

Too hot to handle? Dutch Whaling and Seal Hunting in the Arctic during the Nineteenth Century, 1815-1885 ¹

Joost C.A. Schokkenbroek

Les entrepreneurs hollandais, initialement aidés par de généreuses subventions gouvernementales, ont créé au dix-neuvième siècle un certain nombre de compagnies spécifiquement pour la pêche à la baleine et au phoque, mais ces industries n'ont jamais prospéré. La difficulté était un manque d'esprit d'entreprise et de bonne volonté d'innovation plutôt qu'une pénurie de finances. Les pêcheurs à la baleine, tant anglais qu'écossais, allemands, et, particulièrement, norvégiens ont fait la transition de la voile à la vapeur beaucoup plus tôt que le Néerlandais qui se sont raccrochés bien trop longtemps à l'idée que la technologie et les méthodes des dix-septième et dix-huitième siècles étaient encore applicables à l'industrie de la pêche à la baleine du dix-neuvième.

Introduction

Over the last three decades or so, whaling has obtained its own rightful place in Dutch maritime historiography. However, nearly all studies about whaling and sealing that have seen the light during these last thirty years concentrate either on the hey-days of the "old" seventeenth and eighteenth century whaling expeditions to the Arctic, or on the brief albeit intensive involvement of the Netherlands in modern, post-war whaling in the Antarctic waters during the period 1946 to 1964. Here I would like to shed more light on Dutch whaling and sealing in Arctic waters during the nineteenth century, focussing on the years of increased activity that began with King Willem's accession to the throne in 1815 and tailed off about seventy years later. I will discuss the actors both on shore as well as afloat, the ships, the role played by the Dutch government, and the successes and failures of these enterprises.

King Willem I and the subsidy system

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Dutch whalers had ruled the waves in the rocky waters near Spitsbergen, Jan Mayen Island and, as of 1719, the Davis Strait and Baffin Bay. Annually, hundreds of ships with several thousands of crew roamed these waters in their search for the Greenland right whale. This thick, fat, slow whale

¹ This article is based on my Ph.D. research, published under the title *Trying-out. An Anatomy of Dutch Whaling and Sealing in the Nineteenth Century, 1815-1885* (Amsterdam: Aksant Publishers, 2008).



Figs 1 and 2: King Willem I with a detail from the lower portion of the print that shows the prominence of whaling in the monarch's encouragement of industrial development. Engraving by Willem van Senus (1773-1851), ca. 1820. Collection National Maritime Museum Amsterdam.



produced long strips of baleen and massive quantities of blubber which would be boiled down to oil. Baleen and oil would then find their way to domestic and foreign markets. During the second part of the eighteenth century, Dutch whaling and sealing faced increasing competition from English whalers who were backed by generous governmental subsidies. Moreover, the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780-1784) and the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars (1793-1815) had devastating effects on Dutch whaling and sealing.

The early years of the nineteenth century witnessed haphazard initiatives to resume whaling. Winds of change came about a decade later. From the moment King Willem I returned to the Netherlands via the harbour of Scheveningen to usurp the throne, he endeavoured to boost Dutch industries. One of the main fields of interest was shipping. The king invested heavily in maritime enterprises, hence his nickname the Merchant-King. By *Koninklijk Besluit* (Royal Decree: KB) dated 19 March 1815, subsidies for the outfitting of whale ships were increased. This *Koninklijk Besluit*, the first indication of the king's willingness to stimulate whaling financially, became law on 12 January 1816. Subsequent subsidies were extended to the years 1819, 1820 and 1821.²

With the incentive of the subsidies, merchants and ship owners undertook new whaling initiatives. Entrepreneurs focused attention and energy on two whaling grounds; one being the Arctic, familiar to many generations of Dutch whalers, the other being the waters of southern oceans. The municipal archives of Harlingen in the province of Friesland provide a wealth of data about the day to day operational side of the subsidy system, and some particulars of the application procedure.³ The subsidy consisted of three elements: the so-called *eerste helft* (first half) and *wederhelft* (second half) for fitting out the vessel(s), and, thirdly, for *wanvangst* in case the ship returned empty. Moreover the Harlingen archives provide data concerning the settling of payments and the actual transfer of money from provincial authorities to the Frisian whaling companies that were active between 1824 and 1864.

Most whale ships left the harbour of Harlingen for Jan Mayen Island and Spitsbergen sometime in February or March. In order to receive the first half of the subsidy the directors of the whaling company were obliged to send all information pertaining to the outfitting of their ship to the City Council. They had to file the paperwork prior to the ship's departure. A few days to a week later, upon recommendation from the City Council, the representatives in the States of Friesland and the Governor of the province, the money would be transferred to the whaling company by the State Exchequer (*Rijkskassier*). A subsequent letter from the directors of this company to the City Council would acknowledge the payment of the subsidy.

The whale ships customarily returned to their home ports between mid-July and mid-August. Then the application procedure for the second and third instalments (the *tweede helft* of the subsidy for outfitting in combination with the one issued in case of

² De Jong, *Geschiedenis van de oude Nederlandse walvisvaart* (Johannesburg 1978), 2: 450.

