Historical Geography of Whaling in Bequia Island, West Indies
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HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY OF WHALING
IN
BEQUIA ISLAND, WEST INDIES

John Edward Adams *

Throughout most of the 19th century American whaling vessels based at lower New England ports made regular cruises to Caribbean waters in search of sperm whales (*Physeter catodon*), humpbacks (*Megaptera nodosa*), and pilot whales or blackfish (*Globicephalus melas*). The most popular whale hunting ground in the Caribbean extended from the south Windward Islands to the north coast of South America, including St. Lucia, St. Vincent, the Grenadines, Grenada, Barbados, Tobago, and Trinidad (see Map 1).

Probably the most important species hunted by Yankee whalemen in the Windward Islands was the humpback, a baleen whale averaging 30 feet in length. The humpback makes an annual migration to tropical seas during the winter solstice. Brandt (1940:19) explains that humpbacks and other species of baleen whales “cannot avoid migrating to warmer seas, because the young calves with their thin blubber would freeze to death in the icy waters of the Arctic and Antarctic Oceans.” Humpacks follow a regular migratory pattern in the south Caribbean. In January they appear in the shallow bays, coastal shelves, and channels of the Windward Islands, and from April through May they migrate back to northern latitudes.

New England whalemen chased, killed, and processed humpbacks near the Windward Island settlements, affording the local populations an excellent opportunity to observe whaling activities. Moreover, whaling ships made frequent visits to Windward Island ports in order to replenish their stores. It was through these contacts that New England whaling technology was introduced to the West Indies.

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In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Yankee skippers recruited West Indians to fill their crews, as it became increasingly difficult for them to find American seamen to go whaling. Brandt (1940:54) writes that whaling was:

... often a strenuous and dangerous voyage of a year and frequently yielded not a penny besides the food. Slowly the crews had to be composed more and more of half castes from all parts of the West Indies and of Central America.

At the same time, a number of West Indian merchants, seamen, and planters erected small whaling stations and trained local inhabitants in whaling skills. The typical West Indian-type whaling concern consisted of 3 or 4 open, sailing boats and a fireplace or "boiler" to fry out oil from the blubber. No vessels were used. Boats were launched from protected beaches and the catch was towed to shore. Although the locally managed West Indian whaling enterprises were small and relatively crude operations, they provided seasonal employment and a source of income for many islanders.

From 1870 to 1925 at least a score of whaling stations were started in the south Windward Islands and Trinidad. The first and most important whaling center was Bequia, a 7-square mile island lying in the northern Grenadines, south of St. Vincent Island.¹ At the peak of its development (circa 1910), nearly 100 men were engaged in catching and processing humpback whales for their oil and meat. Whaling not only brought much needed income to the island but the activity also played a major role in the transformation of the island from a land to sea-based economy.

**Physical Setting**

As in the other Grenadine Islands, Bequia is irregularly shaped and deeply embayed. At the head of the bays are found short stretches of white sand beach derived from the weathering of coral and shell. The

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¹ The Grenadine Islands are comprised of a chain of over 100 small volcanic islands that stretch 70 miles between St. Vincent and Grenada in the Lesser Antilles. (See Maps 1 and 2.) The Grenadines were formerly dependencies of Grenada. In 1791 Great Britain divided the islands for administrative purposes between St. Vincent and Grenada. The total area of the St. Vincent Grenadines is 17.3 square miles about 45 percent of the total land area of the Grenadines, and has a population of approximately 6,000 (1985 estimate). Bequia, the most important island of the St. Vincent Grenadines has a population of 3,600. Other inhabited islands in the St. Vincent Grenadines include Union Island, Canouan, Mustique, and Mavero. The larger Grenadines under Grenada's administration, i.e. Carriacou, Petit Martinique, and Isle Rond, have a total population of 9,000.
beautiful beaches are a tourist attraction, but they are limited. Most of the shoreline is steep, rocky, and fringed with coral. Only Admiralty Bay, on the sheltered west side of the island, and Friendship Bay, on the southeast coast, offer relatively good anchorage for boats and small vessels. Admiralty Bay is the best and most used harbor in the northern Grenadines. No reefs block access to the coast and the harbor is wide and deep enough to accommodate large schooners. (See Map 3.)

Most of Bequia's surface is moderately or steeply sloped. The island is dominated by rounded hills and ridges that plunge steeply to the sea or end abruptly at the upper edge of a wave-cut cliff. The island's only level or gently sloping land is confined to seven bowl-shaped vales, ranging from about 50 acres to slightly over 100 acres. The vales represent formerly submerged embayments which have been filled in with sediment from the nearby hillsides. Their upper portions are well-drained and constitute the best agricultural land in the island.

Bequia offers a spectacular view of the other Grenadine Islands. Immediately offshore are the rugged, uninhabited islets of Petit Nevis and Isle Quatre. To the east and southeast appear Battowia, Baliceaux, and Mustique. In the distance, to the south, looms Canouan and, slightly beyond Mayero and the jagged twin pinnacles of Union Island. Farther south the hazy outlines of Carriacou, the largest island of the Grenadines, can be seen on a clear day.

