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magazine

Gary Tonkin By tooth and nail

the Art of
Scrimshaw



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COVER STORY

The old art of scrimshaw by tooth and nail

WAYNE HARRINGTON speaks to Master Scrimshander Gary Tonkin about the completion of an epic project which will be unveiled to the public this month.



BACK in the heady days of 1850s American maritime trade, the south coast of Western Australia was seen as a destination of great bounty.

Explorers and traders had known this for some time, and the fact was certainly not lost upon Major Edmund Lockyer who, only months after establishing a settlement at King George's Sound, reported to Governor Darling of the great resource to be found in the sea.

"The coast abounds with the sperm whale and have not as yet been molested from the whale ships not approaching so near the land from dread of the coast, that, as far as I can learn from the sealers who have been down here with common care and prudence not the slightest danger is to be apprehended," he wrote.

Lockyer pushed for regulation to protect whale and seal stocks, but the general view from Governor Darling was that New Holland was too far away and the ocean too vast to patrol.

The Swan River and other colonies would eventually be established to protect the region from American and French interests. However, in the meantime the American whaling trade continued.

Among the many ships that visited these waters was the bark "Kathleen" from the whaling port of New Bedford.

Sailing under the J&R Wing's company flag, the Kathleen was a profitable ship, regularly returning laden with prized whale oil after voyages demanding years away from home.

On these long voyages, music played an important role in keeping the crew entertained and in high spirits. The crew of many vessels relied on their few companions who could carry a tune, usually accompanied by a fiddle or banjo.

Aboard the Kathleen, under the stewardship of Captain Marble, a makeshift band was convened to pass the time, led by Elizabeth (Lizzie) Marble, the captain's wife.

As women were not permitted on long voyages, this was a privilege only extended to the Captain's wife. Being the only woman on board, Mrs Marble soon became a favourite amongst the Kathleen's crew for her kindness and maternal interaction. Even at the age of 32, she was still substantially older than many of the crew.

Taking on the role of "mother-hen", she helped make the journey a considerably friendlier voyage for all, and incorporated music into their daily lives.

During her time at sea, Mrs Marble kept detailed journals and letters, recording voyage's details, songs and poems. Years after her death, these cherished songs and notes in journals





held in the New Bedford Whaling Museum offer a window into the unique life aboard the whaling vessels.

Within Mrs Marble's journals, a 72-verse ballad, "A Voyage to New Holland" was preserved. This extensive song is one of the most complete ballads written about a single whaling voyage.

Written on-board the Kathleen in 1857, the ballad narrates the intricacies of the journey, including crewmates, passing vessels and events. Some of the most notable events include the loss of a shipmate and subsequent burial at sea, and heartbreak at various whaling ports.

The main account of the ballad chronicles the whale catches and stopovers at each port, highlighting the most profitable coastlines.

A shorter 14-verse ballad, "A Voyage in the Bark Kathleen" was also set aboard the Kathleen, written on the next whaling voyage in 1861, under the command of Captain Moores.

The overarching theme of this shorter ballad focuses on the crew of the vessel, naming them individually and thereby immortalising them in the history books.

Although both ballads are similar in style, there is a clear comparison between the "hasty tempered" Captain Moores, and seemingly easy-going nature of Captain Marble. Although the Marble family was not aboard for this

voyage, the new ballad made its way into Mrs Marble's possession and into her journals.

Sailing 15 successful voyages under the J&R Wing company flag, the bark Kathleen met a spectacular end while whaling in the Atlantic Ocean in 1902. While on a routine whaling voyage, the Kathleen was struck by a sperm whale causing the hull to crack and vessel to sink.

Slipping below the surface in a matter of hours, the crew safely disembarked into the three whaleboats. All boats and their crew made it to safety, with some reaching Barbados, over 1700km from where the Kathleen went down.

The Kathleen became one of three early wooden ships known to have been sunk by a whale, one of which, the Essex, was inspirational to the 1851 novel by Herman Melville, Moby-Dick.



