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The Harpoon's Head

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In January 2004 a harpoon's head with a section of its shaft intact was uncovered beneath the ruins of Oashore whaling station on Banks Peninsula. Encrusted with over 150 years of dirt, dust and rust, it is notable for being the most complete item of whaling equipment found to date in similar excavations across Australasia.¹ The arrow-like head of the whaler's harpoon is an instantly recognisable emblem of the global whale hunt, and of the broader struggle for human mastery over the natural world; works of art depicting its use date back to the fourteenth century. Yet in New Zealand, the harpoon is associated not only with global resource extraction, but also with the very beginnings of Pākehā life in these islands. Shore whaling in particular was intimately connected to colonialism, forming the context for interaction and settlement around much of our coastline. Taking the Oashore harpoon as its inspiration, and exploring the object's significance in a range of other settings, this essay makes an argument for the harpoon as colonial artefact.

The 'harpoon head with shaft', as it has since been labelled, was unearthed in front of a stone fireplace amid the foundations of one of three whalers' huts on the Oashore dig site. Measuring 28 by 12 centimetres and weighing just over 600 grams, the harpoon points provocatively back in time, its curved shaft bending like the tip of an unformed question mark, as if inviting us to speculate on its life story. Where in the world was this twisted rod of iron forged and shaped, and by whom? Which of the globe's great oceans did it then traverse, before coming to rest on the remote southern Banks Peninsula shoreline? In whose hands was it held and hurled? How many whales did it pierce, hook and tow before it snapped in two and was cast aside? Did it break off when lodged in its target? What happened to the whale? Did it swim off, or was it caught, killed and processed for oil and bone? Where was the oil and bone shipped to, for how much and to what end?

Sadly, little is known about this particular colonial object, and not a lot more about the shore whaling station from which it came. Shore whaling at Oashore Bay, a narrow inlet on the far west of Banks Peninsula, began in 1840 under the prominent Weller Brothers' firm, based in Sydney and Ōtākou. The initial crew of 24 included Weller employees Samuel Brown and Thomas Brown, and the short-tempered Irishman William 'Paddy' Woods. When



*Harpoon head with shaft,
excavated from site of Oashore
whaling station, Banks
Peninsula, 2004.*

*Courtesy of the Department of Anthropology
and Archaeology, University of Otago.
Photograph by Michael Hall*

the Wellers went bankrupt soon afterwards, Woods took over the running of the station and developed a reputation for hard drinking and brutality towards his men, and towards neighbouring Kāi Tahu. Despite this ill repute, the Oashore station was profitable for close to a decade, with production peaking at 80,000 litres of oil and 4 tonnes of whalebone in 1844. By 1848 whales had become scarce and commercial whaling in the region ground to a rapid halt, though Kāi Tahu and local farmers continued small-scale operations until the mid-1870s.² One of the few things we can say with any certainty about the Oashore harpoon head is that, as a tool of the colonial whaling trade, this object and those like it were all too successful at skewering their quarry.

Oashore was just one of roughly 100 stations operating at various times on the New Zealand coastline from the late 1820s to the mid-1960s, to which must be added many hundred more whaling ship visits, both in bays and far out in the open ocean.³ Any attempt to quantify the impact of this activity on whale populations must address a crucial problem: that its subjects live chiefly underwater. This makes them hard to count, and may be one reason why environmental history in New Zealand has tended to focus on the land, so that maritime and marine environments remain largely 'uncharted waters'.⁴

In the last 10 years scientists have begun to shed light on the legacy of marine extraction for our waters, as part of the global History of Marine Animal Populations (HMAP) project. Historians would do well to look closely at the results. In the case of inshore whaling, we now know that the southern right

whale (*Eubalaena australis*) population fell from some 27,000 in 1825, before the advent of whaling, to approximately 1000 in 1997. At its nadir in the 1920s, the species came perilously close to extinction, reduced to as few as 60 breeding females in the entire Southern Ocean, from South Africa to South America.⁵ That the vast majority of these removals occurred under sail, mostly from rowboats, with handheld harpoons, is testament indeed to human determination to extract profit from the oceans, often at great personal cost.

