

William Penny (1809-1892)

I am perfectly acquainted with the arctic regions, my knowledge having been acquired by thirty-three voyages to these regions, and by spending three winters there. I have become intimately associated with the Esquimaux and their habits and manners.



Portrait courtesy of Scott Polar Research Institute, Cambridge.

So wrote William Penny, arctic whaling master, in 1856 at the age of 47. He had sailed ten times to the East Greenland Sea and "twenty-five times or upwards" to the Davis Strait whaling grounds west of Greenland. In the dangerous business of pursuing Greenland (bowhead) whales in wooden sailing ships among pack ice and icebergs, all the while coping with the hazards of cold, snow, fog, and uncharted reefs, Penny

must be considered successful. The ships that he commanded from 1835 to 1864 — including the *Bon Accord*, *Saint Andrew*, and *Lady Franklin* of Aberdeen, the *Advice* and *Polynia* of Dundee, and the *Queen* of Peterhead — brought into Scottish ports approximately 1470 tons of whale oil and 90 tons of baleen from 162 whales. He never lost a ship, although wrecks were all too common in arctic whaling.

William Penny was born in Peterhead, Scotland, in 1809 and followed his father (William Penny, Sr.) into the whaling trade at the age of 12. He became a mate before he was 21 and a master before 27. From 1821 until 1864 he sailed almost annually — and sometimes twice in one year — to arctic whaling and sealing grounds, interrupting the whaling by a few mercantile voyages from 1841 to 1843 and a Franklin search expedition in 1850-51. Penny was not content merely to follow established routines in familiar places. Using an Eskimo pilot who had accompanied him to Scotland in 1839, he expanded the limits of the Davis Strait whaling grounds in 1840 by leading other vessels into Cumberland Sound — the first European visitors there since Davis in 1585. He introduced the technique of wintering on board ship in 1853-54, and helped develop the practice of floe whaling. He was a strong proponent of shore whaling bases and, with other members of the Aberdeen Arctic Company, designed an ambitious scheme for arctic whaling between Novaya Zemlya and Baffin Island, involving steam whalers, permanent settlements, and subsidiary mining of plumbago. But because Penny's application to the British Colonial Office for a large grant of land on Baffin Island was opposed by rival whaling interests and rejected by the government, his grand scheme was never realized. Nevertheless, he established small, temporary shore bases during his whaling voyages and wintered in Cumberland Sound on four occasions.

To William Penny belongs the distinction of undertaking the first maritime search for the ships of Sir John Franklin. In 1847, during a whaling voyage on the *Saint Andrew*, he penetrated Lancaster Sound to 78°W but failed to find traces of the *Erebus* and *Terror*. In 1849, while in command of the whaler *Advice*, he again attempted to search Lancaster Sound, in company with the *Truelove* under Captain Parker, but ice barred their progress. Penny then offered his services to the Admiralty and, with the support of Lady Jane Franklin, obtained leadership of an expedition. With HMS *Lady Franklin* and HMS *Sophia* he entered Lancaster Sound in 1850, discovered Franklin's 1845-46 winter quarters on Beechey Island, wintered near Cornwallis Island, explored Wellington Channel, and laid down some place names. But Penny was rankled by the superior bearing and adverse public comments of Austin and other naval officers, by the suggestion at home that he and Austin had not done enough in the time available, by what he considered unfair treatment by the Arctic Committee reviewing the work of the two expeditions, and by the Admiralty's unwillingness to offer him another opportunity to search for Franklin in 1852. He dropped out of the Franklin search in frustration and anger, turning his considerable energies toward the development of whaling and the establishment of a mission in Cumberland Sound.

The extension of whaling to the coast of Baffin Island about 1820 had initiated a period of rapid cultural and economic change among the Inuit. Contact between natives and whalers intensified after wintering was introduced to Cumberland Sound in the 1850s. Penny was astute enough to realize that some aspects of whaling, particularly the introduction of alien modes of behaviour and unfamiliar diseases, had proved harm-

ful to the native inhabitants, and he was determined to soften the blow of whaling by introducing Christian teaching. When he sailed to Cumberland Sound in 1857, he was accompanied not only by his wife Margaret and their son William, but also by the Moravian missionary Mathias Warmow, who preached to the Inuit at Kekerten and other places during the winter. To the great disappointment of Penny and Warmow, however, the Moravian church later decided that it would not be feasible to establish a permanent mission in the region.

One of Penny's concerns was that the arctic regions north of Canada, which were ostensibly British on the basis of many discovery expeditions since Frobisher's in 1576, might fall to the United States if Britain failed to exert her authority there. When he applied for a land grant in 1852 he emphasized that a permanent British presence would forestall the plans of American whaling interests to establish bases on Baffin Island. The point aroused considerable discussion in the Colonial Office, Foreign Office, and Admiralty, and although the government in the end refused to sanction Penny's scheme, it did instruct its ambassador in Washington to notify the American Secretary of State that Cumberland Island (Baffin Island) was British territory and that American whalers should not trespass there. That gesture marked a step in the evolution of British attitudes towards the North American Arctic, a step that led to the transfer of the Arctic Islands to Canada in 1880, shaping the destiny of the Canadian North.

By expanding the frontier of the Davis Strait whale fishery, by developing the technique of wintering on board whaleships, by pointing the way into Lancaster Sound for subsequent Franklin searches, and by initiating the first missionary presence on Baffin Island, William Penny influenced the course of Euro-American activity in the eastern Arctic during the nineteenth century. Among all those who sailed along the barren coasts or travelled across the tundra spaces, Penny stands out for the breadth of his experience, for his skill in navigation, and above all for his concern for the native people. His vision extended far beyond the normal requirements of the whaling profession, and if his goals were not always attained, it was not because of a lack of ability or determination but probably because he found it difficult to exercise tact, persuasion, and patience when faced by less competent and less decisive men.

An ice cap, a highland, and a strait in arctic Canada now bear the name of this extraordinary Scottish whaling captain.

FURTHER READINGS

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