GARY Tonkin has a stunning view over Princess Royal Harbour from the office in his Frederick Street home. And this seems fitting for someone considered amongst the world's foremost scrimshanders – keepers of the ancient art of scrimshaw.

While he didn't know it at the time, Gary's adventures while growing up in

Portland, Victoria, would later shape his career and artistic calling.

"Portland was a historic whaling town and full of maritime history and the first European settlement in Victoria," he reflects.

"We used to play as kids in what was a land-based whaling station. It was at the bottom of a cliff and nobody took any interest in it.

"It was covered in prickles and gorse and that sort of thing, but we knew what it was.

"Years later the Victorian Government wanted to know more about it, so they got hold of a mate of mine who is now involved with heritage at the town. When the Victorian Government sent divers out, they found a couple of tripods and whalebones.

"Of course, I never thought more about it, but different things change in your life and, for me, there was always this thing about heritage."

Gary embarked on a career as a meat inspector for the Commonwealth with a view he could use the job as a ticket to travel in Australia and overseas.

He was encouraged to travel west to ply his trade and, once here, was further encouraged to join teams stationed in the "plum" towns of the North West – Port Hedland, Broome and Derby.

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"When I got here and they were picking the teams, I thought I was a bit young, so I was keen to go anywhere," he says.

"Every Friday they'd come into the lunch room looking for volunteers for Geraldton or Bunbury or Albany.

"The other blokes said, 'We're going to Geraldton' or this and that, and I said, 'Well I'll go to Albany'. They said not to go down there because it rains six months a year and drips off leaves the other six months.

"They were all West Australians who'd been up north and I was only 21.

"I drove down here in an old EH Holden. I thought it was a pretty seaside town as I drove into town, but then I took the road out to Marine Drive and thought, 'Wow, this'll do!'

"There were about half a dozen inspectors here and I ended up getting in with a couple of older blokes who were divers and went spear fishing. I was going 100 miles each side of Albany down the coast and saw all the different places.

"No one wanted to come down to Albany so I just kept staying here."

It was a charmed life in the Albany of 1974 but, being something of a free spirit, Gary soon felt a sense of monotony, fuelled by the call of travel and adventure.

Despite cautionary advice to the contrary, Gary took a year off with a plan to travel through Africa.

"I went to Nairobi, and then I made my way down to Tanzania and across to the Congo," he recalls.

"I met some Germans who said they wanted someone to travel with them through the Congo in an old Unimog army radar truck. So I went with them for a while but decided they were mucking around too much so I went north because I wanted to go hunting with the Pygmies, which I did.

"I met an Australian who's now a lawyer in Melbourne. We were living with Canadian Peace Corps workers. Fifty cents a day and there was an Ovaltine tin full of dope if you ever wanted it. There was just everything.

"We went our own way at Kisangani. I learned a lot. I moved up the mission circuit, going from one mission to the next. If you planned your day right, at the end of the day you'd arrive and they'd give you a meal and a bed.

It was a dangerous time to be travelling in Africa, so Gary was always aware of avoiding trouble spots. He took heed of advice to avoid Uganda and also made the difficult decision



■ A series of chance events while travelling in Africa, Europe and the Middle East resulted in some life-changing experiences for the young Gary Tonkin.

to steer clear of the infamous George Foreman versus Muhammad Ali bout – The Rumble in the Jungle – in Kinshasa, Zaire.

"There was only a handful of white blokes travelling back then," he says.

"I went on to the Sahara, and there was lots of things happening, and later I ended up in Europe, but it was as boring as batshit."

It was while waiting to withdraw some cash at a European bank that, by chance, Gary picked up and read a brochure calling for people to join archaeological digs in Israel.

"Of course, I went and saw them," Gary says. "I lobbed up at this little upstairs joint above a flooded bloody street and said, 'So what's the go with the archaeological dig?'

"They told me not to be like the rest of the people and go on a Roman dig or something like that and think that I was going find something extraordinary.