Whaling at Oashore was little different from that carried out elsewhere. It is often forgotten that whaling, though adventuresome, was also hard and dangerous work, made more perilous by the fact that most sailors of the time were unable to swim. Injuries and drownings were common and, as the workforce was for the most part unskilled, the industry relied on strict hierarchy and discipline, sometimes verging on brutality and economic enslavement, in the whaleboat and on ship and shore. Moreover, despite the whalers' overall efficiency in wiping out entire whale populations in a few decades, the success of the whale chase was by no means guaranteed. Even once a harpooner had struck fast, the whale had been lanced and the long haul back to shore had begun, it was common for a prize to be lost altogether, either by slipping loose or through the carcass sinking and being abandoned.⁶

The global whaling industry, expanding in the mid-nineteenth century from the American seaports of New Bedford and Nantucket, was increasingly polyglot, with ships and men of many nations and

cultures. This was also true of most whaling ships reaching New Zealand waters. Shore stations such as Oashore were similarly diverse, with numerous sailors from the multinational whaling fleet abandoning ship to join shore crews. These places did, however, have several distinctive features that set them apart from ship-based whaling. They were established almost without exception by merchants from the Australian colonies, backed by British capital, and their original crews were drawn primarily from the Sydney and Hobart docks. Shore whalers, too, had a far greater impact on coastal Māori populations and the future colony, because each station brought 30 foreigners, semi-permanently for eight months of the year, to areas of the country that had previously experienced little or no Euro-American contact. James Belich has described the social formation that resulted from these encounters as 'a Tasman World' and its wandering workers as 'Tasmen' – 'products of the space between the fragment and the frontier'.⁷

Not only were shore whalers a cosmopolitan group, but the commodities they produced were sent around the world. Thanks to searchable electronic newspaper databases and the digitisation of other source material, we now have a new level of access to innumerable lists of things that accompanied whaling to New Zealand – among them harpoons and whaling irons, such as the one under discussion, as well as exotic articles of clothing such as monkey jackets and duck frocks and, not least, strange medicines and ointments such as those discussed by Jonathan West in this volume. Often we can also see exactly what was shipped in return: oil and whalebone as well as a variety of other

Pātiti (hatchet) with harpoon head, c. 1830–50.

Ref: OL001037, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa



trade goods, including sealskins, timber, dressed flax and potatoes. Indeed it may be possible to further trace at least some of these items to their ultimate destinations, for example the processing of whale oil and bone into streetlamp fuel and candlewax, fine machinery lubricant, corsets, umbrellas, furniture and various other modern products in Europe and America.

We may assess, too, the significance of material objects introduced through the whaling industry to iwi and hapū of central and southern New Zealand. In considering material culture, we would do well to keep in mind what Nicholas Thomas calls the 'promiscuity of objects': 'Objects are not what they are made to be, but what they become.'⁸ Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the 'pātiti (hatchet) with harpoon head', a weapon fashioned and spliced in wood and cast iron and likely employed in tribal warfare in the Cook Strait region sometime between 1830 and 1850, now held at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.

Māori made up a quarter or more of the workforce at many, if not most, shore stations in the 1830s, and several rose to the rank of harpooner or first mate aboard whaling vessels. Their reputation for strength and good seamanship was celebrated in the work of Herman Melville, whose novels *Omoo* (1847) and *Moby-Dick* (1851) both feature heroic Māori harpooners aboard American whaling voyages.⁹ Māori at home also benefited from a close association with whaling. Until the early 1840s it was standard practice for indigenous leaders to form ongoing relationships with shore whaling proprietors; in exchange for protection and permission to use and occupy land, they received various objects from the stations' material networks, notably muskets, powder and ball and whaleboats. Thereafter, each station received a steady stream of Māori visitors, offering cargoes of whalebone, pigs, fish, potatoes and other produce, and the companionship of female relatives, in return for a range of everyday items, including tools, medicine, tea, sugar, tobacco and alcohol. In southern New Zealand these arrangements amounted to commercial partnerships, and there is evidence that Kāi Tahu ran their own whaling operations in Otago and Southland. Kāi Tahu were also active in shore whaling on Banks Peninsula, including at Oashore; there is every likelihood that the Oashore harpoon was at some stage held and thrown by Kāi Tahu hands.¹⁰

The world-famous Bettman photographic archive contains a striking 1936 portrait of an unidentified East Coast Māori man posing with a whaler's harpoon, subtitled 'a heroic (but vanishing) figure'. As the photograph suggests, shore whaling continued well

into the twentieth century, concentrated in Northland, on the East Coast, in Marlborough and periodically in Canterbury and Otago. The last whale was taken by the Perano whalers off Kaikoura in 1964. The image also reflects a disproportionately high level of Māori participation in post-1840 whaling. This may be explained, in part, by their concentration in remote coastal communities, as well as a reluctance by Pākehā to carry on a seasonal and economically marginal activity that remained hard and dangerous work. It nevertheless also signifies a lasting cultural association with the whale hunt, and the passing down of family tradition, especially in those parts of New Zealand where extended contact with whalers resulted in intermarriage and enduring whakapapa ties.

