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Leviathan, Volume 17, Number 2, June 2015, pp. 122-125 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/lvn.2015.0034>



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Report:

Melville Society—Bezanson Archive Fellowship 2012

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Bezanson Archive Fellow Ellie Stedall in the New Bedford Whaling Museum. Photo courtesy of Robert K. Wallace.

I am newly returned to Cambridge after spending a month in the United States as the Melville Society Bezanson Archive Fellow; surprisingly, it is more wintery here than in New England, and there is thick snow on the ground—so much, in fact, that, today, bicycles are being escorted rather than ridden. My memories of New Bedford, Nantucket, and Boston seem oddly sunlit and even warm in contrast: January, if not always literally, was a halcyon month.

I spent the majority of that time at the New Bedford Whaling Museum, researching what was being read and written on board whaling ships in the 1840s. This topic forms part of a wider PhD project on the maritime and literary lives of Herman Melville and Joseph Conrad. When I first arrived in New Bedford, I accompanied Mary K. Bercau Edwards and other scholars to

Vol. 17.2 (2015): 122–125 © 2015 The Melville Society and Johns Hopkins University Press

the Melville Archive and glimpsed the wealth of the existing collection. My research time was spent downstairs in the Museum library, which I came to think of as a contextual sea surrounding the island of the Melville Archive. That sea is stocked with books relevant to Melville without directly concerning him, and Senior Maritime Historian Michael P. Dyer proved to be an unsurpassable guide to its resources. After an initial conversation with him about my research, I saw the surface of the large wooden reading table disappear under suggested texts, not to be seen again. A decade's worth of *The Sailor's Magazine* and the *Annual Reports* of the New Bedford Port Society occupied my first few days, after which I moved on to the log books and journals of whale ships. I removed further into the recesses of the library, where I could be closer to the two tightly shelved caverns that represent the combined collections of the Kendall Whaling Museum and the Old Dartmouth Historical Society. The books they contain—official log books and also the uncompelled records of officers at sea—are extraordinary objects. Some are bound in robust sailcloth; others are naked and fragile; all are world-voyagers. Seated at a tiny desk between two copious filing cabinets, I felt privileged to read and handle them.

These books are largely factual, but they contain rare and vivid irruptions of personality. I found it impossible not to be moved by the melancholy captain, writing at the beginning of a voyage of perhaps four years:

I fell into a doze for about an hour and woke to find my room flooded with water which had got down the hatch ways during the rain it did no great damage except to wet every one of a large bundle of books for which I had paid 30 dollars just before sailing but I must dry them and make the best of a bad fix.

Often I encountered the boredom of these writers, their unimaginative entries, stock phrases (“This day commences,” “so ends”), and disintegrating handwriting. But perhaps as often I came across a record-keeper whose daily entry never faltered and, more occasionally, one who had inscribed humor, poetry, and pictures into a book whose readership—if it existed—must have seemed impossibly remote. A beautiful watercolor sketch of the *Somers* brig, with the three condemned mutineers hanging from the yard-arms, was a particularly special find. I was reminded of the opportunity in academic research to salvage meaning in texts and to retrieve details that are in danger of being overlooked and restore them to their contexts. This watercolor, like many other items I encountered during this fortnight, would not have meant anything to me two years or even six months ago, and now I came across it with delight, since it formed part of a web of associations that had their center upstairs, on Melville Island.

While I was in New Bedford, I made a trip to Nantucket to see Ishmael's point of disembarkation, and in the course of the month I also visited Melville's gravesite in the Bronx and the spacious study at Arrowhead, in Pittsfield, MA, where he composed *Moby-Dick*. Perhaps the most exciting excursions were to two ships—the *Charles W. Morgan* and the *Constitution*. I stood at the keel of the *Morgan*, with the curve of her wide commercial sides almost forming a ceiling over us, while Mary K pointed out the eccentricities of her construction, which have been laid bare in preparation for a voyage in 2014. Perhaps the only real disappointment of this whole trip was the modernized forecabin of the whaler, now a clean and whitewashed space. Mary K obligingly turned off the lights to recreate its original dimness, but we still lacked its nineteenth-century appearance and smell. And perhaps better so. With the lights off, we could wonder how sailors managed to read anything at all while they were “below.” The *Constitution* was equally evocative: huge, stately, and fully adapted for the purposes of war. Mary K had organized a private tour, and under the guidance of the museum historian we travelled downwards from the spar deck to the gun deck and officers' quarters, the orlop deck, the hold, and finally to the copper-lined magazine and its adjacent light room—zones forbidden and fascinating to Melville when he travelled on her sister ship, the *United States*.

Like the other Archive Fellows before me, I found the contact with the Melville Society as valuable as my experience in the Archive. I wish to acknowledge Gail Coffler and the late Walter E. Bezanson, whose generosity has made this wonderful Fellowship possible. My first few days in New Bedford, during the *Moby-Dick* Marathon, were spent in the inspiring company of Wyn Kelley, Mary K, Bob Wallace, Tim Marr, Chris Sten, and Jennifer Baker, and I had plenty of opportunity to observe their discrete expertise at work among the gathered fans. Throughout my time in New Bedford, the museum staff were exceptionally helpful and accommodating, and they ensured that I saw more of the town than simply its whaling archives. I am grateful to Laurie Robertson-Lorant for a day of lovely conversation and a walk in the brilliant sunshine and bitter cold on Horseneck Beach. I had the pleasure not only of staying with Mary K but also of meeting much of her family; I attended a wonderful dinner at which more than half of the assembled guests had sailed round the world at least once and could speak familiarly of Pitcairn Island. I was also the beneficiary of Wyn Kelley's hospitality and humor, and she made possible visits to Walden Pond, the *Constitution*, Arrowhead, and the Houghton Library at Harvard. When we visited Walden on our first day, she reminded me of Thoreau's description of islands of water that form over time around the main pond and drew my attention to one. This image remained

with me over the following weeks, especially as my experience became increasingly sea-logged and awash with maritime insights and artifacts. But this watery time also felt like an island: a rare haven in which to pause and look at things carefully, to indulge in a proximity to objects and places Melville knew, and to enjoy his Society. I am grateful for those Tahitian weeks in the three- to four-year doctoral voyage.