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‘Hardy rascals of doubtful fame’ Historical perspectives upon sealers in southern New Zealand, Ian Smith Memorial Lecture 2025

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Abstract

In paying tribute to the late Ian Smith this lecture takes up a theme arising from his interests in the exploitation of marine mammals and the early historical archaeology of southern New Zealand. The commercial sealing industry, about 1792-1830, is known from shipping and other historical records and to some extent from historical archaeology but the activities and experiences of sealers, as individuals and in their gangs, remain little known. At the same time, sealers as a class appear widely in the general historical literature where they are associated characteristically with primitive, barbaric or immoral behaviours both in New Zealand and elsewhere on the Tasman frontier. The questions at issue are whether observations of the sealers support the general description and how the latter arose. It is argued that inter-gang behaviour, skirmishing with Māori, sealer housing and diet and relationships with Māori women, do not fit the general description nor do sealers stand out in these respects from whalers or other European sojourners. It is suggested that the characterisation of New Zealand sealers owes much to the flow of opinion about sealers across the Tasman world and an historiography of social evolution.

***Keywords*:** perception and behaviour of sealers, southern New Zealand, early nineteenth century

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1. Introduction

It is a privilege to speak in memory of my old friend and colleague from the University of Otago, Ian Woodford Gibson Smith (1954 - 2020). His life was cut short by cancer while he was at the peak of his career as an international authority on the Oceanic prehistory of marine mammal exploitation and as a leading figure in New Zealand's historical archaeology. Following some remarks on Ian's career, I discuss a subject in which the two themes of Ian's research are joined, specifically the historical understanding of sealers in southern New Zealand.

I met Ian first when I returned to Otago University in 1978. He sought assistance in completing his PhD proposal on the entirely reasonable ground that he was severely pressed for time by the onerous social obligations expected of an Otago student and his duty to attend a summer music festival in Coromandel. The last time I met Ian was in the late Spring of 2019 when we went out to lunch in Dunedin and he joked about his severely eroded neck vertebrae being filled with medical cement, so he could hold his head up. It was typical of Ian, a man of courage and humour, to make light of his dire predicament. His cheerful and gregarious manner and his scholarly generosity were appreciated by staff and students alike in the university and beyond.

Ian loved a party and he was impressively knowledgeable about 'both kinds' of music. I recall his fondness for Gram Parsons of *Grievous Angels* fame, who died romantically young at 26, and also for Emmylou Harris, John Prine, Waylon Jennings, Janis Joplin and Tom Waits among others that come to mind. Ian was in his element at home or on fieldwork with his friends, music, some cool refreshments and a ration of electric puha. In the field, he was the silkily mischievous MC of after-dark music, dancing and disorder. It made 44 days of gales in a tent camp at Hawksburn in 1979 bearable; and in excavating at Papatowai in the winter of 1990, nothing boosted morale so much as a nude conga line snaking out into falling snow, with Ian grinning maniacally at its head: the hardy rascal-in-chief.

The daylight hours, I hasten to add, were devoted entirely to the business of archaeology. Ian is known today mainly as an historical archaeologist, not least for his impressive review of the subject in New Zealand, *Pakeha Settlements in a Maori World: New Zealand Archaeology 1769-1860* (Smith 2019), but his early career was in prehistory, or pre-European archaeology. We, sometimes with Brian Allingham, collaborated in excavations of early Māori sites in Otago, notably at Waitaki River Mouth, Pleasant River, Hawksburn, Shag River Mouth and Papatowai (Anderson, Allingham and Smith 1999; Anderson and Smith 1992, 1996; Smith and Anderson 1998). We also worked together on Norfolk Island (Anderson, Smith and White 2001) and Huahine in French Polynesia (Anderson et al. 2001; 2019). Ian was a calm and well-organised director of excavations; particularly good at unpicking complex stratigraphy and in identifying faunal remains in the field. His main interest, and expertise, was in the archaeology of marine mammals.

2. Prehistoric exploitation of marine mammals

Ian's research began with a B.A. hons thesis (Smith 1976), Prehistoric Fur Seal Exploitation on the South West Coast of Chatham Island, a topic made feasible by material from Douglas Sutton's (1979) doctoral project on the Chathams, and instructive through its emphasis upon hunting seasonality. The substance and perspective were aspects of the economic prehistory approach that had be brought to Otago in 1966 by Charles Higham (its originator, Graham Clark, came also, as a visitor). For New Zealand's archaeology, economic prehistory was a new, and much-needed direction which emphasized the roles of economic imperatives and their management in long-term cultural continuity or change through research on key factors of variation such as the structure of resource environments, population growth, climate change, subsistence mobility, seasonality, nutritional values, and surplus (e.g. Higham 1976; Leach 1976; Anderson 1981; more generally Dow and Reed 2023).

In his PhD on Sea Mammal Hunting and Prehistoric Subsistence in New Zealand (Smith 1985), Ian examined 111 faunal collections from 53 sites and established the species and anatomical portions represented by each element of mammals, birds, fish and shellfish. He then quantified the aggregated usable flesh, calorific yields and other nutritional data and worked out changes in Māori hunting strategies, seasonality and diet from the thirteenth to eighteenth centuries. He showed that fur seals were, by yield, the most important source of flesh in the early Māori diet, contributing more than moa and lasting longer, and that hunting was the primary cause of pre-European seal decline from north to south (Smith 1985, 1989, 1996, 2005). Altogether, it was an exemplary project of economic prehistory carried out by 'one of our best' students at Otago (Charles Higham, his supervisor, pers. comm. April 2025).