³ The municipal archives in Harlingen (GAH) contain numerous entries to letters that were sent to the City Council by private individuals, local companies and institutions or provincial or even national representatives ranging from the States of Friesland to judges from towns located in other Dutch provinces.

wanvangst) would commence. Some time between mid-August and late September the whaling company would send the appropriate paperwork, notably including catch results, to Harlingen City Council. The Governor and State representatives would discuss granting the subsidies and inform the City Council. In most cases the whaling company acknowledged the receipt of the payments by directors' letter between mid and late November. Thus, the company usually had to wait about three months, from mid-August to the second half of November, before this last phase in the procedure was completed.

The archives have been least helpful in providing information about the granting of subsidies for *wanvangst*, and some confusion has arisen in secondary literature about the amounts of money involved in this type of subsidy.⁴ A recalculation on the basis of the data now available shows that during the 1820s, 1830s and 1840s whale ship-owners could earn as much as *f*9,000 (approximately \$3,600) per ship per expedition.⁵

With increasing costs and decreasing success in the whaling and sealing industries, the Dutch subsidy system was doomed to be abandoned. At the beginning of the 1850s the first signs of its inevitable demise became clear. Those fisheries that had received guarantees for subsidies applicable up to and including 1850 were still to receive subsidies. In 1851, however, they would receive 10% less. In the years 1853, 1854, and 1855, these subsidies would be reduced by 25, 50 and 75 percent respectively of what they had been up to 1851.⁶ In 1856 the liberal government under prime-minister Jan Rudolph Thorbecke saw fit to bring an end to the financial support of a dwindling maritime enterprise. From that year onwards, the risks of whaling and sealing more than ever before during the nineteenth century fell to the whale ship owner himself.

Entrepreneurs and their expeditions

Shortly after the king's accession to the throne and the subsequent decision to support whaling and sealing financially, the Amsterdam merchant Barend van Spreekens applied for subsidies. On 24 April 1815, he paid *f*16,700 for a *fluitschip* of 200 lasts (about 400 tons) at an auction in Dordrecht. This ship must have been at least fifty years old at the

⁴ In his authoritative study of socio-economic developments in the Netherlands between 1795 and 1940, I.J. Brugmans devotes some ten lines to the nineteenth-century whaling industry. He – erroneously – mentions the subsidy of *f*9,000 per ship – while referring to a raise in subsidy for haringbuizen from *f*500 to *f*750 in 1825 on the preceding page. I.J. Brugmans, *Paardenkracht en mensenmacht. Sociaal-economische geschiedenis van Nederland 1795-1940* (repr., 's-Gravenhage 1976), 153-54. In order to get a sense of the size of this financial impetus one may want to compare this sum with the annual salary of the presiding judge of the court of Amsterdam in 1835. In that year, this top-ranking official earned *f*3,500. Despite the fairly loose nature of this comparison, it clearly shows that the subsidy, set by the King and issued for a whale ship returning empty, can be considered quite generous. Salaries ranging from that of the presiding judge in Amsterdam down to those of the clerks of much smaller courts and suggested to be introduced in 1835, are mentioned in *Leeuwarder Courant*, 2 December 1834.

⁵ Around 1830, \$1.00 equalled about *f*2.50.

⁶ J. Swart, ed., *Verhandelingen en berigten betrekkelijk het Zeewezen en de Zeevaartkunde* (1853), 6:191-92.

time, as the announcement in the newspaper mentions the fact that the ship has been completely refitted (*uitgehaald*) in 1764, and again in 1788.⁷ Later that year (1815) Jacob Broertjes, a very experienced master from Amsterdam, took the vessel, appropriately named *Groenland*, to the coastal waters of the vast territory bearing this name. The ship carried seven boats and a crew of 43.⁸ One year later, on 7 April 1816, the vessel with a crew of 50 left again from Texel for Greenland, again under Jacob Broertjes. The ship returned on 15 August, having caught two whales which rendered forty barrels of oil. Broertjes took the *Groenland* to the whaling grounds in 1817, and again in 1819.⁹

Results, however, were not encouraging: in addition to the two whales harvested in 1816, another two were caught in 1819, but the *Groenland* returned empty during the other years. Broertjes blamed the lack of success to natural causes. He mentioned the unfavourable ice conditions east of Greenland, where during the years 1816 to 1818 the icepack had opened quite early in the year. This way the whales could get among the ice fields well before the whale hunters. In this view Broertjes is supported by the notorious English whale hunter Willam Scoresby Jr.¹⁰

In February 1820, Van Spreekens sold the *Groenland* for f6,000 to merchant Jan Vas (1773-1824).¹¹ In his whaling activities Jan Vas had sought to establish an alliance with Cornelis Claasz. Honig (1773-1845). Together, the two men created Vas & Co., into whose service the *Groenland* immediately entered. Frans Oom was appointed master. Between 1820 and 1825, Oom made six voyages to Greenland and Davis Strait, and the results were reported in the *Amsterdamsche Courant*. In 1820, Oom returned ‘empty.’ G.J. Honig, in his book on influential families in the Zaanstreek, refers to a meeting he once had with Gijsbert Krijt, ship’s carpenter on board the *Groenland*. According to Krijt, every time Oom returned empty, he reported to his directors with tears in his eyes.¹² In 1821, Oom and his crew caught six whales which rendered 90 *kwartelen* of oil.¹³ In March 1822 and March 1823 Oom left for Davis Strait.¹⁴ In 1822, his expedition resulted

⁷ *Amsterdamsche Courant*, 20 April 1805.

