

THE DARTMOUTH WHALERS

MARGARET ELLS.

THERE can be few incidents in Nova Scotian history which, on the surface, present a greater enigma than that of the Dartmouth whale fishery. In 1785 a fleet of thirteen whalers, with fishermen and their families, came to Dartmouth. They put up houses, and settled, and in three years built up a successful and lucrative industry. But four years later, in the full enjoyment of it, suddenly, and for no apparent reason, they packed up their belongings, left their homes to tumble down or rot, and sailed away. This strange interlude has attracted scant attention from contemporary or subsequent writers. The loyalist and romantic town of Shelburne, whose dramatic rise and fall after the loyalists' coming has evoked prolonged comment from nearly everyone who has written on that period of Nova Scotian history, presented no stranger phenomenon than contemporary Dartmouth. Yet no Haliburton has arisen to grieve over her deserted wharves and vacant houses. For more than half a century they bore mute witness to the few years of frenzied work that comprised the life of Dartmouth's lost enterprise.

The conclusion of the American Revolutionary War left many problems in Anglo-American relations unsolved. One which continued to vex both England and America was the whaling industry. The Nantucket whale fishery had amply supplied Great Britain with oil and other essential products since the middle of the century; in 1783 it became part of a foreign nation. Its products no longer came as by right to England, but were liable to prohibitive duties. Some dependable source of supply for whale products was necessary for England. Conversely, the break with England had robbed American whale fishermen of their greatest, almost their only, market. If they sold in England, the duties left them almost no profit, and the United States could use only a fraction of the oil, bone and wax which Great Britain annually required. The livelihood of all the inhabitants of Nantucket depended on the fishery; they had the vessels, the equipment, the men and an unrivalled reputation in whale fishing, all of which were of little avail without a profitable market. During the war, whaling had of necessity languished; with the resumption of peace-

ful occupations, the question of what was to be done about the Nantucket whale fishery faced the people of Nantucket on the one hand, and the British Government on the other.

Being a matter of bread-and-butter to the Nantucketers, a solution of the problem was first reached by some of them. While the British Government was still determining its official attitude towards the people of the United States, the Nantucket men looked around and saw that, although they could not send their oil into England without incurring a duty of £18 a ton, their relatives, who had been living in the nearby colony of Nova Scotia for the past twenty years,¹ were able to export it from that province as colonial oil, liable to a duty of only fifteen shillings five-pence. The inference was obvious. A committee was appointed, and two agents were elected to go to Nova Scotia to investigate conditions there and enquire as to the terms upon which they might immigrate. Whether the impetus to consider Nova Scotia as a possible home was entirely from within, or came from interested merchants in Nova Scotia, is at present an open question. Such evidence as there is points to the possibility of suggestions having come from Nova Scotia; a year before the two agents, Starbuck and Folger, arrived in Halifax, a prominent Halifax business firm had received their first returns from a whaling voyage. That same firm, the Cochran Brothers, had five vessels in the fishery in its heyday, and one of the firm, Thomas, is mentioned in an editorial on the whale fishery written in 1825 as a prime mover in encouraging the Nantucketers.² It is probable that the crew of the Cochrans' whaler were from Nantucket, and quite possible, though by no means certain, that the suggestion came from Nova Scotia to Nantucket through them.

Once arrived in Nova Scotia, Starbuck and Folger found no difficulty in obtaining a hearing. To the eighteenth century the products of the whale fishery were essential. Sperm oil and spermaceti candles produced the best light, and were in constant demand; refined sperm oil was necessary for lubricating delicate machinery; spermaceti was used also in dressing fabrics, in medicine and in the preparation of cosmetics; ambergris and ivory (from the whale's teeth) had a standard value; common whale oil was used in preparing wood for combing, in chamois-leather making and in batching vegetable fibres like flax, besides its function as a heavy lubricant; the making of umbrellas and various boned

1. P. A. N. S. Vol. 222 doc. 12 and Vol. 221 doc. 69, accounts of the province in 1763 and 1782, show Nantucket whalers at Barrington.

