

‘That Glorious Stinking Stuff . . .’: Whale Fishing and the Economic Development of Early Wellington

BRAD PATTERSON

Victoria University of Wellington

For generations of New Zealand school children, brought up on texts such as *Our Country* or *The Changing Land*,¹ the sealers and whalers were itinerants who came after the Maori canoe migration phase, but before European settlement proper began. And the depiction of whale fishing has been an overly romantic one, owing much to what might be termed the Herman Melville tradition.² In the words of British whaling historian Gordon Jackson, there has been a tendency to portray pursuit of the marine Leviathan by puny men more as ‘an Act of God . . . than as capital in the pursuit of profit’.³ To date, with the exception of Harry Morton’s monumental *The Whale’s Wake*,⁴ there has been little substantial published scholarly writing on the nineteenth century New Zealand whaling industry. Certainly, in the early 1900s Robert McNab⁵ published several vital compilations of relevant documents. Then, in 1965, L.S. Rickard⁶ produced a short popular account of the trade. But apart from several small but detailed recent monographs by Rhys Richards,⁷ the whalers continue to feature almost as a footnote to general and regional histories.

In the present paper the primary emphasis will be on what happened *after* the first systematic colonisers arrived, not before. It will be suggested that in at least one New Zealand settlement, Wellington (or Port Nicholson), whale fishing continued to be of major economic importance for most of the founding decade. It will also be contended that the industry helped ensure the viability of the settlement in the short term, and that there were long-term structural legacies for the evolving settler economy. In a sense, too, the paper seeks to fill an obvious void. There have been previous short studies of the impact of the Cook Strait whaling industry on the local Maori population.⁸ However, with the exception of Ray Grover’s splendidly evocative ‘faction’ account of the life of sometime whaler ‘Scotch Jock’ Niccol,⁹ there has previously been little inquiry into the implications of whaling for Europeans or European settlement.

Viewed retrospectively, it was almost inevitable that the Wellington settlers should become, if only for a comparatively short period, what merchant

George Butler Earp was to term 'ardent followers of the whale fishing'.¹⁰ Whale catching had not, of course, figured in the pre-arrival planning of the British promoters of the Wellington settlement, the New Zealand Company. Indeed, the organisation's senior local officials, wedded to their vision of agrarian prosperity, consistently disparaged the industry. This distaste did not, however, preclude those same officials from investing modestly, and sometimes not so modestly, when opportunity presented. And, it might also be noted in passing, when the *Brougham* returned to Britain in 1840, having offloaded the Company's advance party, it did so with a cargo of whale products aboard. Yet, if the Company officials' involvement in the industry was to be essentially passive, the more entrepreneurial amongst the introduced settlers were quick to grasp the potential of 'the oceanic fisheries'. They knew only too well that the new settlement would have to be sustained through local production. Until the planned grain farms yielded marketable surpluses, or until some new staple was fastened upon, any exploitable resource that could help offset Wellington's initial trade deficit was welcome. Enthusiasm for whaling was further kindled by the urgings of the small but influential cadre which arrived direct in the new settlement from New South Wales or Van Diemen's Land, several of whom had had first hand experience of the Australian whaling industry.¹¹

What then was the nature of the resource? To settler eyes and minds, whales were there for the taking, and seemingly in abundance. In season, which ran roughly from May to October, southern right whales were reputed to run through Cook Strait like shoals of herring.¹² The New Zealand Company's naturalist, Ernst Dieffenbach, postulated this run was part of a migration from the northern waters, the pods then heading for the Chatham Islands, a theory which held sway for some time.¹³ Later scientific evidence conclusively proved, however, that the migration was actually in the reverse direction.¹⁴ After wintering in the southern oceans, the whales travelled up the east coast of the South Island, with large numbers then turning into Cook Strait, the warm shallow waters of Cloudy Bay providing an ideal calving area. A proportion then carried on through the Strait, passing between Kapiti Island and the mainland before proceeding to another major calving area in the Taranaki Bight. Robbing the nursery might have suggested sustainability issues, and certainly the matter was raised, but such niceties were of little concern to the majority of the prospective exploiters. For them, the very existence of the resource was enough.

So much for the supply factor. There were also important demand factors. At 1840 whale oil was still being eagerly sought world-wide as a lubricant, vital in the new age of machinery, for fuels, and for the manufacture of candles.¹⁵ The finer grades of oil were particularly in demand in the burgeoning textile industries of Britain and the United

Whale Fishing and the Economic Development of Early Wellington

States. Quite simply, the North Atlantic economies could not get enough oil from traditional supply sources. There was little less demand for an associated product, misleadingly described in export returns as 'whalebone'.¹⁶ Several whale species, including the right, lacking teeth, instead had horny plates suspended from their upper jaws, the bristly edges filtering food from the sea. These plates, known as 'baleen' (or 'whalebone'), also attracted strong interest from manufacturers, being used for stays to keep the Victorian female torso in place, and for strength in such items as umbrellas, fishing rods and whips. Up to £50 and £25 per tun was being paid for black oil in London and Sydney respectively in the late 1830s, with £180 and £100 per tun being paid for bone in the same markets.¹⁷ Considerably higher prices were being paid for sperm oil. Given these price schedules, there can be little doubt that influential sections of the settler community thought they were on to a potential winner.

