

William Adams Senior and Junior: Whaling Captains

By Professor Hugh M Begg

Whaling formed a significant part of the economy of Dundee from the 1750s to the outbreak of the Great War and the careers of two men both residents of Broughty Ferry were reflective of, and made major contributions to, the history of whaling in the city.

William Adams senior was born in 1832 and he died in 1890. His father, also William Adams, was, amongst other things, the Master of a coaster which plied between Perth and Dundee and he also sailed several times with the Dundee whaling fleet in their heyday. He died in 1893 at the age of 81, some three years after his son, referred to here as William Adams senior.

A posthumous portrait in oils of William Adams senior was commissioned by his son, William Adams junior. It was painted by William Ferrier in 1891 and is part of the collection of Dundee Art Galleries and Museums. Adams is presented in the prime of life, confident and successful both as a whaling Master and businessman. He appears to be seated within his mansion in West Ferry, built towards the end of his life, which he named "*Disco*" after the island in the Davis Strait off the east coast of Greenland, and a chart of the vicinity is open on the table to his left. The small Danish administrative settlement of Lieveley was located on Disco (also Disko) in the harbour of Goodhavn which provided a haven for whalers en route for the whaling grounds in Baffin Bay, Melville Bay, Lancaster Sound, Prince Regent's Sound and beyond.

Albert Hastings Markham (cousin of Clements Markham and later an Admiral) joined Adams on the whaler *Active* in 1873 and in his journal "*A Whaling Cruise to Baffin's Bay and the Gulf of Boothia and an Account of the Rescue of the Crew of the Polaris*" claimed that the voyage demonstrated "*the boldness and skill with which her dashing captain, William Adams, pursued his mighty and valuable prey through ice, storm and dangers*".

After a characteristic send off from Dundee the *Active* had stopped at Broughty Ferry "*at which place the captain allowed himself a brief leave taking of his wife*" who was then living in the family home at 8 James Place. (An interlude at Broughty Ferry was not uncommon for out-going vessels to disembark adventurous young stowaways, and to allow those of the crew who had over imbibed during their leave-taking to come to their senses.)

Closely observed by Markham, Captain Adams displayed many of the traits characteristic of his fellow whaling Masters who, along with their crews, were notoriously superstitious. Thus, for instance, although all set to leave on 2nd May the sailing of the *Active* was put off until the next day, Saturday, because of the pervading view that to set sail on a Friday was unlucky. Then again: "*Our captain always carries about with him what he calls a "lucky*

penny”, one of those huge coins in circulation in the reign of George III”, which he was in the habit of tossing with the doctor for the best of five guesses. There is no doubt that Adams was consistently “lucky” in finding and killing whales. However, the evidence is that his good fortune had nothing to do with rituals and irrational belief and all to do with good character, sensible behaviour and outstanding skills as a whaling Master.

For whaling Masters the voyages to the Arctic fishing grounds were first and foremost commercial ventures with all else coming a poor second save when the rescue of fellow voyagers was required. Central to Adams role as Master was the task of seeking out the regions where whales could be found and he would spend long hours in a purpose built “crow’s nest” scanning the waters. Markham noted that the captain: “...is possessed of remarkably quick eyesight, rendered doubly acute by constant observation and frequent use of the telescope...” On the voyage, Adams appears to have been consistently good humoured except when “unlucky” in finding whales for slaughter. On those occasions he was “...constantly picturing to himself the other ships in the midst of whales, whilst we are lying idle; and he is, therefore, rather morose and taciturn, so different from his usual jovial and boisterous humour.”

A whaling voyage to the Arctic might last for anything up to six months from April to October. The stress placed on the Master must have been very considerable and it is interesting that Adams seems to have recognised the need to eat well. Markham noted that Adams was fond of “whelks” and he “having by the skippers advice smothered the welk with vinegar, mushroom ketchup, and pepper, found them by no means unpalatable...Another favourite edible of our worthy captain is a sea weed called “dulse, which is picked up in large quantities on the beach at Broughty Ferry. This is kept in a bucket of salt water on the after-part of the quarter-deck, so as to enable those so disposed to refresh themselves at their pleasure.” Today dulse continues to be sold as a snack food, recognised as having a high protein content and being a good source of minerals and vitamins with all the trace elements needed for a healthy diet.