"They said I was better off going to do this pre-history thing because they wanted a handful of people to work with university students."

Under Professor Ofer Bar Yosef, Gary and a small team lived on a kibbutz and worked on a dig in the Upper Rift Valley in the search for evidence of homo erectus.

It was a fascinating experience for the young Australian traveller – and not totally without some inherent risk, given the area was still on red alert after the end of the Yom Kippur War fought between the Arabs and Israelis.

"So I worked on that dig for a while,

looking for homo erectus," Gary says. "Professor Bar Yosef said if I found some cranial bones he'd pay for my airfare home.

"We found all sorts of tusks and things from prehistory animals."

Back in Western Australia and drawn once again to the South Coast, Gary happened upon a plan to bring together his interests in history and art.

"I had a house and it had a closed in fireplace. I suddenly decided, 'Bugger it, I'm going to pull out the fireplace and light a fire anyway'," he says.

"I was rapt because I love fireplaces. I decided I'd do some drawing by the fire. I topped my class in art at school.

"I knew of some pretty crude scrimshaw in town and I got interested in that because I was fascinated by whaling.

"I went out to the Whaling Station quite often and I saw the scrimshaw collection they had out there. The manager, Geoff Reilly, had a pair of big teeth in the office, and I kept driving out to look at them. I was fascinated."

"Anyway I started experimenting. You know, start off with the roofing nail, and went on and on and on. I just persevered.

"I used to sell it all around Australia to hotels and galleries and just trying to make money out of it so I could get out of the public service."

Meat inspection became a seasonal job in Albany and – when faced with a posting to Queensland – he hatched a clever plan to find a replacement and take leave without pay in order for him to stay home and concentrate on scrimshaw.

Gary was soon faced with a dilemma, however, as the imminent closure of the Cheynes Beach Whaling Company meant a catastrophic loss of supply of the main ingredient for scrimshaw – whale teeth.

"I put all my money into whales teeth because I just thought, 'This is my lot and I've gotta put my money where my mouth is'," Gary says.

He figured a personal loan of about \$2,000 might secure enough teeth to see him through for the foreseeable future. However, the four bags containing 200kg of teeth were to set him back the then staggering sum of \$10,000.

"That was enough for Reilly to buy a new car, but it was a good investment in the end," he reflects.

"I bought more and more but it still wasn't enough to get out of the Department – just too hard – but yeah it worked out alright.



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■ Twin passions for history and art have led Gary Tonkin to the highest echelons of scrimshanding.

“You pay a lot more than that now.” For the scrimshander purist, the artform has changed very little over the centuries. Gary works with ink and a simple scribe and his work has won acclaim from all over the globe. “I take the rough surface off to try and get it smooth. When I get it smooth I draw the design on with a HB pencil and then I start carving in the design,”

he explains. “It seems that people that have a crack at scrimshaw soon give it away because you’ve got to draw straight lines on a curved surface. “And that’s where they reckon I get the life and the energy into my work – the way I handle the curvature.” Loyal patrons from the United States have regularly flown him across the world to complete commissions

and exhibitions. Gary says his relative isolation from the rest of the scrimshanding world has proven to be a blessing – and one not lost on an American market which is ever on the lookout for works with authenticity. “A gallery owner in South Toledo said, ‘The best way for you to succeed is through where you live and being away from all these people in my gallery,

because they all copy each other’, which ends up being true,” Gary says. By chance, an enquiry from a would-be buyer from France sent Gary on the hunt for a complete whale jaw in the early 1990s. It would ultimately lead to the completion of perhaps the most epic of scrimshaw projects. “This Frenchman comes in and says, ‘I want a big whale’s jaw for my bibliotech in Paris’,” Gary says. “So I run around trying to find him one. I told him I couldn’t export them but he wanted me to find him one anyway. “I knew John Bell had one out at the Station, and that was from the biggest head of a sperm whale that had ever come up on the deck that they could remember. “He paid to have it removed without going through the head saw because when they cut a whale’s head off they cut through the jaw. Anyway, he had it lying on the shed floor out there. “He didn’t want to sell it when the Frenchman asked, but years and years later, he says to me, ‘You still want that jaw?’ I said the Frenchman’s gone but I was still interested.” And so work on the piece began. “The jawbone and teeth had numerous curvatures and densities. To apply engraving and carving over a large expanse was a challenge,” he says. “To get the composition in perspective over the full length required my young son Sam to hold model ships and levels while I moved around up to four metres to gain the proper perspectives.”