Ian continued research on prehistoric exploitation of marine mammals in New Zealand (Maxwell and Smith 2015; Smith 1978, 1979, 1981a, 1981b, 1996, 2009), and also extended his interests to marine mammal, bird and fish bones recovered from archaeological sites in the tropical Pacific (Anderson et al. 2019; Smith 2000, 2008a; Leach et al. 1979, 1984; Walter and Smith 1988). Later, he wrote and contributed to works of historical ecology which helped to define the ecological baseline of natural history in New Zealand prior to human intervention (e.g. Parsons et al 2009; Smith 2013a; Collins et al. 2014; Grosser et al. 2016; Rawlence et al. 2015; Salis et al. 2016).

3. Historical archaeology

Following a period in Auckland, working in contract archaeology (see Flexner 2020), Ian returned to a lectureship at Otago in 1989. There, the scarcity of new faunal collections and declining research access to Māori archaeological sites, encouraged him to switch the bulk of his interests to historical archaeology. Characteristically, he made a deliberate decision and signalled it through two position papers, one a review of the subject locally (Smith 1990) and the other, in the *Australian Journal of Historical Archaeology* (Smith 1991), contextualising historical archaeology in the wider trans-Tasman 'frontier,'(see also Smith 2001, 2004, 2013b). His monograph, *The New Zealand Sealing Industry: History, Archaeology and Heritage Management*

(Smith 2002) and Nigel Prickett's (2002) companion volume on shore whaling, provide invaluable guides to the archaeologies and histories of these pioneering industries.

A key location in sealing history is Whenua Hou (Codfish Island), a small island off the west coast of Rakiura (Stewart Island). Sealing began in earnest in Foveaux Strait when a gang was set down from the Pegasus on Whenua Hou in 1808, and another to relieve it in 1809. From then on, Sealers Bay (Koropupu) on Whenua Hou was inhabited frequently by sealers as the main base for access to seal rookeries in Fiordland, Foveaux Strait and western Rakiura. Year-round settlement began, perhaps about 1815 under the chiefdomship of Honekai, when Māori women joined the sealers on Whenua Hou. Their children formed the first mixed-race community in New Zealand (Anderson 1991; Howard 1940: 62-67; Middleton 2007: 9-13). My sealer ancestors, George and John Newton and their respective wives, Wharetutu and Pii, were in the Whenua Hou settlement and, partly through that connection, I joined Ian in 2007 in directing fieldwork at Sealers Bay. The project, supervised and much of it carried out by Ngai Tahu, continues under Brooke Tucker, with the result overall that we know more about our recent ancestors there than anywhere else in the tribal territory.

The main feature of the 2007 research was an excavation, under Ian's direction (Figure 1), of the remains of a rectangular, A-framed house with a stone-lined hearth and stacked-stone chimney; a style depicted at Sealers Bay by Bishop Selwyn in 1844 (Figure 2). The floor and superstructure had been constructed from split totara planks. Excavation produced artefacts of considerable variety: nails, pieces of iron and copper, a bone-handled fork and spoon, ceramic and glass plates and containers; a tobacco box and pipes, gunflints, buttons and the hour hand of a fob watch. There were also Māori flaked stone tools, a piece of a stone adze, bone fishhooks and a bowenite pendant that had been drilled with a nail or something similar, the last suggesting a Māori woman was one of the residents. Analysis of European artefact styles indicated occupation AD 1800-1830, which was the shore sealing era in southern New Zealand (Smith and Anderson 2009).

The neat and durable construction of the house and its variety of imported goods, raises two questions upon which the remainder of this discussion dwells. First, how well do archaeological data and sealer narratives or contemporary observations of them, square with descriptions of sealer behaviour in the historical literature? Second, upon what are differences in historical perception based? These are larger questions than can be answered satisfactorily here, but worth introducing. In reference to the first I look at how whalers and sealers were described historically (reversing the usual order, as did Tuhawaiki, below). I suggest that whalers, who were much better known to their contemporaries, were described in terms closer to the historical evidence than were the sealers, for whom scarce historical observations encouraged more speculative impressions.

Figure 1: Above: Sealers Bay house during excavation in 2007 with Ian Smith lower right and Angela Middleton with folded arms at top. Below: Ian (and Angela) in 2007 writing notes at Sealers Bay.