The precipitation pattern of Bequia Island and the other Grenadines is characterized by low averages, extreme departures from normal, and by an unpredictable seasonal distribution. It appears to be mere chance when a shower falls on one of the Grenadines. Rain-bearing cumulus clouds form and dissipate out at sea, without being influenced by the small, low-lying Grenadines. Whereas banks of dark cumulus clouds are seen almost daily over the rugged, interior highlands of St. Vincent, they are virtually absent in the Grenadines.

In the less rainy season (January through May) the brown, almost desertlike appearance of Bequia Island stands in sharp contrast to the green, cultivated and forested slopes of St. Vincent, the windward portions of which receive, annually, twice as much precipitation as does Bequia.²

The most critical feature of climate in Bequia is the lack of dependable rainfall. In 1956, for example, Bequia recorded 68.01 inches of precipitation but a year later the island recorded only 35.05 inches.

The seasonal distribution of rainfall is also erratic. It frequently happens that, while the total rainfall for the year is average or above

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² Average annual rainfall for the island is 65 inches. Rainfall data are based on Annual Reports on the Agricultural Department of St. Vincent, from 1938 to 1948 and from 1954 to 1961.
average, the amount that falls in the planting season is less than adequate for crops. Planting starts at the time of the spring rains, in late May or early June, but often a long spell of hot, dry weather intervenes and destroys the crops. When this occurs, a second planting is usually made later in the season. However, dry spells often lengthen into a protracted drought with disastrous effects on crops and livestock. Agriculture is a speculative undertaking in most years.

**Historical Background**

Bequia was one of the last islands in the Lesser Antilles to be settled by Europeans. The island’s lack of surface water and springs and its shortage of arable land were apparently major deterrents to early settlement. Formerly a French possession, Bequia was ceded to Great Britain in 1763 by the Treaty of Paris.

In the late 18th century British planters pushed ahead sugar cane cultivation on large estates. In 1827 Shephard (1831: Appendix VI) listed nine sugar cane estates in Bequia, ranging from 105 acres to 1,000 acres. In the same year, the island had 1,257 slaves. Aside from slave villages and plantation houses, the only settlement was Bequia Town (now named Pt. Elizabeth) which served as the island’s administrative and trading center.

Bequia planters encountered serious environmental restrictions on the cultivation of sugar cane, namely, the lack of dependable rainfall and the shortage of gently sloping land. The marginal plantation agriculture was ill-equipped to survive the problems created by Emancipation in 1838. As a result, the production of sugar cane began a precipitous decline from which it has never recovered. In 1854 sugar production was only 206,838 pounds (St. Vincent Bluebook, 1854), or about one-quarter of the 1828 figure. In 1931 there were only five acres in sugar cane in Bequia (Abstracts of the Census of St. Vincent, 1931), and today this crop is not cultivated in the island. More important, Bequia planters failed to introduce successfully new cash crops following the decline of the sugar cane industry.

Since Emancipation, less land was cultivated in cash crops and more land was devoted to subsistence crops and to the rearing of livestock for export. Sharecropping, in which tenants worked on estate lands for a percentage of the crops, became the most important land tenure system in Bequia. Tenants could also earn wages for task work, but hired labor on a regular basis was too expensive for most planters. The association of field labor with slavery left a strong aversion to any form of agricultural labor, and sharecropping was especially unpopular because it offered no financial security.
MAP 2

THE GRENADINES

BEQUIA
ADMIRALTY BAY

ISLE QUATRE

BATTLEWIA
BALICEAUX

MUSTIQUE

ST. VINCENT

12 30'N.LAT.

GRENADINES

PETIT MARTINIQUE

CARRIACOU
HILLSBOROUGH BAY

GRENADA
GRENADINES

ISLE ROND

12 32'NO.LAT.

PETIT MARTINIQUE

JEA '69 (SEE RIGHT SIDE)

SCALE IN MILES

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Repelled by unproductive soil and the absence of remunerative employment on land, Bequia islanders emigrated to British West Indian colonies in search of work or turned to the sea for their livelihood. Since Emancipation emigration became a permanent feature of Bequia, involving mainly single males in the 18 to 25 year age group. The number of males leaving the island is not known but the volume was sufficient to substantially affect the sex ratio which for the past century has stood at nearly three males to every five females.

Although emigration became an important outlet for Bequia’s growing population, many islanders found employment in the local maritime trading and whaling industries. Within half a century, circa 1870 to 1920, the marine enterprises became firmly established in the island, while agriculture declined.

**Origins of the Bequia Whaling Industry**

Bequia and the other Grenadine Islands were visited periodically by American whaling ships in the early 19th century (Shephard, 1831:216), but it was not until the late 1860s and early 1870s that regular expeditions were made to the islands. In 1868, the St. Vincent Bluebook (Anon., 1868) noted that “American whaling vessels annually visit these islands (Grenadines) and take large quantities of oil from the Hunchback (Humpback) whale, and Blackfish.” From 1867 through 1870 inclusive 6,702 barrels and casks of whale oil, amounting to over 250,000 gallons and valued at £28,000, was shipped from St. Vincent and its dependencies.  