They were certainly not the first to have this thought. Whaling vessels had been sporadically working New Zealand waters from the 1790s.¹⁸ Indeed, by 1840, to the minds of many, the South Pacific whaling boom was fast approaching, if it had not already reached, its peak. Initially, the principal quarry had been sperm whales, caught and processed far out to sea. But the high cost of outfitting suitable vessels, and of keeping them at sea for years at a time, naturally restricted entry into the industry. However, by 1810 British owned and operated whale ships were regularly making landfall on the New Zealand coast, and the British maintained their ascendancy well into the 1820s.¹⁹ To that point colonial (i.e. Australian) involvement in deep-sea whaling had been limited. Yet by 1835, with the merchants of Sydney and Hobart having amassed sufficient reserves to enable participation, there were more Australian than British whalers operating in the Pacific.²⁰ Sizeable American and French fleets also added to the competition. While the international fleets ransacked the waters east of New Zealand in the 1820s and 1830s, and continued to do so, albeit on a reduced scale, in the 1840s, only turning to the inshore right whale fisheries in off seasons, and then only when catches were down, there had been an important colonial realisation by the late 1820s.²¹ This was that the greater value of sperm oil might be offset by the greater availability, and vulnerability, of the slower moving rights; and with considerably less investment required. Two alternative forms of whaling therefore emerged: shore whaling, where semi-permanent stations were established; and bay whaling, vessels being moored inshore during the migratory season.²² In both cases oared whaleboats were employed for the actual chase, the catch then being towed back for rendering. Nevertheless, it was the shore station concept which eventually held greatest appeal. Owners or backers were thereby able to service several stations with one small ship, dropping

off supplies, collecting the season's catch, where possible also collecting other commodities.

It should therefore have been no surprise that, when they arrived, the settlers found an already flourishing whaling industry on the shores of Cook Strait. The Hon Henry Petre may have been exaggerating slightly when he later claimed that the newcomers had found 'scarcely a harbour . . . (or inlet in the Strait) . . . without a whaling establishment',²³ but the fragmentary evidence of contemporary travellers suggests that at least 16 shore stations were operational on both sides of the Strait in the 1839 season.²⁴ Shorebased pursuit of the right whales had commenced at Te Awaiti (or Tory Channel) in 1827, and two years later a station had been set up on Kapiti Island. Those were just the first of many. Through the mid-and late-1830s stations came and went. Boats operated from some stations almost continuously, albeit under changing owners. In other instances, stations lasted little more than a single season. Just as it is possible in the ensuing decades to distinguish phantom pastoralists in the Wairarapa, their probable presence identifiable by perhaps a single clue, so too with the whale fisheries. With no comprehensive records of where stations were established, only contemporary shipping columns and site relicts now remain.²⁵

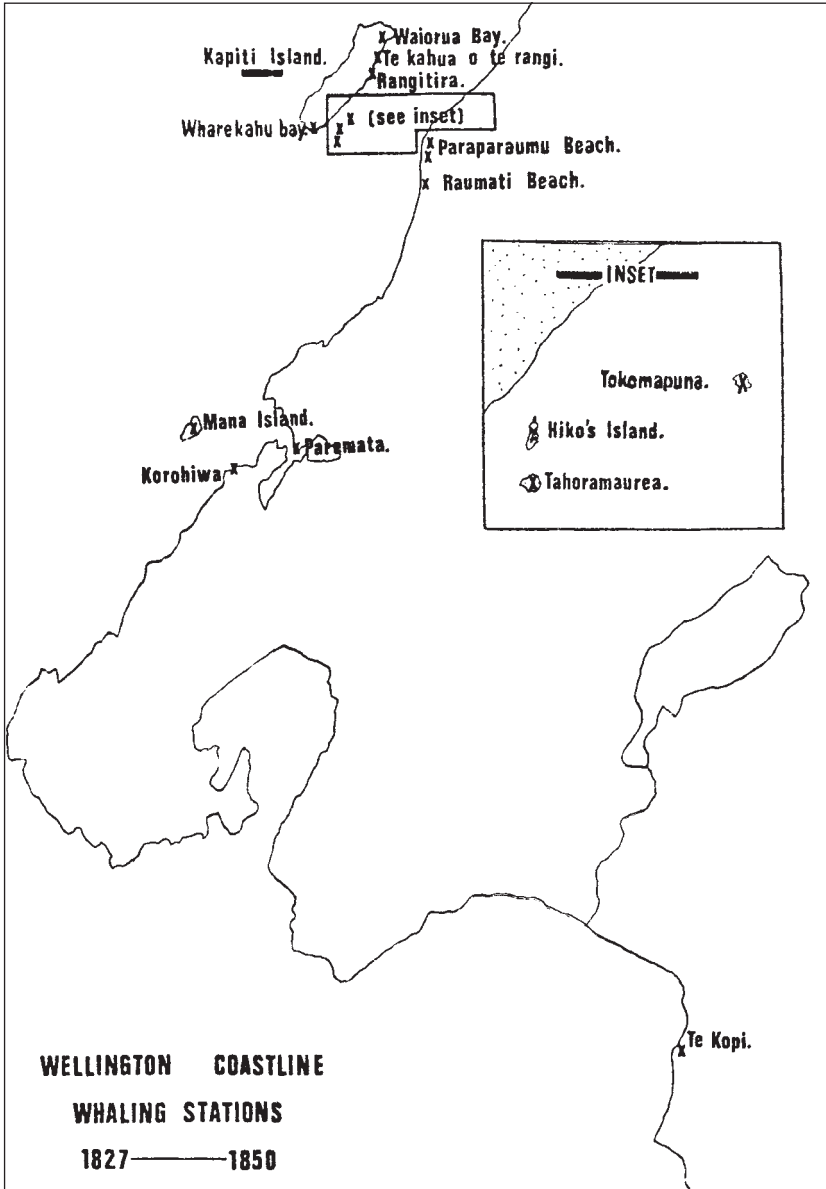
Yet, it seems clear that while most attention was focused on Cloudy Bay and the Sounds in the early 1830s, in the course of the decade emphasis shifted to the environs of Kapiti Island. Apart from the fact that this was a point where the right whales invariably came close inshore, the reasons were partly geographic, partly economic.²⁶ For a start, the lee of the island offered vessels safe anchorage. Linked to this, and possibly of more significance, was the development of Kapiti as the major Maori-European trade locus of central New Zealand in the 1830s. In a sense, the story of whaling at Kapiti is inextricably linked with that of Te Rauparaha.²⁷ Having conquered the southern North Island districts in the 1820s, the Maori leader soon saw the advantage in encouraging location at a base where local produce – flax, provisions – could be exchanged for muskets and trade goods. With whaling being seasonal, it made sense to site stations in close proximity to other trading nodes, this facilitating all-year servicing. For the newcomers, the significance of the existing shore stations was that they were going concerns. There was thus no necessity for heavy experimental investment, nor for an extended learning period: the requisite local knowledge already existed; experienced boat crews were available; processing plants were in place.

