

BECKE LOUIS

THE AMERICANS IN THE
SOUTH SEAS

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Louis Becke

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THE AMERICANS IN THE SOUTH SEAS

Perhaps the proper title of this article should be "The Influence of American Enterprise upon the Maritime Development of the first Colony in Australia," but as such a long-winded phrase would convey, at the outset, no clearer conception of the subject-matter than that of "The Americans in the South Seas," we trust our readers will be satisfied with the simpler title.

It is curious, when delving into some of the dry-as-dust early Australian and South Sea official records, or reading the more interesting old newspapers and books of "Voyages," to note how soon the Americans "took a hand" in the South Sea trade, and how quickly they practically monopolised the whaling industry in the Pacific, from the Antipodes to Behring Straits.

The English Government which had despatched the famous "First Fleet" of convict transports to the then unknown shores of Botany Bay, had not counted upon an American intrusion

into the Australian Seas, and when it came, Cousin Jonathan did not receive a warm welcome from the English officials stationed in the newly founded settlement on the shore of Sydney Cove, as the first settlement in Australia was then called. This was scarcely to be wondered at, for many of those officers who formed part of the "First Fleet" expedition had fought in the war of the rebellion, and most of them knew, what was a fact, that the English Government only a few years earlier had seriously considered proposals for colonising New South Wales with American loyalists, who would have, in their opinion, made better settlers than convicts. And it is probable that if the crowded state of the English gaols and prison hulks had not forced the Government into quickly finding penal settlements for their prisoners, the plan would have been carried out.

When his Majesty's ship *Guardian* under the command of Nelson's "brave captain, Riou," was wrecked off the Cape of Good Hope, and her cargo of stores, badly needed by the starving colonists of New South Wales, were lying at Cape Town without means of transport, an American merchant skipper saw his chance and offered to convey them to Sydney Cove. But the English officers, although they knew that the colony was starving, were afraid to take the responsibility of chartering a "foreign" ship. Lieutenant King—afterwards to become famous in Australian history—wrote to the almost heartbroken and expectant Governor Phillip from the Cape as follows: "There is here a Whitehaven man who, on his own head, intends going

immediately to America and carrying out two vessels, one of 100 or 120 tons—a Marble Head schooner—and the other a brig of 150 tons, both of which he means to load with salt beef and pork which he can afford to sell in the colony at 7d. a pound. He wished encouragement from me, but anything of that kind being out of my power to give him, he has taken a decided part and means to run the risque. I mention this so that you may know what is meant."

This "risque," undertaken by the adventurous "Whitehaven man" was the genesis of the American trading and whaling industry in the Southern Seas, and American enterprise had much to do with the development of the infant colony of New South Wales, inasmuch as American ships not only brought cargoes of food to the starving colonists, but American whalers showed the unskilled British seamen (in this respect) how to kill the sperm whale and make a profit of the pursuit of the leviathan of the Southern Seas.

In 1791 some returning convict transports, whose captains had provided themselves with whaling gear, engaged in the whale fishing in the South Pacific on their way home to England. Whales in plenty were seen, but the men who manned the boats were not the right sort of men to kill them—they knew nothing of sperm-whaling, although some of them had had experience of right whaling in the Arctic Seas—a very different and tame business indeed to the capture of the mighty cachalot. Consequently, they were not very successful, but the Enderby

Brothers, a firm of London shipowners, were not to be easily discouraged, and they sent out vessel after vessel, taking care to engage some skilled American whalers for each ship. Sealing parties were formed and landed upon islands in Bass's Straits, and regular whaling and sealing stations were formed at several points on the Australian coast, and by 1797 the whale fishing had become of such importance that a minute was issued by the Board of Trade, dated December 26th, setting forth that the merchant adventurers of the southern whale fishery had memorialised the Board to the effect that the restrictions of the East India company and the war with Spain prevented the said whalers from successfully carrying on their business, and that the Board had requested the East India Company, while protecting its own trading rights, to do something towards admitting other people to trade. The effect of the Board's minute—worded of course in much more "high falutin" language as should be the case when a mere Board of Trade addressed such a high and mighty corporation as the Honourable East India Company—was that directors permitted whaling to be carried on at Kerguelen's Land (in the Indian Ocean), off the coasts of New Holland, the New Hebrides, New Caledonia, New Zealand, the Philippines and Formosa, but they restrained trading further north than the Equator and further east than 51° of east longitude, and that restraint remained for a long time to come.

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