vessel, taking care to engage some skilled American whalers for each ship. Sealing parties were formed and landed upon islands in Bass's Straits, and regular whaling and sealing stations were formed at several points on the Australian coast, and by 1797 the whale fishing had become of such importance that a minute was issued by the Board of Trade, dated December 26th, setting forth that the merchant adventurers of the southern whale fishery had memorialised the Board to the effect that the restrictions of the East India company and the war with Spain prevented the said whalers from successfully carrying on their business, and that the Board had requested the East India Company, while protecting its own trading rights, to do something towards admitting other people to trade. The effect of the Board's minute-worded of course in much more "high falutin" language as should be the case when a mere Board of Trade addressed such a high and mighty corporation as the Honourable East India Company-was that directors permitted whaling to be carried on at Kerguelen's Land (in the Indian Ocean), off the coasts of New Holland, the New Hebrides, New Caledonia, New Zealand, the Philippines and Formosa, but they restrained trading further north than the Equator and further east than 51deg of east longitude, and that restraint remained for a long time to come.

For the Spanish war trouble the whalers took another remedy: they obtained letters of marque and pretty soon added successful privateering to their whaling ventures, and the Spaniards on the coast of Peru and on the Spanish Pacific Islands before a year had passed found that an English whaler was a vessel armed with other weapons besides harpoons and lances, and was a good ship to keep clear of.

By this time the Americans were taking a share in the whaling and sealing industries-rather more than their share the Englishmen thought, for in 1804 Governor King issued a proclamation which sets forth that: "Whereas it has been represented to me that the commanders of some American vessels have, without any permission or authority whatever, not only greatly incommoded his Majesty's subjects in resorting to and continuing among the different islands in Bass's Straits for skins and oil, but have also in violation of the law of nations and in contempt of the local regulations of this Territory and its dependencies, proceeded to build vessels on these islands and in other places... to the prejudice and infringements of his Majesty's rights and properties thereon," he (King) had, while waiting for instructions from England, decided to prevent any foreigner whatever from building vessels whose length of keel exceeded 14 feet, except, of course, such vessel was built in consequence of shipwreck by distressed seamen. There was nothing unreasonable in this prohibition, as the whole territory being a penal settlement, one of the Royal instructions for its government was that no person should be allowed to build vessels without the express permission of the Governor, so the Americans were only asked to obey the existing law. The proclamation ended with a clause ordering that all vessels coming from the State of New York should do fourteen days quarantine in consequence of the plague having broken out there. Just about this time news reached Sydney that the crew of an American sealer lying in Kent's Bay among Cape Barren Islands (Bass's Straits) were building a schooner from the wreck of an East Indiaman named the *Sydney Cave*-a ship famous in Australian sea story. King despatched an officer to the spot with orders to "command the master to desist from building any vessel whatever, and should he refuse to comply, you will immediately cause the King's mark to be put on some of the timbers, and forbid him and his people from prosecuting the work, and also forbid the erection of any habitation on any part of the coast... taking care not to suffer any or the least act of hostility, or losing sight of the attention due to the subjects of the United States," &c.

Writing to England on this matter, King says: "This is the third American vessel that has within the last twelve months been in the Straits and among the islands, procuring seal skins and oils for the China market." In the same letter he tells how the loss of the ships *Cato* and *Porpoise* on Wreck Reef had led to the discovery of *beche-de-mer* which could then be sold in Canton for PS50 a ton; this find was another reason

for keeping foreigners out of Australian waters.

As no more is heard of the schooner building in Bass's Straits, we may assume that the Americans quietly obeyed the laws and desisted; but there were soon more causes of trouble.

In March, 1805, a general order set forth that American ships, after receiving assistance and relief at Sydney Cove, were continually returning this hospitality by secreting on board and carrying off runaway convicts, and so it was ordered that every English or foreign vessel entering the ports of the settlement should give security for themselves in PS500, and two freeholders in the sum of PS50 each, not to carry off any person without the Governor's certificate that such person was free to go. This order had some effect in putting a stop to the practice, but not a few persons managed to leave the colony and reach American shores without there being evidence enough to show how they got away. Muir, one of the "Scotch Martyrs," escaped in the American Ship *Otter* as far back as 1795; and although his story has been told before in detail, we may here briefly mention that the *Otter* was hired expressly to affect his escape. Muir got on board safely enough, and the ship sailed, but was wrecked off the west coast of America. After sufferings and privations enough to satisfy even the sternest justice, Muir managed to reach Mexico, and embarked in a Spanish frigate for Europe. The vessel was taken by an English man-of-war after a sharp engagement, in which Muir was severely wounded. His identity was concealed from the English commander, and he managed to reach Paris, only to die of his wound.