There was just one figurative fly in the ointment. At the beginning of 1840 each and every one of the Cook Strait shore stations was a small outpost of Australian enterprise. Each had either been established by Sydney merchant houses or maintained direct links with those houses. The firms involved

Whale Fishing and the Economic Development of Early Wellington

constituted almost a roll-call of the Sydney mercantile elite: Campbell and Co; Cooper and Levy (later Cooper and Holt); Montefiore; Jones and Co.; Duke and Co.; McGaa and Co.²⁸ In the early 1830s, the Cook Strait shore parties had tended to fish purely as the employees of distant station owners. By late in the decade, however, in contrast to stations further south, a somewhat different ownership structure had evolved. By this point there was a clear preference for tiny co-operatives with seasonal supply agreements, or for joint venture arrangements between on-site station heads and the Sydney merchants who supplied the stations and regularly collected oil and bone.²⁹ The desire to thus spread risk arose from a number of Sydney business failures in the mid-and late-1830s, from losses of ships and men on the New Zealand coast, high freight costs, the increasingly heavy competition and, by the end of the decade, the onset of colonial depression. The risk to the former owners of the stations may have been spread by this tactic, but what tended to be overlooked, certainly prior to the arrival of the settlers, was that the changes in ownership also laid the stations open to bids from competing suppliers and collectors.

Undoubtedly, what were loosely termed the 'Kapiti stations', those near the south-western tip of the North Island, first attracted settler interest. By combining contemporary written and later archaeological evidence, it is possible to be reasonably definite about these sites.³⁰ In January 1840 two stations were situated on Kapiti Island itself, both towards the northern end. By far the larger was that at Waiorua, on the shores of a small bay and sheltered from the northerly winds. This station was the oldest on the island, having been in continuous operation from 1831. It was also by far the most elaborate and settled of all the Kapiti stations. About three quarters of a mile further south was Te Kahuaoterangi. An altogether smaller station, it was of much more recent origin. In fact, it is possible that 1839 was the first season it had been fully operational. Three more stations were sited on the minuscule islets immediately to the south-east of Kapiti. Tahoramaurea was the base of Captain William Mayhew, an American with interests at the Bay of Islands. Mayhew also operated sporadically from Wharekahu, at the southern tip of Kapiti. Adjacent Motungarara (or Hiko's Island) was the preserve of another American, Captain Horse Lewis. The pick of the Kapiti stations, however, was that operated by Tommy Evans, on Tokomapuna. Early visitors invariably wrote of the efficiency with which this station was run, of the almost naval discipline. And the available figures tend to bear this out. Of the 466 tuns of black oil produced by the 23 boats of the combined Kapiti stations in 1839, more than half was derived from Evans' six boat station.³¹ Up to three further stations are believed to have operated on the mainland, in the lee of Kapiti, but there is no hard evidence that any were in business in either the 1839 or 1840 seasons. Nevertheless, the



Source: D.P. Millar (1971)

Wellington Coastline, Whaling Stations, 1827-1850.

Whale Fishing and the Economic Development of Early Wellington

sites are recorded on an 1842 New Zealand Company map.³² There were also three stations to the south of Kapiti, clustered around the Porirua Harbour mouth. Longest established was that run by the Fraser brothers at Mana Island, described by Jerningham Wakefield as 'sort of half farm, half whaling station'.³³ Nearby, on the mainland, was Korohiwa, run by Thomas Ellison. Then, on the shores of the harbour itself was Paremata, owned by Cloudy Bay whaler Joseph Toms. This station was described by Wakefield as a miserable place, with 'two or three houses . . . and a filthy, pigsty-like pa'.³⁴ Incidentally, it was oil from this station that was in the *Brougham's* hold when it returned to England.

Just what were these primitive processing plants like? Obvious scale differences apart, and allowing for particular site idiosyncracies, the layouts were near identical. Safely above high-water mark, but as near as possible to the water's edge, lay boat-sheds. These sheltered the clinkerbuilt whaleboats, each up to 30 feet in length. Slipways ran from the sheds to the water, enabling rapid launching of the boats when whales were sighted. Most stations provided cover for up to four boats, sometimes many more. The sheers and windlass equipment were also located close to the water edge. The former, a triangular arrangement of stout poles, was used for hoisting whales into the shallows or right out of the water. Human muscle provided the winching power. Planks and moveable scaffolding provided sound footing for those engaged in dismemberment. Nearby were the tryworks, where slabs of blubber cut from the whale carcasses were rendered down. The tryworks comprised large cast iron boilers or vats, often mounted on masonry stands, the furnaces beneath being fuelled by wood and/or tried out residues from the vats. Alongside were cooling vessels, together with casks to be filled. Within easy rolling distance, but well away from tide danger, were the station storage sheds, generally of sound construction. The safekeeping of oil and bone was always accorded higher priority than human comfort. Overlooking the scene was a frieze of huts and special purpose buildings: the carpenter's and cooper's shops, the station store, in some instances a clerk's office. Where stations were long established there could be an air of permanency, the appearance of a village. Elsewhere crude supplejack and raupo structures sufficed.