2. P. A. N. S. Files of the *Nova Scotian*, 15 June 1825, Article on the Whale Fishery. Cochran and R. J. Uniacke are mentioned.

garments was impossible without whale-bone. Being productive of so many necessities, the whaling industry assured the prosperity of the community which was its base. Small wonder that both merchants and inhabitants of Halifax were filled with enthusiasm at the prospect of such an establishment in their midst. The lucrative nature of the industry and the unequalled reputation of Nantucket whale fishermen were too well known to admit of any doubts as to its success.

Having received such encouragement from this interested section of the population as led them to hope for success with the provincial authorities, the agents of the whalemens next approached the head of the colony with their proposals. Professing that they wished to become residents and settlers, the Nantucketers made application to Governor Parr in the form of enquiries¹. They asked the amount of land they might expect, their religious status in the province, and what special considerations would be made to them. Most important of all, because on it depended their ability to carry on the whaling industry from Nova Scotia, they wished to know whether their vessels might be entered and registered as British. To their applications the Governor turned a favourable ear. Convinced that real advantages would follow the success of the project, he and the Council were ready, pending the arrival of instructions from England, to offer every inducement in their power to attract the whalemens to Nova Scotia. Parr assured them that they would meet with no hindrance in the exercise of their religion as members of the Society of Friends. He promised that they would be made British subjects, which would permit them to receive the Mediterranean Passes that were necessary for the Southern Fishery, and to bring into Nova Scotia and re-export their products as colonial merchandise. In addition the Governor would allow the fishermen to import into Nova Scotia the value of their Nantucket properties converted into whatever commodities they wished, subject to the usual duties, would grant them free land, and would recommend them to the Home Government for further consideration.²

Being assured of so hearty a welcome from the merchants with whom they would be associated, and the authorities under whom they would live, the prospective settlers lost no time in arranging their affairs and preparing for migration. By the middle of September, 1785, the vanguard, consisting of three brigantines and one schooner "with their crews and everything necessary

1. Enclosed in Parr to Sydney, P. A. C. N. S. A. Vol. 107 M. 503, pp. 159-161, 27 July, 1785, Enquiries, with Parr's answers.

2. Ibid. and also P. A. N. S. Vol. 47 doc. 47 Parr to Sydney, 20 Sept., 1785.

for the whalfishery"¹ arrived in Halifax Harbour, and before the summer of 1786 forty families had come from Nantucket to settle in Dartmouth. The Governor was as good as his word. Orders were given in October for grants of land for them, and over two thousand acres were finally laid out on the Dartmouth side of Halifax Harbour². The Assembly voted £1,500, no small sum in the then impoverished state of the provincial treasury, for the encouragement of the settlers. Most of this sum was expended in building house-frames for them. The commissioners whom the Governor appointed to expend it submitted a comprehensive and illuminating report in 1788, when the fishery was in full swing, which shows the efforts expended by the Assembly and the prominent people of the province to make the establishment a success.

Governor Parr reported promptly to the Home Government the concessions he had proposed to Starbuck and Folger. Before he had received its assent, the speedy arrival of the whalers forced Parr to redeem his promises. It was not until the first fleet out of Dartmouth was well on its way home that the Secretary of State for the Home Department made known to the Governor the Imperial will with regard to the new establishment. That will was expressed in unequivocal disapproval of the encouragement that the Governor had given, and a royal command forbidding any continuance of it to forthcoming applicants.³ Sydney reprovved Parr severely, not only for making promises without waiting for an indication of the Home Government's attitude, but because the carrying out of the promises, being contrary to the old Navigation Laws, could be effected only by Act of Parliament. He proceeded to detail the confusion and inconveniences which had been caused by the granting of British registers to the Nantucket vessels, and wound up with an expression of the Government's policy. "It may on this occasion," he wrote,

"be necessary that I should inform you for your own guidance that it is the present Determination of Government not to encourage the Southern Whale Fishery, that may be carried on by Persons who may have removed from Nantucket and other places within the American States, excepting they shall exercise that Fishery directly from Great Britain."⁴

