The Balaena

The Balaena

The noble fleet of whalers went sailing from Dundee
Well manned by British sailors to work upon the sea
On the Western Ocean passage none with them can compare
But the smartest ship to make the trip is Balaena I declare

cho: Oh the wind is on her quarter her engines working free
There's not another whaler that sails out of Dundee
Can beat the ol' Balaena she needs no trial run
We challenged all both great & small from Dundee to St John

It happened on a Tuesday three days out of Dundee
The gale took off her quarter boat & a couple of men you see
It battered at her bulwarks her stanchions & her rails
And left the old Balaena boys a frothing in the gale

Bold Jackman cut his canvas & fairly raised his steam
And Captain Guy with Erin Boy was ploughing through the stream
And the noble Terra Nova her boilers nearly burst
And still at the old whaling grounds Balaena got there first

And now the season's over & the ship half full of oil
Our flying jib boom points for home towards our native soil
And when that we have landed boys where rum is very cheap
We'll drink sucess to the skipper's health for getting us over the deep

THE OLD POLINA

There's a noble fleet of Whalers, a sailing from Dundee
Manned by British sailors, to take them o'er the sea
On a western ocean passage, we started on the trip
And we flew along, just like a song in our gallant whaling ship.

CHORUS
For the wind was on her quarter, and the engines working free
There's not another whaler, that sails the Arctic Sea
Can beat the Old Polina, you need not try me sons
For we challenged all, both great and small, from Dundee to St. John's.

'Twas the second Sunday morning, just after leaving port
We met a heavy Sou'West gale that washed away our boat

It washed away our quarter deck, our stanchions just as well
And so we set the whole she-bang a-floating in the gale
[Note: some sing "a-floating off to hell"]

[chorus again]

Art Jackson set his canvas, Fairweather got up steam
And Captain Guy, the darling bye, came plunging through the stream
And Mullins in the "Husky" tried to beat the blooming lot
But to beat The Old Polina was something he could not

[chorus again]

There's the noble "Terra Nova", a model without doubt
The "Arctic" and "Aurora" they talk so much about
Art Jackman's model mail boat -- the terror of the sea
Tried to beat the "Old Polina" on a passage from Dundee

[chorus again]

And now we're back in old St. John's, where rum is very cheap
So we'll drink a health to Captain Guy who brought us o'er the deep
A health to all our sweethearts and to our wives so fair
Not another ship could make the trip with the "Polina" I declare.

NOTE: The Balaena was right around the time (1890's) of cutting edge tech. fast steamers & the harpoon cannon. While Captain Guy started the hunt for bottlenose whales (considered the most dangerous to chase), the Balaena went into the Ant arctic after the finn and blue whales. They were fast swimmers & couldn't be cau ght in the old style, they were too big & too fast, yet the finn was easy to cut & try & had a good yield. The blue was the was a great yield & meant big money for the men. The fast steamer and cannon changed the face of the industry & its music. BF

Yes, the song is a Newfoundland song, but the ship's name (says Edith Fowke, Pen guin Book of Canadian Folk Songs) is the Polynia, launched 1861, a 472-tonner ow ned by Dundee Seal and Whale Fishing Company (so you didn't know whales and seal s were fish?). It was commanded by Capt. William Guy from 1883 until it was lost in Davis Strait 10 July 1891, being crushed between two ice floes in a gale. Fo wke got the song from Doyle (Old-Time Songs and Poetry of Newfoundland, 1955 ed.), and it's also mentioned in Paul Mercer's "Newfoundland Songs and Ball ads in Print 1842-1974" and Michael Taft's "A Regional Discography of Newfoundla nd and Labrador 1904-1972", both lovely books from Memorial U. Folklore dept. JB

The Report of the Commissioner of Fish & Fisheries (New England), register a Ba laena from the 1850's up till it's sale in while in the port New Bedford 1871.
She had been managed by the same ship's agent (James Howland & among her captain s there was never a Guy), tonnage was 301. She was ship rigged & sometime betwee

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n 1863 & 64 rerigged as a bark. She fished the Alantic, Pacif
the reports cover futher north than Mass. only from New York to Mass. but I'd t
hink that those ports handled a very large percentage of the ships in the whalin
g industry for the North Alantic. BF

And for your etymological digression, I wonder if Polynia is a spelling of "poly
nya", an area of open water in sea ice, from Russian polyn'ya. If so it was a ne
w word then--Merriam-Webster On Line gives the first use in English as 1853. And
the pronunciation changed, as the Newfoundland tape I've heard pronounced it to
rhyme with "Carolina". And the fate of the ship was ironic. TJ

EDITOR'S NOTE: I included the commentaries in hope that they'd be a reminder of
the difficulties of establishing historical truth of folksonsgs. Also of the fut
ility of relying on proper names. I've seen it spelled Baleena, Balena, Balina,
Polina and Balaena. Go figure. RG

TJ, JB, BF
apr00

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