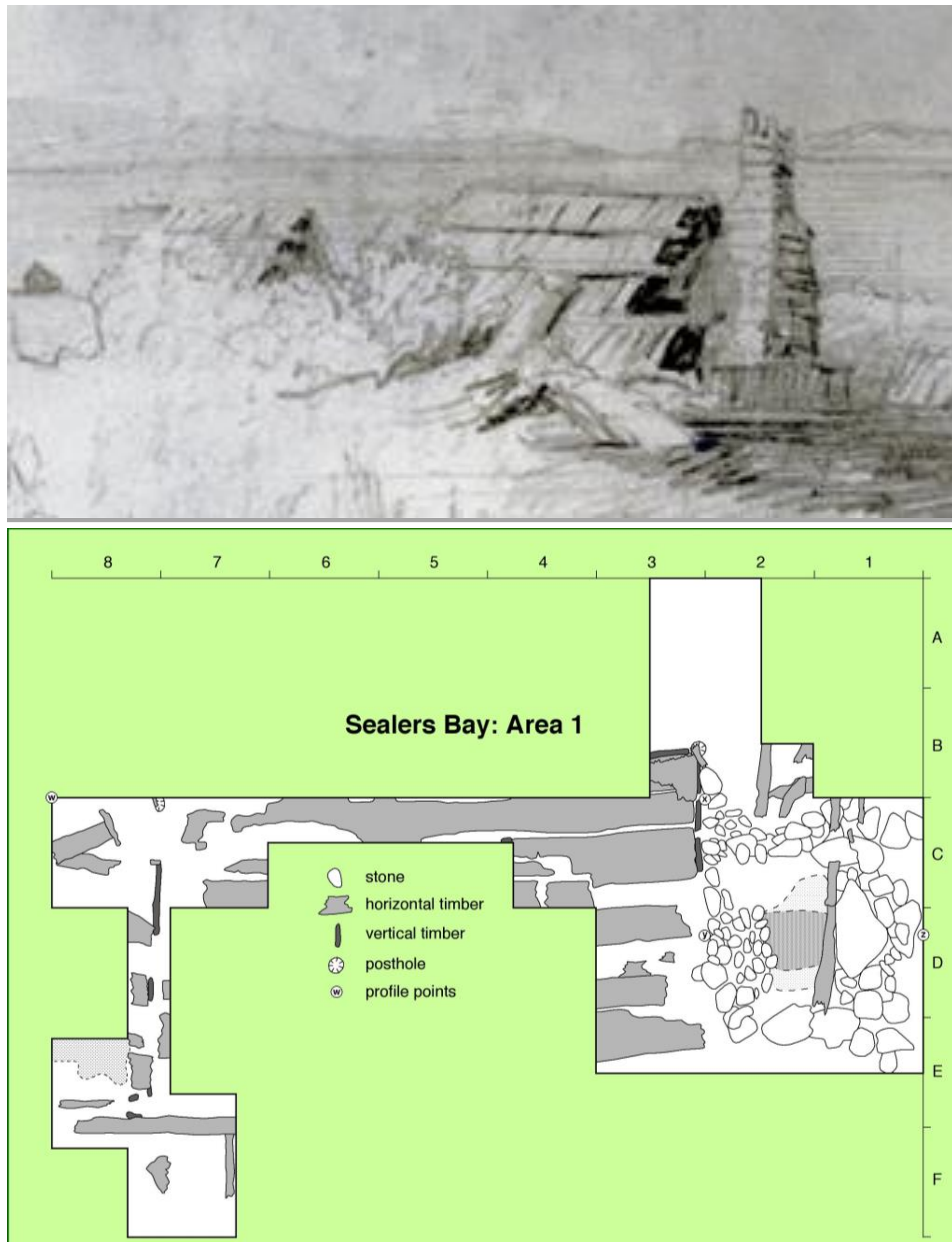

Figure 2: Above: sketch of sealers' houses at Sealers Bay in 1844 by Bishop Selwyn. Below: Plan of sealer house excavation in 2007 with surviving planks and hearth at right.

3.1. Whalers and sealers

Whalers and sealers were sometimes regarded as indistinguishable and, for Māori, it really did not matter. If Pakeha had their uses, they were also collectively objectionable. During negotiations in 1844 for Ngai Tahu sale of the Otago block, the paramount chief Tuhawaiki complained that "you think us very corrupted, but the very scum of Port Jackson shipped as whalers or landed as sealers on this coast" (Clarke 1903), a sentiment familiar among European administrators and churchmen (Anderson 2017). Many

whalers and sealers, or at least their fathers, had been invited to leave England for England's good. Right-thinking people thought them to be inherently degenerate, their convictions being both its proof and an explanation of their continuing dissolute behaviour: "a reckless class of people – runaway sailors and former convicts" and "men of desperate character" wrote Dieffenbach (1843: 40, 190); "without exception, drunkards" said Wohlers in 1846 (1895: 98).

Later historians tended to agree but also made a distinction between whalers and sealers (as did Smith 2008b). They were described equally as tough, hardy, courageous and so on, but direct and frequent observation of the lives of shore whalers contributed to a more nuanced and sympathetic impression of them compared to sealers (Table 1).

Table 1: Distribution of behavioural characteristics attributed to sealers and whalers. Note that 'primitive' attributes and independence are typical of sealer perceptions while drinking, discipline and skill are typical of whaler perceptions: A = Struggling, Primitive; B = Destructive, Brutal; C = Rough; D = Debauched; E = Drunken; F = Independent; G = Tough; H = Daring; I = Disciplined, Skillful.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
SHORE SEALERS									
Howard 1940	X	X	X			X	X		
McLintock 1949		X	X				X	X	
Morton 1982			X			X	X		
Olssen 1994	X	X	X		X	X	X		
Salmond 1997	X		X						
Entwistle 2005	X	X							
Phillips 2006	X		X						
SHORE WHALERS									
Howard 1940				X	X				
McLintock 1949	X			X	X		X	X	X
Morton 1982			X		X		X	X	X
Olssen 1984					X		X		
Phillips 2006					X				X

Whalers were seen as capable at seafaring, boatbuilding, and other trades. They built snug huts or houses, had well-kept gardens, and formed long-term relationships with Māori women. The arrival of many children was seen as a good thing, and even better when everybody was baptised and married. It was argued that whalemen taught Māori women the shipshape merits of cleanliness, tidiness and order, while Māori women taught whalemen the domestic virtues of love, loyalty and childrearing. The weakness of the whalers was drinking and associated rowdiness, but it is widely accepted that this was periodic rather than habitual behaviour. It was encouraged wilfully by the whaling stations as a means of putting the men in debt by pay-day sale of liquor and other goods at inflated prices (Prickett 2002: 5).

