



*Herman Melville's  
Whaling Years*

**WILSON HEFLIN**

*Edited by Mary K. Bercaw Edwards  
and Thomas Farel Heffernan*

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*To my family  
who shares  
my love of literature  
and the sea*

W L H



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allowed the author to see the galley proofs of *The Melville Log*, a most significant landmark in Melville biography; exchanging information with him was one of the real pleasures of this work. The first chapter of this book would be less detailed and accurate without the kindness of William H. Gilman of the University of Rochester who allowed me use of the discoveries he later published in *Melville's Early Life and Redburn*. The author is similarly obligated to Harrison Hayford of Northwestern University for permission to study his penetrating notes for his edition of *Omoo*. Without the advantage of having ever present the scholarly studies of Charles R. Anderson and Robert S. Forsythe—pioneer explorers of these waters—the sailing would have been rougher and more hazardous.

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## Editors' Preface

For years the log of the *USF United States*, the ship on which Herman Melville served after his whaling career had come to an end, lay on a shelf in the National Archives in Washington. It would be hard to think of a more important source than this log for the study of Melville's fifth novel, *White-Jacket*, which the author based on his experiences aboard the ship. Pioneering researchers like Wilson Heflin and Jay Leyda were just the people to find it; the strange thing is that they not only both found it, but even found it the very same day. Their reactions when they met at the desk in the Archives' reading room were more than incredulity when they realized that they had simultaneously turned in call slips for the prized log. "We almost had a fist fight over it," Heflin said.

Of course they did not, and of course—for happy outcomes really do occur—they became close friends and colleagues. Leyda, whose *The Melville Log* is an incomparable contribution to Melville studies, relied heavily on Heflin for answers to questions about Melville and the sea. In time the Melville scholarly community did too. Heflin's published articles, some of which are listed in the bibliography of this book, delivered discoveries that became permanent Melville references—see, for example, "Melville's Third Whaler," which identifies the ship on which Melville sailed from Eimeo near Tahiti to Hawaii and on which he probably had his best experiences as a whaleman.

Born in 1913 in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, Heflin attended Birmingham-Southern College and went on to earn his master's degree and doctorate at Vanderbilt University. From 1937 to 1941 he taught in the English Department of the University of Alabama and from 1942 to 1943 he was a member of the English Department of Vanderbilt University. From 1943 to 1946 he was a flight instructor in the U.S. Navy. In 1946 he joined the faculty of the U.S. Naval Academy, where he taught until the time of his death in 1985. A founding member of the Melville Society, he was its president in 1958.

From graduate school to his last day at the Naval Academy, Heflin was devoted to the study of Melville and the sea. It was his life's work, as one would easily conclude from his publications and from a look at the 20 boxes of his nautical and literary archive now housed in the Newberry Library in Chicago.

The distillation of that lifetime of research is the present book. Why

did the book remain unpublished after more than a half-century of work? A plausible answer is that Heflin's collection of material never ended. It would not have seemed right to him to let the book out without the material that continued to accrete as correspondents sent him hitherto unknown records or as repositories near and far continued to yield key documents. His narrowly defined articles he could publish, but the scope of this book was to be as large as the ocean; it never seemed finished.

The editors of the book have had to declare it finished, even as they recognize that generations of scholars to come are going to shed new light on many aspects of Herman Melville, including Melville the whaleman. It is proper to explain the editorial principles that governed the preparation of this volume. The first principle was that it had to be Wilson Heflin's book; it was not the occasion for new ventures into investigation of Melville and whaling except to the extent that Heflin would have made those ventures himself. The second principle was that reorganization of the manuscript and changes in phrasing were to be undertaken only when there was reason to believe that the author would have made those changes.

Fortunately for the editors, the Heflin archive contains several files that provide a good indication of the author's intentions about revision. The first is a set of notes focusing especially on placement of subjects in the book. The others are a 37-page detailed criticism of Heflin's manuscript and a file of correspondence from his most important adviser on the early editing of the manuscript. In the mid-1950s Heflin had a contract with New York University Press for the publication of the book; it was his good fortune, while working with the press, to have as his editor Wilson Follett. The Follett critical notes and letters contain detailed advice on the preparation of the manuscript for publication, advice that by all surviving indications Heflin welcomed and with which he agreed. Another important indication of the guidance from which Heflin benefited is the 20 pages of typed comments on the manuscript sent to Heflin by Charles F. Batchelder, Jr., from whom the author also received the loan of many rare whaling documents. These scholars, along with Jay Leyda, Leon Howard, and Harrison Hayford, contributed significantly to the final *Herman Melville's Whaling Years*. The present editors, sensitive to the role of these eminent past Melvillians, are happy to have had their guidance and their company in the final stage of this book's creation.

