

The Whaling Journal of Thomas Beale (1807-1849)

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The Whaling Journal of Thomas Beale and his biography has been subject of a number of researches. Beale is said to have been born in 1807 and attended the Aldergate Street Medical School between 1827 and 1829. As a recently graduated and married husband he went onboard the British Whaling Ship "Kent" in 1830 under Captain Langton (Owner: Sturge) departing in London aiming the Japanese Whaling grounds.

In the "Kent", Beale took off from London in the direction of the South Atlantic and sailed over the South American Cape Horn towards the Pacific. The first intermediate stop was the Ildefonsa Islands near the Cape Horn, before the journey continued westwards via further South American intermediate stops until Owhyhee (Hawaii) (1). From there they sailed along the Japanese whale grounds over the Bonin Islands (2), south over the Caroline (3) and Lousiade Islands (4) to Bougainville (5) and New Ireland (6) in today's Papua New Guinea. Afterwards they oriented themselves again to the north over the Ladrone (7) and Sulphur Islands (8) back to the Bonin Islands (9). During the voyage Beale apparently did not only fight with the hard conditions on board, but he increasingly disliked the captain's handling of the crew too, who were treated so repressively that many men left or deserted the ship during the voyage. The harsh tone of the captain's voice also led him to change his place at Bonin Islands in June 1832 with the ship's surgeon of "Sarah and Elizabeth" (Captain: William Swain ; Owner: Thomas Sturge) and former schoolmate, Mr. Hildyard. With the "Sarah and Elizabeth" he sailed again far into the north of the Pacific Ocean near Kamtchatka (10), before returning via Oahoo, Hawaii, (11) and the Society Islands (12) via the South American Cape Horn to London in February 1833. Apart from this voyage, Beale was no longer active on any other whaling ship.

Only two years after his return, Beale published a widely received treatise on the "Natural History of the Sperm Whale" in 1835, in which he presented his detailed observations on sperm whales. Beale's 1835 edition experienced such a strong reception that in 1839 he published a further, strongly supplemented and revised edition. It has been shown that Beale's publication enjoyed a wide resonance. The Romantic artist Joseph M. W. Turner and the America Novelist Herman Melville were strongly inspired and influenced by Beale's remarks about whales.

His distanced depictions of everyday life on board and the detailed descriptions of the islanders at stopovers, in contrast, were based on his privileged position as a ship surgeon, who was unlikely to have shared his living space with even the ordinary sailors. Being free from usual duties and work, he had enough time for his writings, but at the same time made his integration into the social space of the sailors more difficult. This is shown by the fact that he hardly deals with the maritime rituals, that he was not exposed to the punishments and lashes of the captain and that he does not even use the word Forecastle. If one also considers Beale's biography, there was probably no interest at all on his part in integrating himself into the seafaring community.

Regarding the motives of his Journal, Beale notes that he wants to give records of his journey for the closest relatives at home. Further on, it should be considered also as a general assistance for all those, who are interested in the job description of a whaler. His descriptions are directed above all at the "many thousands" concerned relatives of seafarers with whom they have neither contact nor an idea of such a voyage. The records are also helpful for those who want to enter the whaling business and get a reliable picture of life at sea. In addition, Beale assures that everything written down, in spite of its excessive formulations, is true: „although I may be an enthusiastic admirer of the works of nature, [...] yet I never shall be found straying beyond the boundary of truth“.

However, Beale probably did not embark on the voyage quite voluntarily. The mass dismissals in the British army following the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 would have affected many doctors, which resulted in a relative surplus of doctors in England from 1820 to the 1850s. Therefore, many physicians have moved from mainland to seafaring due to a lack of professional alternatives and to financial reasons. Many medical students in London in the 19th century took advantage of the Northern Whale Fishery hunting seasonally between March and October to gain practical experience on board of whaling ships and to finance their studies. While the Journeys to the Arctic waters lasted only about nine months, ship's doctors to the Pacific had to spend at least two or three years on the ship, which turned out to be unpopular.

Beale's publications is among the few remaining sources of British whaling in the 1830s. Dealing with Beale's whaling Journal, it should be borne in mind that he did not write a logbook, which contained monotonously recorded striking events on a regular basis, but intensively revised monographs intended to reach a specific readership. Beale has divided its 1839 edition into two large sections. The first part (pp. 23-192) deals in great detail with the anatomical description of the sperm whale and covers almost every conceivable aspect. Among this section, Beale dedicates pp. 136 - 192 to the whaling business. Here he traces the rise of the whaling business and lists the hunting and processing process before adding a list of "favourite places of resort of the sperm whale". The remaining 200 pages (193-393) are placed for the descriptions of the islands and societies that he had visit.

Further resources:

Beale, Thomas: A few Observations on the Natural History of the Sperm Whale, London 183 and Beale, Thomas: The Natural History of the Sperm Whale, To which is added, A sketch of a South-sea whaling voyage, London 1839, in: Archive.org, San Francisco
<https://archive.org/stream/naturalhistory00bealgoog#page/n6/mode/2up> [Last Access: 1.5.2018].

Bouchier, Ian: Some Experiences of Ships' Surgeons;

Bouchier, Ian: Whales and Whaling: Contributions by the Medical Profession;

Forster, Honore: British Whaling Surgeons in the South Seas.

Forster, Honore (Ed.): The Cruise of the 'Gipsy',

Gordon, Eleanora: Sailors' Physicians: Medical Guides for Merchant Ships and Whalers, 1774-1864, in: The Journal of the History of Medicine and allied Sciences, Vol. 48, 1993, pp. 139-15

Howard, Mark: Thomas Sturge and his fleet of South Sea whalers, p. 415.

Olsen-Smith, Steven: Melville's Copy of Thomas Beale's The Natural History of the Sperm Whale and the Composition of Moby-Dick, in: Harvard Library Bulletin, Vol. 21, 3, 2010, pp. 1-79.