⁸ GAA, Archief van de Waterschout inventory nr. 38; nr. 95.

⁹ GAA, Archief van de Waterschout inventory nr. 38; nrs. 99 (1816), and 110 (1819). In this specific archive we did not retrieve information about the 1817 voyage.

¹⁰ De Jong, *Oude Nederlandse walvisvaart*, 2:451-52. Jacob Broertjes must have been an experienced officer, as he is mentioned as being part of the fleet transporting Napoleon, 20 October 1803-May 1806. In 1810, the fluitschip *Zaandam* (in former years most probably a whaling ship, 1796), *captain* [sic] J. Broertjes, was sold at auction. See *Amsterdamsche Courant*, 27 February 27 1810.

¹¹ De Jong, *Oude Nederlandse walvisvaart*, 2: 451.

¹² *Ibid.*.

¹³ One *kwarteel* equals 232.8 litres. A passenger travelling with captain D. Ouwehand from Hull, Scotland, refers to the fact that he, while on board an English whale ship in Davis Strait, spoke with Frans Oom on 8 August 1821. At that moment, Oom had caught five whales. Two months later, the *Groenland* returned with a total catch of six whales. Passenger cited by G.J. Honig, *Uit den gulden bijkorf. Genealogisch-historisch-economische studiën over Zaausche families*. Uitgegeven als vervolgdeel op het stamboek Smit (Koog aan de Zaan, 1952), 39. See also *Haarlemsche Courant*, 18 October 1821.

¹⁴ Until 1822, the *Groenland* had been the only whale ship under Dutch flag. De Jong, *Oude*



Fig 3: The whaleship Harlingen stuck in the ice of Melville Bay (Baffin Bay) in August 1826. This ship, built in 1826 in Harlingen for the *Groenlandse en Straatdavidse Visscherij Sociëteit* (1825-1834), was lost on its maiden voyage. After abandoning his ship Captain Klaas Hoekstra and his crew first found shelter on board the *Dundee*, Master Robert Duncan. This vessel is depicted in the background. Hoekstra eventually returned home in August 1827. Painting on canvas by Herman Siderius (1819-1892), ca. 1850. Collection National Maritime Museum Amsterdam.

in a catch of two whales. On 29 September 1823, however, he returned to Texel roadstead with eleven whales and 207 barrels of blubber. More than 100 *kwartelen* of oil were rendered.¹⁵ The firm, renamed *Weduwe Jan Vas* (widow Jan Vas), undertook its last whaling expeditions to the Arctic in 1825.¹⁶ In 1827 an accident in the *Groenland* brought

Nederlandse walvisvaart, 2: 451.

¹⁵ De Jong, *Oude Nederlandse walvisvaart*, 2:457.

¹⁶ See Municipal Archives Amsterdam (GAA), inv. nr. 38: archief Waterschout, nr. 124 (25 February 1825) for a crew list. The subsequent year the firm fitted out the *Groenland* for two

an end to Oom's life.¹⁷

Entrepreneurs in Rotterdam, Frans Smeer, D.H. van Damme and M.A.F.H. Hoffman, met on 21 January 1825 to establish a whaling and sealing enterprise. King Willem I subscribed to several shares of f500 each, and the city council of Rotterdam received his permission to take a share in the company for f5,000.¹⁸

Between 1825 and 1828, two ships – the *Rotterdam*, Jacob Keller master, and the pink *Maasstroom* (155 lasts/294 tons) under Douwe Jansz. Cupido – were equipped for whale and seal hunting in the Arctic. Results were again not promising. The *Rotterdam* headed for the Davis Strait in 1825 and 1826, returned empty both times. The owners received not only the total subsidy for outfitting the vessel (f4,000) but also the financial support for *wanvangst* (f5,000). In total, government aid amounted to f9,000 for two highly unsuccessful whaling voyages. The *Rotterdam* was taken out of service in 1826.¹⁹

The Rotterdam-based company achieved slightly better results with the *Maasstroom*. After an unsuccessful first season in 1825, with the government issuing another f4,900 for *wanvangst*, the vessel returned to Rotterdam on 11 August 1826, with 2,800 seals. Whaling had been a complete failure.

Soon after the return of the *Maasstroom* the directors informed the shareholders that they were forced to liquidate the company “[...] ter oorzake van de importante schade en verliezen door dezelve geleden” (“due to the considerable damage and losses, suffered by them”). *Maasstroom* was auctioned off on 23 October 1827, and a year later, all equipment was sold. At the time of the company's liquidation, the city council received only f400, a mere eight percent of the nominal value, f5,000, of its stocks.²⁰

Individuals and companies from the province of Holland tried to gain their share of the rich harvest of baleen and whale and seal oil in the Arctic. Around the same time, initiatives for whaling (and sealing) expeditions were developed in Friesland on the other side of the Zuiderzee as well. As it turned out, the Frisians managed to stay active much longer, and achieve much better results than their counterparts in Amsterdam and Rotterdam.