Shore whalers, then, were seen as simple but skilled workmen, who exhibited the "frankness and manly courage" of the sailor - as opposed to the "cunning and reckless daring of the convict" (Wakefield 1845: 311). Despite occasional lapses into moral turpitude, whalers were seen as amenable to order and authority and they had the advantage of peaceful relations with Māori. When the crew of the *Clarence* deserted at Otago in 1829, they were replaced by Māori volunteers who sailed her to Hobart. When the *Rob Roy* traded in Otago Harbour in 1830, and Joseph Price in 1831, there was no trouble. The only serious disruption occurred in 1834 when Ngai Tahu warriors, having failed to entice Te Rauparaha to fight at Cloudy Bay, took out their frustration on the Otago whaling station.

Sealing in New Zealand included the subantarctic islands and the Chathams (McNab 1909; Richards 1982; Brett 2017) but the southern South Island and Foveaux Strait sealing ground is discussed here. Two bursts of activity, 1800-1811 and 1822-1829, were separated by a slump in fur prices. The first period was mainly 'ship-based' in which ships sent their boats ashore for a brief period and stood off to recover them, while the second was mainly 'boat-based' (or 'shore-based'), when boats and gangs were set down to work a substantial stretch of coast or islands until their recovery, often after a year or longer (Smith 2002).

Sealers appear much less often in the historical record than whalers and more as agents than individuals. They are, in Peter Entwistle's (2005: 3) apt simile, mainly 'silhouettes.' Tony Ballantyne (2012: 127) observed that, "sealers left a thin and patchy archive," attributable to the competitive and secretive nature of the industry and to the general illiteracy of the men. The paucity of observational records reflects, additionally, the isolation of our sealing grounds from most contemporary maritime traffic in the Southwest Pacific and, also, the contingency of visitor chronology. As a systematic industry, sealing was finished in southern New Zealand by about 1829, and therefore before the possibility of observation by colonial officials, scientific visitors, whalers, missionaries, or land company agents who arrived in numbers around 1840.

3.2. *Observations of and about sealers*

Fleeting glimpses of the activities of sealers in Murihiku (southern South Island) are afforded, *inter alia*, by the narratives of Robert Murray in 1809 on Rakiura (McNab 1909: 169-170, 195-200) and James Caddell, captured on Rakiura in 1810 (recorded by Edwardson 1823, McNab 1909: 306-340). There is a description of William Tucker living in Otago 1814-1815, from a Māori source recorded by the Rev Creed at Waikouaiti

in the 1840s (Entwisle 2005). The most informative source is the John Boultbee journal from 1826-27 (Starke 1986).

Vital as these records are, they do not compare with the rich descriptions of whalers. Where we might have expected to learn about the attitudes, activities and experiences of the sealers we find, instead, mostly comment and opinion, *ex post facto*. Furthermore, it has been constructed into a hypothetical stereotype of a sealing class and mentality, and a notably censorious one at that (c.f. Stuart 1997 on Bass Strait). Sealers were seen as more independent than whalers. Their contracts were settled in cash, in Sydney and, when boat-based, they were separated from sources of authority. Independence was assumed, however, to encourage licentiousness and loss of control in which sealers became violent, brutal, and barbaric, amongst other faults.

For Howard (1940: 38), sealers "as a class...were hardy rascals of doubtful fame in Port Jackson, in whom the finer impulses had been stifled by the privations of their calling and by the harsh treatment of their merciless captains." For McLintock (1949:58-60), they were, "without any guiding principle save indiscriminate killing, and freed from the restraining influence of the law, surrendered to the lust of slaughter and the lure of wealth" although he conceded that, "these rough and daring men [were] the true pioneers of the south." For Australian historian, Tapp (1959: 17) the New Zealand sealers were, "men of the coarsest and most brutal type...with some of the most debased human practices." In summary, Olssen (1984:13) observed that, "almost all reports of the sealers describe them as rough, violent, drunken, and brutal," although some "began the climb to economic independence."

In the virtual absence of sealer narratives or eyewitness testament, the most probable origin of such damning assertions is casual repetition of the terms used earlier to characterise sealers in Bass Strait (Stuart 1997) and, before them, convicts in Australia. Sealing was similar across the Tasman and sealers on both sides came mostly from the same ex-convict and working-class population in Australia, so it was no stretch for opinions about Australian sealers to fill the gap in the New Zealand narrative. By its nature the process is difficult to specify, but a modern example exists in description of New Zealand sealers as 'sea-rats,' to emphasize their squalid, makeshift and mobile existence. Anne Salmond (1997) wrote of "gangs of 'sea-rats' landed on rocky beaches [who, when timber was unavailable] lived in caves, tents or under their upturned boats... in miserably cold and wet conditions... plagued by thirst, hunger and scurvy." Jock Phillips (2006) in the Encyclopedia of New Zealand referred likewise to "a tough breed of sea-rats [who were constantly wet and cold] and would live in caves or under upturned boats [where] swarms of rats were common."