In 1868 whale oil ranked fourth in the value of exports from St. Vincent behind sugar, rum, and arrowroot starch. The fifth and sixth leading exports from the colony were cotton and molasses, respectively. (Anon., St. Vincent Bluebook: 1868).

American whaling activity declined sharply in the Grenadines and neighboring islands after 1870. In 1876, the St. Vincent Bluebook (Anon., 1876) reported that “American whalers used to fish in the waters of this government but none have been here in the last year or two.” However, American whalers continued to operate in the Windward Islands, at least intermittently, until the turn of the century.

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3 These figures are based on the annual reports of the St. Vincent Bluebooks which are held in the Government Offices Building, Kingstown, St. Vincent. The oil processed was from whales caught by American vessels operating in St. Vincent territorial waters and was probably subject to export tax. There was no local whaling enterprise in the St. Vincent Grenadines before the early 1870s.
American whaling activities in the Grenadines reached its peak in the 1860s and 1870s, and it was during this period that a number of Bequia islanders found employment aboard the vessels and learned the skills of whaling. One of the Bequia males who enlisted aboard an American whaler was William T. Wallace, the founder of the island’s whaling industry.

Bequia-born in 1840, and of Scottish ancestry, William Wallace and his brother Charles inherited Friendship Estate, on Bequia’s southeast coast. The living descendants recall that “Old Bill,” as William Wallace was affectionately known in later years, joined the crew of an American whaler as a young man seeking adventure. On the cruise which terminated in New Bedford or Provincetown, Massachusetts, Wallace learned the skills of whaling.\(^4\) Wallace returned to Friendship Estate, Bequia, shortly before 1870, the year his first son was born.

The events leading to the development of Wallace’s whaling establishment on the Estate are not known, but it appears that Wallace started whaling in 1875 or 1876 for, in the latter year, the St. Vincent Bluebook (Anon., 1876) noted that “there are now 3 or 4 whaling boats now owned in the smaller islands (Grenadines) which, in the season, go out fishing in the channels between the islets.” In the same year, the St. Vincent Government Gazette (Anon., 1876) listed William T. Wallace as the owner of two 26 foot and one 25 foot boats which, because of their large size, were undoubtedly the “whaling boats” referred to in the Bluebook.

In addition to the three whaling boats, Wallace’s whaling concern consisted of a small shore station with facilities for boiling out oil from blubber. The station was built on the west coast of Friendship Bay, a short distance from Friendship Estate’s sugar cane mill.

Wallace also assumed the task of training men in the skills of whaling. The whaling crews, consisting of six men for each of the three boats, were recruited mainly from tenants residing at Friendship Estate and nearby Paget Farm Estate. In 1881 the two holdings had a total population of 286, of whom 138 were males (Anon., Abstracts of the Census of St. Vincent, 1881). Wallace’s three sons also served in the fishery, and all became Captains of the whaling crews.

It appears that Wallace’s main purpose in erecting a whaling concern was to generate a new source of income for Friendship Estate and for the poor sharecroppers of Bequia. It should be emphasized that

\(^4\) In Massachusetts Wallace met and married an American girl, Stella Curren, reported to be the daughter of a Yankee whaling Captain. Wallace’s three sons were born in Bequia, and all became active in whaling. The eldest, born in 1870, was lost at sea on an American whaler in the Gulf of Mexico. The surviving sons remained in Bequia, and their descendants live in the island today.
cash crop agriculture had been in a decaying condition for many years in the St. Vincent Grenadines and the small returns from the export of sugar was undoubtedly a major factor in stimulating the development of whaling activities in the island.

Moreover, whaling activity complemented the agricultural work cycle. Male agricultural laborers had little to do in the dry season when humpbacks made their annual appearance in Grenadines. The whaling season ended in the first or second week of May, when the last of the humpback herds drifted through the channels in their northward migration. This allowed whamen time to prepare the land for planting following the first rains of late May or early June.

The appeal of whaling in Bequia was not based solely on monetary considerations. It was also a prestigious activity. The whaleman’s skills in sailing and hunting, and his daring exploits at sea won widespread praise and admiration. Only the strongest and most reliable men were recruited for whaling, and those who demonstrated above-average ability and qualities of leadership were often promoted to officer rank, namely Captain or harpooner. The two officers assigned to each whale boat enjoyed high status and their rank entitled them to an extra share of the whale oil and meat.

Spread of Whaling

Following the lead of Wallace, Joseph Ollivierre, a leading proprietor of Bequia, erected a whaling station at Petit Nevis, an islet lying south of Bequia. Sometime in the 1880s the Petit Nevis Shore station was abandoned in favor of a new whale processing site at Semple Cay, a low islet lying a short distance from Friendship Bay. (See Map 3.) Joseph Ollivierre’s sons managed the whaling concern and took an active part in whaling by serving as officers of the crews.

