

## “The Eskimos Knew Better”: Representations of Arctic Whaling in Charles Brower’s *Fifty Years Below Zero*

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**Abstract:** In this article, I examine Charles Brower’s *Fifty Years Below Zero* (1942) with respect to its depictions of Iñupiaq subsistence whaling practices. Elaborating a theoretical framework that draws on scholarship produced by those working in the field of masculinity studies, I locate Brower’s memoir within the tradition of the American whaling narrative and compare it to two of its contemporaries, John A. Cook’s *Pursuing the Whale* (1926), and Hartson H. Bodfish’s *Chasing the Bowhead* (1936). I argue that, as a man familiar with Iñupiaq culture, Brower possessed an attitude toward the Indigenous inhabitants of northern Alaska and Canada which was very different from that of Cook and Bodfish. I demonstrate that Cook and Bodfish go to great lengths to represent themselves and their employees as being isolated from the Yupik, the Iñupiat, and the Inuvialuit. I also show that, throughout their narratives, they celebrate the achievements of white, American whalers and dismiss the accomplishments of their Indigenous counterparts. Brower’s descriptions of Arctic whaling, meanwhile, praise these individuals for their courage, their boat-building technologies, and their knowledge of the behaviour patterns of bowhead whales. As I conclude, *Fifty Years Below Zero* ultimately reveals the remarkable impact that the Yupik, the Iñupiat, and the Inuvialuit had on the American steam whaling trade and the significant amount of cultural exchange that occurred when individuals from these disparate communities interacted with one another.

Sometime in the winter of 1884, Josiah N. Knowles of the Pacific Steam Whaling Company asked Charles Brower to travel to Cape Lisburne, Alaska, a remote promontory jutting into the Chukchi Sea, situated roughly 170 miles (274 km) north of Kotzebue, Alaska and 270 miles (434 km) west of Barrow, Alaska. Knowles wanted Brower to investigate the accessibility of a

recently discovered coal deposit and determine the feasibility of establishing a recruiting station for whaling vessels at this location. Because he wanted to travel to Africa as an able seaman with the merchant marine, the twenty-one-year-old sailor from Bloomfield, New Jersey hesitated to accept Knowles's offer. After consulting some friends and mulling over the situation, he decided to defer his African adventure and accept the Arctic commission (*Fifty Years* 6–7).<sup>1</sup>

Thus, in May 1884, Brower boarded the steam schooner *Beda* in San Francisco and embarked for the Far North. When he returned to California almost a year later, he reported that because of the instability of the soil and the remoteness of the location, extracting the coal and building the recruiting station was impractical (*Fifty Years* 13–14). Though a commercial failure, Brower's trip to Alaska had a dramatic impact on the trajectory of his life, because it exposed him to the Arctic whale fishery and introduced him to the Iñupiat of northern Alaska.<sup>2</sup> In 1886, he returned to Alaska—this time to Barrow—to open a shore whaling station for the Pacific Steam Whaling Company. After marrying an Iñupiaq woman named Toctoo, Brower decided to make a permanent home for himself and his family in this remote Arctic village.<sup>3</sup> As his memoir *Fifty Years Below Zero: A Lifetime of Adventure in the Far North* (1942) demonstrates, Brower became a prominent member of the Barrow community, who was well-respected by both its Iñupiaq and American residents.

Though valuable as an autobiographical and historical document, *Fifty Years Below Zero* is also important insofar as it reveals Brower's regard for Iñupiaq whalers and their traditional, subsistence hunting practices. In his memoir, he praises these individuals for their courage, intelligence, and ingenuity, as well as their prowess with their hunting implements, their knowledge of boat-building, and their insight into the behaviour patterns of bowhead whales. Throughout the text, Brower also demonstrates the remarkable amount of cultural exchange that occurred when the Iñupiat interacted with the other American whalers who travelled to Barrow in search of oil and baleen. With a keen eye for detail and a good deal of empathy, he records the impact of this exchange on both Iñupiaq subsistence whaling practices and American steam and shore whaling activities.

Because he was familiar with Iñupiaq culture, Brower's attitude toward Barrow's Indigenous whalers was very different from those of his contemporaries John A. Cook and Hartson H. Bodfish, both of whom were captains of Arctic steam whaling vessels and both of whom composed memoirs of their experiences in the fishery. Unlike Brower's book, Cook's *Pursuing the Whale* (1926) and Bodfish's *Chasing the Bowhead* (1936) depict the

officers and crewmen of American whaling vessels as members of distinctly different, hierarchically stratified communities, organized according to their members' racial identifications and class affiliations. In these texts, the Inupiat represent a third community, primarily operating in isolation from the others. Not insignificantly, *Pursuing the Whale* and *Chasing the Bowhead* also indicate the authors' investment in the idea that the white men who occupied ranks in the upper echelons of the whaling industry were hyper-masculine national heroes, exemplary Americans whose physical talents, personal character, and hunting acumen were absolutely awe-inspiring.<sup>4</sup>

Given that they focus, albeit to varying degrees, on the Arctic steam and shore whaling fisheries, *Pursuing the Whale*, *Chasing the Bowhead*, and *Fifty Years Below Zero* can be classified as whaling narratives. These kinds of texts have a long history in the United States, for they first emerged in the American literary marketplace in the 1600s. The publication history of early American whaling narratives parallels the development of the New England whaling industry, which dramatically expanded its scope prior to the American Revolution and the War of 1812. After these two disruptive international conflicts, the fishery became globally dominant, and it maintained its monopoly on the trade throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century. By the 1870s, foreign and domestic markets for whale oil began to decline because viable substitutes had been discovered and cetaceans had become increasingly scarce (Schell ix-x). Whalebone was still in demand, however, and bowheads were still plentiful in the Beaufort Sea. With the advent of steamships in the 1880s, which made Arctic travel faster and safer, the trade relocated its centre of operations from New Bedford, Massachusetts to San Francisco, California, where it enjoyed a roughly thirty-year period of prosperity before it finally collapsed (Bockstoce 20-21, 52). Published between 1926 and 1942, Cook's, Bodfish's, and Brower's memoirs address the twilight years of this once powerful and profitable American enterprise.

