

## AJ Lamb and the Harpooner

Diary of Edward Scott

9<sup>th</sup> April 1903

A cool spring breeze brushed past us as we waited to board the *Diana*. The gust softly pushed and cajoled us onto her deck, we but follow nature's calling. Not but a few weeks previously was I standing here in this great ship's shadow looking for a new adventure; now I was onboard as harpooner.

The ship's bow stood tall facing North with a steadiness I was yet to learn. Above, small, thin bits of wire and rope connected tall beams so that it appeared as if ropes were holding the ship together, and if I could take my knife to them, I would dismantle this ship, returning it to timber, one by one, back to the trees it was constructed from. I wondered if the ropes and beams might be our saving grace in times of need or whether it be God, luck or fate. I wondered about this great ship capsizing; its tall mast ever pointing to the Earth's core, sinking us further and further down.

The wind blew again, as the *Diana's* faithful crew stood on the deck watching her move with the quiet rhythm of the water on the Tay; she ebbed and flowed gently, responding to the breeze. The men boarded and soon we were underway North, leaving with the 11:30am tide. Ere leaving, all men on deck cheered to the women and families below. The chorus of shouts and farewells, of men huddling together in the breeze almost drowned out my fear and hesitation at the start of what could prove to be a hazardous journey traversing the ferocious Northern arm of the Atlantic Ocean in sight of God's greatest creature.

10<sup>th</sup> April 1903

*Weather fine going along under steam, fore and aft sails set now and again.*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> University of Dundee Archive Services, MS 254/2/1/12 AJ Lamb whaling log extracts, 1903-1904

19<sup>th</sup> April 1903

The sea was not calmed for several nights; she roared with a vengeance that we all tried hard to ignore and drown out, with song and drink. Many men, nigh, the greenhands could not cope with the bitter air and sea sickness, and laid down below in their hammocks, trying to fight off their nausea. But sleep hardly comes, she is a mistress that teases us with minutes or hours at night but then leaves us again to face restless nights thrashed by great waves as the sea tries to rid us from her.

We have left Longhope in Orkney but the worse was yet to come.

20<sup>th</sup> April 1903

The weather proved more unwelcoming; gales from the West worsen as we ploughed further North. Every man is equal in the face of the weather, as every man suffers as much. It would become colder and wetter, with more work and casualties, but we hoped to chance upon a whale also.

We headed towards the hunting grounds of Davis Straits, between Western Greenland and Baffin Island. Our ship was mastered by Adams, an experienced captain. We were on the hunt for white whales; every day past I clapped my eyes upon the horizon, scouring for a break in the ocean that is not caused by waves. These beasts may try to stay hidden but they must come up for air, and it is then where that they will allow me to behold their white flesh.

The crew continued with their jobs all day and into the early evening, the foremasthands and greenhands mopped the ship's deck, tidy the mess room down below, some unlucky man had the role of paying the devil. It is all tiresome work with little reward.

Up above, I try to ignore the angry sea by spotting birds. Every time I see one fly by, I am reminded that we are not lost at sea, we are not yet outwith humanity's reach.

30<sup>th</sup> April 1903

I sat outside today, looking above in the hopes of seeing a bird fly by but the sky was as empty as the sea. A cloud appeared overhead and hindered my ability to see the sun, or the moon; I could only see an empty void of grey. It felt like we could have sail so far into the distance that we would end up sailing into the sky, for I could not see where the water ended and the air began.

With nothing to see, I closed my eyes to the world and allowed my mind to wander; I saw our ship sailing between the clouds, amongst large white whales as harpooners from smaller boats yelled, "A whale! A whale!" The whales swam behind a cloud then reappeared to breach, clearing their blowholes, before diving back into the clouds. One whale almost looked human; her eyes were dark brown, her pupils suggested some innate knowledge. Ere long, a harpooner threw, with weighted fist, a lance down into her thick flesh, piercing her skin in one fluid movement. Another harpooner struck! Standing tall on his small boat, moving his weight to each foot as his boat crested and fell, his harpoon punctured her flesh. She cried, whined and wailed before diving deeper into the clouds, her blood smearing the sky with crimson.

I trudged back down below. My eyes adjusted to the dim light and I saw my crewmates eating. I sat and joined them and prayed for birds.

1<sup>st</sup> May 1903

*Weather fine, light wind from the North East.*<sup>2</sup>

The men grow claustrophobic; tension bubbled beneath the surface as we manoeuvred around each other in these small spaces, with dull food and company, and with no white whale in sight. Some challenged each other to fight but nothing has come of that yet. I was

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<sup>2</sup> University of Dundee Archive Services, MS 254/2/1/12 AJ Lamb whaling log extracts, 1903-1904

irritated by their jostling down below at night when I try to fall into sleep but these men were irked by me for contesting with their singing and drinking. In my sleep, I imagined the crew sinking down deeper, water filling their lungs, the cold instantly freezing them inside out, the great whale taking them and swimming away.

3<sup>rd</sup> May 1903

I feel like I have, with some great foreshadowing, pre-empted what I am about to write.

The sea, thrashing her great waves against our keel has been the rhythm and song to our days; like a great drum calling gladiators to battle, her beat quickens and quickens... urging the men to pit themselves against her.

Today, a boaststeerer suffered a broken nose at the hands of a lower ranking greenhand. No punishment seemed to fit the crime, as I stood aghast, watching the captain whip him with such great ferocity that he yelled out, pleading with the crew, the captain and God, but no one helped. His screams played over in my mind like a broken Grandfather clock; I still feel his sweat and cries wash over my cheeks, I still feel the lashes on his back as if they were on mine. The crew stood on the deck covering their eyes with every thrash, I kept mine open, looked straight at the poor man, unable to look elsewhere.

28<sup>th</sup> May 1903

*Weather fine, a light airy wind still blowing from the North East. Reached Upernivick at 7:30am.*<sup>3</sup>

A whale was spotted starboard forward! She was a glorious and shockingly large beast that sank low beneath the waves and then raced and broke out of the water, blowing air five metres into the sky with such brutish force. Stood at the masthead, I was the first person to

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<sup>3</sup> University of Dundee Archive Services, MS 254/2/1/12 AJ Lamb whaling log extracts, 1903-1904

see this striking creature. I watched her pale flesh shimmer underwater 200 feet from the boat; the sea attempted to camouflage her, but not for long as another harpooner shouted, "A whale, a whale!"

The crew mustered quickly, I stood silent and still, my eyes not leaving this beast on which I have laid my claim. Around me, all men ran and shouted, racing to get to the smaller boats that will take them out to the whale. Their loud yells affected my disposition, I wanted to tell them to calm their shouts, to allow us to keep her close; but it appears that with some strange animalistic sixth sense, the whale felt our presence and dived deep below. The men upon realising this, stood still mid race to the smaller boats. They looked to the harpooners for guidance, for some call to action, in case we wanted to make chase on this great creature, or if we might want to abandon the creature to catch sight instead of another whale. A deathly quiet descends as every man held their breath.

My whale. My glorious, intelligent, sentient whale, dived too deep for us to follow. Finally a harpooner shouts at the crew, "no whale" and every man sighed and turned on their heels.

I sat and looked out to where the whale might have been and with great faith, swore that I could have heard her sweet 'thank you' blowing through the Arctic air. But I wanted it to be my kill. The 'thank you' is misplaced.

I kept my eyes steady on the horizon, and allowed my head to move in tune with the ocean. Ere long, I spotted my white whale once more!

All men rushed to the boats and I, as a harpooner, raced to my boat to prepare to catch this great beast. Once all the crew were in, the foremasthands grabbed their oars and paddled quickly against the waves. The oars were heavy. The men struggled to maintain speed as the whale ducks and the chase began. "Hurry! Go boy!" I bellowed.

I felt a pressure rising in my chest, a desire to yell out, but I kept my breath quiet, my hands steady and watched the cold air blow from my mouth. All my men moved with the water, silently waiting for the whale to surface again and it does! She rose, her thick blubber

breaching the quiet surface of the water not but a few metres from our boat. I, and my crew muster to capture her, for she was mine to be slain!

I rose up from my position. The boat shook. I thrust down my weapon, expelling all tension inside me. The harpoon pierced her white skin, the blubber parted ways as the spear tip made way deeper and deeper. Red began to pour from her wound. I shrieked and looked to the crew to share my moment of pure blissful, joy.

But the whale dived deeper to avoid capture, and great waves were cast upon our small boat. The rope unravelled to catch up with her but it had not been threaded correctly!

I, stood still, watching as the end of the rope begun to tangle around my leg, tightening like a snake around its prey. The salt of the sea sprayed my face as I fell backwards, my hands reached high into the air.

My whale dived ever deeper, pulling me under the icy waters. I felt her white flesh barrelling against blue, deep cream tunnelling deeper, whining strong, powerful cries. My own voice echoed hers.

30<sup>th</sup> June

*On his deathbed, Edward Scott dictated his last will and testament to AJ Lamb and passed him his final diary entry.*

My body is failing me, expelling the smell of a slow, painful demise, I grimace at the sight of myself, but I long to complete my story before I go.

On that fateful day my captor swam further into the darkness, pulling me unwillingly with her. My leg ached, water filled my mouth as I tried to pull myself upwards, but there was no point, this great beast and my fate were intertwined. I prayed for help. I searched for the space between the water and the air, the sacred space between the living and the dead. Nigh, no man reached over to pull me out of what could have been sky, sea, or cloud.

I sank deeper and deeper. My eyes dimmed, my mouth opened, my limbs weakened. But, before darkness took me, the tension on the rope slackened, and a figure not human or animal floated beside me and pulled me towards the sun.

*18<sup>th</sup> July 1903*

*One of the harpooners named Edward Scott who had been lying badly for two or three months died this morning at (6am). He suffered awfully before he died.<sup>4</sup>*

*In Memory  
Of  
Edward Scott  
Harpooned  
S.S Diana Dundee  
Died July 18<sup>th</sup> 1903  
Aged 54*

- AJ Lamb

## References

University of Dundee Archive Services, MS 254/2/1/12 AJ Lamb whaling log extracts, 1903-1904

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<sup>4</sup> University of Dundee Archive Services, MS 254/2/1/12 AJ Lamb whaling log extracts, 1903-1904