



## High Spirits

*‘Written to honour the memory of my late husband \*David Douglas Mackenzie, great-grandson and grandson of Captain William Adams, Sr. and Jr.’*

By May Georgina Mackenzie, MLitt Humanities, Dundee University, 2010

When I made my journey from Western Canada to Scotland and the city of Dundee, I was not aware that I was travelling along the route, albeit from the comfort of my airplane seat that, centuries before, the Thules<sup>1</sup> had taken across the inhospitable land that stretched out below. The Thules left the region, known today as Alaska, in search of food and I had set out in search of history, but we were to be inextricably linked by Dundee whaling master and Arctic navigator, Capt. William Adams, Sr., to a common cause; the study of survival.

While reading Basil Lubbock’s book, *Arctic Whalers*,<sup>2</sup> I came across a photograph of Capt. Adams, in stern pose, looking out to the horizon from the vantage point of his crow’s nest. I wondered what he saw, what it must be like to look at the world from where he was so high up in the rigging and what he was thinking behind the serious mask. I thought it would be an interesting challenge to create a work of fiction based on historical research, to bring to life something of the era in which he lived and to reveal more of his persona other than that of ships’ master.

Perhaps I had set myself an impossible task. I was to discover that Capt. Adams was used to setting impossible tasks and through his example of courage and dedication, he challenged others to venture out and make them possible. So I ventured out.

I discovered that the Thules eventually settled in the Arctic region of Eastern Canada and became expert whale hunters. It was the descendants of the Thules, the Inuit, with whom Capt. Adams first made contact during his arctic voyages. This was the link that connected Dundee and its inhabitants with Canada and the Thules tribe.

I had completed Chapters One and Two of the creative work as part of the MLitt in the Humanities university course and as I continued with the requirement for the dissertation by completing Chapters Three to Seven, it became apparent that Capt. Adams and other arctic seafarers lived in two worlds, two dimensions, one very different from the other.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert McGee, *Ancient People of the Arctic* (Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 1996) p.24

<sup>2</sup> Basil Lubbock, *The Arctic Whalers*, (Glasgow, Scotland 1937) Captain Adams Sr. (see photo plate).



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I wanted to present both worlds by walking the reader through the streets of 19<sup>th</sup> century Dundee to describe the socio-economic conditions during Capt. Adams time<sup>3</sup>. Writing of a voyage on a whaling ship was an opportunity to present the other world, one of Inuit, survival, grandeur, ice, monotony, terror, bravery, fear, killing and conscience.

I learned from some of Capt. Adams' descendants that he spoke with a broad Scots accent. This seems to be validated by comments made in a journal written by naval explorer, Capt. Markham<sup>4</sup>. A copy of one of Capt. Adams' public speeches however, indicated that he also possessed the ability to speak with eloquence, sophistication and knowledge<sup>5</sup>.

To write a story of such complexity and attempt to uncover what lay behind the mask of Capt. Adams within the boundary of a 15,000 word dissertation was a challenge, but I tried to make it credible given the constraints.

To write in the vernacular across all social classes in Victorian times posed a challenge in the crafting of a flowing narrative. There was a formality of written and spoken language in the era that I therefore tried to emulate by using that formal voice throughout in writing the story and dialogue. When writing about the character Johnson's experiences in his personal journal entries, I had to be careful not to use modern language. This resulted perhaps in a more formal and restrained dialogue for someone of this character's working class background. However, as a journalist, he would have had an affinity with words and language. His work would have provided an opportunity to cross the social divide where he might have heard and learned of such complexities. In the fictional work, his personal journal was also to be used in a professional capacity as he wrote his editorials. For these reasons therefore, I believed the formal tone would hold its credibility.

In the Barrack Street Museum I found that the documentary evidence was scarce given the activity surrounding 19<sup>th</sup> century whaling, trade and industry. It raised speculative questions in my mind that perhaps some sensibility to whaling and business practices of the day had resulted in a purge of documents or that they had merely been lost over time. The initial research surrounding Capt. Adams was positive, but without extensive records it did not necessarily provide a balanced, objective

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<sup>3</sup> *The Dundee Courier and Argos* (Dundee, Scotland), Monday, November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1867 Issue 4452. *19th Century British Library Newspapers: Part II Jute Manufacturing in Dundee.*

<sup>4</sup> Capt. Albert Hastings Markham, *A Whaling Cruise to Baffin's Bay and the Gulf of Boothia* (Sampson Low, Marston, Low and Searle, London, 1875) p.61.

<sup>5</sup> *The Dundee Courier and Argus* (Dundee, Scotland), Thursday, August 7<sup>th</sup>, 1890; Issue 11571, *19th Century British Library Newspapers: Part II. Death of Capt. Adams.*



viewpoint. However I was able to read a ship's journal, touch the pages and connect to a sense of the atmosphere and life aboard a whaler which was helpful when writing Chapter Six.

