

Trading Contacts in the Bismarck Archipelago during the Whaling Era, 1799–1884

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HISTORIANS OF NEW GUINEA HAVE HAD LITTLE TO SAY ABOUT THE WHALING ERA, AND in the histories of the Bismarck Archipelago the whalers have been virtually invisible, even though significant work has been done on the roles of missionaries, beachcombers, castaways and traders.¹ It has been acknowledged that whalers first arrived around 1800, but where they went, the patterns they adopted, what they traded, with whom, and with what effect have yet to be discussed. This paper argues that with the judicious and intensive use of the logs of especially American whalers,² it is possible to form a detailed picture of trading and contact between islanders and Europeans. By using them in conjunction with other historical and non-historical sources, it is possible to elucidate the significance of the whalers and the impact of their trading on island societies.³

Most of the islands of the Bismarck Archipelago had experienced some contact with Europeans before the whalers began arriving in the 19th century. Ships in the East Indies and China trade had contacted islanders, introducing glass and metal to the New Guinea mainland,⁴ particularly in the west. From 1528 when the Spanish ship *Florida* was attacked in the Admiralties, there was an irregular stream of European visitors: the Dutch explorers Schouten and Le Maire in 1616, Tasman 1642, Dampier 1700, Carteret 1767, Bougainville 1768, Hunter 1791 and D'Entrecasteaux 1792.⁵

The impact of such contact is more difficult to assess. Before 1800 contact was sporadic and relations characterised by suspicion, tentative trading and occasional violence, each side's behaviour based upon fear and uncertainty as they grappled with their own spiritual and material perceptions to incorporate the other. Knowl-

¹ See, e.g., I. Hughes, *New Guinea Stone Age Trade* (Canberra 1977); P. Hempenstall, *Pacific Islanders Under German Rule* (Canberra 1978); S. Firth, *New Guinea Under the Germans* (Melbourne 1982); D. Oliver, *Bougainville, A Personal History* (Melbourne 1973); and K. Howe, *The Loyalty Islands, A History of Culture Contacts 1840–1906* (Canberra 1977).

² There appears to be little surviving oral evidence. In consequence, this study has relied upon 54 whaling logs of which 46 recorded some form of contact with islanders. These logs have been filmed for the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau (hereinafter PMB) and in New Zealand are held on microfilm in the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, and in other participating libraries.

³ For sources, logs have been supplemented by the whalers' journals, memoirs, newspapers and records of the Royal Navy for information about trading and contact. Ethnographical and anthropological material on the Bismarcks has been used in conjunction with the primary sources to elucidate the impact of contact and trading.

⁴ Hughes, *New Guinea Stone Age Trade*, 13; J. Whittaker et al., *Documents and Readings in New Guinea History* (Milton, Qld 1975), 176.

⁵ See Hughes, loc. cit.; Whittaker, loc. cit.; Oliver, *Bougainville*, 18; O.E. Allen, *The Pacific Navigators* (Alexandria 1980), 80; *Journal of Abel Tasman* (Amsterdam 1898), 43; Louis de Bougainville, *A Voyage Around the World* (London 1772), 327; W. Dampier, *A Voyage to New Holland* (1981), 208–9; V.E. King, 'The End of an Era, Aspects of the History of the Admiralty Islands 1898–1908', BA Hons thesis, Macquarie University (Sydney 1978), 50; and Gray, 'From Windfall to Copra', 16–21.

edge of iron remained limited and most islanders had no contact with or knowledge of Western visitors.

By the turn of the century this had changed profoundly. The position of the Bismarck Archipelago on the direct sea link between Australia and East Asia meant that its waters were traversed regularly after British settlement of New South Wales in 1788. After this time routes northeast from Sydney to China were in regular use by government and private vessels. While large and faster ships kept to the east seeking maximum sail in the open sea, smaller ships chose the shorter inner routes, especially when refreshments were required. The St George's Channel route was best for this purpose.⁶

But in addition to the increase in maritime and commercial through-traffic, there was another presence. During the first half of the 19th century regular visits by whaling ships gradually succeeded occasional contacts by European explorers or passing merchant ships. Whalers, as opposed to merchants making their run to China or Bengal, had the opportunity and inclination for both contact and landing because they were constantly cruising the waters around the Archipelago. The first whaling ship arrived in 1799, and there was a gradual increase in their numbers in the 1830s. As the Atlantic became less profitable, American and British whaling ships increased their activity in the Pacific.⁷ The heyday of Pacific whaling lasted from 1835 to 1850,⁸ but in the Bismarcks the peak, as indicated by the number of whaling ships present, was reached in 1840. Remaining steady until 1870, numbers declined dramatically in the 1880s. The last recorded whaler there was in 1884, the year the Germans annexed the islands.⁹