Perhaps because of the whaling industry's fairly rapid decline, *Pursuing the Whale* and *Chasing the Bowhead* possess a hefty sense of nostalgia for the fishery's storied past. Functioning as elegies lamenting the passing of one of the first globally dominant business enterprises in the United States, these narratives promote the notion that New England whalers were mythic, hyper-masculine heroes, who sailed across the widest oceans in order to confront some of the planet's largest creatures with hand-tossed harpoons and lances. As Allan Forbes, author of the preface to Cook's narrative, puts it: "The whaling days are gone, to be sure, but the romance is left and *Pursuing the Whale* will do much to keep that romance alive" (x). According to Roy Chapman Andrews, author of the forward to Bodfish's narrative, "Those

men were real explorers who wrote a glorious chapter in the history of the United States" (v). Significantly, these passages applaud the white sailors, who built the New England whaling industry into a global powerhouse, not the many non-white and foreign-born mariners who worked alongside them. They also do not include North America's Indigenous hunters who practised subsistence whaling, using methods and tools developed before they came into contact with Europeans and Americans. Playing into the intense emotions nostalgia produces, *Pursuing the Whale* and *Chasing the Bowhead* celebrate the heroism of white mariners in order to inspire readers to take pride in their remarkable exploits and gain a greater appreciation for the United States, its men, its industries, and its history. Although it was produced at roughly the same time, Charles Brower's *Fifty Years Below Zero* refuses to depict white, non-white, foreign-born, and subsistence whalers according to these well-established, racially- and nationally-inflected paradigms, and this is precisely what makes it such a remarkable text.

## II. American Whaling Narratives and Masculine Identity

As archival evidence indicates, whaling novels, poems, songs, orations, memoirs, and stories proliferated across time, and they remained popular with American readers up through the early twentieth century (Schell 2–6). Many of these texts position white whalers as perfect specimens of American manhood. In his *Narrative of the Most Extraordinary and Distressing Shipwreck of the Whale-Ship Essex* (1821), Owen Chase describes nineteenth-century Nantucket whalers as possessing "exemplary private character, uncommon intelligence, and professional gallantry" (17). Speaking before the Senate in 1852, William H. Seward proclaimed:

I wish to converse with you now of the chase, and yet not of deer, or hawk, or hound, but of a chase upon the seas ... of a nobler sport, and more adventurous sportsmen than Izaak Walton, or Daniel Boone, or even Nimrod, the mightiest as well as most ancient of hunters, ever dreamed of—the chase of the whale over his broad range on the universal ocean. (236)

After likening white whalers to these famous anglers and hunters, Seward added that the success of the New England whale fishery was "a great triumph," because it represented a significant "source of national wealth, and an element of national strength" (242, 244). In *The Marine Mammals of the Northwestern Coast of North America* (1874), Charles Melville Scammon celebrates the "energetic," "intelligent," "skilled," "ambitious," and

“muscular” qualities of these mariners (240, 241, 252, 274). Meanwhile, in his novel, *Up North in the Gorgon* (1869), William H. Macy describes Mr. Pomroy as “one of the finest specimens of manly beauty that I have ever seen. A man of Herculean strength, with noble and dignified air, his character comported well with his appearance” (14). Taken together, these passages highlight some of the many admirable aspects of white American whalers. They also stress the symbolic qualities and national import of these individuals.

Importantly, Chase, Seward, Scammon, and Macy focus on a wide range of manly qualities, some of which have to do with character and some of which have to do with physicality. In so doing, they provide further evidence for a claim that numerous scholars—Mark E. Kann, Amy S. Greenberg, David Greven, and Gail Bederman, among others—have made regarding the operations of certain forms of early American masculine identity. As Greenberg explains in her book, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* (2005), “multiple practices of manhood,” each of them class-based and racially-inflected, “competed for hegemony” in nineteenth-century American culture (10, 14). This idea helps to explain why some authors described whalers as embodying all the characteristics of aristocratic manhood, while others described them as epitomizing self-made manhood or rough manhood. A holdover from the eighteenth century, aristocratic manhood was an upper-class form of manliness that required that men be genteel, refined, noble, dignified, and gallant (Kann 12). In contrast, self-made manhood was a middle-class ideal that represented “a shared program of self-reliance, self-maintenance, self-control, self-creation,” and rough manhood was a working-class ideal that embraced “values like physical prowess, pugnacity, and sexuality” (Greven 4; Bederman 17). To make matters more complex, some authors—including Scammon and Macy—described whalers as embodying a mixture of these different manly ideals.

Although numerous non-white and foreign-born sailors worked in the nineteenth-century New England whaling industry, few, if any, of these men were depicted as exemplars of any form of American manhood. Scarcely mentioning them, Chase downplays the presence of the six African American sailors who shipped aboard the *Essex*. Resentful at having to share his living quarters with Portuguese and African American shipmates, foremast hand J. Ross Browne refers to the former as “mere brutes” and the latter as “disagreeable animal[s]” (41, 107–108). Exploiting these racial prejudices, some authors of nineteenth-century novels cast non-white and foreign-born whalers as formidable antagonists for their white protagonists. In Joseph C. Hart’s *Miriam Coffin, or The Whale-Fishermen* (1834), a Wampanoag whaler

named Quibby kills a young Nantucket sailor named Harry Gardner, and in Roger Starbuck's *The Golden Harpoon* (1865), a Maori whaler named Driko leads a mutiny, temporarily holding hostage all the white sailors aboard ship. In these texts, as well as many others published across the nineteenth century, non-white and foreign-born whalers are not applauded; rather, they are ignored or disparaged according to prevailing racial stereotypes.