Shortly after 1895 Wallace’s sons constructed a shore station on the leeward side of Point Hillary, a low-lying, rocky peninsula that

5 In the latter part of the 19th century, Joseph Ollivierre was in possession of all land from West Cay to Friendship Bay, Bequia, including Paget Farm Estate and La Pomp (412 acres). His holdings also included the islands of Isle Quatre (350 acres), Petit Nevis (15 acres), and Savan (12 acres). Ollivierre owned altogether 789 acres, which was the second largest landholding in Bequia and fifth largest in the St. Vincent Grenadines. In 1881, Ollivierre’s holdings had a population of 200, all of whom resided in Paget Farm, on Bequia’s south coast (Anon., Abstracts of the Census of St. Vincent, 1881).

6 Misnamed “St. Elair’s Cay” on British Admiralty Hydrographic Chart, number 791, published in 1908. The feature known as Semple Cay on this chart is known as “Middle Cay.”

7 In 1895 William Wallace sold his whaling boats to his sons. The bill of sale, signed and dated by Wallace, is in the possession of a descendant.
frames the northeast end of Friendship Bay, Bequia.  

The Point Hillary station was in use as a whale processing site by the Wallace family until about 1927, and was re-opened for a few years in the 1930's.

The Wallace and Olivierre families of Bequia dominated whaling in the Grenadines. Approximately one-third of the working male population of Friendship Estate and Paget Farm Estate were engaged in whaling in the season.

From Bequia whaling spread to other islands in the Grenadines. (See Map 4.) In the first decade of this century, Bequia whalers started a fishery at Palm Island (formerly Prune Island), a short distance southeast of Union Island. From 1905 to 1925 the two proprietors of Canouan Island each operated a whaling establishment. Snagg, who was in possession of most of the island, built a shore station at Whaling Bay, a small indentation on the west coast. The second proprietor, Lewis, conducted whaling operations from Friendship Bay, on the southeast coast. In the same period, Richard Mulzac, planter of Union Island, was in charge of a whaling station at Frigate Rock, south of Ashton. (See Map 4.)

In the second decade of this century, the Grenadines supported six small whaling establishments, each equipped with a shore station and from three to five whale boats. In this period at least 100 men found seasonal employment in the enterprise, representing about 20 per cent of the working male population of the islands.

Significantly, the Grenadines whaling industry was developed by influential men of the islands, individuals who had the necessary capital and organizational ability to build facilities and to recruit and train tenants for whaling. However, the owners of the Grenadine whaling concerns frequently had difficulty in retaining their crews. Many enlisted aboard American whalers that stopped at Kingstown, St. Vincent, once every one or two years to take on supplies and to pick up seamen. In this way, Grenadine whalemens were assured of a passage to the United States, and better employment opportunities. A few remained in the United States on a permanent basis but most returned to the Grenadines after working in the United States for several years.

The Grenadine Whaleboat

Grenadine whaling crews depended upon small, open sailing craft to hunt the humpback and to tow the huge carcass back to shore for

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8 In British Admiralty chart number 791, the peninsula is labelled "St. Elair's Point," but local residents call the feature "Point Hillary." The peninsula was probably named after Jean-St. Hilaire, a 19th century planter in the Grenadines.
processing. No schooners or brigs were used to hunt whales in the Grenadines in the manner of the New England whaling industry.

The Grenadine whaleboat was modeled after the Nantucket-type whaling craft which was introduced to Bequia in the 19th century. Probably the first whaleboat to be constructed in the island was built by William T. Wallace at Friendship Bay. Boatbuilding skills spread to other parts of Bequia and by the first decade of this century whaleboats were being constructed in Canouan and Union Island.

The Grenadine whaleboat was double ended, had a deep V-shaped hull, and a powerful foresail and mainsail, of which the latter was set on a bamboo sprit and boom of equal length. The craft was also equipped with a centerboard which, lowered through a slot in the hull, helped to prevent lateral drift. The over-all length of the Grenadine whaleboat was 25 or 26 feet, reduced from the original Yankee version of 28 to 30 feet.  

The Grenadine whaling craft was strongly constructed of locally-cut white cedar (Tabebeuia pallida) whose natural curvature was ideal for framing ribs. Pitch pine, imported from the United States, was used for planking. Sailcloth, rope, and nails were imported from England via Kingstown, St. Vincent. The bamboo masts and boom came from St. Vincent.

The whaleboat was difficult to beach because of its large size and weight. At least eight men were required to beach the craft, and skids made out of smooth hard wood or whale bone ribs were laid on the beach to facilitate hauling.

Whaleboats were built and kept in good condition by their owners with the help of apprentices. The whaleboat was not used for finfishing, turtling, or any function other than whaling. At the end of the whaling season the boats were turned over on the beach in front of the owner’s house.

**The Hunt**

Preparation for the whaling season started in early November, when boats were caulked and painted, sails mended, ropes coiled, and knives cleaned and sharpened. The owner of the whaling concern made a sizable expenditure for Manila rope, harpoon points, bomb lances, and

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9 The two-bow design and sturdy construction of the Nantucket whaleboat has also served as the prototype for present-day Grenadine fishing craft used in handlining, trolling, and seineing. The Grenadine fishing boat is variously called two-bow, double-ender, and billieboat. Though shorter in over-all length than the whaler it has basically the same design as its prototype.
other gear. Officers and crew went through a brief, but rigorous training period, and a few dry runs were made in the whaleboats to test the equipment and readiness of the crew.