By contrast, in the McManus Museum, I thought that the modest display on Whaling during the 19<sup>th</sup> century was well balanced. It preserved the history while recognizing current sensibilities to whale conservation. To view artefacts such as scrimshaw, carved objects and a sealskin pouch gave a connection to the 'other world' of Capt. Adams and helped in writing about them later. A separate display of the harpoons raised my awareness to how large these weapons were. They looked cold and cruel and I was reminded of what it took to kill the whale with three or more of these large steel harpoons.

Then there was the large oil painting of Capt Adams in the display that I found very illuminating. This was different from the earlier picture I had found. It was an artists' impression and had been crafted with much sensitivity. Unlike the side profile in the photograph, the artist had painted Capt. Adams facing forward. There was softness in the eyes that I wasn't expecting. If, as the expression goes, the eyes are the window to the soul, then the artist<sup>6</sup> had captured a very kind, humane and almost vulnerable side to Capt. Adams. I wondered if the artist, through his art, had given me some additional understanding of the man or if he had perhaps painted the subject as society and the sitter had expected. It was a curious experience because I had seen these eyes and the expression before, in the descendants of Capt. Adams.

A highlight of my research was a visit to *RRS Discovery*, the sailing ship I first saw in the harbour when I came over the railway bridge into Dundee. Although this research vessel was not built for the whaling industry it, none the less, gave a sense of what life must have been like on board. The amazing extent of the masts and rigging to the crow's nest was a magnificent sight as I bent my spine backwards and looked up from my place on the deck. It was difficult to imagine how masters of ships and their officers had not frozen to death once they were hoisted to the top of these huge masts as a lookout for navigation and whale spotting in inclement conditions.

A visit to the engine room provided an opportunity to explore below decks. Now that steam had been combined with sail, space had to be made for coal to feed the furnace and left less room for men and cargo. Provision for ships stores and hammocks slung on hooks made very cramped crew quarters for a long six month voyage, sometimes longer if a ship got stuck in the ice and had to winter in the

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<sup>6</sup> W. Ferrier, Artist, oil on canvas painting of Capt. William Adams, Snr., on display at the McManus Museum, Dundee. Museum Number 8-1941.



arctic. It was during such times that mariners such as Capt. Adams relied on the Inuit to teach them the skills for survival.

In 1875, a gift sent from Lady Franklin to Capt. Adams just before she died was the catalyst around which the fictional story developed. Capt. Adams had advised on many searches for the lost crew of the Franklin Expedition<sup>7</sup>. The death of Lady Franklin brought an end to that connection, although many would continue to pursue answers to the mystery over the next two centuries.

Also in 1875, Capt. Albert Hastings Markham, R.N., published his book entitled, *A Whaling Cruise to Baffin's Bay*, in which he described his experiences during a voyage he had taken with Capt. Adams aboard the *Arctic* two years earlier. This was an excellent resource when writing about a whaling voyage and for discovering more about Capt. Adams' character.

This was the year of the launch of *Arctic II*,<sup>8</sup> a replacement for the *Arctic* which was crushed in the ice in 1874<sup>9</sup>. It was this new ship that Capt. Adams referred to in Chapter Four of the literary work and the one in which Johnson would make his Arctic voyage the following year.

In addition to these documented sources, I used the fictional work to allude to Capt. Adams' layers of personality and possible political motives.

The title, *Flotsam in the Weave*, was chosen to combine the two worlds known to Capt. Adams and the fictional characters, the nautical connection with the industry in the town and the debris of their interwoven existence.

The organization of the chapters provided an opportunity to build on the physical and metaphorical weaving of the characters and develop a story around Johnson, the journalist. Johnson's experiences of struggle, suffering and survival during his journey to the Arctic provided the climax in the story. Dialogue presented in the final chapter between Johnson and Capt. Adams served to offer resolution.

In addition to library research. I walked through many of the streets in the town and the seaside village of Broughty Ferry where Capt. Adams had lived<sup>10</sup>. I visited the Verdant Works Museum in the Lochee area to experience what it would have been like for workers who had arrived at the gates to

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<sup>7</sup> *Caledonian Mercury*, (Edinburgh, Scotland), Thursday, January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1850; Issue 19951.

<sup>8</sup> *Dundee Register of Shipping 22<sup>nd</sup> Jan 1875* (Ingram Shipbuilding 1871-78, D31093, Local History Department, Central Library, Dundee)

<sup>9</sup> "*Arctic*", crushed in the ice in 1874 in Creswell Bay. (Ingram Shipbuilding, 1856-70; D31092, Local History Department, Central Library, Dundee).