In fact, despite allusions to the contrary, e.g. in Gill (1967: 232), 'sea-rat' does not appear to have been used during the nineteenth century in New Zealand or Australia. Stuart (1997) traces it to early twentieth century romantic fiction about Bass Strait during the time when predatory groups, described as pirates, banditti or runaway convicts, roamed the islands, "plundering the legitimate sealers" (Gill 1967: 227). Surreal sea-rats appear now in 'AI Overview,' (an online excrescence), as violent creatures not entirely human. The case serves to illustrate how the trans-Tasman flow of information about sealers transformed meaning and obscured regional differences.

There are few sealer accounts from Australia, only one according to Stuart (1997: 53) but, unlike in New Zealand, there are many contemporary descriptions. Naturally, the French naturalist François Péron, condemned British treatment of convicts and described the King Island sealers in 1802 as, “good people [who] showered us with proofs of their interest and goodwill... they served an [excellent] dinner and enjoy the most vigorous health” (Plomley and Henley 1990: 40). John Boultbee (Starke 1986: 16) in 1824 admired the sealing leader James Munro, on Furneaux Island, as a man of “cool judgement and natural stability” (Stark 1986: 18) who had clever and handsome mixed-race children, and traded vegetables and livestock to visiting ships. Even George Robinson, Protector of Aborigines, who condemned the ‘depravity’ of alliances with Aboriginal women, described neat and self-reliant sealer settlements in the 1830s.

Boultbee’s sealing mates in Bass Strait, however, were, “disgusting and disagreeable characters... void of every good quality” (Starke 1986: 11) and similar views were held amongst government officials. In 1817 Captain Sutherland saw Kangaroo Island sealers as, “complete savages... not cultivating anything [who] dress in kangaroo skins without linen, and ...smell like foxes.” Their freedom of movement was also offensive; Major Lockyer, in 1827, complaining of “the lawless manner in which these sealers are ranging about” (in Plomley and Henley 1990: 41-49). Similar views that assign sealers to the lowest levels of human society have prevailed in the historical literature (e.g. Stuart 1997; Taylor 2000) and doubtless spread readily through networks of travel, labour, and trade (Ballantyne 2012, chapter 6), creating an ‘homogenized’ impression pitched at the lowest level.

The prevailing views were also resolved into conflicting colonial perspectives, of which ‘humanitarian’ and ‘settler’ attitudes have been recognized (Lester 2006). The former, held notably by higher officials and churchmen, saw sealers (sometimes also whalers) as intrinsically disreputable and harmful to Māori or Aboriginal interests, while the settler perspective took a more generous view of European forebears but thought indigenous people were an obstruction to progress. As observation of sealers in Australia came mainly from humanitarian sources, the consensus overall on the Tasman frontier was unfavourable.

3.3. New Zealand sealers

In-so-far as evidence as can be gleaned about the New Zealand sealers, notions of violence, barbarity, and so on are not sustained by official records or surviving sealer narratives. Sealers shipped out of Sydney to New Zealand had to be free men, although many were former convicts. Their names were vetted by colonial authorities before departure and carrying convicts attracted heavy fines (of course, convicts still reached New Zealand, often with the connivance of ships crew). The sealers were on contract and generally well-treated, if only because their welfare was fundamental to the industry. There was little trouble between sealers or sealing gangs in New Zealand, except occasionally in the Chathams (Richards 1982: 59) and Subantarctic islands when American gangs were landed. Other sealers, mostly British, regarded the Americans as bumptious, selfish and avaricious (McNab 1909; Howard 1940) although grievances from the Revolutionary War (1775-1783) might have been involved.

Sealers were generally fraternal in their gangs and solicitous of the welfare of other gangs. At times they gathered in large, peaceful, groups. They searched for lost gangs or marooned sealers, and they protected caches of skins that belonged to others or took them to Sydney to advertise for owners (McNab 1909). *The Sydney Gazette* and other contemporary sources were largely sympathetic to the problems facing sealers in New Zealand, including exposure to attack by Māori, but were sealers themselves especially violent toward Māori, or Māori toward them? This is difficult to determine but, in terms of casualties, most occurred in short bursts associated with particular vessels: the *Sydney Cove* and the *Brothers* in 1810-1811, the *Matilda* 1814-15, the *Sophia* in 1817 and the *General Gates* in 1822. The common pattern was a theft or a murder leading to reprisals on both sides. There were 20 to 40 Pakeha deaths (Entwisle 2005: 100; Smith 2002), some of them runaway seamen or ships crew searching for them. More Māori died, but it is difficult to estimate the total. Broadly speaking, the violence seems to have been equally initiated and equally matched.