Due to space constraints we can only briefly discuss developments in Friesland. The first company in Harlingen to explore the possibilities of the whaling industry was the firm of Barend Visser & Son. This firm had been active in the whale fishery from as early as 1760. In 1822 acting director Pieter Rodenhuis (1777-1826), his father and former burgomaster of the city IJpe Jetzes Rodenhuis (1751-1835), Dirk Cornelis Zylstra (1775-1844), Jan Sikkes Yzenbeek (1779-1862) and Jarig Cornelis Mollema (1795-after

non-whaling related voyages. See crew lists GAA, inv. nr. 38: archief Waterschout, nr. 126 (15 March 1826), and 127 (18 August 1826).

¹⁷ J. van Sluijs, *Nederlandsche koopvaardij schepen 1800-1860* (Unpublished listings; n.p. n.d.), 205-206.

¹⁸ De Jong, *Oude Nederlandse walvisvaart*, 2: 460.

¹⁹ Gemeentearchief Rotterdam (Municipal Archives, Rotterdam: MAR), Repertorium Stadsbestuur 1825, fo. 278; idem, 1826, fo. 275; Koninklijk Besluit, 6 November 1826; De Jong, *Oude Nederlandse walvisvaart*, 2: 460

²⁰ De Jong, *Oude Nederlandse walvisvaart*, 2:460-61.

1857)²¹ bought the brig *Spitsbergen*.²² The initial plan was to buy more ships for whaling purposes, but lack of funds forced the owners to limit their operations to this one ship. The first two voyages to Greenland in 1822 and 1823 were not unsuccessful, but failed fully to cover expenses. In the municipal archives in Harlingen several indices of incoming letters addressed to the City Council refer to Barend Visser & Son's claims for subsidies.

These voyages nevertheless sparked interest among some notable Harlingers involved in Barend Visser & Son to consider the establishment of a whaling company. Visser sold his ships to the new whaling company, temporarily as things turned out.²³ On 4 August 1824, King Willem I endorsed the establishment of a whaling company by a *Koninklijk Besluit* (Royal Decree).²⁴ The company, established on 1 January 1825 for a period of ten years, operated under the name of *Groenlandse en Straatdavidse Visscherij Sociëteit* (hereafter, Sociëteit). Pieter Rodenhuis was appointed chief executive officer ("President Directeur").²⁵ The first general shareholders meeting took place on 2 February 1825. Some two months later, 433 shares at a nominal value of f500 had been issued, producing capital of f216,500. According to article six of the founding regulations (*oprichtingsstatuten*), a minimum of 200 shares had to be sold in order to have the company effectively established,²⁶ so the share issue had been quite successful. During the decade of the company's existence the government subsidized the operations heavily, not only for outfitting, but also for many instances of *wanvangst*.

For years no dividend was paid to the shareholders. On 5 April 1833, during the general shareholders meeting, the board of directors took the initiative by asking the

²¹ Jarig Cornelis Mollema, born in Harlingen on 21 May 1795, is mentioned in local archives as a merchant in 1820, and soap manufacturer (*zeepzieder*) from about 1839 onwards. Jarig Cornelis was son of Cornelis Mollema, proprietor of a warehouse. See about J.C. Mollema: Gemeentearchief Harlingen (Municipal Archives Harlingen (GAH)), Burgelijke standsregisters Harlingen, 1820/1823/1825/1826/1830/1840 huwelijk (marriage); Bevolkingsregister Harlingen 1851 A-17; Volkstelling 1839.

²² Gemeentearchief Harlingen (GAH). Stukken betreffende het stadsbestuur van Harlingen, 1816-1924. Archiefstuk betreffende de Groenland- en Straat-Davids-visserij 1830 (1 omslag), nr. 3399. This document with appendices (*statuten*) eventually led to the establishment of the Sociëteit.

²³ Aside from the firm's involvement in the timber trade with the Baltic, Barend Visser & Son was one of the few Friesland based shipping companies – and probably the only one – that rented out one of its ships to the NHM. In June 1825, the *Waterloo* left for Batavia. GAA, Particulier Archief 38, Waterschout, 124, 15 June 1825. Quoted by F.J.A. Broeze, *De stad Schiedam. De Schiedamse Scheepsrederij en de Nederlandse vaart op Oost-Indië omstreeks 1840*. Werken uitgegeven door de Linschoten-Vereeniging LXXX ('s-Gravenhage 1978), 62.

²⁴ Koninklijk Besluit, 4 August 1824, no. 101.

²⁵ Rodenhuis did not live long enough to experience the rise and subsequent fall of the company. He died on 10 October 1826. De Jong, *Oude Nederlandse walvisvaart*, 2:457.

²⁶ *Ibid.*; Anne J. Dijkstra, 'De Groenlands- en Straat davids-Visserij Sociëteit te Harlingen', *Jaarboek Fries Scheepvaartmuseum en Oudheidkamer* (1964-65), 55. Dijkstra erroneously suggests that the *Harlingen* was the first purpose-built ship the Sociëteit paid for. He thus ignores the existence of the *Willem de Eerste*.

shareholders whether or not they should continue to equip ships for Greenland.²⁷ The answer must have been in the affirmative, as the *Spitsbergen* and *Nederland* did leave for whaling and sealing that year.²⁸ The ships returned with disappointing catches. The *Spitsbergen* had three whales on board and 150 seals, and the cargo of the *Nederland* consisted of only one small whale and 256 seals. This total catch yielded some 150 kwartelen oil. Revenues were disastrous. When auctioned off on 3 October 1833, prices were about a third lower than in the previous year.

