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THE TASMANIAN ORIGINS OF NEW ZEALAND SHORE WHALING

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In September 1991 the writer visited Tasmania after attending the annual conference of the Australian Society for Historical Archaeology in Melbourne. The purpose was to look over the archaeological remains of some of the many shore whaling stations in Tasmania to see how they compared with such sites in New Zealand.

Shore whaling, or hunting whales in small boats based at land stations, has a long history. Basques, Vikings and North-west Coast (British Columbia) Indians were among early practitioners (Morton 1982:225). By the 17th century it was an important industry along the bays and inlets of the New England coast (Edwards and Rattray 1956). From this developed the great New England pelagic whaling industry in which vessels would leave the whaling ports of Massachusetts and neighbouring states, sometimes for many years, to return eventually with a cargo of whale oil and other products.

The shore whaling industry of Australia and New Zealand developed out of the earlier pelagic industry in this part of the world. Three years after the first European settlement of New South Wales in 1788, convict transports to Port Jackson cruised for whales in the south-west Pacific before returning to Britain (Pearson 1983:40). In New Zealand ocean whalers first called at northern harbours for supplies in 1792. For New Zealand archaeologists the Tasmanian industry is interesting because shore whaling began so much earlier there and because there is a strong historical connection between whalers of the two regions. Shore whaling in New Zealand was not an isolated phenomenon.

SHORE WHALING IN TASMANIA

According to Murray (1927:10) whaling in the Derwent Estuary, Tasmania, began in 1806 under William Collins, an ex- Royal Navy man who brought men from Sydney to undertake the work. His establishment was at Trywork Point, Ralphs Bay.

The Tasmanian shore whaling industry, like that in New Zealand, was based on the right (or 'black') whale (*Balaena glacialis*). Pilot whales (*Globicephala* spp.) and sperm whales (*Physeter macrocephalus*) were also sometimes taken (McGowan 1984:6). Murray (1927:5) states that the right whale was common in the Derwent from July to December. McGowan (1984:6) quotes the whaler James Kelly who gave June to August as the best season for

whaling in Tasmania as this was when the whales came inshore to calve. The industry could be carried on from April to October or even later. The New Zealand whaling season is said to have been from May to October (see Prickett 1983:42).

The female right whale came inshore to calve, migrating along well established routes to the shallow and sheltered waters where they were vulnerable to anchored whaling vessels and shore based parties. In New Zealand a distinction is drawn between 'bay whaling' from ships anchored inshore and 'shore whaling' from land stations (Rickard 1965), but in Australia this does not seem to apply (see for example McGowan 1984:6; Kostoglou and McCarthy 1991:1).

The slaughter of females and calves quickly destroyed the basis of the industry. In New Zealand this happened very quickly, the first shore station being set up in 1829 and the industry being in terminal decline by the early 1840s (see Prickett 1983:42). In Tasmania the process seems to have taken longer. While the first shore whaling took place in 1806 the peak of the industry seems to have coincided with that in New Zealand, at the end of the 1830s.

In 1833 the Tasmanian whale fishery comprised ten stations with a total of 2-300 men employed (Murray 1927:29). In 1836 there were nine stations operating out of Hobart employing 392 men, in addition to 50 men on Launceston stations. These took 2291 tuns of black oil and 117 tons 6 cwt of whalebone or baleen (Murray 1927:30). In 1840 the establishments were even larger but catches were declining. Pearson (1983:40) says there were "at least 35" Tasmanian shore stations in 1841 but this seems unlikely. McGowan (1984:9) quotes the Hobart Town Gazette which listed nine whaling firms in 1841 with a total of 59 boats, taking 1011 tuns of oil in all.

R. Copping of Hobart who joined a whaling party operating at Yellow Bluff, Adventure Bay and Recherche Bay in 1841 stated that, "This was the last of Whale fishing in the Bays of Tasmania, for the Whales all deserted the coast" (see McGowan 1984:9). No whaling stations were licensed after 1842 although whales were taken occasionally in Tasmanian bays until 1852 or later.