The New Guinea waters were fished for sperm whale over three grounds,¹⁰ and, while larger grounds existed elsewhere in the Pacific, the New Guinea waters played an important role in what was essentially a seasonal industry. J. Whittaker suggested that the most extensive of these was off the northern coast of the main island on either side of 140°E longitude, and killings were made from October to November. However, according to the logs used in this study, an overwhelming majority of whalers bypassed this area in favour of the ground that stretched from New Hanover past New Ireland to Bougainville. Whittaker acknowledges that this was used and suggests it was fished from February to March, and another ground on the northeast coast of the main island was used in the season October to January.¹¹ As he tentatively suggests, the New Guinea whaling grounds were used in conjunction with whaling in the northern and central Pacific; virtually all the

⁶ Whittaker, *Documents*, 320.

⁷ For general histories of the Pacific Whaling industry, see J. Bennett, *Wealth of the Solomons* (Honolulu 1987); E. Dodge, *New England and the South Seas* (Cambridge, Mass. 1965); H. Forster, *The South Sea Whaler* (Sharon, Mass. 1985); C. Ralston, *Grass Huts and Warehouses, Pacific Beach Communities of the Nineteenth Century* (Canberra 1977); S. Sherman, *Voice of the Whaleman* (Providence 1965); E. Stackpole, *The Sea Hunters* (New York 1953); A. Starbuck, *History of the American Whale Fishery* (New York 1964); R.G. Ward, *American Activities in the Central Pacific 1790-1870*, Vol. 1 (New Jersey 1966); A. Whipple, *Yankee Whalers in the South Seas* (London 1954), and also Whittaker, *Documents*.

⁸ Ralston, *Grass Huts*, 16.

⁹ See Gray, 'From Windfall', Appendix 1 and 2.

¹⁰ See Forster, *The South Sea Whaler*, 143.

¹¹ Whittaker, *Documents*, 316-21.

American whalers fished the waters of the Archipelago before heading to Japan, the Solomons, Carolines, Australia and New Zealand to whale there or rest and replenish before returning or heading home.¹²

It has been generally held that during the season April to September the Japan grounds and the coast of Japan were fished. For the remainder of the year the on-the-line ground was utilised, and the New Guinea grounds were used in conjunction with this large and important ground.¹³ But while a few ships followed this pattern there is little evidence from the logs that the New Guinea grounds were fished seasonally. In fact little or no pattern emerges. For example, the *Resource* whaled off New Ireland in October 1799, and the *Elizabeth* did the same in November of 1849. The *Clarice* in 1844 spent April off New Britain, while the *Virginia* was off Buka in November 1845. Moreover the *Young Hector* was in Bougainville in July of 1859 and off New Ireland and Lihir during October of 1860.

Unlike other areas such as the Carolines and New Zealand, there were no permanent settlements or resorts in the Bismarcks, only common anchorages. More than two whalers were seldom at the same place at the same time. But virtually all of them spent months cruising the waters adjacent to the Archipelago, having sporadic contact with the islanders and each other. Because American whalers did all their processing at sea in huge tryworks that boiled the blubber down to oil, one of the tasks of whaling ships was to maintain supplies of wood, and some islands became centres for this activity, while others were conspicuously avoided because it was felt the islanders were too hostile or because there were no supplies.¹⁴ Many whalers' captains passed through the Archipelago and avoided (or did not log) all possible contact with islanders.¹⁵

While first contact with some groups on virtually all islands had occurred in the previous century, and some European trade goods had diffused through indigenous trade networks to many coastal and some inland groups, most of the contact between islanders and whalers through to the 1870s was relatively new and was never easy for either side. Where the contact between the two cultures occurred was often a matter of chance. The location, the quality of anchorages, the presence of reefs, the wind direction, in addition to the inaccuracies of charts, determined most where contact took place.