The Home Government's censure came as a great surprise to Governor Parr, who had anticipated anything but reproof. Among others, the Provincial Agent in London, Richard Cumber-

1. P. A. N. S. Vol. 47 Ibid.

2. P. A. N. S. Land Papers, 14 Feb., 1786 Grant to Samuel Starbuck and Others.

3. P. A. N. S. vol. 33 doc. 26, Sydney to Parr, 20 Apr., 1786.

4. Ibid.

land, had given him good reason to expect otherwise; two months before Sydney's letter to Parr, he had written to the Assembly:

"I observe with great Satisfaction the public Attention which is paid to the important Object of the Whale Fishery. . . . I hope from my heart there will be no diligence spared in prosecuting this great source of wealth and population. I have no reason to fear but Government here will take Every prudent Measure for the prosperity of your Trade."¹

The Commodore on the station had likewise given his approval;² and Council and Assembly agreed with them that the opportunity offered by the Nantucketers held unlimited possibilities of prosperity and development for the Province. But, to so strong an expression of government policy as that expressed in Sydney's despatch, there could be no reply but implicit obedience. After he had received the Secretary of State's letter, Parr granted no more privileges to would-be settlers from Nantucket.

No orders had come from England with regard to those who had already arrived in Nova Scotia, and with these forty families as a nucleus, a whaling community grew and flourished. Year by year it absorbed more capital and more of the youth of Dartmouth and Halifax. The whalers were fitted out with a year's provision and the necessary boats and tackle at Dartmouth. They sailed, usually in autumn, for the South Atlantic; in 1785 all the vessels went to the Brazilian coast, but usually the west coast of Africa was equally favoured. Before sailing, the owners of each vessel were obliged to obtain a Mediterranean Pass, on taking bond, from the Governor. The Pass gave them protection as British subjects, and was surrendered on the return of the vessel.³ Whaling ships ranged in size from 60 to 160 tons burden, but averaged about 80, and carried a crew of twelve or thirteen. The average cargo in 1788, a successful year, was 48 tons, of which 32 were common oil, 10 sperm-oil, and the rest head-matter and bone.⁴ Sperm-oil brought about £10 more per ton⁵ than common whale oil, the price of the former being about £55 at this time, and that of whalebone between £300 and £500 per ton.

The sperm-whale or cachelot and the black whale were the chief objects pursued by the fishermen who went forth from Dartmouth, as they had been by the Nantucket whalers since 1712. They frequented all tropical and sub-tropical seas, and were es-

1. P. A. N. S. vol. 301 doc. 78 Cumberland to the Committee of Correspondence of the N. S. Assembly, 25. Feb., 1786.

2. P. R. O. Admiralty 1/491, Sawyer to Stephens, 30 July, 1785.

3. P. A. N. S. 2 folios of Mediterranean Passes, including many for whalers, 1785-1791.

4. P. R. O., C. O. 217/60, Parr to Nepean., 13 August, 1788.

5. P. A. N. S. Files of the *Nova Scotian*, Ibid.

pecially plentiful between the thirty-first and thirty-sixth parallels of south latitude; until about 1790 they were sufficiently numerous to make the short voyage profitable; but towards the close of the century, and thereafter, whalers were forced to extend their voyages around the Horn. The ships from Halifax Harbour proceeded to the Brazil Bank

“and if not successful there, crossed the Southern Ocean to Walwich (Walfish Bay) on the Coast of Africa... Upon arriving there it was usual to moor the vessel in good anchorage-ground, and then betaking themselves to their boats, proceed to the mouth of the Bay and there await the approach of the whales; to which they sometimes came in such immense multitudes, that the sea appeared covered, and moving with them, as far as the eye could reach...¹

Having caught and killed the whale, the fishermen removed the spermaceti wax and oil from the cavity in the head, and the forty or fifty teeth, or if it was a black whale, the baleen plates, which sold as whalebone, from the roof of the mouth. The blubber was then cut in a continuous strip, removed to the ship, and boiled. A large sperm whale yielded about three tons of oil, a small female one or two.²

“Most of the vessels were fitted out upon shares, and these were usually fixed at the following ratios:

Captain.....	one fifteenth or sixteenth
Mate.....	one twenty fourth
Steersman.....	one thirty second
Seaman.....	one sixtieth to a seventieth

part of the nett proceeds after deducting all outfits and other charges—the remainder was claimed by the owners. Everyone was expected to advance step by step, that he might acquire an intimate acquaintance with the duties of every successive station.”³

The success of the industry carried on from Dartmouth was shown in the establishment of “manufactories” for utilizing the products, and in the increase in the number of ships that went out. By 1788 there were two spermaceti factories, one each in Halifax and Dartmouth, for making candles and straining sperm-oil.⁴ The number of ships employed increased from nine to twenty in the three years following 1785, and the number of persons engaged from 126 to 280.⁵ From the three years’ voyages after the Nan-

1. P. A. N. S. Files of the *Nova Scotian*, Id.

2. Enc. Brit. Articles *Whale*, *Spermaceti*. Also Macy, Obed: *History of Nantucket*.

3. P. A. N. S. Files of the *Nova Scotian* Id.

4. Ibid. and P. R. O., C. O. 217/60 Advt. in *Halifax Journal*, Apr. 1788.

5. P. A. N. S. vol. 238 doc. 32 Rpt. of Commissioners to Governor, 1788. Henceforth, unless otherwise stated, all references are to documents in the Public Archives of Nova Scotia.

tucketers' arrival, products amounting to £61,500 were exported from Nova Scotia to England.¹ Besides this, a good deal of spermaceti and oil must have been used in the province. The writer of the editorial on the fishery of 1825 describes the effect of whaling on the two towns as furnishing profitable and regular employment to a large proportion of the inhabitants:

On every side were to be seen the marks of a busy and prosperous population. Mechanics were well paid and their labours in request—many houses were put up—and almost all the persons connected with the fishery did well and some became wealthy The most respectable young men of the town went out as apprentices When the usual period for the arrival of the vessels approached, all persons were filled with expectation and anxiety. The success of each voyage inspired a more than ordinary interest, as every person on board had a direct interest in its result, and their relations and friends were eager to hear the recital of their adventures, and welcome them to their home after all their toils and dangers.²

Three years after its inception, the commissioners who had been appointed in 1785 made a report on the progress and accomplishments of the whale fishery. They congratulated the Governor for "having (notwithstanding so many difficulties thrown in your way) established a fishery in this Province which furnishes a new source of wealth to its inhabitants", and summed up the gains accruing to the Province as follows:

The Province is now possessed of every kind of Artificer necessary to fit out Vessels in the Southern Whale Fishery, as well as some of the best Navigators that the Island of Nantucket has produced, and the Commissioners are happy to inform your Excellency that the successful Adventures made from this Port has diffused a Spirit of Enterprise amongst the Young People of the Province, that many of them are already become expert fishermen and more offered to enter this Year than could be accommodated on Board the Vessels that fitted out.³

They concluded by hoping "that the great advantage which the Commerce and Navigation of the Mother Country will derive from this Establishment so wisely undertaken and made by your Excellency will continue to you the favour of our most gracious Sovereign, as we are Assured and convinced it has and ever will procure for you the most grateful acknowledgments from the Inhabitants of this Province."

1. Vol. 238 doc. 32 Report of Commissioners to Governor, 1788.
2. Files of the *Nova Scotian*, Ibid.
3. Vol. 238 doc. 32, Report of the Commissioners, 1788.