The ongoing Māori connection with whaling can also be seen in the 1932 gifting of the whaleboat *Maori Girl* and a collection of harpoons and other whaling gear by a group of prominent Kāi Tahu whānui including the Ellison, Bradshaw and Parata families, to Dunedin's Otago Settlers Museum. In the 1860s and 1870s these items had been used for the short-lived revival of whaling at Waikouaiti and Ōtākou.¹¹

The harpoon's legacy in New Zealand is, fundamentally, a colonial one. Shore whaling, especially, is best regarded as the extension of settler commerce from one developing sphere of British influence – the Australian penal colonies – to another, coastal New Zealand. Relationships of trade and co-existence between Māori and shore whalers emerged not in a vacuum, but within this colonial context. Further, to consider whalers and their methods as somehow separate from colonial settlement is to



LEFT: Standing beside the Maori Girl whaleboat in 1933 are James 'Tiemi' Apes (right), an original Kāi Tahu crew member, and Kenneth Ross, who restored the vessel.

Ref: F-609, Collection of Toitū Otago Settlers Museum

BELOW: Whaleboat showing position of crew, early nineteenth century. Ref: A-032-025, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand

BOTTOM: A Māori man aims a harpoon in 1936. The photograph was captioned: 'A heroic (but vanishing) figure. With their almost obsolete methods, the natives achieve excellent results.' Courtesy of Corbis Images

ignore the significant history of whaling by Māori and non-Māori in the decades after 1840. Rather than thinking of those who wielded the harpoon as foreign, prior and 'other' to our settler past, we must come to terms with the fact that colonialism in this part of the world was founded on the exhaustive extraction, if not pillaging, of natural resources. We must also face the uncomfortable reality that the colonial urge to slaughter marine mammals endured long into the twentieth century, even after several whale species had become so rare as to be virtually extinct.

Archaeological excavations at Oashore and elsewhere, the prominence of the *Maori Girl* and Kāi Tahu harpoon collection at the entrance of the recently relaunched Toitū Otago Settlers Museum, and historical fiction such as Fiona Kidman's *The Captive Wife* are all evidence of a continuing fascination with the history of whaling.¹² An object-focused approach has the potential to move us past romantic portrayals, to consider instead a new history of harpoons: of artefacts embedded in colonial ground, of long-submerged marine environmental histories, of wandering workers in the Tasman world, of colonial commodity circuits, of the persistence of Māori whaling traditions and, ultimately, of overlapping and entangled categories of indigenous and colonial in nineteenth- and twentieth-century New Zealand.