Of course, white New Englanders were not the first or the only whalers on the North American continent. According to archaeological evidence from Alaska, the Birnirk peoples of the northern Arctic coast hunted whales between 400 and 800 AD (Brunner and Lynch 108). They were succeeded by the Thule people, ancestors of the Iñupiat and the Inuvialuit, who perfected their whaling techniques and practised them more intensively (Jensen 143). The Makah Tribe, located in what is now the state of Washington, engaged in subsistence whaling at least as long, perhaps longer (Erikson 578).<sup>5</sup> Importantly, these groups—and several others living in the Pacific Northwest—continued to practice traditional forms of whale hunting up through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. When white American sailors travelled to the Pacific and Arctic Oceans, they sometimes encountered these whalers and wrote about their subsistence hunting endeavours. In his memoir *The Arctic Whaleman* (1857), Lewis Holmes provides a fairly objective description of the whaling practices of the Iñupiat (117–18). In his dime novel *Old Tar Knuckle and His Boy Chums* (1884), Roger Starbuck describes the paddling and hunting abilities of these individuals as “truly wonderful,” “graceful,” and “marvelous” (6). Other authors employed far more derogatory language. Macy describes a fictional Iñupiaq whale hunt, appearing in *Up North in the Gorgon*, as “a bungling job” (172). Meanwhile, Scammon describes the Makah as uncivilized “savages,” who hunt leviathans with “toy-like harpoons” (32, 46). As he explains, “Like enemies in ambush, these [whalers] glide in canoes from island, bluff, or bay, rushing upon their prey with whoop and yell, launching their instruments of torture, and like hounds worrying the last life-blood from their vitals” (29). For Scammon, Indigenous whalemen are not noble sportsmen, characterized by their ambition, intelligence, nobility, or muscularity. Rather, they are uncivilized heathens who harasses their prey to death with all the savage cunning of a pack of hunting dogs.

Although American attitudes toward manly ideals changed over time, their regard for the Indigenous subsistence whalers of the Pacific Northwest and the Arctic did not. As Gail Bederman argues, toward the end of the nineteenth century, middle-class American men “were actively, even enthusiastically engaging in the process of remaking manhood” (15).

To do so, they borrowed various features of the different, competing forms of manly identity circulating throughout nineteenth-century American culture. This new ideal represented a combination of what Bederman calls “civilized manliness”—which emphasized qualities like intelligence, honour, gentility, and respectability—and “primitive masculinity”—which emphasized qualities like strength, aggressiveness, power, and virility (23). As products of this period, Cook, Bodfish, and Brower display an investment in this newly-formed, but culturally-dominant manly ideal. In their narratives, they characterize themselves, and other whalers like them, as heroes because they possess the muscularity, stamina, and skill needed to endure the demands of whale hunting in the Arctic, as well as the intelligence, authority, and respectability required to command steam whaling vessels and shore whaling stations. Cook and Bodfish do not extend this consideration to Iñupiat subsistence whalers, whom they describe using derogatory, racialized language. Simply put, they do not consider the Iñupiat to be exemplars of American manhood. Brower, however, adopts a different attitude toward these whale hunters, one of respect and admiration. What’s more, he describes them as possessing many of the exact same manly characteristics as the white Americans applauded by Cook and Bodfish.

### III. John Cook’s and Hartson Bodfish’s Isolationist Impulses

While *Pursuing the Whale*, *Chasing the Bowhead*, and *Fifty Years Below Zero* are all whaling narratives, they take different forms and address different features of the trade. A fairly orthodox record of his Arctic whaling experiences, Cook’s book was first published in London in 1926.<sup>6</sup> This text presents the author as a successful “self-made man” and chronicles the major events in his life, beginning with his first nautical voyage in 1868 and ending with his last whaling expedition in 1916. Published exactly ten years after Cook’s narrative, Bodfish’s *Chasing the Bowhead* is an as-told-to autobiography which was recorded by amanuensis Joseph C. Allen. Despite the compositional differences, Bodfish’s and Cook’s memoirs are very similar with respect to their structural and thematic content. Their titles are also grammatically parallel. Just like *Pursuing the Whale*, *Chasing the Bowhead* traces the narrator’s rise through the rigid hierarchy of the American whaling industry and concludes with the author’s last whale-hunting voyage. More than anything else, these books position Cook and Bodfish as capitalist success stories, hyper-masculine men from working-class origins, who, via a regimen of hard work and dedication, achieved the heroic status of captain. They also represent American whaleships as self-contained, isolated communities.

Significantly, Cook's *Pursuing the Whale* and Bodfish's *Chasing the Bowhead* present readers with a very economically and racially stratified view of the steam whaling industry and life in Arctic Alaska. These texts demonstrate that the captains and their wives and families, all of whom were white Americans, occupied positions at the top of the shipboard hierarchy.<sup>7</sup> Just beneath them were the mates and harpooners. The foremost hands—a motley crew composed of individuals of various races, ethnicities, and nationalities—ranked below the officers. As unskilled labourers, these sailors aboard ship performed most of the backbreaking toil involved in killing whales, trying-out the oil, and procuring the baleen. Typically not included in this hierarchy, the Iñupiat, the Yupik, and the Inuvialuit served the fishery in many different capacities: they furnished American whalers with handmade fur clothing; they provided them with caribou and ptarmigan meat; and they served as guides on wilderness hunting expeditions.

Cook's and Bodfish's descriptions of winters at Herschel Island, a small, remote island located in the Beaufort Sea north of Canada's Yukon Territory, suggest that these four groups segregated themselves into exclusive communities. Because it possessed a deepwater harbour, provided shelter from the crushing pack ice, and afforded vessels accessibility to the bowheads that congregated near the Mackenzie Delta, Herschel Island was a popular wintering ground for American whalers who sought to take advantage of spring whaling (Cooper 248–49). At the end of the summer season, vessels anchored at the island, where crewmen prepared for winter by gathering driftwood, digging food caches, and cutting blocks of ice. As Cook describes the situation, this labour was performed by the common sailors and overseen by the officers. With terse, spare prose, he records the routine of a typical day at Herschel Island: "the crew went to work at 8 A.M. At 12 noon they had dinner for which one hour was allowed them. At 4 P.M. all work was finished for the day. Thus seven hours each day with the exception of Saturday and Sunday, the men were expected to work" (258). Note that Cook does not mention the Iñupiat and the Inuvialuit, who also spent a large portion of their time living near the ships and working for the Americans.

What makes Cook's and Bodfish's descriptions of these winters even more remarkable is their emphasis on the exclusive social circles that the white Americans created for themselves. After listing the names of all the resident whaling couples, Cook mentions that "as often as once a week, we would be invited to a supper or dance aboard some of the vessels" (58). Since one of the ships had "a house fitted for theatrical performances," Cook and his wife "were entertained often by companies whose performers were found among the members of the several ships" (58). A quick survey of the



chapters describing their first two winters in the Arctic demonstrates that the Cooks' social activities also included sled rides, holiday celebrations, orchestral performances, church services, masquerade balls, and whist parties (56, 58, 82, 83). Needless to say, these pleasures were reserved for the white men and women occupying upper-class positions in the hierarchy of Herschel Island society.

Because he was a first mate during several of these winters, Bodfish's narrative has a slightly different perspective on this class-based and racially-stratified hierarchy of men and women. According to him, each group had its own distinct name: "there was a circle known as the Four Hundred which included masters and their wives" (114). The officers formed their own club, a temperance society, which they called the "Dry-Throat Association" (116). The latter entertained themselves with meetings, minstrel shows, and athletic events. In a revealing moment, Bodfish describes some of the animosity that developed between Herschel Island's upper and middle/lower classes: "They [the captains] had quite an orchestra .... I might add that we had another orchestra in the fleet, even better than that, which was claimed by the less elevated social strata, and once when the Four Hundred wanted our band we found it impossible for the organization to be spared" (115). As this comment indicates, officers and their subordinates found a way to register their independence from their superiors; they refused to perform for Herschel Island's elite.

Significantly, neither Cook, nor Bodfish have much to say about the Iñupiat, the Inuvialuit, or their whaling practices. Although Cook often notes his gratitude toward the hunters who supplied his crew with fresh meat, he does not describe these men and women in any great detail. Several times, Cook mentions subsistence whalers, but he posits that these individuals learned the trade and obtained shoulder guns and bombs—what he calls the "necessary implements" of whale hunting—from American sailors (154). With respect to the Indigenous inhabitants of Plover Bay, a small settlement on the Siberian side of the Bering Sea, Cook goes so far as to claim that "the natives have depended on this supply of such articles [Western goods and whaling gear], without which they would have been unable to get the necessities of life" (145). He adds that these people "have been very quick to grasp the big advantage a whaleboat is to them over their big skin canoe, and they will save for years articles sufficient to trade in for a whaleboat" (147).<sup>8</sup> In Cook's estimation, the Indigenous peoples of Alaska and Siberia did not engage in whaling until they acquired Western tools and hunting methods.

Initially, Bodfish makes similar assumptions about subsistence whaling practices. Toward the middle of his memoir, he observes that several Iñupiat

“had seen us take whales and had an idea that they could do it as well,” but they had to be taught how to go “whaling American style” (178). After discovering stone spearheads in whale carcasses, Bodfish concedes that the Iñupiat “tackled the whales with such implements” prior to their contact with Americans (215). Still, his comment that “these natives belonged back in the Stone Age” demonstrates that he was not particularly impressed with these hunters or their modes of killing whales (208).

While *Chasing the Bowhead* contains several interesting observations about Indigenous whalers and their hunting practices, it is perhaps more remarkable for some of its omissions with respect to American-Iñupiaq relations. Although Bodfish provides detailed descriptions of the various activities of the sailors wintering at Herschel Island, he does not mention that, during one of these winters, he developed an intimate and enduring relationship with an Iñupiaq woman named Lucy Kongona. During the 1901-1902 whaling season, Lucy lived with and worked for Bodfish aboard the steamship *Beluga*. She enjoyed a privileged position among the Iñupiaq employees, for she spent the winter making fur clothing for the ship’s officers. The following spring, Bodfish took Lucy to the village of Teller, Alaska, where she disembarked from the *Beluga* in order to give birth to their son, Waldo Bodfish, Sr. Even though he was already married—he had wed Clara D. Howes of Martha’s Vineyard in 1893—Bodfish did not abandon his Iñupiaq family. For many years, he provided Lucy with financial support, and he offered to pay to have Waldo formally educated outside of Alaska. Declining Bodfish’s proposal, Lucy elected to raise their son in the Arctic as an Iñupiaq.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps because it is such an intriguing question, scholars have speculated as to why Bodfish fails to mention Lucy and Waldo in *Chasing the Bowhead*. William Schneider suggests that, by focusing his memoir on his whaling life, not on his domestic concerns, Bodfish was trying to prevent both personal and professional embarrassment (163–64). While interesting to consider, Bodfish’s reason for omitting Lucy and Waldo from his memoir ultimately does not matter all that much. What is more important is the vision of life in Arctic Alaska that finally emerges from *Chasing the Bowhead*. Because it contains no reference to either Lucy or Waldo, the memoir obscures the fact that American whalers could, and sometimes did, engage in close, long-lasting relationships with the Iñupiat. Much like *Pursuing the Whale*, then, *Chasing the Bowhead* suggests that the white American men who worked in the whaling industry tended to isolate themselves from the Indigenous peoples they encountered in the Arctic.

#### IV. Charles Brower's Integrative Tendencies

When compared to Cook's and Bodfish's memoirs, Brower's *Fifty Years Below Zero* presents readers with a far more complicated vision of life in the Far North in the early years of the twentieth century. He clearly demonstrates the degree to which he and a few other Americans—Fred Hopson, Jim Allen, L.M. Stevenson, and H.R. Marsh, among others—integrated themselves into the Iñupiaq communities of Arctic Alaska.<sup>10</sup> More importantly, he records the changes that resulted from this integration, with a complex mixture of pride, nostalgia, regret, and sadness.

Here, it is worth noting that *Fifty Years Below Zero* has a very convoluted textual history. According to historian Terrence Cole, Brower was prompted to write his memoir by Vilhjalmur Stefansson, an anthropologist and traveller interested in the Indigenous peoples of the Arctic (xviii–xix). As a close friend, Stefansson knew that Brower was a valuable source of information about the Iñupiat and their cultural practices. Thus, he urged him to record his Alaska experiences for posterity. Although Brower felt some apprehension about his abilities, he began composing his memoir—originally titled “The Northernmost American”—sometime in the 1920s. Drawing loosely on his journal, Brower autotyped the manuscript in individual sections, which he mailed to Stefansson as soon as they were complete.<sup>11</sup> At approximately nine-hundred pages, the final text proved to be so unwieldy that most of the publishers Stefansson consulted refused to take on the project. After some wrangling, he managed to convince a magazine editor to adapt it into a series of four articles that were eventually published in the *Blue Book* between 1932 and 1934 (Blackman 36–37). Finally, in June of 1941, Dodd, Mead, and Co. agreed to condense the compendious manuscript and rewrite portions of it for publication in book form (Cole xx). The end result was *Fifty Years Below Zero*, a memoir that went through nineteen printings and proved to be very popular with American reading audiences (Cole xi).

Although it is a whaling narrative, *Fifty Years Below Zero* is very different from *Pursuing the Whale* and *Chasing the Bowhead*. Since Brower was not a steam whaler, entrenched in strict shipboard hierarchies and motivated by intense personal ambition, his memoir does not meditate on class, wealth, and social mobility as much as Cook's and Bodfish's do. Also, it does not focus exclusively on whaling. Instead, *Fifty Years Below Zero* describes Brower's most exciting Alaska endeavours and adventures. According to his book, he travelled extensively; he lived with several different Iñupiaq groups; he trapped and traded for furs; he owned a mercantile store; he excavated archaeological sites; he collected specimens for natural history museums; he entertained explorers; he assisted aviators; he rescued stranded sailors;

he served as an intermediary between the Iñupiat and the Presbyterian missionaries; and he worked for the United States Census Bureau and Post Office. In the end, what emerges from *Fifty Years Below Zero* is a sense of how dedicated Brower was to experiencing all aspects of life in Arctic Alaska.

Given that whaling was such an important feature of Brower's life, it should come as no surprise that descriptions of this activity appear everywhere in *Fifty Years Below Zero*. Not coincidentally, the book opens with a celebratory depiction of white American whalers and their exceptional manly qualities. Blending humour with seriousness in the first few paragraphs of the first chapter, Brower proclaims, "Ladies' corsets! For without them there would have been no demand for whalebone, hence no great whaling fleets of sturdy wooden vessels, sail and steam, manned by men the like of whom the world had never known" (6). Later, he describes the American whale fishery as "A far-flung Arctic industry with hardship, disaster and violent death on one side of the ledger, balanced by fabulous profits on the other" (6). Taken together, these two statements stress the tremendous financial gains waiting for those brave and hardy men willing to take on the severe challenges of hunting whales in the Far North.

Brower continues to praise white American whalers throughout the opening portions of the book. After watching Captain Colson navigate the *Orca*, an Arctic steam whaling vessel, through the treacherous ice floes of the Chukchi Sea, he explains that he "acquired great and sudden respect for whaling captains. You couldn't help it after watching that night's work" (12). He adds, "Captain Colson was no exception to dozens of others with whom I became intimately acquainted later. They hailed mostly from eastern states but all the old whaling centers were represented. Whatever else anyone may say about those two-fisted whaling captains of the Arctic, believe me they were *men*" (12).<sup>12</sup> Here, Brower refers specifically to high-ranking white whalers and invokes the long, proud history of the New England whaling industry. By endorsing the manly qualities of these American mariners—particularly their physicality, intelligence, and determination—Brower, much like Cook and Bodfish before him, substantiates the idea that these men are national heroes.

In his descriptions of his own whaling exploits, Brower characterizes himself in much the same manner. Although he occasionally adopts a self-deprecating tone, he consistently emphasizes his manly bravado, his physical dexterity, his practical intelligence, and his improvisational abilities. When he tells the story of his first successful whale hunt, he uses vivid prose, italicized words, and exclamation points. After noting that the season was initially filled with failures, Brower explains, "What happened

then was like one of those dreams where no sooner do you *think* a thing than it materializes before your eyes" (124). After this preamble, he elaborates the circumstances of the hunt: "The men had hardly returned to their boats and were still flinging back jibes when the first whale anybody had seen in days broke directly in front of the oomiak" (124). Segueing into action-oriented prose, he notes, "There was only time to grab a handy whale-gun and shoot before it pitched to go under the ice" (124). Still within earshot, Brower's employees responded swiftly:

At the report, followed by the bomb burst, back the men came on the run, thinking sure I'd had an accident. I had no idea myself of having actually killed that whale. But with everyone running around me trying excitedly to explain, Toctoo quietly peeked over the edge of the ice and saw some enormous flukes just beneath the water. Next instant a dozen hands had grabbed irons and made them fast in the submerged carcass. (124)

With a series of short staccato sentences, he concludes, "I had waited a long while to kill my first whale. Here it was. And not a bad haul for a novice!" (124).

Although he spends the majority of *Fifty Years Below Zero* describing his own whaling endeavours, Brower does bestow some unadulterated praise upon Alaska's Iñupiaq subsistence whalers and what he calls the "primitive art of whaling from the ice" (46). Toward the beginning of his memoir, he records an instance in which he was invited to witness an Iñupiaq hunt. After watching a harpooned whale dive underneath the ice, Brower admits that he thought that the Iñupiat had lost their quarry. According to him, though, "the Eskimos knew better," for the whale soon resurfaced, and they were able to kill it and haul it onto the ice (51). Of note, Brower gives all the credit for this success to the Iñupiaq "lance expert," whose "lightning speed" and "deadly precision" slayed the mighty cetacean (52). Taken altogether, these passages highlight the practical knowledge, innate intelligence, and physical prowess of Iñupiaq subsistence whalers.

When describing another hunt that took place during the same whaling season, Brower emphasizes some of the Iñupiat's other admirable qualities:

Then things happened fast. As we slid off the animal, one kick filled the boat with water and nearly swamped us. But this seemed only to weld the Eskimos into a single machine that responded perfectly to Attungowrah's orders from the stern. No sound or ripple marked their powerful paddle-strokes, no fear showed on any face. (56-57)

Here, he highlights the courage and coordination of Indigenous whalers, using a highly complementary mechanical metaphor that most American whaling authors reserved for white seamen.<sup>13</sup> More significant is the fact that he concludes this passage with some particularly effusive praise, exclaiming “Wonderful whalers, those old-time Eskimos!” (57).

Even Brower’s descriptions of the Iñupiat’s “probably prehistoric” whaling implements are complimentary (47). Of their lances, he says, “The flint heads of these murderous things were beautifully made. Often as large as a man’s hand, they had edges so sharp that a casual cut from a lance head was one of the most painful wounds I ever got” (48). He describes their knives as “well adapted to the tough job of cutting up dead whales,” and he comments that “It was marvelous how quickly a whale’s carcass could be sliced up with such knives” (48). Marvelling over how quickly and efficiently the Iñupiat completed this process, Brower notes that they followed “a trial-and-error technique developed through untold generations of whale hunting” (53). To register his appreciation of the entire subsistence whaling experience, he explains, “I wouldn’t have missed my several weeks’ dip into the Stone Age for anything in the world” (68). Note that nowhere in this discussion does he disparage Indigenous whaling gear or practices, and nowhere does he insist that the Iñupiat learned their methods from white Americans.

Taken together, Brower’s descriptions of American and Iñupiaq whalers raise an important question: why was his attitude towards these individuals so different from that of his contemporaries? The answer to this question lies in Brower’s work history and the empirical circumstances surrounding his first trip to Alaska. Simply put, Brower was not a lifelong veteran of the New England whale fishery. He was already an experienced merchant mariner when he began whale hunting, and his involvement with the trade was restricted to shore whaling, not deep water whaling. Unlike Cook and Bodfish, then, he did not have a strong personal investment in presenting readers with heroic images of the fishery and its hyper-masculine workers. Also of note is the fact that Cape Lisburne, where Brower spent his first winter in Alaska, was not a popular stop for whaling or trading vessels. Initially, Brower’s entire social circle consisted of three co-workers, one of whom he disliked immensely. Although he does not have much to say about this situation in *Fifty Years Below Zero*, he discusses it in “The Northernmost American.” As he explains, his relationship with the co-worker in question deteriorated so much over time that he “thought it best to stay out [of the house] as much as possible” (133). Befriending several nearby Iñupiat, Brower spent the remainder of his first winter in Alaska living in their camps,

learning their language, and exploring their country. Four years later, he married one of these individuals, a sixteen-year-old girl named Toctoo (*Fifty Years* 15).<sup>14</sup> Right from the very beginning, then, a variety of factors made Brower far more predisposed to appreciate Iñupiat culture than either Cook or Bodfish.

Over time, Brower's curiosity about and admiration of Indigenous beliefs, traditions, and practices served him well. He was able to see that the methods of coastal whaling employed by white men were ineffective, especially when compared to those used by the Iñupiat. During his first few shore whaling seasons, Brower directed his men to build long roads over the constantly shifting pack ice so that they could transport their wooden watercraft from the shore to open water. According to Brower, "dragging heavy whaleboats over eight miles of ice shaped like the Rocky Mountains" proved to be "man-killing work" (100). It was also completely ineffectual. As Brower explains, "Chipping and chopping alone, it took us all night and most of the next morning to haul our boats to the new flaw [floe]. We got there just in time to learn that one small and three large whales had been taken by the jubilant Eskimos—but that the run was over now" (102). Emphasizing the frustration he felt, Brower concludes with the short, exclamatory sentence: "It *would* be! (102).

What made the shore whaling practices of the Iñupiat far more successful than those of the Americans was their *umiak*, highly-maneuverable, lightweight boats made of wooden frames covered with sealskin.<sup>15</sup> Instead of cutting trails through and hauling wooden whaleboats across the jagged pressure ridges of the pack ice, the Iñupiat simply carried their *umiak* to the edge of the floes and watched for whales. When they spied a bowhead, they slipped their boats into the water, paddled swiftly to within harpooning range of their prey, and retreated before they could be swamped by the whale's flailing fins and flukes (Brower 50–53). Though he does so in a dry and understated fashion, Brower openly admits the superior hunting abilities of the Iñupiat and the advantages of their boats in *Fifty Years Below Zero*, commenting, "Maybe those Eskimos weren't so dumb, at that" (100).

To avoid financial ruin, Brower devised a new plan for his shore whaling station. As he explains in *Fifty Years Below Zero*, "It was this. If I could get a native crew together, fit out an oomiak and whale *Eskimo fashion*, it might be worth a try" (122). Although these whale-hunting methods eventually proved to be very successful, Brower initially faced a great deal of opposition from both white Americans and the Iñupiat. He explains that his friend and partner, "George [Leavitt] was skeptical about my getting a native crew" (122). He adds that "our own boys" had great difficulty "trying to keep

their faces straight” as they watched his Iñupiat whalers perform traditional rituals over their *umiaq* (122). Meanwhile, Iñupiaq hunters were hesitant to work for Brower, because they were bound by particular cultural taboos and reluctant to abandon their traditional whaling customs. His first recruit was Poka, a well-respected whaler, who was forbidden from joining the Iñupiaq hunt because his wife had died recently. Significantly, Poka only agree to join Brower if he “succeeded in getting a full crew of Eskimos” and if he “promised to do everything the Eskimo way” (122). To satisfy Poka’s demands, Brower hired numerous Iñupiaq women, with whom came a whole host of rules, rituals, and prohibitions, most of which had to do with menstruation and urination (149).<sup>16</sup> When he and his crew of Iñupiaq men and women caught the first whale of the season, Brower proved all of his doubters wrong. Reflecting upon that year in “The Northernmost American,” he credited his success to the Iñupiat: “I have often wondered what we should have done without the eskimomen” (324).<sup>17</sup>

Thus, Brower demonstrates the irrevocable impact that he had on both the American steam whaling industry and Indigenous subsistence whaling practices. With respect to the former, he inspired shore whaling stations to hire native recruits, a practice that became commonplace by 1894 (Blackman 11–12). With respect to the latter, Brower convinced the Iñupiat to use American whaling implements and abandon many of their cultural taboos. In so doing, he helped to transform whale hunting from a subsistence activity into an economic enterprise. Instead of sustaining Barrow’s entire Iñupiaq community, whaling became a way for individuals to earn money to purchase Western goods for themselves and their immediate family members. With a remarkable sense of self-awareness, Brower records these changes:

Whether or not my eleventh hour success with a bomb-gun made any deep impression on the Eskimos, the spring of 1888 marked the last season in which many of them kept to their old whaling customs. After that the younger crowd began more generally to adopt our whaling gear, tackles, guns, bombs, and all. They even insisted on hard bread and tea out on the ice. Tents, however, were not to be used for many years yet; not until we began to hire Eskimos to whale regularly for the station. Then they demanded everything exactly the same as the white men. (124)

This passage clearly registers Brower’s cognizance of the fact that Iñupiaq life in the Far North rapidly and radically altered in response to increasing contact with Americans and their market economy. As he lamented,



“Somehow, their forefather’ charms no longer worked—regrettable as this seemed from a sentimental point of view” (165).

Along with these changes came numerous others—the introduction of alcohol, the scourge of epidemic diseases, the arrival of Presbyterian missionaries, the prohibition of dances, and the building of wooden houses—all of which Brower recorded and condemned in *Fifty Years Below Zero*. With respect to the devastation wreaked by the alcohol brought to Alaska by American whalers, Brower writes, “The village was not so nice as in other winters. Almost everyone was making hooch” (142).<sup>18</sup> Later in his memoir, Brower describes the painful loss of such close friends as Appiyow, who died from an alcohol-related illness, and Mitigerah, who was killed in a drunken brawl (143, 161). By 1896, “the hooch problem” was so bad that Brower “took direct action ... by walking in and smashing the stills à la Carrie Nation” (182).<sup>19</sup> These dramatic and drastic measures brought hooch-making in Barrow to a halt, at least temporarily.

If the introduction of alcohol caused widespread death and destruction among the Iñupiat, so did the arrival of contagious diseases. Brower’s description of a particularly virulent influenza epidemic that occurred during the summer of 1901 is filled with horrific detail: “they had been dying all along the coast and up the rivers. From the postures of the bodies, we could almost visualize it happening—the stronger members dragging the weaker on to the banks to die, then paddling a little farther until it came their turn to be abandoned” (229). Later epidemics proved to be no less disastrous. During an especially severe measles outbreak in 1902, Barrow lost one hundred twenty-six of its Iñupiaq inhabitants, including Brower’s wife Toctoo and one of their young children (234).

Insofar as the other changes are concerned, Brower explains that the Presbyterian missionaries convinced the Iñupiat to abandon their traditional sod homes for wooden frame houses which were cold and drafty in the wintertime. According to him, “This meant heating by stoves, and as driftwood continued scarce as hens’ teeth, the result was that the wooden shacks were usually cold and drafty, with much pneumonia ensuing” (232). With a complimentary tone, Brower observes, “They [wooden houses] weren’t half so practical as the old-style native igloos which generations of trial and error had developed for just such conditions, and in which an even day-and-night temperature could be maintained by stone lamps” (232). Growing increasingly critical of Barrow’s Presbyterian missionaries, he suggests:

One of the biggest mistakes, I think, was in tearing down the dance houses for fuel. While this put an end to young people freely congregating there at night and sometimes, no doubt, doing things they shouldn't, it didn't improve matters to take away this common family rendezvous. They simply went off somewhere else and continued committing just as many indiscretions. (232)

In these passages, Brower astutely points out that neither of these changes benefited the Iñupiat in any material way. On the contrary, they caused a great deal of harm. Living in these houses amplified the danger of influenza and measles epidemics, and destroying the dance hall did little to prevent adolescents from “congregating.” As he somewhat cynically concludes, “About the only thing to benefit from the ‘new order’ were the consciences of the well-meaning missionaries themselves. Perhaps it’s always this way when ‘reforms’ are forced on people faster than conditions warrant” (232). What these sections of the memoir demonstrate is Brower’s keen awareness of the detrimental impact of cultural change, especially that which was too rapid and too impractical.

At this point, it is important to note that Brower, like Bodfish, omits certain aspects of his personal life from *Fifty Years Below Zero*. Preferring to focus on his Arctic adventures, he has very little to say about his domestic affairs involving Toctoo or their children. What’s more, as Margaret B. Blackman observes, he never mentions his second wife Asianguataq, who remained his companion for forty years despite harbouring resentment towards him because of his affairs with other women (38-40). In the end, these omissions—probably made for personal reasons that will never be known—do not necessarily affect the vision of Arctic life that emerges from *Fifty Years Below Zero*. However scant it is, Brower’s discussion of his relationship with Toctoo certainly demonstrates the degree to which some white American men integrated themselves into Iñupiaq communities. One other omission, though, does threaten the integrity of his representations of American-Iñupiaq relationships. According to Blackman, Brower fails to mention that, prior to 1890, he traded whiskey to the Iñupiat, thereby helping to introduce alcohol, and all of its attendant social problems, to the Arctic (14). Likely, he skipped over this aspect of his career because he was embarrassed and ashamed of his actions and their eventual consequences. Still, by not acknowledging this issue or addressing it in his memoir, Brower casts doubt on his honesty as a memoirist.

