

William Scoresby Junior (1789-1857)

To the arctic enthusiast the name of William Scoresby, F.R.S., needs no introduction. The author of *An Account of the Arctic Regions*, the whaling captain-turned-scientist is too closely associated with pioneer arctic research to remain long unknown, even to the most modest beginner in polar studies. Indeed, the activities and achievements of this remarkable man place him in a class apart from almost all those who have journeyed and researched in polar regions.

Carrying on with great success the most demanding and arduous of all maritime activities — the hunting and capture of whales — he yet collected over a period of some 15 years data on sea currents and temperatures, ice formation and movement, wind directions and velocities, magnetic variations, marine organisms, biology of whales, structure of snow crystals and much besides, gathering all this original work together in his two-volume classic *Account of the Arctic Regions*. The publication of this work in 1820 marks the beginning of the scientific study of the polar regions.

And if this were not sufficient claim to fame, Scoresby's second volume was a significant addition to the literature of the sea in its accounts of whaling adventures and the dangers and thrills of the chase, which compare favourably with those of the great maritime novelists.

Scoresby was esteemed by the leading men of his time — Alexander von Humboldt, Leopold von Buch, and Sir Joseph Banks (fellow-voyager with Captain Cook, that other Whitby man of the sea), to name but a few. Even men whose interests lay outside the main field of his endeavour were aware of the originality of his arctic work. Writing to Scoresby on his return from the notable 1822 voyage, no less a person than Humphry Davy shows a keen appreciation and full understanding of the nature of Scoresby's exploratory and descriptive conquests in the North:

"I congratulate you on your safe return and on the success that has attended your researches. Your spirit of enterprise and your devotion to the cause of science amidst pursuits of so different a character entitle you to the warmest thanks of all those who are interested in the progress of natural knowledge and do honour to your country."

H. Davy October 1822

The results of Scoresby's scientific work in the Arctic have long been part of the fabric of our polar knowledge, and in his published works he left us first-hand accounts of his voyages in Greenland waters.

Geographically speaking, his most important voyage was that of 1822. The uncharted coastline of east Greenland became clear of ice around 1820, and in 1822 Scoresby, in the midst of an arduous whaling voyage, sailed along some 400 miles of this inhospitable landscape,

charting it, and naming points as he went in honour of scientific and other friends, chief of which was Scoresby Sound, named for his father. Almost all his place names survive today. They are currently being listed by A.K. Higgins of the Greenland Geological Survey.

Born at Cropton, near Whitby on the northeast coast of Britain in October 1789, the young William had his first taste of an arctic whaling voyage at the early age of ten, when he stowed away on his father's ship. Later, winters spent at Edinburgh University sharpened the acute observational and descriptive powers manifested during his summer whaling voyages; these talents led to the ultimate publication of Scoresby's major work.

He left active sea life in his thirties and entered the Church, and despite a busy life he continued to work for science with his pen, sending many papers to the Royal Society and the British Association, of which he was a founding member. Scoresby visited America and Canada twice in the 1840s, lecturing to support his many social endeavours in the industrial parish where he pioneered five schools for the illiterate mill-working children of Bradford.

He married three times, but none of his children survived him. He was a gentle man and greatly loved by all who knew him. He remained studious to the end of his life, and all his papers, log books, magnetic instruments, and botanical and geological specimens were left to the Whitby Museum, in whose care they remain.

William Scoresby's life was crowned by his final act of undertaking a voyage to Australia in order to verify his theories of compass behaviour in iron ships; the simple outcome of this was the conclusion that the only reliable place for the ship's compass was aloft. He died at Torquay in 1857.

While researching his records in preparation for his biography our respect and admiration for William Scoresby grew apace, and we marvelled at what manner of man he was who could combine such activities with rigorous descriptive exactitude in the search for new knowledge. Well might Davy have commented on such a phenomenon.

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William Scoresby at age 30. Courtesy of
Caedmon of Whitby Press

FURTHER READINGS

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