By way of comparison, at the Weller brothers' station, Otakou, in the southern South Island, the peak year was 1834 when 310 tuns of oil were taken. At Kapiti six stations produced 466 tuns in 1839 after which production rapidly declined (Prickett 1983:42). Heaphy (1842:38) gives total New Zealand production in 1841 as 1800 tuns of whale oil and 70 tons of baleen. He goes on to argue that the industry was by no means in decline, but in this he was soon proved wrong.

In the available time in Tasmania I was able to visit two shore whaling localities: Maria Island, and Adventure Bay, Bruny Island (Fig. 1). It is to the description of those sites that we now turn.

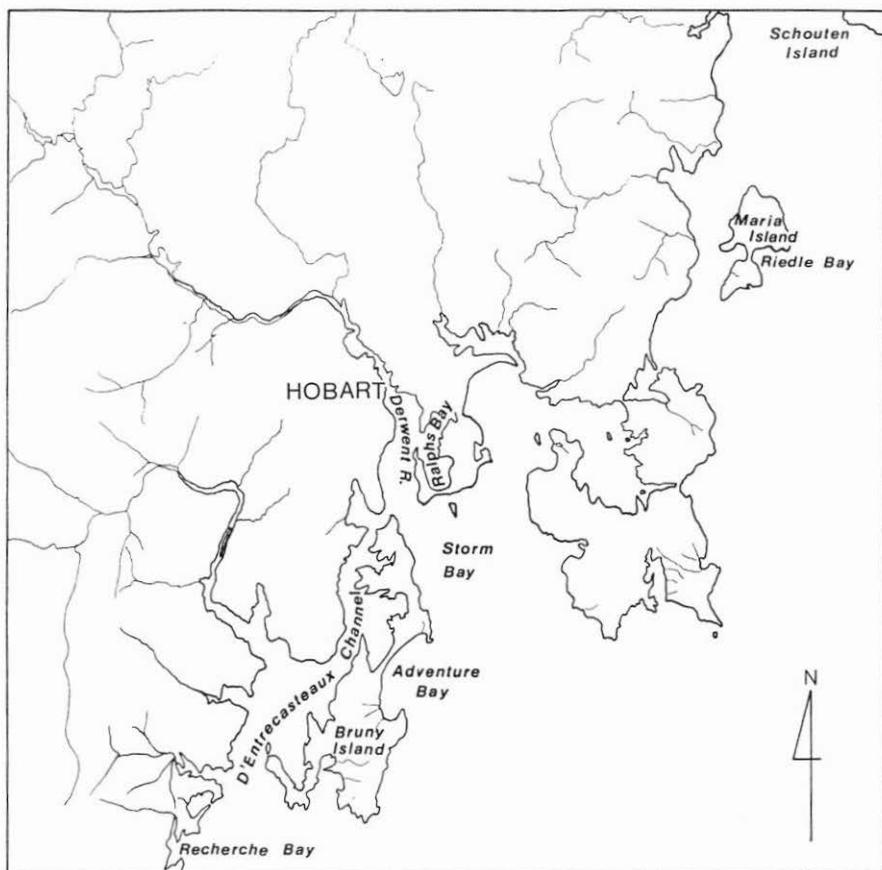


Figure 1. Map showing location of Maria Island and Adventure Bay, Bruny Island, also other mentioned whaling localities.

MARIA ISLAND

In 1988 Maria Island was in the news in New Zealand when the remains of Hohepa Te Umuroa who was transported for rebellion were uplifted and returned here for reburial (Wilkie 1990). Te Umuroa and four other Maori were sent to the Darlington convict settlement on Maria Island in November 1846. The others came back to New Zealand early in 1848 but Te Umuroa died and was buried there. Maria Island was the site of a convict station from 1825 to 1832 and again from 1842 to 1850.