The Home Government did not, sad to state, fulfil the hopes of the Nova Scotian commissioners. Alone among Nova Scotia interests, the whale fishery was deemed of sufficient importance to engage the attention of the Privy Council. At the time when Sydney wrote his censorious letter to Parr, the Privy Council was considering what inducements might be offered to American whale fishermen to come and settle in Great Britain and carry on their industry from there.¹ Their conclusions were embodied in two Acts of Parliament, one in 1786 and another in 1788, which offered large bounties and special privileges. By 1790, when it had become obvious that these terms offered insufficient inducement, and when the success of the French, in attracting to Dunkirk Nantucketers who were denied admission to Nova Scotia, warned against delay, the Committee for Trade and Plantations were ready to offer higher premiums.² In this category was a proposal for removing the Dartmouth colony, lock, stock and barrel to Milford Haven in Wales. The project was fostered by Sir William Hamilton and Lord Charles Grenville, large property owners in Milford Haven. They urged the Government to promote it to such effect that when, in 1790, a man had been sent out, ostensibly representing Hamilton,³ to interview the Dartmouth Quakers, he came with an official introduction to the Governor. Under the aegis of the Secretary of State, this agent, one Stokes, had proceeded to consult the whalemens. The terms upon which Starbuck and Folger, again representing the community, would consider removing were by no means modest. Besides expecting equal privileges with English whale fishermen, they asked for the full value of their Dartmouth properties, amounting to £6,000 sterling, £55 per family for moving expenses, and compensation for the time wasted in making arrangements.⁴

When the Secretary of State reported these proceedings to the full Privy Council in May, the terms proposed by Starbuck and Folger were considered, and the Council's decision thereon⁵ transmitted in a letter from the Lords of the Treasury, which reached the whalemens through Parr in August, 1791.⁶ By the ensuing correspondence, the Privy Council Report, and two letters from

1. P. R. O., P. C. 2/131 p. 258 ff. Report of Committee for Trade and Plantations to the Privy Council, 3 May, 1786.

2. P. R. O., P. C. 2/136 p. 92 ff. Rpt. of Com. of P. C., 18 May, 1791.

3. P. R. O., C. O. 217/63 p. 3 Parr to Grenville, 31 Dec., 1790, acknowledging receipt of despatch introducing Mr. Stokes; and *Assembly Journal* for 1793, p. 56 refers to a letter written by the Speaker to the Agent concerning Stokes, the agent of Hamilton.

4. P. R. O., C. O. 217/63 p. 3 Encl. in Parr to Grenville, 31 Dec., 1790.

5. P. R. O., P. C. 2/136. Report to the Privy Council, 18 May, 1791.

6. Which I have not been able to find; but vol. 248 doc. 32 has (1) a copy of Parr's letter to Starbuck, Folger and Holmes, asking for their answer to the Treasury letter, and (b) copy of Starbuck and Folger's reply, 23 August, 1791, both in Parr's hand.

the Speaker of the Nova Scotian Assembly,¹ it appears that, although the Privy Council were not willing to purchase the Nantucketers' properties or grant them special premiums, they would allow each a "proper sum," later set at £50, for the cost of removal, and remit the duties on their first cargo. In addition they would grant pensions to the promoters, Starbuck and Folger, and £2,000 indemnification for loss of value in property and loss of time. After a further interchange of questions and answers, the whalemens on these terms consented to move. With certificates to the Treasury as to the value of their properties in Nova Scotia, and to the Customs Officers at Milford Haven as to their intentions², the Nantucket whale fishermen, on the twenty-second of August, 1792, set sail from Dartmouth.

By the time they left, a fishery of respectable size had grown up in Halifax, whose merchants then owned nineteen or twenty whalers. In 1791 R. J. Uniacke wrote: "Now there is at least the Amount of one hundred thousand pounds of the Property of this Province embarked in this enterprise".³ The Halifax merchants were not unaware of the Home Government's policy of encouraging whale fishermen to settle in Great Britain. As early as 1788 the commissioners had given their opinion on that policy when they pointed out that:

from the best Information which the Commissioners can procure from the most Intelligent Persons belonging to that Island, the Inhabitants thereof, if encouraged in the Province of Nova Scotia, would prefer settling there to what they would in Great Britain. . . . it would far exceed the bounds of a Report were we to state the Various reasons given for the Preference.⁴

Their attitude, when the proposal to move the small Dartmouth branch became known, was at first one of incredulity. The Speaker wrote:

I would fain hope that a measure so very unjust must have originated with Government through some misinformation; we have too good an opinion here of a British Government to think otherwise.