The whaling season started as soon as the first humpback herds were spotted in the channels, sometime between the first and second week in January. Whaling crews pursued the humpback vigorously every day except Sunday or when the weather was unusually rough and windy.

Whaling boats were launched from sheltered beaches and sailed east, beating into the wind. Whalemen generally kept to the windward of their shore stations so that they could take advantage of the east to west going trade winds in towing the whale to shore.

From the point of departure, the maximum range of whaling was about 10 to 12 miles. From Friendship Bay, Bequia, the outermost limits within which whales were struck was bounded on the north by Argyle, on the southeast coast of St. Vincent; as far east as three miles windward of Battowia, Baliceaux, and Mustique; and, as far south as Petit Canouan, south of Mustique. Most whales were struck in a four mile channel running between Bequia and Mustique. (See Map 5.)

Whales were often difficult to spot from boats, especially in January and February, when windy conditions made the water choppy. Keen-eyed look-outs were stationed at strategic points along the coast, usually on high, clify promontories, to watch for humpback. Flashing mirrors were used to direct the crews to the whales.

Within the narrow confines of these channels boats representing different whaling concerns or “Companies” were often in sight of one another, and they frequently gave chase to the same whale or herd. This situation often led to serious quarrels. In order to reduce friction the officers of several Grenadine fisheries agreed upon a set of rules which were incorporated into the Laws of St. Vincent, under the “Whalers Ordinance of 1887” (Anon., Laws of St. Vincent, 1888). These regulations are quoted below:

1. If a whale is seen from the shore and the boats of both companies shove off and give chase the boats which get nearest to the whale has the preference.

2. If a whale is seen ahead or to the leeward or to the windward when the boats are near to each other they should give chase together and if one boat reaches the whale before the others that boat must have the preference; and if the Captain of that boat hoists the flag (or signal to join in taking the whale) the carcass or oil is to be divided in equal shares between the companies or in shares as may be mutually agreed on.

3. If several whales are seen in close company (that is in a school) the boat nearest to the whales has the preference;
but, after that boat has struck one whale, the other Company's boats may capture any of the other whales.

4. When one whale in a school of whales has been struck and is nearly dead, and another whale of the same school (which has been struck by the other Company's boats) has run across the dying whale and the lines get tangled, the lines of the whale which was last struck must be cut (otherwise all damage thereby incurred must be paid) and every effort must be made by the boats of both companies to prevent the loss of the whale which was first struck.

5. If more whales than one are seen separate, each Company's boats must chase different whales and must not interfere with each other's whales.

6. If a cow and calf whale are seen together, the Company's boats that capture the one have the right to the other also; but if the flag is hoisted and the other Company's boat assists in the capture, the carcass or oil is to be divided in equal shares (or in such shares as may be agreed on between the Companies).

7. When the boats of one Company are waiting for a whale to come to the surface to spout or breathe, none of the other Company's boats may pass over or near the spot where the whale goes down to feed.

8. The boat which is chasing a whale has the preference until the whale has been captured or until the boat has ceased to chase the whale.

9. When the Company's boats are chasing a whale the other Company's boats must not take in sail or stand in the way of the whale so as to get it away.

10. If a whale is seen and the boats give chase together and reach together in taking the whale the carcase or oil is to be divided in equal shares between the Companies.

The above regulations clearly defined the responsibilities and restrictions of competing Companies in striking and killing whales, and it was common for crews, representing different concerns, to assist each other in hunting whales.

Grenadine whalemen hunted mainly the humpback. On rare occasions a sperm whale was taken when it came close to the Grenadines but usually the mammal remained in deep water offshore and out of range of whaleboats. The humpback, on the other hand, spent much of its existence in shallow water and came well within the range of whale boats launched from beaches.

The whale boat was manned by a crew of six, consisting of the harpooner at the bow, the Captain seated at the stern, and four ordinary crewmen. The main function of the harpooner was to "strike" the whale with the "iron," a wrought iron blade and shank that was
attached to a five foot wood shaft. The end of the shank was made fast to six feet of “box line” that was spliced to a thick Manila rope. The rope ran aft to the loggerhead, a stout piece of wood stepped through the stern deck around which the rope was turned to slow the harpooned whale. From the loggerhead, the line passed forward to a wood tub in which was coiled 150 fathoms of rope.

The heavy harpoon could not be thrown far, so it was necessary for the crew to maneuver the boat to within a few yards of the whale. The harpooner attempted to sink the iron deep into the whale’s flesh in order to hold the creature fast. Once secured, the Captain exchanged places with the harpooner and attempted to kill the whale with a bomb lance, an explosive projectile discharged from either a shoulder gun or a “darting gun.” The bomb lance consisted of a brass cylinder about 14 inches long with a pointed head and a metal feather. The device had a time fuse, and exploded shortly after it entered the whale.