Had the NYU Press contract not been allowed to lapse—the reason for the lapse was probably the reason suggested above, that Heflin could never say the work was complete—Wilson Heflin's recognition as *the* authority on Melville and whaling would have been a commonplace early on in Melville scholarship.

The editors have added new material only in the appendices and notes,

and have identified it as such. This, they feel, has been done in keeping with the second principle articulated above, namely that Heflin would have added such material if the sources had been available to him. Minor changes in phrasing in the text and in the notes have been silently made. The book may be compared with the earliest form of Heflin's work on Melville and whaling, his Vanderbilt University dissertation (1952). Occasionally, as in Chapter 2, the format has been changed. A sizable excision of biographical material on Melville was made in Chapter 1; details that would have been unfamiliar in the 1950s have become more widely familiar thanks to recent biographical studies and need not be rehearsed in this book.

The facts and the traces of facts that Heflin was able to work with are definable. Herman Melville left for his first whaling voyage on the *Fairhaven*, Massachusetts, whaleship *Acushnet* on January 3, 1841. The ensuing three-and-a-half years of his life immersed Melville in experiences far beyond the horizons of his staid upper-middle-class boyhood—experiences on which he drew repeatedly in his writing, from his very successful first novel *Typee* to his masterpiece *Moby-Dick*. While glimpses of these days appear in the fictionalized and reworked events, characters, and settings rendered in Melville's rich prose, other records of the details of this period are hard to come by. So far as is known, the original log of the *Acushnet* has not survived. No personal journals of the voyage have yet been found. The log of the *Acushnet* was abstracted, however, by Captain Daniel McKenzie in 1848 for Lieutenant Matthew Fontaine Maury. This abstract log still exists, kept in the National Archives, and contains much information, including latitude and longitude, weather, when whales were raised, and the bearings and distances of islands sighted. But much we would love to know is missing. First of all, the abstract log does not begin until March 22, 1841—77 days after the *Acushnet* left port. And, although it records every time whales were sighted, it does not tell whether the boats were lowered or whether any whales were captured. Filling in the information left out of the abstract log occupied much of Heflin's time.

For his Ph.D. dissertation, Heflin set himself the monumental task of searching out every available contemporary record of the vessels, individuals, and surroundings with which Melville had contact in the extraordinary and influential years of his life spent on board whaleships. Heflin combed through all the logs he could find of vessels that were at sea when the *Acushnet* was. For instance, the *Acushnet* was fighting her way around Cape Horn in mid-April 1841, and Heflin notes, "It is quite possible that the *Acushnet* passed in these waters the homeward-bound whaler *Huntress* on either April 16 or April 17. A comparative plot of the tracks of the two ships (based on their abstract logs . . .) shows that between noons of April 16–17 their tracks were almost parallel

and no more than five miles apart. Their possible meeting is of significance because Melville mentions the *Huntress* in *Redburn* as the vessel in which Harry Bolton perished” (notes to Chapter 9).

The *Acushnet* cruised through the In-Shore and Off-Shore Grounds. When another vessel was sighted, the two vessels “spoke”: exchanged names, home ports, months out to sea, and barrels of whale oil stowed. Heflin writes, for example, “Just before she reached the Line, the *Acushnet* hailed on Saturday, October 23, the barque *United States* of Westport, Massachusetts, twelve months, 300 barrels. . . . Captain Pease reported 720 barrels of sperm oil for his ship’s ten months of whaling” (Chapter 11)—a fact that was duly recorded in the *United States*’s logbook and later found by Heflin. Often the logbooks themselves do not survive, but the information does, recorded in newspapers. Gathering all these facts—150 barrels of oil stowed down aboard the *Acushnet* by March 13; 160 by May 8; 350 by July 4; 600 by September 25; 720 by October 23, etc.—Heflin figured out the details of the voyage. He knew from the abstract log that a lone “Sperm Whale” was sighted on July 25, but the day was “rugged with rain” (Chapter 11) and evidently the whale was not taken. Heflin deduced the latter from the newspaper account of the whaleship *Midas*, which spoke the *Acushnet* on August 9 and reported the same number of barrels as the whaleship *William Wirt* had on July 4. Thus, like a detective, Heflin sorted through all the evidence and set his conclusions before the reader for week after week and month after month of Melville’s years at sea.

