

ADVICE UPON USING AMERICAN WHALING RECORDS IN NEW ZEALAND RESEARCH

It is axiomatic that the large number of research workers from a multitude of disciplines who have examined the extensive records of American whaling activities, have found them to be enjoyable, exciting and romantic source materials offering however only a very limited return of relevant information for the time spent. The following elementary guide has been prepared in order to share with New Zealand research workers some of the experience and short cuts accumulated after three years of fairly concentrated part-time search among the many historical and whaling institutions along the North East Coast of the United States.

The quantity of information available is truly amazing. Stuart C. Sherman, former Keeper of the Nicholson Collection in the Providence Public Library, has estimated in his invaluable guide to whaling source materials, *The Voice of the Whalemens*, that 'if logbooks and private journals are taken as a group, records for about 3,200 voyages are known to exist, or about one fourth of the known voyages (which total 13,927). With concerted effort other records will come to light, but it is doubtful if thirty per cent of the logbooks and private journals relating to this great industry have survived.' By this estimate, a logbook or journal exists for every third or fourth American whaleship which visited New Zealand waters. Sherman also describes at length the enormous quantity of other types of whaling records (e.g. accounts books, outfitting checklists, sea letters, crew lists, illustrations and consular and customs records) but these are rarely specifically relevant to New Zealand research.

As to the quality, or content, of whaling sources, it is worth repeating emphatically that the rewards are slight for much hard work, unless of course the focus of attention is upon the whalers and their fascinating industry. If not, it must be understood that the creators of these records were invariably seamen with pelagic and oceanic perspectives very different from those of landmen. Generally foreign coasts were regarded as dangerous unknown places to be avoided in all but exceptional circumstances – such as the need to obtain drinkable water and fresh provisions. Thus shore visits occurred only infrequently and many were not recorded in their ships' logbooks.

Further, as few seamen of the period were well educated or scholarly inclined, it is indeed rare to discover entries which include identifiable descriptions of localities, or the individuals, life and customs ashore. As Sherman explains, logbooks were kept primarily to record a form of commercial activity and for navigational purposes. Typical logbook