<sup>10</sup> *County of Forfar, Parish of Dundee, 1888-1889*, Valuation Roll, p.16: Home of Capt. Adams, 12 Duntrune Terrace, West Ferry, Dundee.



look for work.

Inside the mill, recordings made by actors of scripted dialogue between the workers gave a sense of eavesdropping on a conversation and transported me in time, putting me there with the weavers behind the looms. Photographs and architectural detail from Charles McLean's, *Lost Dundee* and Chris Whatley's. *The Remaking of Jutepolis* were helpful resources when writing about conditions in the mill and town.

In Chapter Three, writing about Johnson's thoughts as he studied the linen tablecloth, gave an opportunity to bring the weavers to the table where they deserved a place. It was a treat to read the chapter on linen in, *The Words of the Grey Wind*, by Chris Arthur. The author writes about selective history and highlights the connections through the linen to the hard work of generations of weavers, working long hours in dreadful conditions so that the middle and upper classes could enjoy a pastime of needlepoint, bringing the colour of patterns to the cloth<sup>11</sup>. I agreed with these beautifully written sentiments and later in the work I tried to incorporate a further idea of embroidery as a

sort of code to the touch, messages from the past in the feel and texture of a form of raised and colourful Braille.

The mystery and intrigue surrounding Franklin was useful to include in the fictional story to imply that Capt. Adams perhaps knew more about it than he cared to impart. There was nothing to be found in the archive that spoke directly to this theory, but research showed that Capt. Adams knew the Inuit well, probably better than most. It seemed plausible that throughout his thirty years voyaging in the Arctic, the Inuit would have confided in him with regard to the fate of the Franklin crew. If, as reports suggested, cannibalism had been an issue, it was highly possible that Capt. Adams would have known about it but have kept it to himself.

Writing of a guest from India at the dinner, made it possible to introduce information about merchant trading and jute expansion in India<sup>12</sup>, a crucial part of Dundee's history.

It was the transfer of jute production to India that was to see the demise of industry in the town and with it, the whaling industry.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Chris Arthur, *The Words of the Grey Wind: Family and Epiphany in Ulster*, (Blackstaff Press, Belfast, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> House of Commons Hansard, HC Deb 8<sup>th</sup> February 1875 Vol 222 v76 India: Question on increase in factory system in Bombay.

<sup>13</sup> Markham, *Ibid* xiii.



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The funeral was an opportunity to present the surrounding customs and merge the classes on the street.<sup>14</sup> The men doffing their caps implied not only deference to the deceased but also alluded to a lower station in the social hierarchy.

A visit to the Howff Burial Ground in the town was a very moving but uplifting experience. I am not of the Jewish faith, but as I walked amongst the tombstones and read the rows of names, the dreaded word ‘cholera’ and noticed the wings representing the death of an infant carved into the stone, I was reminded of the Jewish ritual of placing a small stone on top of the tombstone as a token of respect; a gesture to show those resting beneath that they were remembered with a visit.<sup>15</sup> It occurred to me as I stood in this place of history, that we were all connected, whatever our faith or belief system. A stone, a spirit, a bell, or whatever symbolic ritual was meaningful, was another reminder that we stand as survivors today on the shoulders of our ancestors. There was a parallel here in the tombstones, surrounded by those who made bonnets, dresses, shoes and prepared the meat and baked the bread for other tables, with the story of linen. They gave their lives in the process but their voices continued to be heard as we connected through touch.

Today, the Chamber of Commerce building dominates the corner of Panmure Street.<sup>16</sup> As I walked by, I thought that it must have been an even more impressive symbol of power in its 19<sup>th</sup> century surroundings as a structure in less crowded architecture and something of an anomaly given the lack of space for the tenements. It therefore seemed the most suitable setting for a meeting of the mill owners to discuss the latest socio-political agenda at the beginning of Chapter Six, while presenting a reason to connect Johnson with Capt. Adams, for a journey to the Arctic.

It was not possible to research the ‘other world’ in the story through physical presence and much reliance had to be given to library research and oral histories of the Inuit.<sup>17</sup> It was however, relevant to place it nearer to the end given the chronology of the fictional story.

In Chapter Six, I wrote of Capt. Adams outlining the arctic journey to Johnson using a marine chart. This was to encapsulate the voyage for the reader and make the connections between Capt. Adams’ seafaring background, Johnson and the world of the Inuit.

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<sup>14</sup> Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, (Oxford University Press Inc., New York, 1966) p.300.

<sup>15</sup> Colin Murray Parkes, *Death Bereavement Across Cultures*, (Routledge, London, 1997) p.119.