The shareholders meeting of 21 October 1834 decided to file for bankruptcy and dismantle the company. A clear indication of the rapid decline of the financial position is given by the value of stocks. Initially, shareholders were expected to receive twenty percent of the original share price of f500. They had to wait until after 16 December, and present themselves at the desk of D. Fontein Pieterszoon, bookkeeper of the company in order to receive payments. Belongings and property of the Sociëteit were auctioned off at a public sale that was announced in the *Leeuwarder Courant* on 30 December 1834. By that time the value of shares had fallen from the twenty percent estimated to some fourteen percent of the initial nominal value of f500. Instead of the anticipated f100, only f70.25 per share was reimbursed.²⁹

After the liquidation the *Nederland* and *Spitsbergen* were auctioned off in Amsterdam on 26 January 1835. Both ships were added to the fleet of the merchant house of Barend Visser & Son. Visser paid f15,227 for the five-year old *Spitsbergen*, considerably more than the f6,635 he paid for the much older *Nederland*.³⁰

With the disappearance of the Sociëteit and the re-appearance of the firm of Barend Visser & Son, a new dawn seemed to have emerged for Dutch Arctic whaling. Governor Jan Adriaan Baron Van Zuylen van Nyevelt (1776-1840), in a meeting with the States of Friesland, phrased matters as follows:

De Groenlands en Straat Davis Visscherij Sociëteit te *Harlingen*, werd ten gevolge van het daartoe door de Directie gezamenlijk met de Deelnemers genomen besluit ontbonden en gelijk algemeen bekend is, was zulks met schade voor de actiehouders vergezeld. Het Schip *Spitsbergen* is evenwel in dit jaar door de Heeren *Barend Visser en Zoon te Harlingen*, voor *hunne bijzondere rekening* [mijn cursivering, JS] ter Walvischvangst uitgerust, en daar door heeft die stad, ten minsten gedeeltelijk deze voor haar vertier belangrijke inrigting mogen behouden.

(As a result of a decision made by Directors together with their shareholders the Greenland and Davis Strait Fishery Society of Harlingen has been dissolved, which, as is

²⁷ During the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries an association intended for the financial support of seamen operated in Harlingen under the name of Roma. Archival records in the municipal archives of this city cover the period 1634 to 1815. It is probable that this association and the building (erected before 1640) are historically linked. See H.T. Obreen, 'Harlingen,' *Bulletin van de Koninklijke Nederlandse Oudheidkundige Bond*, vol. 69, no. 2 (1970), 88.

²⁸ Haagsma, 'Frieslands Groenlandvaart,' 51.

²⁹ Haagsma, *ibidem*. See also C. de Jong, *Oude Nederlandse walvisvaart*, 2:459.

³⁰ *Handelsblad*, 26 January 1835; J. van Sluijs, *Nederlandse Koopvaardij schepen 1800-1860* (n.p. n.d.), 43, 16.

commonly known, has caused damage to the shareholders. This year, however, the ship *Spitsbergen* has been equipped for whaling by the gentlemen *Barend Visser & Son on their own extraordinary account* [my italics, JS] – hereby enabling the town to at least partially maintain this locally important industry.)³¹

In 1836 Barend Visser & Son fitted out the *Spitsbergen*. The vessel left Harlingen harbour on 6 March, under the command of Hendrik Rickmers, the whaling master from the German island of Föhr who had served the Sociëteit for several years.³² Visser & Son remained active in whaling and sealing until 1864 when the firm sold its whaling ship the *Dirkje Adema* to a Norwegian company involved in the timber trade. (In 1865, the 65-year old vessel became a loss after it ran aground near the island of Rügen.) Barend Visser & Son had been involved non-stop in whaling and sealing for 29 years. The firm equipped at least one ship annually, and two ships during several years until 1855, when the government subsidy system was abandoned.

Frisian participation in whaling and sealing in the Arctic waters was not brought to a close with the sale of *Dirkje Adema*. The Harlingen based firm of Zeilmaker & Co. continued to send ships to Arctic waters. The nature of the operation, however, had changed from a relatively transparent, locally organized business into a manifestation of fairly complex international entrepreneurship. While the catches from the Arctic were still transported to Harlingen, Zeilmaker's crew and equipment came from Norway, and their vessel *Noordpool* had its homeport in either Tønsberg or Sandefjord, Norway, not in Harlingen or another Dutch harbour.

Another firm interested in whaling and sealing in the Arctic was Nicolaas Brantjes & Smit in Purmerend, a city located some twenty kilometres north of Amsterdam.³³ During the 1850s and 1860s only two ships were equipped for seal hunting, near Jan Mayen Island. Customarily these ships carried a crew of between 40 and 45 hands. The vessels left the Netherlands in late February to return in late June or early July. In 1851 the ship *Martha* set sail on its maiden voyage to Arctic waters. In 1857 the ship was sold to Norway. The second vessel in Brantjes' fleet, *Maria*, explored the waters in high northern latitudes for the first time in 1854, just the year before the ending of government subsidies in 1855 greatly increased the costs of organizing whaling or sealing expeditions.