The well preserved remains of a whaling station are to be found on the east coast of the island, in Whalers Cove on the north side of Riedle Bay. On the low spur west of the cove naturalists with Baudin's French exploring expedition

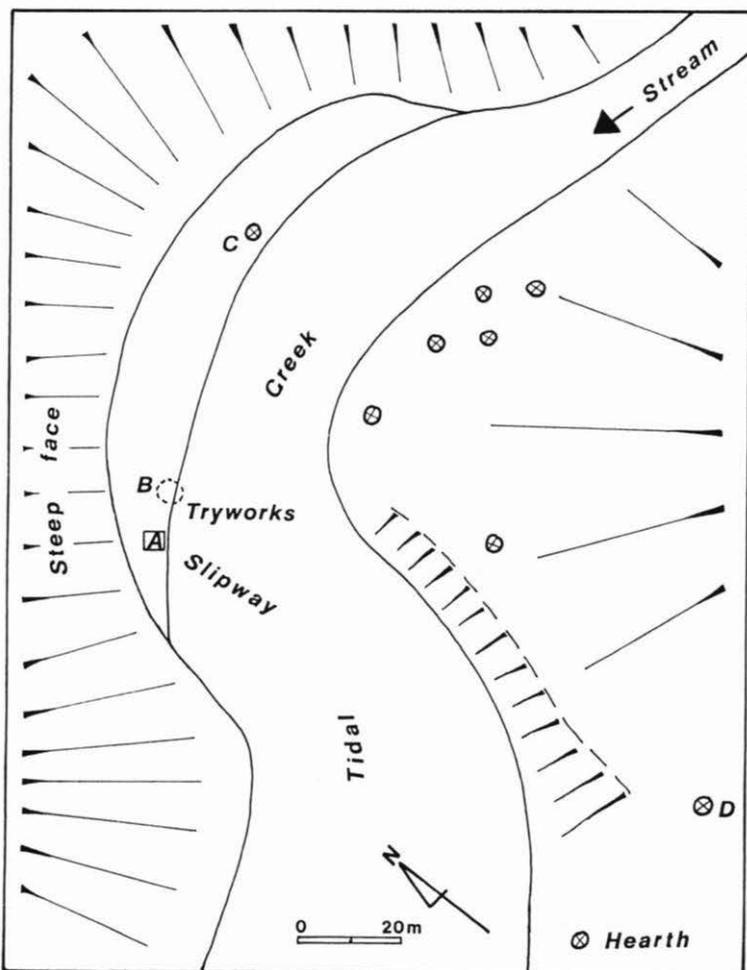


Figure 2. Sketch plan of Maria Island site.

in February 1802 saw standing bark tombs of the Aborigines and thus named the nearby point of land Cap des Tombeaux (see Bonnemains et al. 1988:51, 125-127).

Whalers Cove is a narrow rock-bound channel of c. 150m length (Fig. 3), tidal in the inner reaches so that the whalers could only have brought in whales at high water. A small freshwater stream (Montgomerys Creek) runs into the inner end of the cove. On the east side is a gentle spur rising to c. 25 m above sea level at the site. On the opposite side is a 15-20 m deep flat just



Figure 3. Whalers Cove, Maria Island, from the sea.



Figure 4. Fireplace 'D' at Maria Island shore whaling station with Angela McGowan.

above high tide, backed by the steep faces of a ridge higher than that over the creek. Dry and open vegetation is dominated by eucalypts.

Archaeological evidence of the shore whaling station is on both sides of the inner end of the cove (Fig. 2). On the east side are at least seven stone fireplace mounds which signal the location of whalers' huts. The mounds are 1.5-2.5 m in diameter and made largely of angular granite boulders brought probably from the nearby stream and shore. Only one retains anything of its original shape. Fireplace D (Fig. 2) is c. 100 m from the other hearths and measures c. 2.2 m across and 2 m deep (Fig. 4). It overlooks the open entrance to Whalers Cove while the other six are tucked away up the cove, close to fresh water and the tryworks.

Evidence for the tryworks is to be found on the west side of the creek. At the south end of the narrow flat, half a metre above high tide, is a 3 m square foundation with large rocks at the margins (A in Fig. 2). Two 800 x 500 mm flat topped boulders mark the front (seaward) corners.

Within the foundation is black soil, charcoal and burnt iron fragments. Ten metres north is a low mound of bricks and black soil c. 5 x 4 m in size, now eroding out from beneath a tree at the sea shore (B in Fig. 2). Black soil can be found between and about these two foundations, one or both of which will mark tryworks.