Though shipping manifests reveal that several of the newcomers brought sets, sometimes multiple sets, of whaling gear with them, it seems probable that few had any intention of themselves using the gear. There was every cognisance that whale catching and processing was unpleasant and hazardous work.³⁵ Along the coasts, as much as at sea, there were ever present dangers; from the vulnerability of small boats in frequently changeable weather, even from attack by the wounded mammals. Indeed, the actual pursuit of whales has been likened to the tormenting of fighting bulls. Once a whale

was spotted, a small flotilla would set out. Placing a harpoon was simply the first step. Frequently further irons followed, the doomed creature having to be worn out before the *coup de grâce* could be administered with a lance. Ernst Dieffenbach describes what happened next: 'Gasping in the agonies of death, the tortured animal throws up jets of blood, dyeing the sea all around; . . . beating about with its tail; but it at length dies . . . exhausted from the many wounds inflicted'.³⁶ Thereafter, there might be a ten hour or more haul back to the station towing the carcass. Rarely did whales expire close to base. Work at the small processing complexes had its own dangers, and evidence of the business was always apparent to the eye and nose, sometimes also the ear. Approaching his first station near nightfall, Dieffenbach likened it to a scene from Hell: 'Large fires glared through the darkness . . . lighted for the trying out of the blubber of a large whale . . . brought in that morning'.³⁷ The figures flickering in the firelight and the babble of well-primed voices only added to the awfulness of the image. On going ashore the following morning, the impression was of a huge open air slaughter house: the beach was 'covered with the remains of whales – skulls, vertebrae, large shoulder blades and fins'. The sands were stained with blood and fat. Chunks of rotting flesh lay about. With trying-out still in progress, the small complex was overhung with clouds of oily black smoke. The stench was intense. Understandably, there was little inclination amongst most settlers to directly participate in these activities. Yet the migrant merchants, probably just as squeamish but more hard-headed, sensed there might be ways to expropriate a major share of the profits from what one of their number termed 'this truly horrible, yet immensely satisfying, trade'.³⁸

In subsequently endeavouring to wrench control of the whale fisheries from the Sydney houses, the more thrustful of the Wellington merchants adopted several strategems. Perhaps most audacious were the tactics of Captain William Barnard Rhodes,³⁹ himself a former whaling skipper and no stranger to the New Zealand coast, an arrivee from New South Wales not Britain, and temporarily the local representative of leading Sydney emancipist house Cooper and Holt. It might well be argued that Rhodes was simply seeking to protect his principals' interests – Cooper and Holt, in various manifestations, having already been active in the Cook Strait trade for a number of years – but it is equally likely, in the light of his later actions, that he was laying foundations for a more independent enterprise. Arriving off Kapiti in the barque *Eleanor* in October 1839, Rhodes, well aware of the pending arrival of the settlers, purported to conclude purchases of both Kapiti Island itself and a substantial block between Waikanae and Otaki on the mainland.⁴⁰ The wording of the purchase deeds, tendered before Commissioner Spain in June 1842, is significant. In respect of Kapiti, Rhodes claimed 'all that

Whale Fishing and the Economic Development of Early Wellington

tract of land known as Entry Island, or Capiti, situated in Cook Strait, New Zealand – *Together with all buildings, whaling stations and right of whaling in the adjacent waters*’ (my italics). The mainland purchase included: ‘. . . all rivers, waters, streams of water, creeks. Bays and harbours . . . *together with all the right and uninterrupted right of fishing, and the fishes in the said waters*’ (my italics). What Rhodes was attempting to do was buy out established stations from under the existing operators. Spain’s reaction was surprisingly sympathetic, Rhodes being ultimately awarded 688 acres on Kapiti, and offered 722 acres in settlement of his mainland claim.⁴¹ But a claim was one thing; actually getting possession of the stations was quite another. Notwithstanding Spain’s awards, the Maori sellers repudiated the sales. And the irate whalers let it be known that any attempt to forcibly take possession was likely to be repulsed with muskets and lances. Thirty years later the impasse was still unresolved.⁴²

More subtle takeover techniques ultimately proved to be more successful. An obvious ploy was for the new Port Nicholson merchant houses to set up as alternative suppliers of the shore stations, and as oil brokers, accepting consignments of oil and bone for the British market.⁴³ There was a clear logic to this approach. It required little additional outlay to become station suppliers, the goods most in demand at the stations, particularly liquor, being already liberally stocked. Equally, the immigrant vessels, returning to Britain, were clamouring for back cargoes. The principal investment for the new houses lay in the procurement of small craft to service the stations, but even this expenditure could be offset by use of the vessels to collect flax or provisions from other points on the coast. Fortunately for the newcomers, there was only limited resistance from the Australian houses. By 1840 recession was biting deeply both in Sydney and Hobart.⁴⁴ As early as October 1839 Colonel Wakefield had noted the increasing infrequency of calls by the promised supply and collection vessels,⁴⁵ and it appeared that the situation would be even worse in the 1840 season. Some of the earlier leading Cook Strait players were already facing bankruptcy, while most were finding it difficult to keep their sides of agreements. When the Port Nicholson merchants were able to offer greater certainty of service, extended credit and better prices, as well as direct shipment of product to Britain, the willingness of many station heads to abandon earlier agreements, some of long-standing, is more readily understood. Such small inroads, however, were never likely to be enough. It was the determination of the merchants to monopolise the supply sources in their own figurative backyard that led directly to even more thrustful involvement in the industry. This was through the lease or outright purchase of stations.

The imposition of Port Nicholson merchant control over the whale fisheries within a fifty-mile radius of the port commenced in 1840, and it gathered

pace in 1841-42. The impact was immediate. According to the *Hobart Advertiser* in June 1842,⁴⁶ the value of oil and bone despatched from Sydney in the preceding season (1841) had declined by 43%, the result of so much being sent direct from New Zealand. By the beginning of 1843 a disinterested observer was able to report that the whole of the Cook Strait whale fishing had passed to local hands.⁴⁷ First to fall were the Kapiti coast stations, though not to Rhodes! Curiously, the first breach was not by a merchant at all but by a consortium led by leading landholder Edward Daniell and future Canterbury surveyor Joseph Thomas, the partners taking a lease of Toms' Paremata station for the 1840 season.⁴⁸ This unexpected independent initiative, however, quickly stimulated mercantile emulation. Former Hobart dealers, the brothers Wade, for example, acquired controlling interests in two of the Kapiti stations.⁴⁹ Others followed suit.