Even so it is clear from maps compiled from the sources that there were four epicentres that remained relatively constant. Cape Denis on the northeast point of the Trobriand Islands¹⁶ was a major stop for wood and bartering for yams. Generally, contact there was on land. On the New Ireland coast, Gower's Harbour

¹² There were of course exceptions. The *Avola* fished with considerable success out of season around New Ireland.

¹³ Whittaker, *Documents*, 321. One example of this seasonal fishing was the *Stephania*, which spent Jan. and Feb. in the New Guinea grounds before moving north to the Japan grounds.

¹⁴ See, e.g., the *Gay Head* in the Trobriands which would cut wood and then leave it to season before returning to pick it up later. The *Superior* focused on Joveny Island for its supplies. Never once did a whaler record venturing on shore at Buka or Bougainville to collect wood. The entry in the log of the *Avola* on 10 Mar. 1872 was 'went on shore gunning and got five pigeons' at the Duke of Yorks, a known and relatively safe place of contact.

¹⁵ See, e.g., the *Sea Queen*, *Sea Breeze*, *Sun* and *Peruvian*.

¹⁶ While this group does not lie within the confines of the Bismarck Archipelago, 19th-century whalers had it firmly within their mental map of the New Guinea grounds as a whole.

situated just within Cape St George was a popular site for refreshment and repair. For example, in 1859 the *Superior* moored there, the ship was washed, the sails dried, a leak in the bow fixed, 2,069 gallons of sperm oil stowed, water taken on, and hogs traded for with the islanders.¹⁷ Probably the most frequented spot was Port Hunter, a small bay at the northwest part of the Duke of York Islands, where it was generally agreed that the islanders were friendly, or became so as time went on, where there was ample fresh water and the anchorage was good.¹⁸ Buka Bay was the other most visited place,¹⁹ but there are only two recorded cases of contact on shore. Not only was the number of contacts greater in these places but the actual time the whalers spent there was longer.²⁰

In addition to showing the major foci of whaling contacts and trade, the maps reflect some of the changes that took place. What becomes clear is that during the whaling era some islands lost their popularity with the whalers, and in the later period there was a major re-orientation in the location of contact and trade. Buka and Bougainville, major centres of contact from 1840, were conspicuously avoided after the early 1870s, possibly because relations at other islands for onshore trade had improved, enabling whalers to avoid Buka and Bougainville and its sea trading.

In the same way, the Trobriands were ignored after 1860 except for one contact in 1875, possibly because supplies of firewood there were exhausted. The Duke of Yorks, a major centre of refreshment for the whalers, were totally ignored for nine years after 1872 (although this fact is not highlighted by the final map).²¹ The overwhelming majority of contacts from 1860 onwards occurred on the coasts from New Hanover down the north and east coasts of New Ireland between Tabar, Lihir, Tanga and Feni to Green Island. There was a slight increase in the number of ships during those later years, but more importantly an increase in the intensity and frequency of their contact. New Hanover, for example, was unvisited before 1870 but received intensive attention after then from two ships in particular, the *A. R. Tucker* and the *Palmetto*.

Some ships returned time after time to the exact place and tribe to replenish their supplies. The *Lusitania* in December 1828 at the northwest end of the St George's Channel logged,

¹⁷ *Superior*, Sat. 2 Apr. to Tue. 12 Apr. 1859, Kendall Whaling Museum, Pacific Manuscripts Bureau (hereinafter PMB) Microfilm no. 818.