A bronze shoulder gun was used to discharge bomb lances throughout most of the whaling period in the Grenadines but, in the early 1920’s, the islands’ whalemen adopted the “darting gun” that was mounted under the harpoon. When the iron shank had penetrated the whale, a slender trigger rod was pressed against the whale’s flank, shooting a bomb lance into the whale. Thus the harpooner could strike and kill the whale in one operation. However, the shoulder gun remained in use for killing whales and backing up both devices were long, slender lances that were driven deep into the whale’s lung cavity.

Towing the dead whale to shore for processing was equally an enduring and perilous assignment. The humpback sometimes took in water through the mouth causing it to sink. It was the duty of one or two whalemen to dive into the water and sew the whale’s mouth closed to keep it afloat. The trip to the shore station was frequently long, and often complicated by darkness, and sudden squalls. On many occasions, the crew was in danger of being swept out to sea because of contrary currents or a calm and the whale had to be cut loose. Sometimes a schooner or small steam vessel was in the vicinity and helped to bring the whale to shore.

Because of the above mentioned difficulties, probably at least one-third of the whales killed and taken in tow did not reach shore. A whaling concern, consisting of four or five boats, was fortunate to dispatch more than six or seven whales in the season.

**Processing the Whale**

*Description of the shore station.*—Each whaling establishment in the Grenadines had a shore station at which whales were butchered and processed for their oil and meat. The whaling stations erected in
the Grenadines had similar locational and site characteristics, and nearly identical processing facilities.

The Point Hillary shore station described below is representative of the other whale-processing sites in the islands (See Map 6.) From the standpoint of field investigation, Point Hillary had two advantages: (1) unlike the other stations, much of its physical plant remains intact, and (2) a former Captain of the Point Hillary whaling concern was on hand to supply information about the station. 10

As mentioned previously, the Point Hillary station was built circa 1900 on the south side of Point Hillary, a low peninsula located at the northeast end of Friendship Bay, Bequia. A winding foot trail, that hugs the north, cliffy side of Friendship Bay, leads past a small sand beach to a cluster of palm trees that stand over the ruins of the old station.

Point Hillary had three excellent locational advantages:

1. The station was located on the leeward side of Point Hillary, offering protection from wind and surf.

2. It was situated west of the whaling grounds, and boats could thereby gain the assistance of the east to west going trade winds in towing their catches to the station.

3. The remoteness of the processing site ensured that the stench of the decomposing carcass and the discarded waste matter did not reach population centers.

The physical plant of the Point Hillary shore station was contained in a small space, measuring 30 feet in width and 50 in length along the shoreline. At first glance it appears that the 1,500 square foot site was a poor one for processing whales. The land pitches steeply to the sea, allowing little room for work, and its shore-line is strewn with black boulders and coral, posing serious obstacles to beaching the bulky whale boats.

The above criticisms are dispelled when it is learned that most of the butchering takes place in the water immediately adjacent to the shore. It was neither possible nor desirable to haul the whale's huge carcass onto the beach. Instead, the head of the whale was brought

10 Unfortunately, no whales were caught and processed in the Grenadines in 1966 when this writer was doing field work in the islands. The account of the cutting-up operation is based on interviews with senior whalersmen of Bequia. I am indebted to Mr. Joseph Ollivierre and Mr. Bertram Wallace of Bequia who supplied the details.
up to, or close to the shore with the aid of a winch and block and tackle, leaving its hulk partially submerged in the water.

A half dozen men stood knee deep in blubber, meat and entrails cutting off large chunks of flesh with long-handled spades. There were placed into whale boats pulled along side the carcass and transported to shore.

One of the major advantages of butchering the whale in the water was that unwanted matter was flushed away by shore currents. Moreover, the water's cooling effect slowed decomposition of at least the submerged portion of the carcass. At times sharks presented a problem but these were lanced from boats.

Whale meat was cut in thin strips, salted, and dried out on rocks on the beach. To avoid mixing sand with the meat, it was advantageous for whaling stations, like Point Hillary, to be located on or near rock beaches.

**Preparation of whale oil.**—A “shore Captain” directed the intricate procedures of flensing the whale and preparing the oil for export. The shore Captain was either the owner of the whaling concern or an older, experienced man appointed by the owner. Normally the owner and/or the shore Captain took care of the business end of the enterprise and was not engaged in hunting whales.

In the preparation of whale oil, blubber was first stripped from the meat and cut or “diced” with sharp mincing knives into two inch square chunks. These were taken to the “trying-out works,” a circular fireplace constructed of local stone and mortar. The Point Hillary fireplace, which is still intact, measures 36 feet in circumference and three feet in height. Two gaping cavities in the fireplace formerly held iron boilers, each measuring four feet across the top and two feet in depth. Beneath the cauldron are openings for firewood and airshafts to build up a draft. (See Map. 6.)

The diced blubber was placed into the kettles and a hot fire, kindled with wood, melted out the oil. Pieces of fried fat, called “crisps” or “cracklings” floated to the surface and were removed with brass ladles, and used as fuel. The heavier oil was also dipped out and placed into “secondary” kettles set on the ground, for cooling. The oil was then stored in 31½ gallon wooden casks or cast iron drums to await delivery.