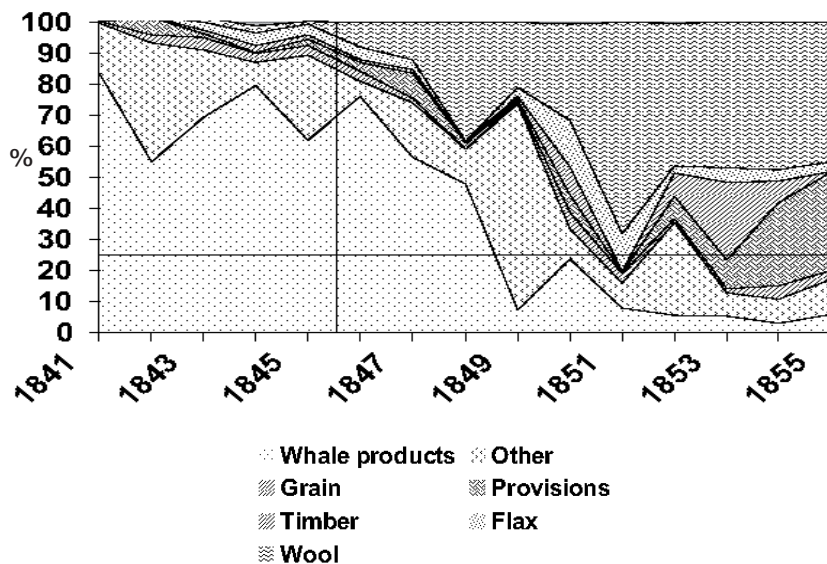
From the outset there were differences of opinion as to whether leasing or purchase was the better deal. At this point the outright purchase of existing stations remained a viable option, certainly for those with spare capital. In contrast to the costs involved in breaking in land, a prospective whaling entrepreneur could purchase a station for between £1500 and £2000, and there was every likelihood the previous operators could be retained on contract.⁵⁰ To this initial outlay had to be added seasonal expenses, which could be up to £1200 for a six-boat station, commensurately less for a smaller establishment. But the prospective returns were good. A single mature whale might yield up to 15 tuns of oil and 500lbs of bone. Three such specimens would be expected to adequately cover a season's expenses. Given the transience of the industry, detailed accounts for individual stations are scarce, but from the surviving fragments there is every indication that the initial investment could be worked off in one or two good seasons.⁵¹ Nevertheless, as competition for stations grew, there was a tendency for disposal by auction, and generally at much higher prices.⁵² It was these escalating entry costs which predisposed the Port Nicholson merchants to lease where they could, this system being in vogue when attention turned to the Sounds and Cloudy Bay stations.⁵³ While the Wades were once more to the fore, there was intense jostling at the top of the South Island. George Moore underwrote two stations, while at least three others, including Rhodes, secured rights to a station apiece.

As even leasing costs rose, however, and with most existing stations having been annexed by the beginning of the 1842 season, the alternative of channelling profits into the creation of quite new establishments became more attractive. According to Moore, new fisheries were being established 'everywhere' by late 1842.⁵⁴ Typical of the new stations was that set up by the Wades at Te Kopi, in Palliser Bay, in early 1842.⁵⁵ Despite teething troubles, the station was fully operational by mid-year, 35 men having

Whale Fishing and the Economic Development of Early Wellington

Principal exports as a percentage of annual exports from Port Nicholson, 1841-1855.

Source: Blue Books



been recruited for the manning of three boats. Nevertheless, their success on this occasion must have been modest, for by the end of the season a switch to flax collecting was in contemplation, whaling being viewed as no more than an occasional pursuit. Notwithstanding such disappointments, at mid-1843 most of the investors remained sanguine. Whales were said to be still 'very plentiful in the Strait' and 'thick on the coast'.⁵⁶ Writing to a British correspondent, George Moore noted that good catches were being recorded at all the established fisheries: 'Without the whaling we should get on but slowly . . . it brings an immense quantity of money into this place'.⁵⁷ In the early 1840s there was scarcely a single Wellington merchant house, even those insufficiently capitalised to own or lease stations, that did not trade in oil and bone. Where oil and bone was already merchant-owned, it was shipped to British agents for sale to best advantage. When sold on commission, infrequent after the 1841 season, small local advances were paid. Whale products held their value so well they came to be accepted as a form of currency, remittances being made in barrels.

The reason for Moore's optimism emerges from analysis of the contemporary trade statistics.⁵⁸ The returns for 1840 are incomplete, but over the next three seasons whale products brought an average return of £13,000 per annum to the settlement. In 1843 the value of exported whale

products topped £20,000 for the first time. These returns may seem small in the light of what had been invested in planting the settlement. They may seem positively puny when compared to the high cost of imports to the settlement (an average of £127,000 per annum between 1841-3). What they did represent were the first significant shipments of wholly settlement-sourced product; with the promise of much more to come. Whale products provided returns before there were any from the projected grain farms, or from the pastoral properties it seemed increasingly likely would be established in the settlement's hinterlands. Moreover, there was the multiplier effect of the industry on other facets of the settlement economy. For a start, the merchants were presented with an ancillary captive market for goods of all kinds. With over 650 hands at stations supplied from Port Nicholson by 1843, the heavy importations of spirits into the settlement may be partially explained.⁵⁹ The foundering of one servicing vessel in mid-1842 with over 1000 gallons aboard is at least suggestive.⁶⁰ Whale fishing also stimulated the emergence of a cluster of small manufactories, and even more modest workshops, on the harbour shores.⁶¹ Previously all barrels and casks had been imported as staves. Many were now supplied to the stations built-up, and there was experimentation with manufacture from local woods. Ropeworks produced lashings and cordage from local fibre for the stations. Boatbuilding yards mushroomed, and general shipping services received a boost. There was also the fact that whale catching tended to occupy little more than six months of any year.⁶² Certainly, some whalers idled away their off-seasons, but others engaged in provisions and flax trading, or in the cultivation of lands near to stations.