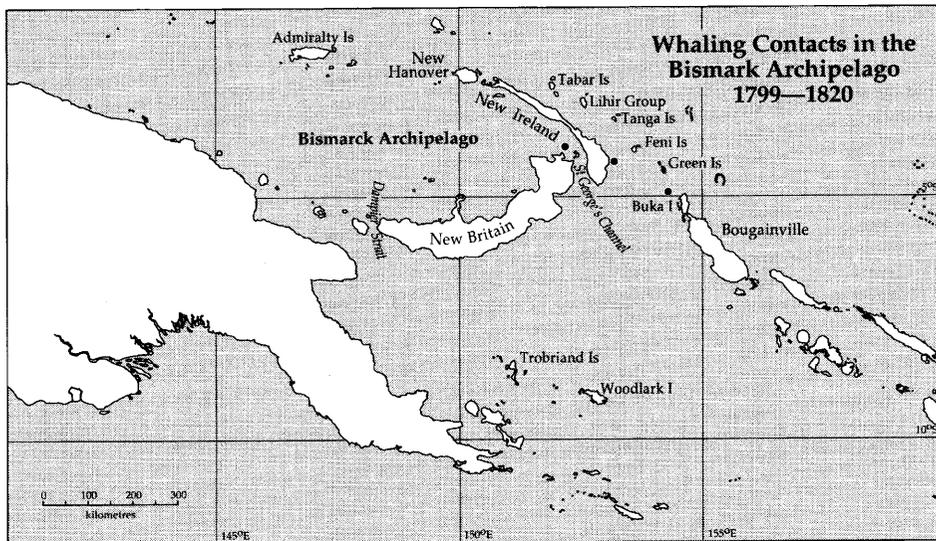
¹⁸ The Duke of Yorks group consists of 13 low islands where there were approximately 37 recorded contacts. Hunter, when he called, was attacked while collecting water and the islanders were only kept at a distance by periodically firing into the wood. See Whittaker, *Documents*, 323. A 'romantic and secluded spot', *Lusitania*, a British whaler, Thur. 13 Nov. 1828, MS Papers, Wellington, Alexander Turnbull Library.

¹⁹ Approximately 46 recorded contacts.

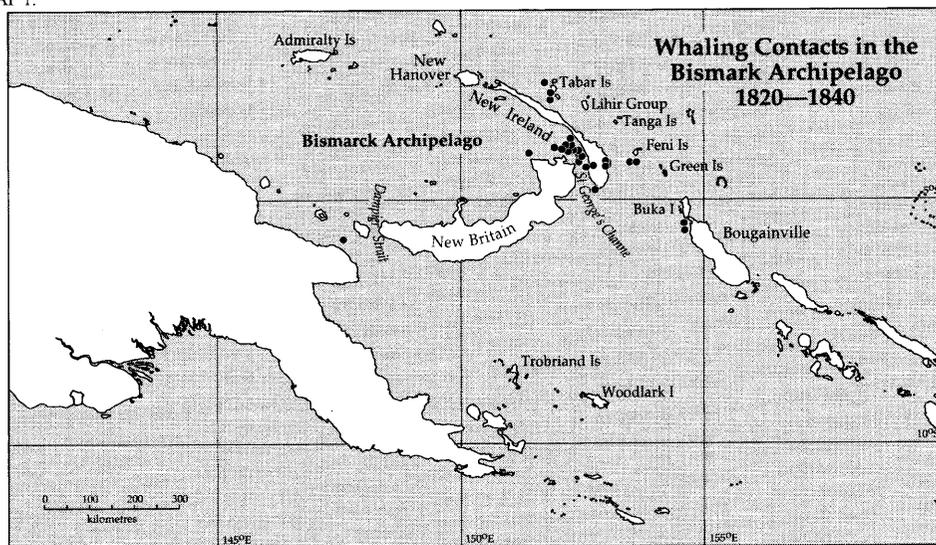
²⁰ See D. Sprod (ed.), *The Tregurtha Log* (Sandy Bay, Tas. 1980), 101; *A. R. Tucker*, 22 Oct. 1872, Kendall Whaling Museum, PMB 802; *Lusitania*, Wed. 11 Feb. 1829, Alexander Turnbull Library; *Avola*, Mon. 28 Dec. 1868, Kendall Whaling Museum, PMB 803. One of the difficulties in the compilation of trading and contact situations was that some ships merely mentioned that they were in, say, Gower's Harbour for a month, but did not mention every specific instance of trade. While this may make a quantitative difference, because these situations happened around the epicentres already mentioned there is little qualitative change. The patterns remain the same.

²¹ The presence of other Europeans contributed to the rapid inflation of prices, which whalers could not afford to pay. The whales themselves must have been rapidly depleting with the extensive whaling activity. What seems most significant, however, is that there was a growing new focus for the whalers.

8 canoes were seen coming off from the land and we were wishing to procure a supply of taro the ship stood in to meet them. About 18 canoes containing upwards of 100 natives came alongside and on board. Among the number were many of our old friends who readily and gladly recognised us. The old chief of the village which is called Tupyia ... undertook to supply us with what we wanted. The trade which was wholly in iron hoop was conducted with the utmost honesty and good temper. The old chief of Tupayia [*sic*] came on board and was shown the process of boiling. He was so overcome that he was unable to speak. The art of heating water is wholly unknown among the natives.



MAP 1:



MAP 2: