

## Arctic Story at Newport

**This an excerpt from a fascinating article describing life in Arctic Whaler in the late eighteen eighties. Some of the Mars Boys would have ended up on ships such as these.**

*Dundee Advertiser Wednesday, November 28<sup>th</sup>. 1883*

*Captain Adams Arctic Experiences.*

*Last night Blyth Hall, Newport, was crowded to hear a lecture by Captain Adams, the well-known whaling captain, who lately retired from the command of the 's.s. Arctic', who had agreed to favour the Newport Literary Society with some account of his Arctic experiences. Mr John Leng, the President of the Society, was in the chair, and in opening the proceedings said: -*

*□□ W lately had a strange fish in the Tay. Some said it was a whale, and others that it was "very like a whale," but it was certainly a very wise fish. It remained in the river enjoying the scenery and admiring the beauties of Newport for two or three days. On the first day it went spouting about as if it wanted to become a Town Councillor or a Member of Parliament. (Laughter) On the second day several boats came from Dundee*

*to try to catch it. On the third day the river was all alive with boats and steam launches, but the whale was not to be caught, and it took no notice of any of them until it heard that Captain Adams was on the river with the harpoon gun – (Laughter) – and then it thought it was high time to be off, and very quickly turned tail and has not been seen since. (Laughter.) The Captain has been engaged in whale fishing in whale fishing for upwards of thirty years, and he has probably caught more whales than any man living. (Applause.) His Arctic experiences began in the year 1851; he went out in the ‘Narwhal’, the first steam whaler, in 1859; and his opinions were so much valued that he had been consulted by the Admiralty and the Geographical Society on questions of Arctic exploration. But I believe Captain Adams would much sooner face any number of whales than face the audience. We are therefore all the more indebted to him for kindly agreeing to relate to us some of his Arctic experiences, and I now invite him to proceed. (Loud applause.)*

□□ *Captain Adams, in introducing the subject of the lecture, gave a brief resume of the history of the whaling industry and of Arctic exploration. In the early days of the British whale fishing, he remarked, the men who engaged in it were fine, noble specimens of sailors. They were furnished by the coast villages of Fife, Haddington, and Aberdeen, and were much better looking, stronger, and better clad than those of the present time. The captain having described a voyage to the Greenland seal fishing, the mode of catching the seal, and the process of making the blubber ready for the market, gave a brief, humorous sketch of the Newfoundlanders. He then vividly depicted the voyage to the Newfoundland sealing ground, and described the occasion when the Arctic was so severely nipped in the ice year.*

## A FEARFUL NIGHT IN THE ICE

□□ He said – Leaving St John's at midnight, we found the ice closely packed on the land and thickly studded with icebergs. Our progress was slow, but we fought on manfully and well. In a short time the 'Arctic' had the lead and kept it. On one occasion the 'Arctic' had to butt at one stiff knot of ice for twenty-seven hours – that is, letting the ship go as far astern as possible and then running at the ice full speed, with 300 men on the ice hauling on a strong rope to assist the ship with all available power, and so backwards and forwards until we accomplished our object. This terribly hard work both for men and ship was continued for twenty days, the ship then showing some signs of distress through her constant crushing down at the heavy ice that everywhere surrounded her. Some good indications of seals were observed, and "Onward" was the password and order of day.

Only one ship, the 'Aurora', of Dundee, was now seen, the rest being far astern. At this time the wind changed from the south, and our progress was a little easier. We got to the north side of the islands called the Funks, and some young seals were taken. All hearts beat high in anticipation of a good cargo, but in the night the wind suddenly changed to the north-east, with fearful drift and snow and such a storm as I can scarcely describe. The ice, very heavy and thick, commenced to tighten around the ship. All hands were sent out with powder and dynamite, hatchets, pokers, and prizes to relieve the ship, or at least to make a bed for her.

As the storm increased the ship commenced to crack and strain, and the men were got on board to secure the boats and provisions and what effects they could manage to save, when a fearful rally of the ice took place. The ship heeled over, first on one side and then on the other, to an alarming degree. The men, amidst blinding drift, rushed to the ice, which was toppling over and breaking in great rifts and tracks and immediately closing again. After seeing this I can

*well imagine the effects of one the great earthquakes in the East. With great difficulty some 100 bags of bread were got out, along with a few more necessaries, when the crew became wild, the ship at this time lying on her broadside, with her lower yards touching the ice. The scene was fearful in the extreme. One could with difficulty hold on to the staggering and reeling ship. I stood to my post on the bridge, and with the engineer – a fine specimen of a man – came to me and told me that the bunkers were stove in and coals and water were filling the engine room, the beams of iron were broken, and all hands had left him.*

*We had the boilers blown down – that is the steam was let off in case of their bursting. The mate and another officer at this moment fought their way through the drift along the ship and told me she was filling up with water. My faithful steward, with a few more of my noble crew, both Scotchman and Newfoundlanders, stood by me on this the most trying occasion of my life, and rendered me every assistance. I know that no ship could stand this much longer, but something told me – after all the others had given up in despair – that we were not to be lost. All of a sudden the ice that had held us in an almost fatal grip slackened, and the ship righted. My fine fellows immediately rushed to the pumps and my heroic engineer to his duty. We freed the ship of water, repaired her as much as possible, and kept our fine ship and home above the water, although in a terribly battered condition. After this we had a hard job to get our crew on board: the night was pitch dark, and the drift and snow so dense that it was impossible at times to see twenty feet before us. This was accomplished without the loss of one man, although some were frost-bitten, and three went mad – one hopelessly. If we had lost our ship on that fearful night few of our hardy crew would have lived to tell this tale of hardship and suffering endured on this occasion. I must here pay tribute of respect to the men who stood by me on that day and night. I fancy it was such men as these that fought the great battles of our country with Nelson at the Nile, and who died with our great explorer, Sir John Franklin, gaining for their country a name to live in history for fearlessness and daring. After all, we got the engines to move, shifted the broken propeller, and got to the seals thirty hours after the storm abated...*

□□ *The men soon forgot their hardships in the brightening prospect of a good harvest of seals, and something to take home. One poor fellow had to be taken to the madhouse at St John's*

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[Career of Captain Adams](#)