It was, in part at least, a matter of circumstance. The shore sealers were few but new, as the first Europeans to exploit resources in Māori territory, and Māori strength had not then met substantial European resistance. The violent events that ensued were not a 'Sealers War', as now asserted on Wikipedia: there was no war, the clashes were not initiated only by sealers, and they were few and years apart. Of 18 episodes of close interaction between southern Māori and sealers between 1792 and 1827, 10 were entirely peaceful (Table 2). Sealers seldom went looking for trouble, nor were they particularly prepared for it. Tucker persuaded his fellow sealers from *Sophia* in 1817 to go unarmed to Whareakeake (Murdering Beach), a tragic mistake. The *Elizabeth*'s Captain advised Boultbee's boat to take six muskets, but the Boatsteerer only took three saying that was enough.

On a similar theme, it does not seem that sealers abducted or enslaved Māori women. Rather, from about 1810, agreed relationships were established between Pakeha men and Māori women in southern New Zealand. Up to 1830, most of these involved sealers such as William Tucker in 1814-15, and many more at Whenua Hou from about 1820. John Boultbee and Jack Price at Pahia in 1826 arranged with fathers to take their daughters as companions, and they gave presents, in Boultbee's case a brass ornament which Kaibibbi, his partner, used as the centrepiece in a new necklace. The women are glad, he said, "when they find their new partners are kind to them" (Starke 1986: 57). When Boultbee was seriously ill he was nursed by Kaibibbi's family, and after travelling about the Straits settlements where he was well received everywhere, Kaibibbi welcomed him back to Pahia and he was present at the birth of her child, quite probably his own.

Overall, Price, Boultbee and other sealers in Foveaux Strait in 1826-27 were welcomed, fed, looked after, and seldom felt threatened. On one occasion in a village on Ruapuke Island when they were very uneasy, the chief, Te Whakataupuka allayed their fears by allowing his baby daughter to sleep in their house. This goodwill was reciprocated. When hunger drove Boultbee and another sealer to steal some potatoes at the Neck, they apologised the next day to the Māori who owned them and offered compensation. Moreover, if only by necessity, shore sealers were generally sober. No liquor was taken in the sealing boats of Boultbee and other gangs from the *Elizabeth*, and Boultbee remarked that "… I do not know of anything that refreshes one more after a day's fatigue than a basin of good strong tea" (Starke 1986: 52).

Table 2: Sealer-Māori encounters: Eye-witness documents (*). Approximately contemporary accounts (#). References: Church (2008), Entwisle (2005), McNab (1909), Starke (1986).

Sealers (and flax traders):	**Encounter type**
1792-93 Sealers & carpenter in Dusky Sound build large house & decked ship. Māori seen and enticed to contact, but refused.*	**Peaceful**
1809-10 *Brothers* and *Sydney Cove* sealers Otago, some living with Māori. *Fox* sealers in Foveaux Strait & Rakiura. Murray & others living with Māori for months.*	**Lengthy & peaceful**
1810-11 *Sydney Cove* seaman kills Te Wahie at Otago, sealer killed then sealers kill Te Pahi at Molyneux; later affray at Oue, two sealers killed.*#	Reciprocal violence.
1813 *Perseverance*; stayed with Māori, trade in potatoes & flax at Bluff & Banks Peninsula.*	**Peaceful**
1814-15 *Matilda*; six Lascars abscond SW coast. Robert Brown sent to find them. Three Lascars killed by Māori, Brown & six crew killed near Moeraki.*#	Violence
1814-15 *Matilda* 11 days at Otago, Māori provided fresh food & wove cordage.*	**Peaceful**
1814-1815 Wm Tucker & Māori partner at Murdering Beach kaika.#	**Lengthy & peaceful**
c.1815-20 McDonald. Peaceful trade in potatoes & mats, Banks Pen.*	**Peaceful**
1817 *Sophia* attack by Māori and sealers attack Māori on ship, destroy kaika.*#	Reciprocal violence
1822 *General Gates*, Ebenezer Eton killed at Port William. Sealers kill four Māori.*	Reciprocal violence
1823 *Mermaid*, Kent flax trading at Ruapuke & Otago.*	**Lengthy & peaceful**
1823 *Elizabeth Henrietta* flax trading at Ruapuke.*	**Lengthy & peaceful**
c. 1823 Tupai kills Pakeha at Codfish Island (confirmed to Kent in 1823)*#	Violence
1826 *Sally*, Edwin Palmer at Chathams & Otago sealing*	**Lengthy & peaceful**
1826 Sealboat crew (incl. Boultbee) attacked on West Coast. Two killed.*	Violence
1827 Boultbee, Price and Māori partners in Foveaux Strait kaika.*	**Lengthy & peaceful**
Maori & Pakeha traditions	
c. 1820 Māori at Paringa shot, Māori kill one man, sealers kill Māori at Jackson Bay. Te Koau & men at Big South Cape kill sealers devastating titi colonies.	Reciprocal violence
c. 1824 Taiaroa kills Pakeha on Rakiura.	Violence

The miserable and primitive existence of sealers is also debatable, for example the belief that they often lived in caves or under their upturned boats. No doubt they did at times, simply as a function of their occupational mobility. John Marmon recalled being one of a group of sealers who had visited Ruapuke Island in 1823 where they, "hauled up our boats and turned them over. These are the sealers' huts" (in Richards 1995: 102). One cave at Southport in Chalky Sound was used by sealers (Smith (2008b: 371), but Coutts (1985: 35) saw no evidence that others were inhabited frequently, and a Ngai Tahu visit in 2022 concluded that material in the caves was predominantly from Māori occupation. Whether the sparse European artefacts represent sealer deposition or trade goods obtained by Māori remains unresolved.