Immediately in front of the tryworks boulders appear to have been cleared from the shallow water, presumably to make easier the bringing in of boats and whales. At the shore would have been the sheerlegs which enabled blubber to be stripped from the huge carcasses. Fifty metres north of the tryworks and 5 m from the creek is a fireplace consisting of several courses of angular granite boulders (C in Fig. 2). Some bricks may not be *in situ*. The hearth measures 1.2 m across the front and 600 mm deep. It faces south-west (towards the tryworks) and like the other hearths stood in all probability at the end of a rectangular hut, perhaps 5-8 m long and 3-4 m wide.

The Whalers Cove station was probably active after the first phase of Tasmanian shore whaling which was based on the rich grounds of the Derwent Estuary and Storm Bay close to Hobart. But it is likely that the authorities would not have welcomed a shore station during the two periods of prison settlement on Maria Island. Provisions and sea-worthy whaling craft would have been a magnet for convicts wanting to escape. It may be argued, therefore, that the station was active within the period 1832-1842 when convicts were not on the island and when the Tasmanian shore based whaling industry was at its zenith.

ADVENTURE BAY, BRUNY ISLAND

Bruny Island is on the west side of Storm Bay, separated from the mainland by

the narrow waterway of D'Entrecasteaux Channel. It is made up of two parts - north and south - joined by a narrow sandspit. Adventure Bay is a large eastward facing area of shallow water which made an ideal whaling ground. At the south end a high promontory protects a sheltered bay and anchorage used by early European navigators and by the whalers who followed.

The bay was named on 11 March 1773 by Captain Furneaux after his 340 ton sloop took on wood and water there (Beaglehole 1961:150). The "Adventure" had parted company with Cook's "Resolution" in the southern ocean a month before. They were to meet up again in Queen Charlotte Sound in May. Cook himself called at Adventure Bay in January 1777 on his third voyage (Beaglehole 1967:50-58).

The whaling stations visited are located along the western side of the promontory which shelters the southern part of Adventure Bay (Fig. 5). The point ends with Penguin Island, accessible on foot at low tide. Most of the area is now a Tasmanian state reserve.

Bay whaling is said to have begun in Adventure Bay as early as July 1804 when Captain Rhodes' English whaler "Alexander" was anchored there. Shore whaling may have begun in 1819 (Davis 1987:1). By September 1827 boats belonging to a Mr Bethune had taken 15 whales in Adventure Bay (O'May 1978:18). In 1829 there were three shore stations working the bay, all of them apparently between East Cove and Grass Point at the southern end.

Station owners were Kelly and Lucas, Young and Walford, and Maycock. Between them they employed 80-90 men, two schooners, two sloops and a large number of whaleboats (Plomley 1966:72). Interestingly, Robinson (in Plomley 1966:71) describes a sloop from one of the stations alongside a whale and engaged in stripping off blubber. Usually, of course, this was done on the shore with the help of sheerlegs. In 1833 Kelly and Lucas employed three boats and 24 men and by the end of July had taken six whales (O'May 1978:21). In 1837 Dr Imlay set up in Adventure Bay. Behind the stations on the 272 m summit of Fluted Cape was a lookout commanding wide views of Storm Bay and the southern ocean beyond.

Like their New Zealand counterparts the whalers sought female companionship among local people; and as in New Zealand this did not always meet with approval. George Robinson, who visited the Adventure Bay stations in August 1829 wrote:

"The conduct of these parties in harbouring a plurality of aboriginal females who were arriving fast to a state of comparative civilisation, making them subservient to their own carnal appetites, is too aggravated to be passed over with impunity. Letters were sent to each of the firms positively prohibiting any intercourse with the natives whatever, therefore they cannot plead ignorance on the subject."

(Plomley 1966:72)



Figure 5. View from Grass Point to the south-east corner of Adventure Bay.



Figure 6. Stone mound, Site 1, Adventure Bay.

Detailed information is needed to match archaeological evidence with particular whaling establishments. The walking track from the road end to Grass Point leads past several groups of features, many or most of which will be associated with the whaling era. They are described here from south to north. Vegetation is now dominated by tall and scattered eucalypts. The area has been farmed and logged in the past.