As well as taking some care with his diet Adams seems to have recognised the need for adequate rest in periods when the handling of the ship could be safely entrusted to others: “The captain has certainly a most wonderful constitution for sleep; during the last forty hours he has been over thirty in his bed”.

William Adams senior was one of the most successful captains working for Alexander Stephen and Sons who by the second half of the nineteenth century were firmly established as shipbuilders and, subsequently, owners of whaling vessels. Alexander Stephen, formerly of Aberdeen, moved to Dundee on the 1840s and built the Panmure Yard on Marine Parade. In 1866 the family had a house built in Beach Crescent Broughty Ferry (later the Orchar Gallery). Stephen subsequently moved to “Corona” in Strathearn Road, and another family member lived in “Helenslea” adjacent to what is now Dawson Park.

Adams made his reputation in a benign climate for whaling from Dundee. Thus, for instance, between 1875 and 1884, when the last custom-built vessel – *The Terra Nova* – was launched

from Stephens' shipyard, on average some 11 whalers sailed annually from Dundee to the Greenland waters and the Davis Straits yielding 734 tons of oil. Over the same period the larger boats engaged in the Newfoundland seal fishery in the early spring and, after refitting at St Johns, proceeded to the whaling grounds in the Davis Straits and beyond. An average of 13 boats went seal fishing to Newfoundland, Labrador and Greenland each year, killing an annual average of some 84,000 seals for pelts and oil. These were good times with profits to be made.

Adams had an outstanding career, and made whaling history by venturing much further west than the traditional whaling grounds when he sailed up Lancaster Sound to Prince Regent's Inlet. In the following year (1869) he was the first non-Unuit to see Arctic Bay at 73 degrees north on Baffin Island. After the loss of the *Arctic*, (Adams was not Master on that voyage) Alexander Stephen and Sons launched the *New Arctic* in June 1875 and Adams was appointed Master. With a figurehead of an Inuit holding a lance, and a motto of '*Do or Die*' in gold on her stern, at just over 200 feet in length, and with a gross tonnage of 828 tons, she was the largest whaler to come out of Dundee and the fastest in the fleet.

In 1883 after his last voyage on the *New Arctic* Adams left the company and bought the wooden barque the *Maud*. By this time Adams was recognised as "*the most famous whaling captain in the world*". It was not surprising, therefore, that it was Adams, home during the winter months at his residence in Broughty Ferry, who led out a group of whalers in their forlorn search for survivors from the Tay Bridge disaster on the night of Sunday, 28 December, 1879. Then again, following the wreck of the *Chieftain* in Greenland waters in 1884 and the heroics of her gallant Master, Captain Gellatly, it was Adams who called a meeting in Lambs Hotel in Dundee to launch a relief fund for the surviving crew.

By this time Adams had built up a fortune as a successful business man. He, like his fellow Masters, had always seen voyaging to the Arctic as part of the commercial ventures of sealing and whaling but to that Adams added some lucrative diversifications. Thus, for instance, he had given the authorities a problem when he took coal to St Johns on a sealing trip as ballast rather than a commercial cargo with a view to using the coal as fuel on the trip later in the season to the whaling grounds. Then again, in 1885 he returned from his voyage with a live walrus which he offered to the Barnum Circus for £500 (around £30,000 today).