Nor should the personal expenditure of whalers in the infant township of Wellington be overlooked. Beyond their indirect transactions in station shops, for some weeks at the end of every season, like the shearers of a later era, the station hands descended on what passed for civilisation. They may have drunk hard during the season, but it was as nothing compared to the annual October-November binge in the town itself. In late 1842 Moore tartly noted that, on the evidence of their spending, 'the whaling gentry' had had a good year.⁶³ He cited the wedding of one, which had cost over £170. But, he grumbled, they tended to squander their money, and not enough of it in his store: 'the grog shops get the cream of it'. The end-of-season festivities were likened by Jerminham Wakefield, himself no stranger to carousing, to the behaviour of sailors paid off after a cruise: 'After the men have been paid the balance due to them . . . they go to Wellington to spend it. During six weeks or two months, Wellington becomes a Portsmouth in miniature'.⁶⁴ Every public house had its fiddle and hornpipe going. Theatres and other places of entertainment were filled to capacity. There was heavy betting on boat races. Almost as a corollary, the weak local constabulary

Whale Fishing and the Economic Development of Early Wellington

force was frequently stretched by brawling mobs in the streets. While it is difficult to assess just how much money changed hands in these few hectic weeks of every year, what seems beyond dispute is that Wellington's taverns and warehouses did roaring trades. As Wakefield rather primly, if scarcely characteristically, observed, if the whaling trade were to increase respectable folk would be compelled to consider shifting their residences to some distance from the township!

The likelihood of whale fishing even further expanding may have posed a moral dilemma for more abstemious citizens, but it was nothing of the kind for most of the settlement's dealers. The generally satisfactory early 1840s catches only further fuelled the latter's ambitions. Having acquired small vessels to service the stations closest to the port, it was a small matter to extend the range of collecting circuits. By the mid-1840s, as Jerningham Wakefield has recorded, merchant-backed shore stations were 'situated at various points on the east coast of the Middle Island, between Queen Charlotte's Sound and Fouveau's Strait; two at New Plymouth; and a large number at various places on the east coast of the North Island, between Cape Palliser and East Cape'.⁶⁵ In this expansion of vistas, the lead was again provided by John Wade. Wade's first sortie beyond Cook Strait was to the Kaikoura Peninsula, he financing the transfer of a group of former Cloudy Bay whalers to the new location in the spring of 1842.⁶⁶ This venture was in partnership with fellow Wellington merchants Waitt and Tyser. With their strong British connections, Waitt and Tyser accepted responsibility for the marketing of oil and bone. Until there could be proper apportionment following sale, Wade's margin came from the return on capital put up to outfit and maintain the fishery, together with shipping servicing charges. With success obvious, roughly one quarter of the oil shipped from Wellington in the 1843 season coming from his Kaikoura station, Wade proceeded to open further stations along the Kaikoura Coast.⁶⁷ He also concluded an exclusive supply agreement with Hemplemann at Akaroa. Under the terms of this agreement all oil and bone collected at Peraki was to be considered as for Wade's 'sole benefit and use'.⁶⁸

Wade's exploits initiated a major expansion of Port Nicholson influence. By the mid-1840s vessels from the port were running regular supply and collecting services to far-flung stations in both islands. Less happily for Wade, intelligence of his Kaikoura success lured competitors south, foremost amongst them the ruthlessly ambitious medico-turned-merchant William Fitzherbert.⁶⁹ Shrewdly utilising his greater access to capital, Fitzherbert, in addition to himself establishing new South Island stations, deliberately set about winning over Wade's lieges. There is evidence to suggest that, while manoeuvring to restrict Wade's settlement credit, he also provided the funds for consequent operator buyouts, the price being

regular interest payments and exclusive supply agreements with Fitzherbert and Co.⁷⁰ Fitzherbert was also prepared to resort to even more doubtful stratagems, in at least one instance financing a legal challenge to Wade's right of possession to a station. In the face of such ruthless competition, Wade was to eventually relinquish the Kaikoura fisheries, desultorily resuming business as an auctioneer before finally quitting the settlement.⁷¹ With other lesser merchants taking note, Fitzherbert was left a virtually open coast in the south. By 1846 his small ships were ranging as far as Foveaux Strait, the collapse of the Sydney interests at Otago ensuring minimal opposition. There were similar displacements on the North Island's eastern coast. At the beginning, the dominant player had been Rhodes, a legacy of his pre-settlement activities.⁷² Scattered pork stations established in late 1839 provided a rationale for regular collecting trips, although there was no immediate move to fisheries ownership. Rhodes' temporary financial embarrassment, between 1842-5, nevertheless permitted others to stake a claim in the trade. His mid-decade reviving fortunes nevertheless permitted Rhodes to reassert himself.⁷³ Although eschewing Fitzherbert's directly confrontational tactics, he exploited old contacts, undermining competitors and building up a new network of suppliers. Unlike Fitzherbert, Rhodes remained largely content to function as station supplier and commission agent, conserving his capital for other unrelated ventures. It must be a moot point as to which colonial wealth creation strategy was ultimately the more profitable.