Depending on its size, the humpback whale yields between 400 and 1,500 gallons of oil, the average being slightly over 1,000 gallons. The meat flensed from an adult whale exceeds 2,000 pounds.
Marketing Whale Oil and Meat

Whale oil.—The owner of the whaling concern made arrangements for one of the local vessels, usually a schooner, to pick up the casks or drums of whale oil at the shore station. Most of the oil was transported to Kingstown, St. Vincent, but Grenadine schooners were also engaged in inter-island trade with Trinidad and Barbados and whale oil was sometimes added with other cargo bound for these islands.

The bulk of the whale oil entering St. Vincent, Trinidad, and Barbados was transferred to the holds of vessels leaving for England and the United States. Until shortly after the beginning of the 20th century England and the United States were the leading customers for whale oil exported from the St. Vincent Grenadines. Smaller quantities of oil were sold in the British West Indies.

According to the annual reports of the St. Vincent Bluebooks, between 1893 and 1903, the St. Vincent Grenadines exported a yearly average of 25,000 gallons of whale oil, valued at £800. Whale oil was priced wholesale at £1 per 31½ gallon cask. Although the yearly receipts from the sale of whale oil were relatively small when compared to the big North Atlantic fisheries, it was generally sufficient to support the little-capitalized whaling enterprises in the Grenadines.

Whale meat.—Humpback flesh became an important marketable item. Whale meat or “beef” was, and still is, a popular food of Grenadine Islanders and Vincentians. According to Mulzac (1963:12), in Union Island, whale meat was given away to the local population “for a dish tastier than beef.” Fenger (1958:63) who visited the Grenadines in 1911, commented that “Negroes are extremely fond of whale meat which brings a price of three cents a pound in the market.” The leading market for humpback flesh was Kingstown, St. Vincent. Dr. Nichols (1891), who passed through the market in 1891, noted in his diary: “We saw some horrible looking flesh, red in colour, and with a horrible rancid oily smell, exposed for sale. It was whale flesh, and I was told that the people liked it.”

Income from Whaling

There was no wage payment in the Grenadine whaling industry. Members of the whaling concern had to await the sale of the whale oil before receiving their money. The owner first deducted enough money to replace the bomb lances expended in the whaling season and then the balance was divided into three parts, called “shares,” and distributed as follows:
1. One-third share to the Company or owner of the whaling concern. From this amount the owner deducted money for the replacement of whaling gear (except bomb lances), and repair items on the whale boats. The balance left over was profit to the owner.

2. One-third was allocated to the officers of the Company, namely the Captains and harpooners of the whale boats, and divided equally among them. The owner of a whaling concern also received an equal part of this share, if he served as an officer.

3. The remaining one-third share was divided equally among the common crewmen, i.e., four men in each boat and all boats in the Company.

Unlike whale oil, whale meat was marketed by individual members of the crew. Only one-quarter of the estimated weight of the “beef” was claimed by the Company, i.e., the proprietor of the whaling concern, and most of this amount was given away to local tenants. The remaining three-quarters share was divided equally among all members of the whaling enterprise, officers and non-officers alike. In a 24-man Company each member received approximately 100 pounds of meat from an adult humpback. Some of the meat was given away to relatives and friends. A small part was corned for future household use, and the remaining portion was sold in St. Vincent.

The earnings on the sale of whale oil and meat were small, but welcomed. The marketing of whale products raised hard currency which was in short supply in the Grenadines.

Whaling was not always profitable for the proprietor of the whaling concern. At times his share of the receipts from the sale of whale oil barely cleared the cost of replacing equipment and maintenance on the boats. The cost of whaling gear was high. The items had to be imported from England and the United States, incurring transportation charges and import duties.

**DECLINE OF WHALING**

Humpback whales became exceedingly scarce in the islands in the 1920s but this situation was not restricted only to the Grenadines. It was a world-wide phenomenon, the result of the excessive kills of cows and their young in tropical waters by whalers operating from northern countries.

In 1900, a Grenadine whaling concern had no difficulty in dispatching four whales per season, but twenty years later it was hard
pressed to capture only one of these mammals. As a result, the Grenadine whaling concerns went bankrupt. By 1925, the two whaling establishments at Canouan and the ones located at Prune Island and Frigate Rock had suspended operations. Only a handful of boats based at Friendship Bay, Bequia, continued to hunt the humpback, albeit rather unsuccessfully, in the ensuing decades. For all practical purposes, whaling had ceased to be an important activity in the islands.

**Whaling in Bequia Island Today**

*Struggle to revive whaling.*—Since 1925 whaling in the Grenadines has been restricted to Bequia. The sheer persistence in whaling among a small number of men residing at Friendship Bay and Paget Farm has kept the tradition alive. The mere sight of humpbacks passing through the nearby channels was usually enough incentive for three or four boats to give chase. However, owing to the scarcity of whales, few were taken after 1925 and between 1949 and 1957 no humpbacks were taken at all.