Undoubtedly, his grandest business initiative was the purchase of the *Maud*. Originally built in Whitby as a sailing ship, Adams had the vessel converted into a whaling steamer in 1886 and she made her first voyage in 1887. Three further successful voyages on the *Maud* are recorded in the Dundee Yearbooks for 1889, 1890 and 1891. In 1889 Walter Livingstone-Learmonth, an Australian of Scottish extraction, sailed aboard *Maud* hoping to follow Markham and others in writing a book on his travels. Unfortunately he was unable to get a publisher but he left a lasting legacy in a series of photographs taken the previous year on the *Eclipse* some of which show the *Maud* which was her companion; others depict some of the gruesome aspects of whaling; while others show him proudly standing over his own kills: 26 walruses and seals and four polar bears

During the return journey from the Davis Straits in 1890 the *Maud* was heavily battered by storms in the North Atlantic. Adams was landed sick at Thurso and died before reaching medical care in Inverness. His extensive obituary in Dundee Advertiser of 7th August, 1890 noted that: “*While fully alive to business interests he found time for the work of exploration, and he was instrumental in adding considerably to our geographical knowledge of the Arctic regions. Captain Adams came to be recognised as an authority upon Arctic exploration*”.... It also noted his concern, as a committed Christian, at the living conditions and way of life of the Inuit and quoted at length his unfavourable contrast between the approach of the British government with that of the Danes in Greenland: “*Captain Adams was a man of large sympathies and his heart went out to the poor Esquimaux whom he met with in the far North. Everyone knows that at considerable expense he brought at different times representatives of the race to Dundee, and by lecturing and otherwise he excited an interest in them. ...In his own way the captain did a great deal for the Esquimaux, and he never failed when opportunity offered to arouse interest in them and sympathy for them.*” One Inuit brought back to Dundee was Urio Etawango from the Davis Strait, who spent the winter of 1886 in Scotland. He gave a canoe and seal hunting demonstration at the curling pond close to Claypotts Castle which was attended by around 2000 spectators.

On his death Captain Adams left a fortune to his family of some £15,000 (which would amount to over £1 million today), and his widow moved from the mansion in West Ferry to comfortable quarters at 9 Castle Terrace. Her second son, William Adams junior had been born in 1869, when his parents were living the mid-terraced property at 8 James Place, looking out on to the River Tay and across to North Fife. In 1878 the family moved to 12 Duntrune Terrace then close to open countryside.

Adams served his apprenticeship under Captain Barrie in the barque *Helenslea*, an iron vessel of 1,197 tons, launched in 1880 and named after the substantial mansion of William Stephen, by then owner of Messrs Alexander Stephen & Sons, in West Ferry. By 1887 William Adams junior had set up his own home at 5 Rugby Terrace, recently constructed and looking out onto amenity ground close to The Esplanade and the Broughty Ferry pleasure beach. In 1889 he moved, once again to a newly built property, this time at 3 Kerrington Crescent in Barnhill.

On his final whaling voyage in 1890, William Adams senior was accompanied by his son William junior who served as mate on the *Maud*. Following the death of his father, in 1892 William was selected to serve, also as mate, under Alexander Fairweather as Master, on the *Balaena*. She was one of the four vessels which set out on the British Whaling Expedition (Dundee) on 6 September 1892 from Camperdown docks for the Antarctic in search of fresh whaling grounds.

On his return from that unsuccessful mission Adams served as mate under Captain Walker in *Novaya Zemlya*. In 1895 and 1896, Adams had his first independent command in the Arctic in the whaler *Esquimaux*. In the following year he commanded *Blencathra* on the private hunting expedition to the Kara Sea financed by Major Andrew Coats. Captain Adams returned to whaling in 1898, commanding the *Diana* until 1904. He received a medal from

the Danish meteorological society in recognition of his services in compiling a log on behalf of the Society during his 1899 whaling voyage to the Davis Strait. The daily entries and detailed observations he made that year won him an award in the form of charts and books from its sister British society.

In March 1903 Roald Amundsen's brother made a visit to Dundee which led to the commissioning of William Adams (of the *Diana*) and William Milne (of the *Eclipse*) to convey stores to Dalrymple Rock on Smith Sound at 81 degrees north as support for Amundsen's attempt to find a North West Passage. The rendezvous did not take place as arranged because of a delay in Amundsen leaving Norway. However, having forced a way through Melville Bay ice and dangerous waters in an effort to keep the appointment the Dundee ships came across an expedition led by the Dane, Mylius Ericksen, who had set off into the wilds of Greenland in 1902. The group was in "a pitiful condition" and the whalers left life-saving medical and other supplies. For his assistance to Amundsen Adams was honoured by King Hakon of Norway with the Distinguished Order of St Olaf.