As has been suggested, the principal beneficiaries of the whale fisheries were Wellington's merchants, and, as has at least been implied, the shares between them were by no means equal. Those seeking greater share therefore had to look for new angles. Writing in late 1841 to his friend H. S. Chapman, yet to depart from England to take up his New Zealand judgeship, newspaper editor Sam Revans openly hankered to participate.⁷⁴ If he were able to raise sufficient capital, he would throw up all his other interests in the settlement and use the funds to erect several stores and a wharf. He was sure entry into the station supply and oil broking businesses would return 'from 80 to 120 on outlay'. He witnessed 'that glorious stinking stuff landing on our beaches with great satisfaction'. Altogether, the tiers of casks and stacks of bone constituted 'a most agreeable sight' on the waterfront, one that rendered inconsequential the 'most unpleasant smell'. Within a few weeks, however, Revans was advancing an even more grandiose scheme.⁷⁵ The real money, he now proclaimed, lay in the promotion of deep-sea whaling. It was inappropriate, in his view, that such whaling should remain largely the preserve of American and French vessels. Hence he proposed the floating of a New Zealand Whaling Company, 'to be got up at home, capital £50,000 for the purchase of 25 ships or 50 brigs'. These

would range through the southern oceans, but would always return to their home port (Wellington) which would soon supplant Hobart as the deep-sea whaling centre of the South Pacific. Such a fleet would employ more than 1000 hands, each earning not less than £70 per annum, which would be largely spent in the port. Expenditure on this scale would be provender for the merchants, coming on top of the returns from the handling of sperm oil, and those from the outfitting and provisioning of vessels. 'A company of this kind', Revans enthused, 'would benefit Port Nicholson to the extent of £100,000 per annum', many times the return from all exports to date. Although, in recognition of the source of capital, the venture should have a London board, its practical management should be left in the hands of a local director. Typically unselfishly, Revans suggested himself for this post. For more than a year Revans continued to bombard Chapman, and other former London friends, with his proposals.⁷⁶ There was never much chance of success. The investment demanded was simply too great. Moreover, British whaling interests, many of whom had also been backers of the New Zealand Company, were already formulating plans of their own to recapture a share of the southern whale fisheries.⁷⁷ It was therefore highly unlikely they would support a potential rival enterprise.

It was not until the mid-1840s that the idea of Port Nicholson becoming New Zealand's chief whaling port was revived. On this occasion external developments lent the concept some credibility. Until that time oil exports from the port had been almost exclusively right (or black) oil.⁷⁸ To 1844 no more than 21 tuns of sperm oil had been despatched. Yet in 1844 this total doubled, and in three of the next four years annual totals of more than 60 tuns were consigned. Little of this oil was locally caught and processed. The main source was off-loading by foreign deep-sea vessels,⁷⁹ calling at Port Nicholson for rest and/or provisioning. Oil was the currency in which they paid. The increase in sperm oil exports therefore suggests that such visits to Port Nicholson had increased substantially. Why? To establish the reason it is necessary to look further north. For decades the Bay of Islands had functioned as New Zealand's principal provisioning and recreation centre for the international deep-sea fleets.⁸⁰ During the mild summers the fleets moved over fishing grounds immediately to the north and east of New Zealand. As winter approached, they sought refuge to rest crews and to take on fresh food and water. Once replenished, they spent the winters hunting off Tonga, Fiji and Samoa. The outbreak of Heke's War in the north, particularly the destruction of Kororareka, led to the avoidance of the Bay of Islands.⁸¹ Although the more southerly port had interracial problems of its own, it temporarily became a magnet. The township's merchants were more than happy to accept any downside.

Inevitably, the more regular appearances of foreign craft helped resuscitate the local deep-sea fleet dream.

That the proposals never won support from overseas backers proved fortuitous. From about 1847 even the local shore-based industry went into abrupt decline. In 1846 W.T. Power noted seven working stations in the vicinity of Kapiti.⁸² By the end of the 1847 season only two were still in business.⁸³ Shipping returns for 1848 in the *Statistics of New Munster*⁸⁴ indicate that the preponderance of the whale products shipped from Port Nicholson in that year were from stations in the deep south, stations which would soon come under the wing of the new Otago settlement. From 1849 shipments of oil and bone consistently accounted for less than 10% of exports from the settlement (the only exception being 1850, when there were unexpectedly heavy offloadings from foreign vessels).⁸⁵ It was not that the bottom had fallen out of the market; indeed, prevailing overseas prices increased slightly. Rather, the settlement catch had plummeted. For a time this was hard to accept. It was fashionable to blame the downturn on competition from foreign whalers; to insist the cetaceans had been merely driven from their normal routes, and that they would surely return; even to argue that the rise of small-scale agriculture had removed skilled boatmen from the trade.⁸⁶ There was only slow recognition that the post-settlement mushrooming of shore stations had, as Dieffenbach had earlier warned it might, contributed to 'felling the tree to obtain the fruit'.⁸⁷ To meet demand, nursing cows and calves had been slaughtered indiscriminately. There had not been, in the environment could not have been, any thought of sustainability. But, with the tree down, there was no chance of a new crop. The nett result was a widespread abandonment of the shore stations. The peak had been in 1845, with over 850 men crewing nearly 100 boats.⁸⁸ By 1850 fewer than a dozen boats were still in service. At many sites rusting trypots and collapsed sheers, mixed with the unsaleable skeletal bone, were the only signs of what had been.⁸⁹ As up-and-coming Wellington merchant George Hunter informed a Hobart correspondent in the following year, shore fishing had been 'reduced to a trifle', while shiploads of discharged sperm oil were becoming ever scarcer.⁹⁰ Port Nicholson, he wrote, 'had been a considerable depot at one time', and as a result his firm was 'thoroughly conversant with whaling matters', but there was little prospect of any revival of the trade.