continued page 10



HAVE YOU CONSIDERED JESUS



Jesus Christ as God’s only beloved son came to this earth to redeem man back to God. His birth was miraculous and even from a young age he made a worldwide impact that resonated through the ages and into society today.

Jesus was a man who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another neighbouring village. He worked in a carpenter shop until He was thirty. Then for three years He was an itinerant preacher. Jesus never owned a home. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family. He never went to college. He never put His foot inside a big city. He never travelled more than two hundred miles from the place He was born. He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness.

He had no credentials but Himself. While still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One of them denied Him. He was also turned over to His enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed upon a cross between two thieves. While He was dying, His executioners gambled for the only piece of property He had on earth - His coat.

The Bible tells us that one Friday almost 2,000 years ago; Jesus Christ died on a cross and was buried before sunset. When He was dead, He was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend. But it also records that He left the empty tomb on Sunday morning, three days later, arising from the dead. That, according to Christians ever since, is the event of Easter. Christians for almost 20 centuries have been declaring that the Easter event is the literal bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the grave. This faith has changed lives in the past and it still does today.

Millions of believers throughout history and around the world, have chosen to die as martyrs rather than to deny their faith. But can educated, refined people living in our generation truly be convinced that Jesus Christ really did come back from the dead? Many would say no. They feel we have progressed too far to consider the resurrection of Jesus to be an authentic historical event. However, truth is not negotiable and historical statements of fact are not open to question. In a historical sense, the resurrection stands on ground that is solid. Reliable witnesses wrote about meeting and talking with Jesus after His death. Sceptical enemies

noticed His disappearance from the tomb. Extra biblical, historical reports were also given of His resurrection. In fact, many eyewitnesses of Jesus’ post-death appearances died defending their belief in it.

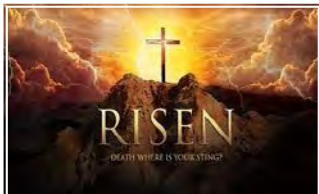
We believe that the resurrection of Jesus is a real historical occurrence with great significance for all of us today. Thus, believing or not believing in it is a life-or-death matter as it determines our eternal destiny. Nineteen long centuries have come and gone and today He is a centrepiece of the human race and leader of the column of progress. We are far within the mark when I say that all the armies that have ever marched, all the armed forces that have ever been assembled; all the parliaments that have ever sat and all the kings that ever reigned, all put together, have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as has that one solitary life!

In recent years, manuscript copies of New Testament portions have been found that prove it was written when the contemporaries of Jesus Christ were still alive. The Christian church was not born nor does it exist today on the basis of Jesus’ life and teachings. The church that began less than 2 months after Jesus’ death is the result of something more significant than His great sayings, parables, and philosophies.

It began because a group of people in Jerusalem testified that they saw Jesus alive after He had been killed. Without the faith of those resurrection witnesses and the new faith of those who believed their testimony about it, there would be no Christian church anywhere today. The evidence is in. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is a verifiable, historical event. Also the gospel still changes lives and gives courage. Thousands of believers can attest to the fact. Think of the key world events of your lifetime. Whatever comes to mind, you can be sure of this: no event has affected every human on earth and none of them has had the kind of monumental, worldwide, eternal effect that the one event almost 2,000 years ago claims to have.

This event is the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He is alive and well - accept Him today as your personal saviour and allow Him to change your life.

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What followed over the next three decades was a piece-by-piece completion of one of the greatest maritime stories every told.