<sup>16</sup> Louise Miskell, et al, *Victorian Dundee, Images and Realities*, (East Linton: 2002) plat 17, Dundee Chamber of Commerce.

<sup>17</sup> Dorothy Harley Eber, *Inuit Oral History Researcher*, [www.inuitwhalers.ca](http://www.inuitwhalers.ca)



Johnson's journal entries gave an opportunity to write about his physical, emotional and spiritual journey. The excitement he felt at the beginning of the adventure was replaced with the elation of the hunt and deteriorated further as disillusionment and revulsion brought him to the brink of madness.

Capt. Adams was presented in the background of the story and brought forward with his strongest presence in the final chapter. This idea came about while reading in Capt. Markham's journal, that Capt. Adams read to his crew during quiet times.<sup>18</sup> This presented another side to the character of Capt. Adams, a paternal image, a Shaman-like figure, with much in common with the Inuit man in the mask that Johnson asked about.

I chose the word 'with' rather than 'by' when writing, "Do not be troubled with whale spirit," because 'by' implied the presence of something external, whereas 'with' suggested that the spirit of the whale had entered the person with whom it had made contact.

The final chapter brought the threads of the story together and offered a conclusion based on the universality of suffering and survival. In the dialogue between Capt. Adams and Johnson, Capt. Adams simply stated his case and left Johnson to come to his own conclusions.

Capt. Albert Markham spent six months in the Arctic in the confines of a whaling ship with Capt. Adams. His recorded impressions were therefore a valuable resource when researching aspects of Capt. Adams' character.<sup>19</sup>

The fact that Capt. Adams' portrait is displayed in the McManus Museum and is also exhibited at the entrance to the *HMS Discovery* exhibit, suggests that others saw in him the bravery, courage and leadership that Capt. Albert Markham described.

The obituary in the Dundee Courier stated that he "... had qualities of the heart that endeared him to his crew....," and confirmed his efforts on behalf of the Esquimaux.<sup>20</sup>

It is Capt. Adams' own words, during a lecture he gave in Newport in 1883, reported in the Dundee Advertiser of 1890 that provide the most insight to his character. In relating a story of how he and his crew were nearly lost in the ice, he shows not only the leadership for which he was well known, but

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<sup>18</sup> Markham, Ibid p.24.

<sup>19</sup> Markham, Ibid pp.9, 10, 122, 123.

<sup>20</sup> The Dundee Courier and Argos (Dundee, Scotland) Thursday, August 7<sup>th</sup>, 1890; Issue 11571, *19<sup>th</sup> Century British Library Newspapers, Part II*.



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his willingness to work alongside his men as part of a team. His respect for his crew is evident, praising them for their fortitude and endurance. He describes how all would have been lost if it had not been for the spirited efforts of his crew and his engineer in particular, whom he describes as a “fine specimen of a man.”<sup>21</sup>

Beneath the mask, another ‘in-between’ world emerged, that of the Inuit ‘spirit’ world. I wondered if what I had experienced in the graveyard and had read in the story of linen was any different from what had happened to the Inuit and a story with which Capt. Adams had some understanding.

Today global warming has forced us to find solutions for ecological disasters by returning to the Inuit. It is their oral history, preserved over generations, that is now crucial to understanding this latest catastrophe perpetrated on their homeland.

Current academic, cultural and artistic interests are raising awareness to Inuit customs and culture.<sup>22</sup> Sadly however, it would seem that it is only when existence is threatened on a global scale that we look back and begin to take an interest in what Capt. Adams referred to as these ‘out of the world’ people.<sup>23</sup>

In lifting Capt. Adams’ mask, I have found another side to his character in his demonstrated affection for the Inuit and I am compelled to stop and listen to their messages. I am reminded, through Capt. Adams, that while current technological, academic and scientific advances provide sophisticated methods of research, we should remember that they have only been made possible through the connections to, and sacrifices of, our ancestors and to our links with the Thules tribe. Then perhaps, we will “not be troubled with whale spirit.”

From the vantage point of my aeroplane seat I have glimpsed another view of the Canadian Arctic horizon which I have found beneath the mask of Capt. Adams as he looked out from his crow’s nest. My journey continues.

**Reflective Essay ‘High Spirits’ written to accompany Masters’ Dissertation.**

**May Georgina Mackenzie, MLitt Humanities, Dundee University, 2010**

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<sup>21</sup> Dundee Advertiser, A Fearful Night in the Ice, (Dundee Yearbook, 1890) p.71 Obituary Notices, Capt. William Adams.

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.canadainternational.gc.ca> (Arctic Perspective Initiatives)

<sup>23</sup> Dundee Courier and Advertiser (Dundee Yearbook, 1890, Local History Department, Central Library, Dundee).