Despite this important omission, the fact remains that Brower comments on the issues affecting the Iñupiat with far more insight and forthrightness

than isolationists like James A. Cook and Hartson H. Bodfish. Unlike these two men, both of whom preferred to socialize with and write about their peers, Brower was not reticent to acknowledge his familiarity with the Iñupiat or his respect for many aspects of their culture. Possessing a remarkable amount of cultural sensitivity and curiosity for a man of his era, Charles Brower was able to record the complicated changes that forever altered life in the Arctic for both Alaska's Indigenous peoples and its American whalers. In the process, he created a radically different kind of whaling narrative. Instead of lionizing white American seamen at the expense of their non-white, foreign-born, and Indigenous counterparts, he celebrates the heroic capacities of all those men and women brave enough to hunt the mighty leviathans living in the waters of the western Arctic. And herein lies the importance of *Fifty Years Below Zero*.

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#### **Notes**

1. Brower describes somewhat different motivations in "The Northernmost American," the manuscript version of *Fifty Years Below Zero*. With no mention of Africa, he explains that he "agreed to go" to Cape Lisburne simply because he "was getting tired of civilization" (111).
2. "Eskimo" is the word that Brower employs to refer to the Iñupiat, Yupik, and Inuvialuit, all of whom live in the American and Canadian Arctic. The Iñupiat reside in the northernmost coastal regions of Alaska, while the Yupik live to the southwest on the shores of the Bering Sea and the Inuvialuit live to the east near Herschel Island in Canadian territory. Throughout, I have elected to use these designators, rather than the terms Eskimo, Inuit, Alaskan Native, First Nations, or Native American. Across most of the Arctic, Eskimo is considered to be pejorative, though it is still used in parts of Alaska. Inuit describes the Indigenous inhabitants of Arctic Canada and Greenland, and it includes the Iñupiat and the Inuvialuit, but it does not include the Yupik. Alaskan Native describes all of the native peoples—Iñupiat, Yupik, Athabaskan, Aleut, Haida, Tlingit, Eyak, Tsimshian—living in what is now the state of Alaska. First Nations refers to the Indigenous inhabitants of Canada, except for the Inuit and the Métis; meanwhile, Native American refers to the Indigenous inhabitants of the contiguous United States. For more on these distinctions, see Lawrence Kaplan's essay "Inuit or Eskimo: Which Name to Use?" on the Alaska Native Language Center website. American is the word that Brower uses to describe himself, his fellow whalers, and other residents of the United

States. Although problematic because it obscures the international character of the Arctic whaling industry's workforce and because it indicates hemispheric identities, American has historically been employed to describe the citizens of the United States. For lack of a better descriptor, I use the word in this sense throughout the article.

3. Iñupiaq is the singular and adjectival form of Iñupiat. It also refers to the language spoken by these people. For more, see Ernest Burch, Jr.'s *The Iñupiaq Eskimo Nations of Northwest Alaska* (1998) and *Social Life in Northwest Alaska* (2006).
4. I recognize that using the adjective "white" to refer to this group of whalers is problematic. In the nineteenth century, race was a fluid category, and it was often conflated with ethnicity. For example, Portuguese whalers, especially those from the Azores and Cape Verde, were not necessarily considered to be "white." The same was true of Irish sailors. For lack of more precise terminology, I use "white" to refer to mariners of European-American ancestry and "non-white" to refer to seamen of non-European-American ancestry.
5. Scholars have had some difficulty ascertaining whether or not the Indigenous peoples of the Atlantic Coast of North America practised subsistence whaling prior to their contact with Europeans. For a review of the existing archaeological and archival evidence, see "A Bold and Hardy Race of Men": *The Lives and Literature of American Whalers* and *Living with Whales: Documents and Oral Histories of Native New England Whaling History* (Schell 179–85; Shoemaker 19–21).
6. Together with co-author Samson S. Pederman, Cook produced another memoir, which was titled "*Thar She Blows*" and published in Boston in 1937.
7. During the mid-nineteenth century, some ship owners began allowing captains to take their wives and children with them on whaling voyages. No other class of mariner was afforded this privilege (Norling 244–54).
8. This statement contradicts assertions that Brower makes about the problems inherent in using wooden boats.
9. In *Kusiq: An Eskimo Life History from the Arctic Coast of Alaska* (1991), Waldo Bodfish, Sr. describes the circumstances of his birth and early life (2–5).
10. After working at shore whaling stations in Barrow and Point Hope, respectively, Hopson and Allen married Iñupiaq women and made permanent homes for themselves in Alaska. Stevenson and Marsh worked for the Presbyterian Church as missionaries in Barrow (Blackman 16–17).
11. This information comes from a note on the title page of the "The Northernmost American." Copies of the manuscript are available at Rasmuson Library at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.
12. For more on the *Orca* and its steam whaling career, see *Steam Whaling in the Western Arctic* (Bockstoce 86).

13. For more on the use of this popular metaphor in American whaling narratives see “A Bold and Hardy Race of Men” (Schell 70–71).
14. Toctoo was twelve when she first met Brower.
15. According to Margaret B. Blackman, these boats are more commonly called *umiaks*. Throughout the essay, I follow Blackman’s practice of using the Iñupiaq words—*umiaq* (singular) and *umiat* (plural)—for these watercraft (Blackman 250–51).
16. Brower describes these taboos elsewhere in *Fifty Years Below Zero*. As he explains, women were not allowed to be on the ice when they were menstruating. They were also not allowed to urinate on the ice. If they violated these rules, they risked severe beatings, which could result in death (149).
17. Throughout “The Northernmost American,” Brower makes many typographical mistakes and employs unorthodox spellings of various words. In the quotations from this text, I have preserved Brower’s prose exactly as it appears in its original form.
18. Hooch is slang for alcohol.
19. Carrie Nation was a famous nineteenth-century American temperance advocate.

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