Finally, in 1958, after nearly a decade of disappointment three humpbacks were killed and butchered. The relatively successful hunt stimulated renewed interest in whaling in Bequia. Two new boats were built bringing the total fleet to six. The whale boats were owned by several individuals, and pooled together to form a “Corporation fishery,” in which all the crews received an equal share of the whale oil and meat regardless of the crew that struck the whale. In this way, close cooperation among the boat owners was assured.

In 1961, a well-equipped shore-processing station was built on the southwest tip of Petit Nevis, a small island lying south of Bequia, and scene of an earlier whaling fishery constructed by Joseph Ollivierre in the late 1870s. The shore station features a cement ramp and platform to facilitate the cutting-in operation, and two large boilers, each six feet in diameter, to fry out the oil from the blubber. The boilers, which are set in a massive stone and cement fireplace, are protected by a shed with open sides to allow for the free circulation of air over the trying-out works. The other structures are used for storing whale oil and gear.

*Markets for whale oil and meat.*—The Bequia whaling concern exports whale oil mainly to Trinidad, followed by Barbados, and Grenada, but deliveries to these islands are small, averaging less than 1,000 gallons of oil yearly (Anon., Annual Trade Report of St. Vincent, 1965). The wholesale value of whale oil has declined in these markets from 1.30 dollars (B.W.I.) per gallon in 1958 to less than 1.00 dollar per gallon
in the 1960's. 11 Whalemen now store most of their share of the oil, owing to the lack of markets for the product. The demand for whale oil is very limited in the West Indies, and if the current downward trend in sales continue it is likely that the fishery will lose interest in the product altogether. 12

The market for "whale beef," on the other hand, is excellent. For some years now, the sale of humpback flesh in St. Vincent has supported the whaling firm. In Kingstown, the meat retails for over 80 cents a pound, and the average size adult humpback yields between 2,000 and 3,000 pounds of meat valued at least 1,800 dollars (B.W.I.). St. Vincent can easily absorb the meat of three of four whales per season, and several times that amount could be sold if the retail price of the whale flesh were reduced to make it more competitive with beef, fish, and corned blackfish imported from Barrouallie, on the west coast of St. Vincent. 13

Prospects for survival of the whaling firm.—The scarcity of humpbacks remains the most serious obstacle to the successful operation of a fishery in the Grenadines. Informants report seeing more humpbacks than in former years but the herds are still few and scattered. Usually weeks pass before a crew makes a strike. Complicating the situation is the fact that the majority of the crew members are inexperienced at whaling, resulting in a high loss of whales through poor judgment and the lack of skill. Captains also complain that some of the men are nervous and poorly disciplined.

To the dismay and frustration of the whalemen, the 1965-1966 season ended in complete failure. Some of the crew members expressed unwillingness to attempt whaling the following year. On the other hand, a good season, in which three or more whales are caught, results in renewed interest in the activity and an increase in the number of men and boats available for whaling. Whaling will never become a leading activity in Bequia, but it will survive as long as there are whales to hunt and markets exist for whale meat.

11 Before devaluation in 1969, one British West Indian dollar was valued at approximately 66 cents to the American dollar.
12 In the West Indies whale oil is used for cooking and as a medicamint.
13 Barrouallie supplies Kingstown, St. Vincent, with a sizable quantity of corned blackfish meat, processed from the pilot whale (Globicephalus melas). A fleet of nine whaleboats go out daily from Barrouallie in search of pilot whale (blackfish) and porpoise. Every Saturday morning five to eight hucksters transport baskets of corned blackfish meat to the Kingstown market where the meat is sold by the bundle (about 26 cents a pound). Salted and dried blackfish meat is one of the cheapest sources of animal protein in St. Vincent. Poor agricultural laborers from the interior and windward parishes of St. Vincent buy the meat when they do their shopping in Kingstown.
Contributions of the Whaling Industry

Although whaling has made little contribution to Bequia's economy since the 1920s, it left behind a legacy of boat building and boat sailing skills that are the outstanding features of the island's fishing technology today. In design and construction, Bequia's two bow fishing boats are a near replica of the Nantucket whaler which was introduced to the island in the 19th century. At first, the whaler was used in Bequia only for hunting whales but, shortly after the turn of this century, a slightly modified version of the two bow whaler was adopted for finfishing and for the gathering of shellfish.

From Bequia, the distinctive two bow fishing boat spread to the other Grenadines, and to St. Vincent and Grenada, where it replaced square stern boats and dug outs for fishing. The rapid and widespread acceptance of the two bow boat in the south Windward Islands is due to the craft's durability and to its superior sailing qualities. At the same time, the sailing skills learned by Bequia islanders in the heyday of whaling have proved invaluable to the present generation of fishermen who do hesitate to cross wind-swept channels to reach fishing grounds and markets. Few islands in the West Indies can match the sailing skills of Bequia's fishermen.

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Since the late 1940s commercial finfishing and the gathering of shellfish have become important activities in Bequia Island. In 1965, approximately 200 men, representing over 50 per cent of the island's working male population, depended upon fishing as their sole or major means of support. Most of the remainder are employed in maritime trading activities and in the public and administrative services. Agriculture, almost entirely for subsistence, is of minor significance in the island.
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