In October, 1804, there was serious trouble in Bass's Straits between English and American sealers. Messrs. Kable and Underwood, Sydney shipowners, had a sealing establishment in Kent's Bay, and among the men employed were some "assigned" convicts. One Joseph Murrell, master of the sealing schooner *Endeavour*, wrote to his owners a letter in which he stated he was too ill to write coherently, in consequence of the usage he had received from one Delano, master of the American schooner *Pilgrim*. Delano's name was familiar to Governor King, inasmuch as he had taken a part in the 1803 attempt to colonise Port Philip, as follows: One of the officers, Lieutenant Bowen, on his way across Bass's Straits in a small boat, had the misfortune to carry away his rudder, and when in danger was rescued by Delano. Bowen, anxious to deliver some despatches, hired the *Pilgrim's* tender from Delano to carry them, omitting to make a bargain beforehand; and for this paltry service the American charged PS400! The British Government growled, but paid.

But let Captain Murrell tell his story: "At four in the morning on the 17th I was suddenly seized by the chief mate of the *Pilgrim*, and three other American ruffians" (they were really Chilenos), "two of whom caught me by the hair, the other two by the arms. They dragged me out of bed and trailed me in this fashion along the ground till they came to the sea beach. Here they beat me with clubs, then kept me three-quarters of an hour naked whilst they were searching for the rest of my people." Murrell goes on to detail as to how he threatened them with the wrath of the Governor, to which they replied that the Governor was not there to protect him. He was then taken to a tree and lashed to it, stripped, and all the Americans took a hand in flogging him into insensibility. When he recovered, he says, he asked for death rather than torture, and was answered savagely that he and his men were the means of depriving the Americans of 3,000 dollars' worth of skins by their operations, and that Englishmen had better keep away from Cape Barren and leave the field open to Americans.

"Then," he wrote, "they began to sport away with their bloody cruelties, until some few Englishmen belonging to other [sealing] gangs out of Port Jackson, stung to the quick to see the cruelties exercised upon me without humanity, law, or justice, determined not to suffer it, and began to assemble. This occasioned the Americans to face about, at which instant I got my hands loose and ran into the sea, determined to be drowned rather than be tortured to death. I was followed by a number of Americans to the seaside, who stoned me, and sent into the water after me a Sandwich Island savage, who gave me desperate blows with a club. I put up my arm to save my head and he broke my arm in three places. I was then dragged on shore and left lying on the beach, the men remarking that they supposed I had had enough, but that there were more of their country's ships expected, who would not let me off so lightly. Then they took away some of my people, rescuing from my custody a King's prisoner."

In all a dozen men-convicts and others-were taken away by Delano and his ruffianly crowd of Chilenos and Portuguese, and this particular sealing station was practically destroyed.

Captain Moody, of the colonial schooner *Governor King* had recorded a similar instance a few months earlier, and there is no doubt that the colonials had just cause for complaint; as there is equally no doubt that they themselves were not altogether innocent of provocation. Nothing, however, came of these quarrels, for although the Governor wrote to England on the matter, the authorities "remembered to forget" to answer, and the rival sealing parties continued to fight without bringing about a serious battle, and the whaling and sealing industry continued to grow in such fashion as is here indicated. What it had become little more than a generation later is shown in the remainder of this article, mentioning incidentally that an American whaler, the *Topaz*, Captain Folger, was the first discoverer of the descendants of the *Bounty* mutineers on Pitcairn Island in 1808; and that Wilkes' United States Exploring Expedition of 1836-42 was in a large measure suggested to America by the great increase in that half of the century of American South Sea trade. What this increase was can best be told in the words of the man-Mr. Charles Enderby-who was unquestionably the highest authority and whose house founded this very industry in the Southern Ocean. In April, 1849, Charles Enderby received a charter of incorporation for a proposed southern whale fishery, together with a grant of the Auckland Islands (but that is another story), and to celebrate the occasion a banquet was held at the London Tavern, Bishops-gate Street, London, presided over by the senior naval Lord of the Admiralty, who proposed the health of the guest of the evening, Charles Enderby. In replying to that toast Mr. Enderby quoted the whalemens' shipping list, in which it was shown that in March, 1849, "the United States, whose flag was to be found on every sea, had 596 whale-ships of 190,000 tons, and manned by 18,000 seamen, while the number of English ships engaged in the whale trade was only fourteen!"

During the next decade the English did something to improve this state of affairs, but their endeavour was made too late, and by the time they woke up to the situation the heyday of South Sea whaling was gone.

We are so accustomed to take it for granted that the English (the original brand thereof, not the American pattern) were fifty years ago in command of all sea commerce, that the old-fashioned English sailor was superior to all others, and that his ships beat every one else's in everything appertaining to the sea, that this fact of how thoroughly the Americans beat us in the great whaling industry is never remembered. And whaling was and is now a branch of sea service that needs *men* to successfully work in it, for it cannot be profitably pursued with the human paint-scrubbers who to-day make up such a large section of our mercantile marine; and the success of the American whaling seamen may supply a clue to the Nelson-like fashion in which American men-of-warsmen tackle the serious business of the American Navy.