Pointing out the benefits that had accrued to the Home Government and the ruin which its removal would bring on those interested, he continued:

In five years British Manufactures to the Amount of £151,200 were imported into this Province and paid for to the English

1. Vol. 302 doc. 20. Speaker to Cumberland and Lawrence, 16 Aug., 1791.
2. Vol. 50 Certificates from Gov. Wentworth, 22 Aug., 1792.
3. Vol. 302 doc. 20. Speaker to Cumberland, 16 August, 1791.
4. Vol. 248 doc. 31. Report of the Commissioners to Parr, 1788.

Merchants through the medium of this Establishment. It is an Establishment of the utmost importance both to this Province and Great Britain; indeed I am much disturbed to see the general uneasiness which this measure has produced: if it is persisted in, it must ruin many, many others will abandon the Country, and it will be a source of everlasting discontent among those that remain.¹

Governor Wentworth commented on the unpopularity of the measure,² and, although three months later he declared³ euphemistically that the orders "were not only wisely obeyed but liberally aided, when it was known to be the wish of Government", there was undoubtedly much bad feeling.

The motives which inspired the British Government to remove the Nantucket people are not far to seek. In the Province it was laid at the door of "interested Persons" who had sufficient influence, by those who looked below the surface.⁴ There is no doubt that Sir William Hamilton and Lord Greville had cause to be interested and were to some degree influential. But there were other influential people as opposed to the removal as Hamilton and Greville were for it,⁵ and one must look for a deeper reason than private influence for the Government's final determination. That reason is plainly indicated in Parr's letter of 1790, when, with reference to "forwarding the Southern whale Fishery *intended to be established at Milford Haven*" he speaks of his own recent efforts "as regards the people from Nantucket here".⁶ It is certain that, between 1786 and 1790, the Government had decided to make a new and extended attempt to insure a supply of whale products. The scope of such attempt, elsewhere hinted at, is proved beyond doubt by papers transmitted from Nova Scotia to the two provincial agents and the Secretary of State.⁷ The whole plan was no less than to move the entire whaling population of Nantucket Island to Great Britain. Parr was asked by the Secretary of State to suggest means of accomplishing this project, and in turn called on the Speaker of the House, Richard John Uniacke. The Speaker responded with a report some fourteen pages in length, in which he pointed out the impracticability of carrying on the Southern Fishery from Great Britain in the exist-

1. Vol. 302 doc. 20. Speaker (Uniacke) to Cumberland, 16 Aug, 1791.

2. P. R. O., C. O. 217/63 p. 291. Wentworth to King, 14 Sept., 1792.

3. Ibid. /64 p. 188. Wentworth to Nepean, 13 Dec., 1792.

4. Vol. 306 doc. 137. Memorial of Halifax Chamber of Commerce, 18 Mar., 1822.

5. e. g. Uniacke's family; Brook Watson (see C. O. 217/57 Leckie and Tench to Watson, 11 June, 1785); and certain merchants in the City of London (see P. C. 2/136 p. 107 Greville to Grenville).

6. P. R. O., C. O. 217/63 p.3. Parr to Grenville, 31 Dec., 1790.

7. Vol. 302 doc. 20. Speaker to Lawrence and Cumberland, 16 August, and Report on the Whale Fishery to the Governor, 15 August, 1791.

ing circumstances, and showed the prohibitive expense the removal of "the whole of the inhabitants and Fishery to Great Britain" would entail. This report was forwarded by the Governor to the Secretary of State late in August, 1791.¹

In accordance with Uniacke's advice, the larger project was dropped. But the Home Government disregarded his opinion that carrying on a successful whale fishery from Great Britain was impracticable. The success of the Dartmouth fishery was too complete, and the temptation to transplant and use it as a nucleus for establishing the industry in Wales too strong, to be resisted. The loss that a good number of Nova Scotians would suffer by the change seems to have been merely incidental to Englishmen and whalers alike. The bargain was struck, and all but one of the forty Nantucket families took their departure. Their houses stood vacant, their wharves idle. Dartmouth's good had been sacrificed to the larger Imperial interest. After the migration of the men of Nantucket, the whaling industry from Halifax Harbour collapsed.

1. Vol. 302, doc. 20. Report to the Lieutenant-Governor.