Site 1. Five minutes walk from the road end at East Cove is a small dam dating apparently from the 1940s. A few metres beyond and immediately above a shore of boulders and rock is a pile of stones which may mark a fireplace (Fig. 6). Some 30-40 m northward, uphill of the walking track, are more piles of stones which are said to mark graves of unknown age and individuals. We saw three, badly damaged by gum trees growing out of them. Beverley Davis of the Bruny Island Historical Society, who we met by chance at Grass Point, said there are four altogether. The mound of stones shown in Figure 6 may be the fourth. It is not clear if this evidence relates to the whaling period.

Site 2. The next remains are ten minutes further along the track. Again we cannot be certain that they relate to the whaling era as the site was later occupied by Bill Davey's sawmill (Beverley Davis pers. comm.). A (seasonal?) watercourse runs down to a 15 m wide boulder beach which provides a rare landing place on the rocky shore.

Archaeological evidence includes four fireplace mounds on an easy slope south of the gully, 20-40 m from the shore. Two other mounds are by the sea. The approximate location of these is shown on Figure 7. Fireplace A still has two or three courses of mostly angular boulders intact at the seaward side. A large gum tree is growing out of the uphill side. Fireplace B now consists only of a mound of stones. Fireplace C comprises mostly angular stones with some water-rolled stones and rare brick pieces. A large gum tree grows from the centre. Two metres north is a water-filled pit 2.5 x 2.5 m. Twelve metres from C is a large pile of mostly angular boulders which probably marks another fireplace (D). Rare water-rolled boulders have been brought from the beach.

Above the boulder beach c. 5 m from high water is a possible fireplace of water-rolled boulders (E). More interesting is a pile which includes some massive angular boulders and water-rolled stones (F) situated on a ledge above the boulder beach and 3 m from the water-course. The location immediately above a rare landing place and the large stones which are used together suggest a trywork foundation.

Site 3. The next group of archaeological features, a few more minutes along the track, includes at least two fireplace mounds and the remains of a road which angles up a relatively steep hillside from a narrow boulder beach. This area was more difficult to search because of scrubby vegetation. It is only 100 m from

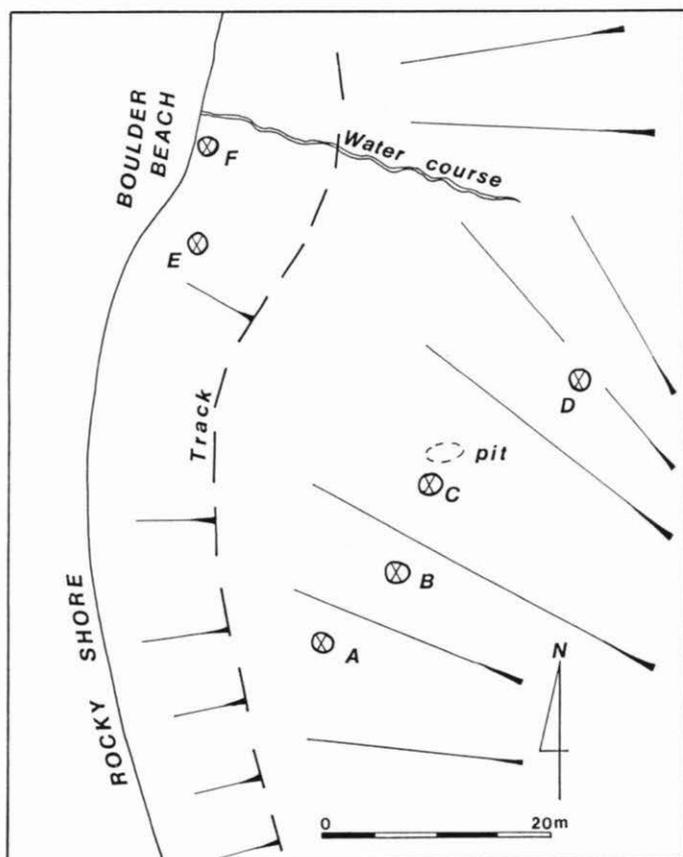


Figure 7. Sketch plan of site 2, Adventure Bay.

the site at Grass Point so may belong with evidence there. However, use of the beach (evidenced by the road) strongly suggests there was a separate whaling establishment here.