One’s respect for Heflin grows as one sees how much he was able to put on the record. Look at Heflin’s chapter on the crew of the *Acushnet*, for example. Charles Roberts Anderson, in *Melville in the South Seas* (1939), discusses the crew and quotes Melville’s manuscript memorandum, “What became of the ship’s company of the whale-ship ‘Acushnet,’ according to [Henry F.] Hubbard who came home in her . . . and who visited me at Pittsfield. in 1850.” Anderson identified eighteen of the twenty-five men in Hubbard’s list. Leon Howard, in his *Herman Melville: A Biography* (1951), described the crew in general terms. But Heflin identified the original twenty-six crew members and the four who joined while Melville was aboard. He mentions twenty-five others shipped by Captain Pease after Melville’s desertion, making a total of fifty-five men who served aboard the *Acushnet* on her maiden voyage.

Anderson and Heflin both reported that Henry F. Hubbard told Melville that Frederick Raymond, the first mate, “had a fight with the Captain & went ashore at Payta.” Heflin, however, additionally confirmed this with a consular certificate signed on December 14, 1842, by the United States consul at Payta. Heflin identified the *Acushnet*’s deserters and those discharged from her, citing consular certificates and sworn affidavits ferreted out from archives

around the world. The amount of work Heflin did in digging out information is astounding; his facts are invaluable.

Heflin even confirmed scenes that seem utterly unrealistic and nothing more than the wanton fantasy of a sailor's brain. Chapter 2 of Melville's first book, *Typee*, ends with a scene of the whaleship *Dolly* surrounded by a shoal of Nukahivan girls. Melville writes, "As they drew nearer, and I watched the rising and sinking of their forms, and beheld the uplifted right arm bearing above the water the girdle of tappa, and their long dark hair trailing beside them as they swam, I almost fancied they could be nothing else than so many mermaids:—and very like mermaids they behaved too. We were still some distance from the beach, and under slow headway, when we sailed right into the midst of these swimming nymphs" (2:14). Eleven days after the *Acushnet* came to anchor in Nukahiva the Nantucket whaleship *Potomac* arrived; Heflin was the first to find an entry in the *Potomac's* logbook that gives surprising authority to what otherwise might have seemed fanciful in the *Typee* account: "[I]n a few minutes the decks [of the *Potomac*] were crowded with Kanackas mostly girls swimming off like schools of porpoises" (entry for July 4, 1842).

The editing of this volume began shortly after Heflin's death when his daughter Kitty asked Thomas Heffernan to examine her father's literary files with a view toward publication. Heffernan traveled a number of times to Annapolis to organize the Heflin papers, consulted with Jay Leyda about the proper treatment of them, and within a year arranged with the Newberry Library in Chicago for deposit of the papers. The Newberry at the time was the center of intense Melville scholarship because of its participation with Northwestern University Press in the publication of the definitive edition of Melville's work, and the Newberry Melville collection was one of the most notable anywhere. Heffernan spent the summer of 1987 at the Newberry cataloguing the Heflin archive, which in the end filled twenty boxes, and simultaneously began work on the editing of *Herman Melville's Whaling Years*.

Heffernan, guided by the revision suggestions in Heflin's papers, edited the whole manuscript in an effort to produce the organization of material that the author seemed to have in mind. This rewriting of the whole text was then re-examined to see if it passed one test, the preservation of Heflin's distinctive voice. As a result, Heffernan rewrote the first draft in its entirety, producing the present version.

In 1990 Heffernan invited Mary K. Bercaw Edwards to become co-editor of the book. She says of joining the project, "I brought to it my previous work as a Melville scholar and authorship of *Melville's Sources* (Northwestern University Press, 1987), as well as my knowledge of whaling and my work on the only 19th-century whaling vessel left in the world, the *Charles W. Mor-*