

William Scoresby Senior (1760-1829)



W. Scoresby

Not least among this man's achievements was being the father of William Scoresby F.R.S. But one is led to wonder what he himself might have accomplished had he been given the opportunities he later gave to his son.

He was of an original and inventive turn of mind, and the shelter given to the masthead lookout by the "crows' nest" is his creation. Before this semi-barrel was hoisted aloft, with shelf and seat and windproof hood, the lookout man — often the captain himself — had to be content with an inadequate piece of canvas for shelter. In storm-tossed, ice-capped waters, the man on the mast sometimes had spells of eight hours and more perched aloft, and he would have good reason to thank William Scoresby for his invention.

Born near Whitby, England into a farming community, he ended his formal schooling around the age of nine. Being dissatisfied with an agricultural life, he determined to go to sea and set himself the task of learning navigation and astronomy. His early voyages took him to places as far away as St. Peterburg and Spain, where he was captured and managed to escape through stratagem. He joined a Whitby whaling vessel when he was 25, and from then on he found ample opportunity for developing his skills.

He was a powerfully built man, and one of keen intelligence. Studying each job to be done, he soon worked out the quickest and most efficient way of doing it. One example involved the flensing of whales. Not long after he had been given command of a whaler, he challenged four men busy at the job, saying he could do it single-handedly in half the time. They were crestfallen when he accomplished it in one-third of the time. In ice navigation he possessed that extra sense also attributed to Captain Cook. It seemed as if he knew what was over the horizon, and he safely led every ship under his command into calm waters heavily populated with whales.

But hunting whales was not the sum total of his sailing life. He had an inquiring mind and was early led to report on arctic winds, currents, and ice conditions to Sir Joseph Banks, who voyaged with Captain Cook.

In 1806 he forced his ship, the *Resolution*, through the Spitsbergen ice barrier into open water in the far north. They reached an estimated 81°30' N latitude and could have sailed even farther, had it not been for the commercial design of the voyage and the scarcity of whales. Even so, the Scoresbys (his son was with him as mate) held the record for sailing farthest north for nearly a century, if one discounts sledging journeys.

Those who did not know Captain Scoresby well thought him eccentric, but his son tells us it was actually his actions, based on reflective, philosophical consideration, that made him appear so. Take, for example, his method of freeing the ship from ice-bound conditions by "sallying". He directed the whole crew to run alternately from side to side of the ship, causing it to rock gently and thus loosen its position, enabling it to be eventually freed. He was a fearless man and did not hesitate to risk even his young son's life by sending him over very thin ice, which would not bear a grown man's weight, to harpoon a whale. According to legend, he could subdue a polar bear by merely looking him in the eye. In fact, the animal was one he had brought to Whitby as a cub; nevertheless, it was a bold act to put his hand between the bars and stroke the fully grown animal in later years.

In these conservation-conscious days, it might be thought out of place to say that Captain Scoresby brought more whales back to Whitby than did any other skipper. Yet it is well to remember that England was greatly dependent on whale products for many things, not least of which was lighting, for gas was in its infancy, and so was Michael Faraday.

The achievements of William Scoresby Senior and his son form an unrivalled chapter in the history of the Arctic, for indubitably the formative years of Scoresby junior were largely shaped by the leadership of his father who, though lacking formal education and sophistication, was yet an original and forceful character, seeing in the Arctic opportunities for exploration and investigation far exceeding the commercial endeavours which were his main object. His son brilliantly continued and greatly enlarged his father's early ambition. That the father's example and training won his son for arctic science cannot be doubted.

FURTHER READINGS

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