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I am newly returned to Cambridge after spending a month in America as the Melville Archive Bezanson Fellow; surprisingly, it is more wintery here than in New England and there is thick snow on the ground - so much in fact that today bicycles are being escorted rather than ridden. My memories of New Bedford, Nantucket and Boston seem oddly sunlit and even warm in contrast: January, if not always literally, was a halcyon month.

I spent the majority of that time in Whaling Museum of New Bedford, researching my interest in what was being read and written on board whaling ships in the 1840s. This topic forms part of a wider PhD project on the maritime and literary lives of Herman Melville and Joseph Conrad. When I first arrived in New Bedford I accompanied Mary K. Bercaw Edwards and the other scholars to the Melville Archive, and in the course of a day spent ordering and accommodating the new acquisitions, glimpsed the wealth of the existing collection. Nevertheless my research time was spent downstairs in the Museum library, which I came to think of as a sort of contextual sea in which the higher ground of Melville’s Archive island happily sits. That sea is stocked with books which are clearly relevant to Melville, without directly concerning him, and maritime curator Michael P. Dyer proved to be an unsurpassable guide to its resources. After an initial conversation with him about the nature of my research, the surface of the large wooden reading table disappeared under suggested texts, and was sadly never seen again. A decade’s worth of The Sailor’s Magazine and the Annual Reports of the New Bedford Port Society occupied my first few days, after which I moved on to the log-books and journals of whale ships. This involved my removal further into the recesses of the library, where I could be closer to the two tightly shelved caverns that represent the combined collections of the Kendall Whaling Museum and the Old Dartmouth Historical Society. The books they contain – both official log-books and the uncompelled records of officers at sea – are extraordinary objects – some bound in robust sailcloth; others naked and fragile; all world-voyagers – and seated at tiny desk between two copious filing cabinets I felt very privileged to read and handle them.

They are largely factual, but there are rare and vivid irruptions of personality that make them well worth poring over. I found it impossible not to be moved by the melancholy captain, writing at the beginning of a voyage of perhaps four years:

I fell into a doze for about an hour and woke to find my room flooded with water which had got down the hatch ways during the rain it did no great damage except to wet every one of a large bundle of books for which I had paid 30 dollars just before sailing but I must dry them and make the best of a bad fix

Often I encountered the boredom of these writers; their unimaginative entries, stock phrases – ‘This day commences…’; ‘so ends’ – and their disintegrating handwriting. But perhaps as often I came across a record-keeper whose daily copperplate entry never faltered, and, more occasionally, one who had inscribed humour, poetry and pictures into a book whose readership – if there was ever to be one – must have seemed impossibly remote. A beautiful watercolors sketch of the Somers brig, with the three condemned mutineers hanging from the yard-arms was a particularly special find. It also reminded me that a great pleasure of academic research is how often it salvages meaning in things that are in danger of being overlooked, of slipping out of consciousness as they become illegible, irrelevant and fatally detached from their context. This picture, like many other things I encountered during this fortnight would simply not have meant anything to me two years or even six months ago, and now I came across it with delight, since it formed part of a tentative web of associations that had their centre upstairs, on Melville Island.
My time was not all spent in the library, and while I was in New Bedford I made a trip to Nantucket to see the point of Ishmael’s departure, and in the course of the month I also visited Melville’s grave in the Bronx, and the spacious study in Arrowhead where he composed *Moby-Dick*. Perhaps the most exciting excursions were to two ships – the *Charles W. Morgan* and the *Constitution*. It was an unforgettable experience to stand at the keel of the *Morgan*, with the curve of her wide commercial sides almost forming a ceiling over us, while Mary K. pointed out the eccentricities of her construction – laid bare since she is being prepared for a voyage in 2012. Perhaps the only real disappointment of this whole trip was the forecastle of the whaler – now a clean and whitewashed space. Mary K. obligingly turned off the lights to recreate its original dimness but the appearance and smell of its nineteenth century incarnation is probably irrecoverable. And perhaps better so. With the lights off we could at least wonder how sailors managed to read anything at all while they were ‘below’. The *Constitution* was equally evocative – huge, stately and adapted in every part for the purposes of war. Mary K. had kindly organised a private tour, and under the guidance of the museum historian we travelled downwards from the spar deck, to the gun deck and officers’ quarters, the orlop deck, the hold, and finally to the copper-lined magazine and its adjacent light room – zones forbidden and fascinating to Melville when he travelled on her sister ship the *United States*.

Like the other Archive Fellows before me I found the contact with the Melville Society, in its broadest sense, as special as the contact with Melville. I wish to acknowledge Walter Bezanson and Gail Coffler whose generosity has made this wonderful Fellowship possible. My first few days in New Bedford, during the *Moby-Dick* Marathon, were spent in the inspiring and enjoyable company of Wyn Kelley, Mary K., Bob Wallace, Tim Marr, Chris Sten and Jennifer Baker, and I had plenty of opportunity to observe their discrete expertise at work among the gathered fans. Throughout my time in New Bedford the museum staff were exceptionally helpful and accommodating, and ensured that I got to see more of the town than simply its whaling literature – including the inimitable Antonio’s. I am grateful to Laurie Robertson-Lorent for a day of lovely conversation and a walk snatched in the brilliant sunshine and bitter cold on Horseneck Beach. I had the pleasure not only of staying with Mary K. but of meeting much of her family, and attending a wonderful dinner at which more than half of the assembled guests had sailed round the world at least once, and could speak familiarly of Pitcairn Island. I was also the beneficiary of Wyn Kelley’s hospitality and help and humour, and she made possible visits to Walden Pond, to the *Constitution*, to Arrowhead and to the Houghton, as well as welcoming me into her home. When we visited Walden on our first day she reminded me of Thoreau’s description of islands of water that form over time around the main pond, and drew my attention to one. The image stuck with me over the following weeks, especially as my experience became increasingly sea-logged, and more and more awash with maritime insights and artifacts. But this watery time also felt like an island – a rare haven in which to look at things more carefully, slowly and openly than is always possible in the course of research, to indulge in a proximity to objects and places Melville knew, and to enjoy his Society. I am very grateful for those Tahitian weeks in the three to four year doctoral cruise.