The broader evidence of sealer residence, both archaeological and anecdotal, emphasizes construction and use of huts. The first sealing expedition, to Dusky Sound in 1792, brought timber and supplies to construct a large house and a skin drying shed, both used often thereafter, at Luncheon Cove. Another house with a cobblestone floor and chimney was built at Facile Harbour. Remains of other known or likely sealers' huts on the southwest coast include: three on the Open Bay Islands, several at George Sound, several in Doubtful Sound, six in Luncheon Cove, three with gardens in Chalky Inlet, and single huts at Arnott's Point and Milford Sound. On Rakiura, there was a sealers' house at Port William and a hut at Māori Beach, three clusters of hut terraces at Port Pegasus and, of course, the sealing settlement at Whenua Hou (Smith 2002). Elsewhere in Foveaux Strait, sealers live in Māori settlements, at least in the 1820s. Ian Smith's (2002) assessment of the data concludes that of 17 recorded dwelling sites of sealers, one was an open site, five were caves and 11 were huts.

One important reason for building huts was that seal skins needed to be dried and salted to prevent rotting. Dry caves could be used if they happened to be in suitable places, but building huts in chosen locations was a better solution. Sealing boats could be rowed about fifty miles in a day, and if they had a good haul of skins they might need to be because they had limited space for cargo. Moving to and from base camps at huts, or convenient caves, also made it feasible to plant vegetables. Four sealers landed on the Snares in 1810 were recovered in 1817 by which time they had built five houses and had extensive plantations of potatoes (McNab 1909: 223-224). It was probably sealers who introduced potatoes and other European vegetables to southern New Zealand and access to those is mentioned in the sealer narratives from the beginning, by Murray and Caddell in Foveaux Strait, at Whareakeake where Tucker also built a house and raised sheep and goats, and by Boultbee who recorded celery, cabbages, potatoes and turnips growing near a hut in Fiordland. The sealers cultivated vegetables, or picked greens, wherever they could.

A sense of the sealing life is apparent in Boultbee's narrative (Starke 1986). Two gangs were set down in 1826 from the *Elizabeth* at the George Sound huts. Boultbee's gang went north and stayed in a hut at Milford Sound, then in huts on the Open Bay Islands, where they found flour, sugar and vegetable gardens. After that, they stayed in a hut at Arnott's River and then a cave used as a sealers' storehouse, where they were attacked by Māori. They went back to the Open Bay Island huts for 24 days then to the Milford Hut and

back to the George Sound huts for three weeks. Following several nights in the open they reached the huts in Dusky Sound, where they stayed for seven months and were re-provisioned by ship. Later, and assisted by a Māori man, they stayed a few days in a cave at Chalky Sound, and then sailed to Foveaux Strait where they spent many months living in Māori villages at Pahia, the Neck, Ruapuke, Toetoes and elsewhere. Later, Boultbee was persuaded to join a sealing boat that worked the southern coast of Rakiura. It was poorly provisioned and Boultbee spent a number of uncomfortable months of constant movement and foraging for food before going to live with a Māori family until the *Samuel* arrived and he could get back to Australia, in 1828.

Boultbee's record shows that there were certainly variations of experience in the working lives of sealers, but little to suggest that it was profoundly degrading as later opinion avers. Nor was it greatly different from whaling. Whalers and sealers were often emancipated convicts, both were involved in dangerous maritime occupations that demanded skilful boat handling, both were shifted frequently to new locations, and both built huts or houses, grew or sought garden produce and developed relationships with Māori women. Greater similarity of whaler and sealer lifestyles and experiences than is generally accepted, lends emphasis to the disparity of received historical impressions about them. This point invites my second line of comment.

3.4. The societal scale

The older historians of southern New Zealand subscribed to an historiographical framework of three, successive, stages: sealing, whaling, and then farming or urban occupations which, with the arrival of literate and religious settlers to buy land or other property, represented the acme of colonial civilization. In terms of chronology, population origins and economic change the model has some empirical merit, but from the beginning it also had a dimension of relative civility and morality based upon a more universal sense of social evolution (Anderson 2017). It mirrored the ancient societal categories of primitive, semi-civilised and civilized, or of savagery, barbarianism and civilisation that had classical roots in European thinking and were much discussed from the late 18th century, in the Scottish enlightenment, to the late 19th century with Darwinian evolution and then, amongst others, Lewis Henry Morgan's (1877) *Ancient Society*. His savages were sexually permissive wandering hunters, barbarians were families with small-scale agriculture, and civilized people were monogamous landowners and urban residents. The beguiling simplicity of this reductionist model, the moral ruler it provided, and the comforting assurance that while savages and barbarians could mimic the behaviour of their superiors they could not join them in less than evolutionary time, encouraged widespread subscription.