5. THE HARPOON'S HEAD

- 5 MacKellar's poem is reprinted in full without an author named but with *American Printer* referenced in the *NZPN*, 4 (June 1876), p. 8.
 - 6 *Scottish Typographical Circular* (STC), XI, 304 (1 December 1886), pp. 427–29. Ten years earlier, *NZPN* ran 'Typo's New Year's Address to his Auld-Stick' written by a Glasgow compositor (No. 6 (August 1876), p. 8). The same organ ran 'The Setting Machine', 6 (July 1876), p. 8 by Mr James Kelly from the firm of Aird and Coghill, printers, Glasgow, undoubtedly also gleaned from the Scottish press. See also 'The Type-Setter's Song', *NZPN*, 14 (April 1877), p. 7 clipped from the *Printers' Circular*, Philadelphia, and 'The Old Compositor' by Oscar H. Harpel, Cincinnati in No. 19 (September 1877), p. 8. STC, XIII, 416 (1 April 1896), p. 528: reprint of poem 'The Song of the Setting Stick' from *Australasian Typographical Journal*, 26 (December 1895), pp. 2614–15.
 - 7 A.G. Bagnall and G.C. Petersen, *William Colenso: His life and journeys*, ed. Ian St George, Dunedin, 2012, p. 39.
 - 8 *NZPN*, 36 (1 February 1879), p. 2.
 - 9 *Old Bailey Online*, Reference Number: t18661022-906, www.oldbaileyonline.org
 - 10 William Colenso, *Fifty Years Ago in New Zealand*, Napier, 1888, p. 6.
 - 11 David Mackay, 'Colenso, William', from the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography: www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/1c23/colenso-william
 - 12 Robert Coupland Harding, 'Relics of the first New Zealand press', *Transactions of the New Zealand Institute*, 32 (1899), 400–04, p. 401.
- ### 5. The Harpoon's Head
- 1 Sincere thanks to Associate Professor Ian Smith of the University of Otago who, with Nigel Prickett, discovered the harpoon, for access to the artefact and for advice in the writing of this essay. For more on the Oashore excavation see Jaden Harris and Ian Smith, 'Artefacts from the Oashore shore whaling station', Otago Archaeological Laboratory Report, 1 (November 2005), www.otago.ac.nz/anthropology/archaeology/reports, p. 61.
 - 2 Gordon Ogilvie, *Banks Peninsula: Cradle of Canterbury*, Wellington, 1990, pp. 214–16.
 - 3 Harry Morton, *The Whale's Wake*, Dunedin, 1982, p. 237.
 - 4 Frances Steel, 'Uncharted waters? Cultures of sea transport and mobility in New Zealand colonial history', *Journal of New Zealand Studies*, 12 (2011), pp. 137–54.
- 5 I am grateful to Dr Emma Carroll for sharing her research. See also C. Scott Baker and Phillip J. Clapham, 'Modeling the past and future of whales and whaling', *TRENDS in Ecology and Evolution* 19, 7 (2004), pp. 365–371; and Dennis p. Gordon, Jennifer Beaumont, Alison MacDiarmid, Donald A. Robertson and Shane T. Ah Yong, 'Marine biodiversity of Aotearoa New Zealand', *PLoS ONE* 5, 8 (2010), pp. 11–12.
 - 6 For the dangers of the whale chase see Morton, *The Whale's Wake*, pp. 32–50.
 - 7 James Belich, *Making Peoples: A history of the New Zealanders from Polynesian settlement to the end of the nineteenth century*, Auckland, 1996, pp. 131–32.
 - 8 Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, material culture, and colonialism in the Pacific*, Cambridge, MA, 1991, p. 4.
 - 9 Geoffrey Sanborn concludes that the enigmatic harpooner Queequeg in *Moby-Dick* was inspired by George Craik's account of Ngāti Toa rangatira Te Pēhi Kupe in *The New Zealanders* (1830). Geoffrey Sanborn, *Whipsnaps and Tattoos: The last of the Mohicans, Moby-Dick, and the Maori*, New York, 2013, pp. 73–92.
 - 10 For an overview of Māori participation in the business of shore whaling, see M.W. Cawthorn, *Maori, Whales and 'Whaling': An ongoing relationship*, Wellington, 2000, p. 8.
 - 11 See Seán Brosnahan, *To Fame Undying: The Otago Settlers Association, 1898–2008*, Dunedin, 2008, p. 53.
 - 12 Fiona Kidman, *The Captive Wife*, Auckland, 2005. See also Daphne De Jong, *Gather the Wind*, Auckland, 1999.
- ### 6. 'Keep the head cool, the feet warm, and the bowels open': Octavius Harwood and the Weller Brothers' Medicine Chest
- 1 Robert Fulton, *Medical Practice in Otago and Southland in the Early Days*, Dunedin, 1922, p. 8.
 - 2 Handwritten notes by Octavius Harwood, DC-0096, TOSM; Mac Harwood, *Octavius Harwood, Titopu, Piro, Janet Robertson*, Nelson, 1989, p. 7.
 - 3 See Arthur Visel tear, 'Looking back at tomorrow: Commencement address delivered at the Yale University School of Medicine, New Haven, Connecticut, May 24, 1981', *Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine*, 54 (1981), pp. 219–25.
 - 4 Ian Church, *Opening the Manifest on Otago's Infant Years*, Dunedin, 2002, p. 43; Journal of Octavius Harwood, G.C. Thomson Papers, MS-0438/3, HC, 1–10 October 1839.
 - 5 Journal of Octavius Harwood, 11 May 1839.