Notwithstanding Hunter's pessimism, he, as much as his more involved mercantile rivals, could be seduced by the promise of oil supplies from new sources. It was this willingness to discount realities that led the house of Bethune and Hunter to becoming the New Zealand agents of the Southern Whale Fishery Co., the ill-fated attempt by Charles Enderby to establish a whale fishing industry in the Auckland Islands.⁹¹ First mooted in the early

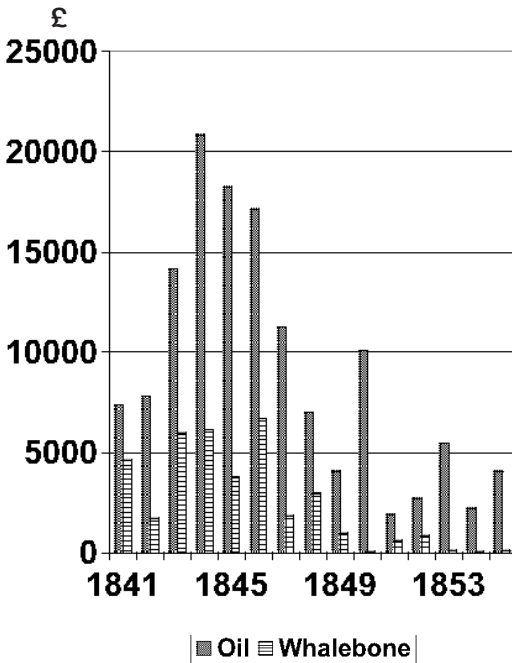
Whale Fishing and the Economic Development of Early Wellington

1840s, the company, capital £100,000, was not incorporated until January 1849. The plan was to base up to eight whale ships at the islands, with a new settlement, Port Ross, as the centre of activities. Late in 1849 Enderby himself, en route to the islands with his first three ships, called at Wellington to conclude an agreement with Hunter.⁹² In return for a guarantee of regular supplies, a considerable volume of oil would be trans-shipped to Britain through the local house, a regular schooner service being run to Port Ross as part of the arrangements. Bethune and Hunter's subsequent records indicate substantial shipments of timber and provisions to the islands, but of the promised return cargoes of oil no trace can be found. Moreover, and more worryingly, the Southern Whale Fishery Co.'s debt with the firm grew steadily. The experiment was an unmitigated failure. By 1852 the losses on the operation were so great that liquidation was the only option.⁹³ By the end of the year Port Ross had been abandoned. Hunter was sadder, but possibly no wiser. It was to general incredulity that his firm underwrote the reopening of Fyffe's Kaikoura station in 1855.⁹⁴

The collapse of the Port Nicholson whale fisheries had widespread ramifications. Those who had been most directly involved were compelled to turn to other things. Paradoxically, this was easiest for the men at the top. Individuals such as Fitzherbert, Rhodes, and their like, soon switched their attention to other trades, and to the development of landed interests.⁹⁵ Their servicing vessels could be redirected to other cargoes, the emerging wool trade, for instance, suggesting a future avenue of profit. Lesser townsmen, and women, those who had contributed through the supply of goods and services to the ships and stations, were required to rethink their personal success strategies.⁹⁶ In the late 1840s over half of Wellington's cooperages closed their doors. Similarly faced with reduced business, the settlement's rope walks also near halved in number. Many of the small boatyards lay idle. What the impact was on the township's bars and brothels, particularly in October-November, can only be guessed. The needs were now more those of a settled community than a bonanza boom town. But the impact, as so often, was greatest on the rank and file workers, on those who had actually run the shore stations, manned the boats.⁹⁷ For those with few ties, there was the possibility of leaving the country, of continuing the hunt aboard foreign vessels. The great majority, however, were forced to adjust; to more fully focus on what previously had been off season activities (cultivation, timber felling), or to embrace quite new ones. Ray Grover's 'Scotch Jock' was by no means the only whaler to become mine host of a public house.

To dismiss the whaling industry as of limited economic importance in the founding of Wellington would be misguided. Certainly the whaling phase was of short duration, but in its five best mid-decade years it brought in excess of

£105,000 to the settlement. Even allowing for relatively high cost structures, this was a tidy sum for division amongst the industry's promoters. Although disliked by local New Zealand Company officials, dismissed by other solid citizens as barbaric, conducive only of drunkenness and whoremongering, its very real commercial significance was as a form of bridging in the absence of other export commodities. In 1840 it was thought that whale products might tide Wellington's exporters over until saleable farm produce became



Source: Blue Books

Returns from whale products exported from Port Nicholson, 1841-1855.

available. As the export returns for the period indicate, whale products did that, and, in the face of the grain cultivation failures, did so for far longer than had ever been anticipated. Between 1841-47 whale products consistently accounted for more than 50% of the settlement's exports, sometimes more than 75%. It was therefore fortunate that the collapse of the whale fisheries coincided with the emergence of wool as a viable export alternative, and one with far greater potential for sustainable expansion.

Perhaps whaling's greatest long-term legacy was in its contribution to the foundation laying of a number of the leading Wellington merchant houses, houses which were to play critical parts in the later nineteenth century development of both town and province. Ironically, it was oil and bone returns which enabled Fitzherbert to move into a far from quiescent landed semi-retirement in 1851. Though removing himself from the commercial hurly-burly, he was to be a leading shaper of economic development in the political sphere until near the century's end. Fitzherbert's withdrawal, however, was atypical. More commonly, Wellington's nascent mercantile elite used their whaling profits to garner further advantage. It was profits from the industry, together with

Whale Fishing and the Economic Development of Early Wellington

military supply contracts, that assured Rhodes' financial rehabilitation in the 1840s, and his subsequent pastoral expansion in both major islands.⁹⁸ For other surviving merchant houses, large and small, whaling returns afforded buffer funds in the difficult founding years. It is tempting to speculate that, without the whaling industry, the Wellington settlement might ultimately have been no more successful than Port Ross. What is certain is that without whaling the difficult founding years would have been even more difficult, and the period of total dependency on overseas capital would have been longer and more intense.

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Whale Fishing and the Economic Development of Early Wellington

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Journal of New Zealand Studies

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