Regardless of these financial set backs catch results were very promising. In 1855, Brantjes' ships brought home some 4,000 seals. In 1856, no fewer than 9,300 seals came from the Arctic waters to the processing plant near Purmerend. This cookery was established in 1850 and continued in existence until around 1875.³⁴ From an eye-witness account of this processing plant we know that most of the oil rendered from seals found

³¹ *Leeuwarder Courant*, 21 July 1835.

³² *Leeuwarder Courant*, 8 March 1836.

³³ About Brantjes & Smit, see De Jong, *Oude Nederlandse walvisvaart*, 2:461-62.

³⁴ See for a description of the cookery both G.J. Honig, 'Purmerenders togen ter walvisvaart', *Nieuwe Noordhollandsche Courant*, 24 February 1947, as well as De Jong, *Oude Nederlandse walvisvaart*, 2:462.

its way to Germany. The home market, however, also showed interest.³⁵

Records for the period between 1856 and 1863-64 are absent. During the latter season, sealing was conducted from the sailing vessel *Maria*. Although under Dutch ownership, *Maria* laid over in Sandefjord, Norway, and Norwegians crewed the ship. The catch, however, was still transported to Purmerend.

Meanwhile, Norway experienced major changes with regard to whaling and sealing. Norwegians had been involved in whale hunting for many centuries. Nineteenth-century Norwegian whaling may almost solely be linked with the accomplishments and endeavours of one man: Svend Foyn. He not only constantly tried to improve the tools whalers used for the hunt, but in 1863-64, he commissioned the construction of the *Spes et Fides*, the first steam-powered whaling catching vessel.³⁶ That same year Brantjes equipped his whale ship *Maria*, sailing from Tønsberg, Norway, with a Norwegian crew and under the Norwegian flag. The *Maria* was one of a fleet of sixteen vessels to leave for the Arctic. The ships were relatively small, measuring about 200 to 250 tons on average. A few years later, in 1870, the Norwegian fleet leaving from Tønsberg comprised eighteen ships – three with steam propulsion. Among the ships was Brantjes' *Maria*,³⁷ which caught 4,700 seals.³⁸

During the 1870s, *Maria* almost continuously sailed to the Arctic, under Norwegian flag. Due to bad results between 1872 and 1874, however, Brantjes decided to have *Maria* stay in Tønsberg harbour for the 1875 season. He revealed to A.J. ten Brink in Enkhuizen the reason why the three seasons had been so unsuccessful:

De enige reden hiervan ligt ook volgens hem [Brantjes] in de onmogelijkheid om tegenwoordig met zeilschepen te visschen, daar de stoomschepen veel eerder en dieper in de ijsvelden kunnen doordringen.

(The sole reason according to him [Brantjes] as well lies in the impossibility nowadays to fish with sailing vessels, as the steamships can penetrate the ice fields much sooner and deeper).³⁹

Steam propulsion had other advantages. Entrepreneurs could much more precisely estimate how long it would take their ships to get to the whaling grounds, how long it would take them to return to their homeports and, thus, the costs, particularly crew salaries. As in the pre-steam-engine days, the prey swimming and floating about on the hunting grounds remained the wild card, as nobody could predict how much time it

³⁵ A.W. Stellwagen, *De Noorweegsche visscherijen in de IJszee*; De Jong, *Oude Nederlandse walvisvaart*, 2:462..

³⁶ For a fine, condensed overview of Foyn's involvement in inventing and improving hunting gear, see Robert Lloyd Webb, *On the Northwest*, 135-37.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 22-25.

³⁸ Ten Brink, *Noordpool-visscherij*, 9.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 33. In his lengthy article on sperm whaling in Indian waters S.C.J.W. van Musschenbroek also points out the necessity to use steam ships in Arctic whaling. S.C.J.W. van Musschenbroek, 'Cachelot-Visscherij in den Nederlandsch Indischen archipel', *Tijdschrift ter bevordering van Nijverheid* (Haarlem 1877), 18, pt. 11:14.

would take to catch an adequate number of whales, walrus and/or seals to make the expedition profitable. More important, with steam power, ships could make *two* voyages per season instead of *one*. Scottish sailors for instance hunted seals between early March and late May. Returning to their respective homeport in early June, they would sell the oil and furs, and immediately return for the whaling season that lasted until mid to late September.⁴⁰

Meanwhile, the larger catches resulting in part from steam propulsion drastically reduced the seal population in Norwegian waters. Both the British and Norwegian governments introduced conservation measures in 1876. These nations forbade the hunting of seals in the waters near Jan Mayen Island, and established a shortened season, with no hunting before 3 April, in other areas,⁴¹ The Dutch government followed the British and Norwegian lead, dependent as the Dutch seal hunting industry was of Norwegian crews and expertise, and with regulations issued in 1876 and 1877 restricted Brantjes and others in their catch.⁴²

Maria, while still employed by the company as late as 1896, made its last and most profitable whaling and sealing voyage in 1884. The cargo consisted of no fewer than 7,000 seals, with total revenues calculated at f70,000. By the mid-1880s, however, it was clear to most whaling and sealing companies that they could prosper only if they were willing and able to make the transition from sail to steam. Brantjes & Smit would not or could not make this change.