Sealers led a lifestyle of 'inappropriate mobility,' to borrow Lynette Russell's (2018: 165) reference to Aboriginal society. It was inappropriate from a settler perspective because it failed to sustain ownership of land or property and mobile hunting and foraging was thought primitive. In their precarious existence, sealers exhibited, "the primitive instinct of self-preservation developed in these rough and often brutal men [which induced, nevertheless] an admirable hardihood and a natural independence" (Howard 1940: 41). The whalers were more advanced again by virtue of their cottages, gardens, maritime skills and family life,

but they were not civilized. Edward Wakefield (1845:310-312, 324, 331) characterized sealers and whalers together as a "rough class of pioneers" with "half-civilised" men, as he called them. They could exist only "while they were paving the way for more improved vehicles of civilization"; those of course being the settlers under recruitment by the New Zealand Company. It was "these simple farm labourers, artisans and weavers, rich only in the plenitude of their faith [who] sailed to subdue the land which was to become a living monument to their endeavours" (McLintock 1949: 238; cf. Entwisle 1998:64-65).

The model notwithstanding, historians understood that its metaphorical appeal exceeded its utility as a description of multi-generational social change. Howard (1940: 67), in fact, managed to compress all the stages into a single generation that was responsible for building the first 'residential settlement.' It was the former sealers, he wrote, who "set about winning a livelihood by the toil of their hands... growing potatoes and vegetables and grazing a few sheep and cattle…[They were] hard men, the first to win freedom from the slavery of the sealing brig, the first to stand independent of the trading firms of New South Wales... the first true settlers in Stewart Island." It was also apparent that the modelled sequence in southern New Zealand was flatly contradicted in Australia where farming was established before the sealing and shore whaling industries began and that the colonists, notably the convicts, were heavily engaged in food production before some were diverted to the maritime industries.

Sealers, nonetheless, continued to be maligned in historical opinion across the Tasman frontier (Stuart 1997), including recently. Paul Moon (2012: 148) describes those on Whenua Hou 'processing their prey' as if they were wild animals, and among Australian examples is the assertion that "many of the sealers must have been mentally deranged [by loneliness], and the stench of rotting carcases must have had some adverse effect on the minds of men already tainted with viciousness and brutality" (Travers 1968: 121). Warneke (2019: 30) suggests that, "the barbaric, ruthlessly repetitive nature of sealing may have been a potent factor ...[in violence by sealers]... Such relentless slaughter must inevitably have led to callous indifference... and brought out the worst in the nature of some men."

Some amelioration in those judgements is indicated by evidence that abduction of Tasmanian Aboriginal women soon gave way to hiring indigenous women on contract when it was realized that their sealing skills were superior to those of European men. In fact, Aboriginal women were probably instrumental in keeping the sealer communities going by their understanding of resource location and availability (Anderson 2023; Merry 2003; Russell 2018; Ryan 1977). Attention to similar issues about southern New Zealand sealers has emerged recently in Entwisle's (2005) revision of William Tucker's reputation; in Ballantyne's (2012) analysis of Anu, one of the Indian crew who abandoned the *Matilda* in 1815, and in Angela Wanhalla's (2009, 2018) nuanced understanding of mixed-race relationships.

4. Conclusion

Much about the sealers and their mobility on the Tasman frontier remains to be explored. For example, how extensive was both Māori and Aboriginal trans-Tasman movement? There were certainly some Māori men and women in Bass Strait (Plomley and Henley 1990; Cahir and Clark 2014) and the redoubtable

Tommy Chaseland, another Aboriginal man and one woman with an infant were recorded in Foveaux Strait, during the sealing era (Prickett 2008). Yet, it is known that at least 750 foreign men landed in the southern South Island between 1780 and 1848, most of them from Australia, and more than half of them were young men, aged 16-26 (Anderson 1991). If many New Zealand sealers came from Bass Strait where sealing was collapsing in 1804, then both adult Aboriginal men and women, and by about 1820 also mixed-race children of 16 or older, could have been more numerous amongst them than is currently known.

Another matter in the historiography of New Zealand sealing is the extent to which the devastation of seal populations was due to the 'rapacity' and 'brutal efficiency' of sealers (Capie 2009: 278), to cite one of numerous such assertions. This is a topic for greater consideration elsewhere, but two points can be noted. First, it was the sealing companies, not the sealers, that modulated the rate of harvest. Second, as Ian Smith (2005) argued, the effective elimination of fur seals throughout most of New Zealand, by a very low-density human population in the first few centuries of habitation, indicates that sustainable harvesting rates needed to be unusually low. Nobody knew that, either in the fourteenth or the nineteenth centuries, although it might be naive to think that, were it known, it would have made a difference.

Returning to the topic here, I have argued that first hand historical and archaeological evidence, admittedly meagre, of sealers' lives and activities in southern New Zealand is at odds with assertions of primitivity, barbarity, brutality, and so on in the broader historical literature. I have suggested that sealers were skilled in boat handling, moved and worked methodically with a network of huts as their primary accommodation, grew or sought vegetables, were generally abstemious, avoided conflict with Māori when they could and, in the later years, spent long periods peacefully with Māori partners in Māori villages, or in sealing settlements.

This might be too generous a conclusion but whether it is or not must await the taking of a truer bearing on the southern sealers through more comprehensive historical and archaeological research. It would involve biographies of individuals and their families, additional archaeology of sealer sites and contextualisation of such 'close-range' evidence in broader studies of nationality, occupation and demography (cf. Cuneen and Allbrook 2023). Bringing the origins, society, manners and experiences of our earliest pioneers of maritime industry into sharper focus would be a valuable contribution to New Zealand's social history and historical archaeology, and a fitting tribute to Ian Smith's scholarly career.

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