

The Greenland Whale Fishery

1. 'Twas eighteen hundred and forty four,
On March the eighteenth day,
We hoisted our colours to the top of the mast,
**And to Greenland bore away, brave boys,
And for Greenland bore away.**

2. The look-out up on the main-mast stood,
With a spy-glass in his hand.
"There's a whale, there's a whale, and a
whale-fish!" he cried.
**And she blows at every span, brave boys,
And she blows at every span.'**

3. The captain stood on the quarterdeck,
And the ice was in his eye.
"Overhaul, overhaul, let your jib-sheet fall,
**And put your boats to sea, brave boys,
And put your boats to sea!"**

4. Oh, the boats got down and the men
aboard, And the whale was full in view.
Resolved, resolved was each whalerman bold
**For to steer where the whale-fish blew,
brave boys,
For o steer where the whale-fish blew.**

5. Now the harpoon struck and the lines
played out.
With a single flourish with her tail -

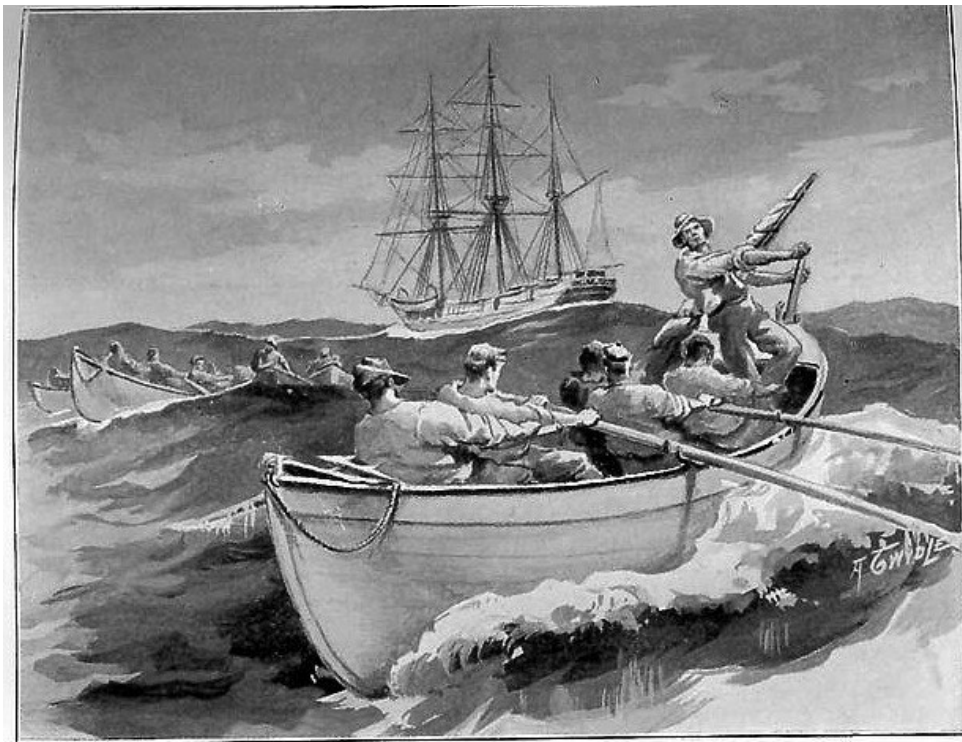
She capsized our boat and we lost five men,
**And we did not catch that whale,
brave boys,
And we did not catch that whale.**

6. The losing those five jolly men,
It grieved our captain sore,
But the losing of of that sperm-whale fish -
**Now, it grieved him ten times more,
brave boys,
Now, it grieved him ten times more.**

7. "Up anchor now," our captain cried,
'For the winter's stars do appear,
It is time for to leave this cold count-ry,
**And for England we will steer, brave boys
And for England we will steer.'**

8. Oh, Greenland is a barren land,
It's a land that bears no green,
Where there's ice and snow, and the
whale-fishes blow
**And the daylight's seldom seen,
brave boys,
And the daylight's seldom seen.**

Hear **The Dubliners** <https://youtu.be/6VaMfF3sd3U>



Frank T Bullen, "A ten-mile steady pull to windward",
engraving from *The Cruise of the "Cachalot" Round the World After Sperm Whales*, 1897.
via [wikimedia](#)

Notes:

A traditional song - very possibly a forebitter.

This version is from 1824; other versions differ in details and order of verses.

A.L. Lloyd wrote in the sleeve notes for *New Voices*:

How old is this song? ... It was already in print as a broadside before **1725**.

The Dutch and English had opened up the Greenland grounds (where, by the way, they fished for right whales, not sperm whales) early in the sixteenth century [by 1830 the Greenland grounds were fished out.] so the song came into being some time between then and the opening years of the eighteenth.

It remained a great favourite, being reprinted over and over again by broadside publishers, and many versions of it have been collected from country singers during the present century. It's one of the great sea songs.

Notes on the words

Overhaul - straighten out misaligned or partially fouled rigging or sails
or - haul the buntline ropes over the sails to prevent them from chaffing.

Jib-sheet - the line attached to the **clew** (movable corner) of the **jib** and controls it.

Other versions here say "let your davit-tackle fall" ...

Davit is one of a pair of pieces of timber or iron projecting over a ship's side or stern, having tackle to raise or lower a boat ... in this case, a boat that would row towards the whale and harpoon it.

I found the engraving overleaf on the web site *Cool Antarctica*, a wonderful resource, which says:

"The lot of a whaler was a hard one and **rowing the boats to reach the whales** one of the hardest parts. More frequently than not the boat would reach where the whales were too late and have to row again to where they surfaced. This was an example of a situation where row boats were at an advantage however as they could approach the whale quietly by careful dipping of the paddles in the water.

"Also whales have their relatively very small eyes on the sides of a very wide head and it is possible to approach them either head-on or tail-on (depending on the species of whale) and take them by surprise. The work wasn't over once the whale was dispatched however as the next job was to row back to the ship with the whale in tow, a journey that in itself could take many hours."



Pesche De La Baleine, (early 1800's) by **Ambroise-Louis Garneray**
(Fishing the whale).
from [Wikimedia Commons](#).

This Ambrose Garneray aquatint from an original by Louis LeBreton; shows a whaling boat crew driving in to deliver the final blow to an already mortally wounded Atlantic right whale. In the distance the whaling ship is shown in the process of cutting in and trying out the recent whale kill.
(Text from the online **blue world web museum**)