Casper Josephus Bottemanne should rightly be considered the first Dutchman involved in modern whaling activities.. During his service in the East Indies, Bottemanne witnessed many an American whaler chasing sperm whales. His interest in whales and whaling must



Fig 4: Portrait of Master Caspar Josephus Bottemanne (1829-1906), ca. 1885, the first Dutch whaleman to introduce new technology in whaling and sealing. Photograph. Nederlands Scheepvaartmuseum Amsterdam

⁴⁰ Ibid., 12. So far I have not found any Dutch whaling entrepreneur who has followed this shrewd example of going about the business.

⁴¹ Jan Ström, *Norsk fiskeri og fangst handboek* (Oslo 1950), 1:853-54; quoted by De Jong, *Oude Nederlandse walvisvaart*, 2:463.

⁴² Law 31 December 1876. Stated in *Staatsblad* 1876, no. 289; Koninklijk Besluit 5 February 1877. Stated in *Staatsblad* 1877, no. 19; Law 21 June 1881. Stated in *Staatsblad* 1881, no. 76. See also Beaujon, *Nederlandsche zeevisscherijen*, 308-309; De Jong, *Oude Nederlandse walvisvaart*, 2:63; _____, *Oude Nederlandse walvisvaart* (Johannesburg 1979), 3:132 (notes 66-68).

have been conceived in those early years. After receiving his certificate as a mate, Bottemanne signed up as skipper of the small, two-mast supply schooner *Jan en Albert*. In 1865, he sailed the schooner to Iceland with a cargo of coal destined for a shore station in Seydisfjörður. This shore station was installed for the processing of whales and run by the American firm of Thomas Welcome Roys and his business partner G.A. Lilliendahl. Bottemanne encountered a heavy storm. In these difficult circumstances he managed to assist captain Boekhout of Veendam and his crew of the koff *Concordia*. This ship was lost, but all men were safely taken on board the supply schooner.⁴³ Eventually the storm blew the *Jan en Albert* ashore. For insurance purposes the ship was declared a total loss by its Dutch owners. Roys bought the schooner at the auction that followed. Not only the ship was transferred to the new American owner. Bottemanne and his crew were taken in at the American whaling station in the Icelandic fjord as well. Henceforth, Bottemanne entered the service of the firm of Thomas Welcome Roys.

The Dutch government, being familiar with Bottemanne's involvement in Thomas Roys' expeditions and the three years' practical experience to his credit (1866-69), approached him to establish a Dutch whaling firm based on *American* techniques. On 16 March 1869, Bottemanne organised a meeting to provide information about his plans in Rotterdam. The financial support was quite impressive. Bottemanne had estimated the operational costs of the firm to be around f80,000. Within a short period of time he managed to raise f20,000. That same year the *Nederlandsche Walvischvaart N.V.* was established. The new company would thus be a stockholding company issuing shares.⁴⁴ In this new organisational form, shareholders were only responsible to the extent of their share in the company.⁴⁵ A handful of investors from Rotterdam were shareholders. Hendrik Veder, owner of a great number of ships, and H. van Vollenhove were directors.⁴⁶ C.J. Bottemanne was appointed expedition leader. Attempts to link up with the successful, good-sized company of Nicolaas Brantjes & Smit in Purmerend turned out to be fruitless. Brantjes declined Bottemanne's offer to co-operate and establish a company equipped to hunt the fast finwhales and kill them with the *vuurpijlharpoen* (rocket harpoon).⁴⁷

That same year, the *Nederlandsche Walvischvaart N.V.* purchased a sailing ship with steam engine at the British wharf of W.B. Hornby Wellington in Tynemouth,

⁴³ G.N. Bouma, *Lijst van Nederlandse koopvaardijchepen, alsmede hun gezagvoerders en thuishavens 1820-1900* (Hoorn 1998), 360; J. van Sluijs, *Nederlandse koopvaardijchepen 1800-1860* (n.p. n.d.), 67; see for the story about the rescue of Captain Boekhout and his crew *Zetijdingen*, 29 October 1865.

⁴⁴ The establishment of stockholding companies experienced a revival during the first half of the nineteenth century. See H.J. den Heijer, *De geotrooieerde compagnie. De VOC en de WIC als voorlopers van de naamloze vennootschap*, Ars Notariatus (Deventer 2005), 128.

⁴⁵ De Jong, *Oude Nederlandse walvisvaart*, 2: 481.

⁴⁶ Around the time Veder made his move to whaling he owned the following vessels: *Toma* (1852-53), *Twee Gebroeders* (1853-58), *Twee Gezusters* (1854-69), *Toma* (1855-72), *Resident van Rijckevorsel* (1856-71), *Jacoba Helena* (1858-75), *Hugo Grotius* (1860-66), *Sumatra* (1865-71), and, finally, *Zuid-Holland*.

⁴⁷ De Jong, *Oude Nederlandse walvisvaart*, 2: 462.