From 1905 to 1911 Adams was Master of the *Morning* which, in 1904, had gone as relief ship to the rescue of Scott's Discovery then ice bound in the Ross Sea. It is clear that by that time the whaling industry was in terminal decline. In short, Adams was working in a rather different context from his father. The Dundee Whaling Expedition of 1892/3 had not identified new fishing grounds in the Antarctic for Right whales to be exploited by the existing fleet, and by the 1890's lost ships were not being replaced. A comparison of the catches made in the three years 1896-1898 with those of 1906 -1908 reveals that the whales were found in more distant waters and they were also smaller. In both of these 3 year periods an average of 8 vessels per year went fishing. In 1910 the *Morning* came across a school of Right whales in Lancaster Sound apparently trapped in a bay by a gathering of predator sword fish and sharks. News of an unusually great catch spread back to Dundee and the *Morning* sailed up the estuary of the Tay past Broughty Ferry to be welcomed by a crowd of thousands which lined the dockside to welcome her home. On the deck were the giant jaw bones of seven large whales - the best catch seen in years. However, it was a false dawn and the returns for the following year were dismal: the *Morning* accounted for 5 white whales yielding only one ton of oil together with 3 walrus and 15 seals.

In the *Hand Book and Guide to Dundee and District* prepared for the members of the British Association for the Advancement of Science on the occasion of their visit to Dundee in 1912 little more than a page was given over to seal and whale fishing. It was noted that whales were scarce, and only 5 whaling ships remained - *Active*, *Balaena*, *Diana*, *Morning* and *Scotia*. All of these vessels had proud histories in polar waters, but in the current season "only two ships have gone forth to try their fortune". The author then went on to a gloomy conclusion: "It is doubtful whether the industry, indeed, will ever recover its former prosperous condition. The grip which it took in the mind of the nation, because of its association with adventure and romance, was always greater than its relative commercial importance". That prediction was accurate. By the start of the Great War in 1914 whaling and the whalers had become a part of the history of Dundee. It was time for William Adams Junior to move on.

Returning on one last voyage to the Arctic, Adams served as first mate under Captain Milne on the *Albert*, which was then owned by the Arctic Gold Exploration Syndicate. However, the objective of establishing trading posts on Baffin Island in competition with the Hudson's Bay Company, which by then had a trading monopoly throughout the Canadian North, was unsuccessful.

During the First World War, William Adams served with the Admiralty and from 1918 until his retirement in 1939 was employed as a North Sea pilot for the long established, Liverpool based, Thos & John Brocklebank Line which was, by then, owned by Cunard. Captain William Adams junior died in September 1942 at Craill aged 73. He was survived by his wife and two daughters but not his eldest child, also named William, who predeceased him at the age of 41. This William was third engineer on the Brocklebank merchant ship - the *Malabar* - which was torpedoed some 50 miles south-west of the Scilly Isles on the 17 October 1939, on her way from Philadelphia to London by way of Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Like his father, Adams was recognised as an Arctic expert and his reputation as a whaler and an explorer was secure. In an interview with the Dundee Courier in 1938 Captain Adams recalled: "*When I first went whaling 40 and 50 years ago, much of the land in which we traded was unexplored. The result was that the crews had to collect as much information as possible to guide them through these dangerous waters.*" On his death, J. M. Wordie, the Chairman of Scott Polar Institute in Cambridge, noted that "*Captain Adams of Dundee belonged to a well-known whaling family and was an authority on North-East Baffin Island*".

Selected Sources and Some Further Reading

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This paper was first published in the booklet "The Memory of Broughty Ferry" published by the Broughty Ferry Community Council in 1913 to mark the centenary of the incorporation of the Burgh of Broughty Ferry into its neighbour, Dundee.