Site 4. The outstanding shore whaling site is at Grass Point, said to have been named on Cook's map of Adventure Bay (McLean 1951:55). It was here that he cut grass to feed the animals he had on board the "Resolution".

Grass Point is made up of boulders gathered by storm and tide to make up an area of flat ground c. 100 x 50 m. It is still predominantly under grass with low scrub in places. The whaling station here had an advantage over others on this coast as it is closest to the point by which whales must enter Adventure Bay. Also there is a sheltered cove for launching boats at the south

side of the flat. Level ground made easy the building of huts and other works for the whaling establishment.

The main archaeological feature on the flat is a two-roomed building marked by broken down boulder walls (Figs 8 and 9). The building measures

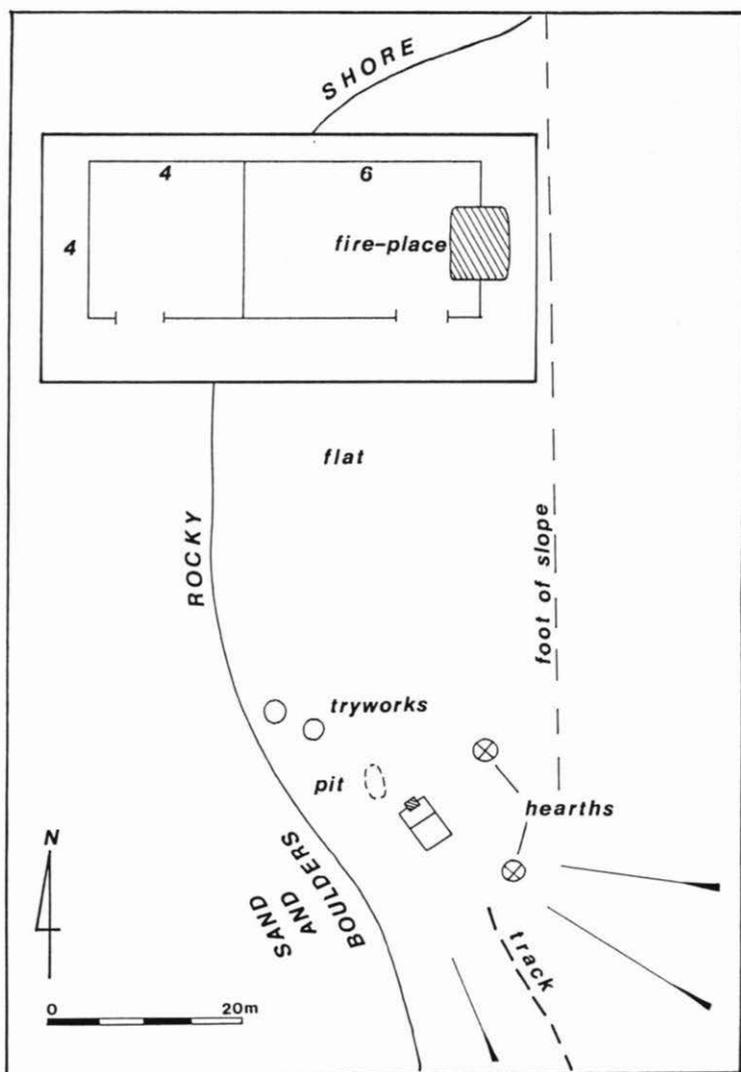


Figure 8. Sketch plan of site at Grass Point, with inset of two-roomed whalers' hut.

c. 10 x 4 m. Doorways enter both rooms from the outside. The larger room has a substantial fireplace foundation at the north side.

A few metres behind the hut are two fireplace mounds, one of them facing north. On a now swampy natural terrace, 3 m higher than Grass Point and immediately to the east, is another possible fireplace mound. At the north-east corner of the two-roomed hut is a pit or depression of elongate form which looks to be man-made. Scattered over the Grass Point flat are a number of half-buried stone features of which careful examination of surface evidence should give some information, and excavation a great deal more.