Northumberland. The three-mast *Noordkaper*, named after the whale species they hoped to find in Arctic waters, carried three whale boats, each to be manned by seven hands. The schooner-rigged auxiliary steamer measured about 150 tons, was fitted with a forty- or seventy-horsepower engine and a screw-type propeller.⁴⁸ Moreover, the ship carried two try-works on the upper deck with a capacity of 1,000 litres each. Catches could be boiled down. This way, Bottemanne could operate his ship in the same way Americans from dozens of ports in the New England and New York area for many decades had employed theirs. With a vessel of this kind, the Dutch could escape from the limitations of the “direct return voyage” and commence longer peripatetic voyages.

The *Noordkaper* made three whaling voyages to Iceland. Expectations remained higher than the actual catches. In 1870 only one small fin whale was caught; two whales were killed but lost. In 1871 the catch amounted to thirteen whales, with another thirteen lost. For 1872 no data are available.⁴⁹ In December 1872, the company was dissolved and the ship was sold. Of all whalers and entrepreneurs mentioned in this chapter, C.J. Bottemanne has been the only one to see the value of the new whaling technology and techniques. His role in trying to modernize Dutch whaling by the use of shore stations and newly developed types of explosive harpoons has been underestimated if not neglected by historians.⁵⁰

Conclusion

The Dutch whaling industry in the nineteenth century was controlled and executed by a small number of individuals or by stockholding companies. In large urban centres like Amsterdam and Rotterdam, the business community seems to have preferred stockholding companies with widely held shares. The international character of the cities was reflected in the composition of the whaling crews. In smaller communities such as Harlingen, Friesland, however, small numbers of entrepreneurs came together in order to establish whaling companies. Crews came from Harlingen and small villages close by, with the exception of a few foreigners from Germany.

The scale of Dutch whaling during the nineteenth century was less than a shadow of former Dutch whaling activities. In about ninety expeditions over some seventy years, whalers serving under the Dutch enterprises discussed in this article caught about eighty whales. Seal catches totalled about 150,000 animals (see table 1). In my research I have calculated that between 1822 and 1855 in Frisian whaling and sealing alone, the

⁴⁸ Sweijs ships' listings for 1870 mention *Noordkaper* being equipped with a forty-horsepower engine. Schmitt et al, *Thomas Welcome Roys*, 165, mention the much stronger seventy-horsepower engine.

⁴⁹ Ibid..

⁵⁰ Cornelis de Jong is one of few to recognise Bottemanne's importance. Louwrens Hacquebord, in his overview of Dutch whaling through the ages, refers to *Dirkje Adema* as being the last floating representation of Dutch presence on the whaling grounds. He does not mention Bottemanne. L. Hacquebord, 'De walvisvaart: geschiedenis van een bedrijfstak,' in: E. Naayer, ed., *Smeerenburg: Holland op z'n koudst*. Mededelingen van het Arctisch Centrum nr. 7 (n.p. n.d.) [Groningen 1983], 26.

Dutch government invested between f200,000 and f250,000.

Most of the whale ships employed were built in the Netherlands. Only in a few instances did shipbuilding expertise from abroad enter the fairly secluded realm of entrepreneurs, masters and shipwrights. *Dirkje Adema* was built in Itzehoe, Germany, in 1800. *Noordkaper* left the wharf of Hornby in Tynemouth in 1869-70. Compared with the average French whale ship of the 1830s (400 tons) or with figures given for the smallest and the largest vessels in the American whaling fleet in 1849 (81 tons and 616 tons), the Dutch vessels were fairly small, measuring 250 to 350 tons. The Dutch started out with *fluitschepen*, later to be complemented or replaced by pinks, brigs (251 to 256 tons), an occasional galliot, a ship (349 tons) and an iron steamship with sails (150 tons). With the exception of the British built *Noordkaper* all ships employed were sailing vessels. At the same time, most competitors (British, Germans, and Norwegians) used fast steam ships. It must have been clear to all actors that the principles of old whaling were no longer applicable to the nineteenth-century industry. Generous financial support from the national government – stimulating for those successful and delaying liquidation for those who failed to procure catches – was abandoned in 1855. Change of attitude and major investments in fast steamships were key factors to success. Entrepreneurs and companies refrained from adapting to new circumstances. To them, Arctic whaling and sealing had become too hot to handle.

Table 1: Total catches of whales and seals, 1815-1885⁵¹

| Company | City | Whales | Seals |
|--|------------|--------|---------|
| Barend van Spreekens, 1815-1819 | Amsterdam | 4 | ? |
| Vas & Co, 1820-1825 | Wormerveer | 19 | ? |
| Barend Visser I, 1822-1824 | Harlingen | ? | 193 |
| Groenlandse en Straatdavidse Visscherij Sociëteit, 1825-1834 | Harlingen | 12 | 12,754 |
| Barend Visser II (1835-1864) | Harlingen | 13 | 70,400 |
| Brantjes & Smit, 1851-1885 | Purmerend | 14 | 63,480 |
| Bottemanne, 1870-1872 | Rotterdam | 17 | none |
| Totals | | 79 | 146,827 |

⁵¹ See Joost C.A. Schokkenbroek, *Trying-out*, Appendix 1, 295-305. This appendix contains references to the sources on which these figures are based.

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