□□□

THERE is a great sense of excitement building at Albany's Historic Whaling Station. Sitting in the new pride of place is its stunning new display, "The Art of Scrimshaw".

The end result of Gary Tonkin's three decades of painstaking work is a finely engraved four-metre sperm whale jawbone – the largest and most intricately carved creation and greatest artistic challenge of his career.

The display will be officially opened on May 2.

The jawbone itself depicts the final leg of the Kathleen's journey, portraying the capsizing ship on the large surface of the jaw's panbone and the crew rowing down the jawbone's length.

The 22 teeth along the jawbone have each been etched with individually designed scenes inspired by the historical ballads written aboard the Kathleen by Lizzie Marble.

Heavily referenced throughout these ballads are the different ports they visited on their journey to the whaling grounds off New Holland, with specific mention of many western landmarks such as Cape Leeuwin, Cape Naturaliste, Geographe Bay and the ports of Fremantle and Bunbury.

The new scrimshaw exhibition at Albany's Historic Whaling Station includes an interactive display that highlights the selected ballad excerpts. Museum visitors can view each tooth's artwork whilst listening to the original verse, reminiscent of the life on deck of the whaling ship.

□□□

GARY Tonkin often marvels at the role fate has played in his life. From his childhood and



■ Gary Tonkin looks forward to the continuation of his quest for scrimshaw perfection.



■ A scrimshander's tools of the trade have changed very little over the past 200 years.

working career to international travels and eventual arrival at the pinnacle of the international scrimshanding community, there have been many remarkable coincidences along the way.

The completion of the centrepiece of the soon-to-be-unveiled "The Art of Scrimshaw" display was littered with curious events and coincidences – not the least of which was Gary's selection of the Kathleen ballads for the

sperm whale jawbone.

Gary had developed a strong friendship with American whaling historian Dr Stuart Frank during the early involvement with scrimshanding.

"Stuart had seen the jaw when he came out here to help me fight the Government to save the Whaling Station," Gary says.

"I rang Stuart from my shed out in the bush – my studio – to tell him what I'd decided to

put on it. He said he couldn't believe it and that it was a really wise choice because it was a whaler recorded in 'Whaling on the New Holland Grounds'. He also explained to me that he'd written his thesis at Brown University on the Kathleen and its ballads.

"He gave permission for me to use all his material from his studies on the project."

Reflecting upon his completed artwork, Gary remains quietly modest about the amazing achievement, but admits it will likely be seen as the pinnacle of his artistic career.

"I've done some very good pieces, but the jawbone, the teeth and the entire story, the connection with Albany and the connection with Stuart Frank's work means it has the whole box and dice," he says.

"It's had a big effect on my

life I suppose, but it's up to other people as to whether they like it or not.

"I was pretty impressed with what they've done at the Station. They've made it all worthwhile."

As for the future, Gary Tonkin is committed to further developing his craft and he looks forward to learning more about the lost and forgotten stories from maritime history.

"I won't ever be completely happy because I'm always learning and getting finer and better," he says.

"But I've met a lot of interesting people and met a lot of challenges on the way.

"It seems like it has all come together. I look back at my life and think it's a bit like that movie, The Truman Show. It's almost like I've been on a journey that was planned for me." **S**

□ Thanks to Albany's Historic Whaling Station's Elise Van Gorp and Alice Ackley for supplementary reporting. The Art of Scrimshaw opens to the public on Wednesday, May 3.



Rebecca Stephens

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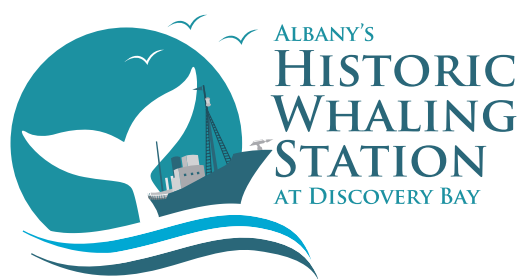
the Art of Scrimshaw

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