Close to the shore c. 15 m north-east of the two-roomed hut are the remains of what looks like two trywork foundations (Fig. 10). Only 3 m from the boulder beach is a circular foundation of accurately laid stones, c. 1.3 m in internal diameter. Nearer to the house is a second foundation separated from the first by a mound of beach stones. Here are some broken bricks in addition to flat stones.

When George Augustus Robinson visited Adventure Bay in 1829 he described, "... a large establishment consisting of three firms" (in Plomley 1966:72). These presumably were not in one place but had their own landing places, tryworks and accommodation. From the surviving field evidence I would suggest that the stations were at Grass Point and the two areas of archaeological remains immediately south. The first locality described (with the grave mounds and 1940s dam) was more distant from the whaling ground and has no evidence which may be unequivocally ascribed to the whaling period.

THE NEW ZEALAND CONNECTION

The shore whaling sites visited on Maria and Bruny Island, Tasmania, are closely similar to sites seen in New Zealand, at Kapiti Island and on the Hawkes Bay coast. Only the gum trees and raucous cries of unfamiliar birds create a different experience for the visiting archaeologist.

Fireplace mounds are highly characteristic of shore whaling sites on both sides of the Tasman. In Tasmania trywork foundations took up their expected place next to the landing places. Because they were of necessity immediately next to the beach the evidence of tryworks is sometimes lost to the erosion of storms and tide. The use of stone as a building material is also very much in evidence in both New Zealand and Australia.

Unusual features in Tasmania were the road from the beach at Adventure Bay, the stone walled two-room house at Grass Point, and the removal of stones to create a landing place at Maria Island. I have not yet seen these in



Figure 9. View north over Grass Point and Adventure Bay to Cape Queen Elizabeth. Ruins of two-roomed hut in centre.



Figure 10. Remains of trywork foundation at Grass Point.

New Zealand. Experience on Tasmanian shore whaling sites can only help in the interpretation of New Zealand sites, and vice versa.

Regarding the history of the two industries, the greatest discrepancy is in the very long period after the first shore whaling in the Derwent before the height of Tasmanian activity and the subsequent demise of whales and whalers. In New Zealand shore whaling began in 1829 and was largely finished except at some isolated stations by the mid-1840s. In Tasmania pressure on the resource came on more slowly: although 1806 saw the first shore whaling establishment the height of activity was no earlier than in New Zealand.

Several things may account for this difference. For many years the Tasmanian industry had to contend with heavy British duty. It was only in 1823 that British duty on colonial whale oil was reduced to one pound a tun. Two years later it was set at a nominal shilling per tun (Rickard 1956:50-51). This greatly improved the profitability of the Tasmanian industry and, within a few years, the New Zealand industry as well. It is likely too that the New Zealand industry benefited from the long development of technology and skills in Tasmania.

Recent work on the Hawkes Bay shore whaling industry has revealed a strong Tasmanian connection (see Lambert 1925:368-371 unless otherwise stated). At Wairoa and various Mahia stations in the 1840s was Samuel Harrington, nicknamed 'Shiloh', a half-caste Tasmanian Aborigine. Harrington was described as "cock of the walk" at Wairoa, "...a first-class boat-steerer, harpooner, fighter, fifty-two inches round the chest, and a hard drinker" (Anon. 1885). At Waikokopu was Ned Tomlins, another Tasmanian half-caste and one of the top whalers in Hawkes Bay. He was also generous, one day giving away a sperm whale for a bucket of water, and he was notorious among a hard drinking group of men. Tomlins was killed in a drunken quarrel, his assailant reading the burial service. George Morrison, who was in charge at Wairoa and later Waikokopu, is also said to have been a Tasmanian half-caste, as was 'Darkie Coon' at Wairoa and the Mahia station of Te Hoe. Also at Te Hoe was Jemmy Moody, described as a white man from Tasmania. These are doubtless only a few of the whalers who learnt their trade in Tasmania and later came to New Zealand. The practice, and archaeological remains, of shore whaling in this country depend very much on that earlier experience.

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