

...excerpt from pages 125-129 of **May We Rant and Roar No More** .

Conditions were remarkable. And as my earlier wharf mate suggested, it was advisable that they were for an attempt to round the head of land separating Placentia and St. Mary's Bays. It was a sheer wall, weathered round and smooth at its peak from eons of constant exposure and an ice age, which had long since created the bare, stark landscape of the Avalon Peninsula. Averaging four hundred feet, the cliffs were a brilliant backdrop to the morning's voyage along their shores.

Surprisingly, I felt little effects from the previous day's abuse of my system, and the negligible swell and winds were certainly accountable for my pleasant disposition. Above me, the upper limits of the cliff could rarely be seen under its cloak of dense, low-lying cloud.

Two miles before reaching Cape St. Mary's itself, I was crossing a small bay. The inner limits of its shore were only a mile away, where I caught a glimpse of a whale rising for air. A long, concentrated blow followed and, viewed from that distance, I immediately knew it was a species I'd yet to encounter. He was traveling in the same direction and I surmised that if he were to maintain his course and I continued on mine, our trajectories would meet as he followed the shoreline; the approach to the cape would be the location of our rendezvous.

I maintained my regular speed and twice more the whale came up casually for air. My excitement grew as I became aware that the creature was of mammoth proportions. As our paths converged, I discovered that this whale was something entirely unique to my journey thus far. "My God, it must be eighty feet long or more!" I exclaimed.

Many minutes passed. Ten, fifteen, and there was still no sign of the giant. My spirits sank as I counseled myself that the brief, distant encounter with the animal would be just that, all too brief and from a distance all too disappointing for my inquisitive self. As with many of my previous encounters with the depths' inhabitants, the sea was vast and there were no rules that these beings had to follow. They certainly didn't have to meander about for the sole enjoyment of a mere human. I'd have to be satisfied with the scene I'd witnessed, for how many others currently alive on the planet had witnessed such an occasion?

Then I nearly capsized from the next unexpected occurrence. A boat length off to my starboard, the gargantuan creature slowly broke the surface, and a vast expanse of whale began to perform its process of entering my world for another breath of life. Slowly his eye became visible over the short distance that separated us, and he looked deep into my soul and was reassured of my peaceful nature. The vastness of his eye – its clarity, its calm, is a vision that will remain in my mind forever.

There were no overzealous whoops of joy. I was humbled into a calm, refreshed understanding with this mightiest of creatures. His curiosity must have overcome him as much as mine had. Without any fear I slowly glided myself closer to him. In an act of solidarity we slowly, side by side, escorted each other to the cape. I'd never felt such a powerful connection with another being. Each time he resurfaced, his eye would remain fixed on my own.

There was a hint of sadness in his as well. We were both very scared for the world that had evolved around us. I wondered how lonely *he* must feel, being one of the last remaining individuals of his kind. He had to roam his world in search of a mate as well, yet his probably no longer existed.

We continued on and separated a little to give ourselves a comfortable berth. All else concerning my surroundings had little comprehension for me, until we slowly began rounding the awesome headland. The sea was so giftedly calm that I approached to within a boat's length of the cliff walls and gazed awestruck at the array of crags and ridges.

The birds. Never had I seen so many. Gannets. I'd seen only six the entire journey, but before my eyes was a colony of thousands! As we reverently proceeded through the paradise, they all began leaving their nests and places of berth on the rock face.

Before me, a massive orb of life began to form in the sky. The top of the cliffs remained shrouded in fog. The sky offshore was clear, and it was there that the spectacle took place. A stunning swirl of soaring birds – it grew dense and magical as swarms continued to leave their roosts and join the gathering in the sky. It developed into a continuous ring, like those surrounding Saturn, and I was merely

on the edge of their orbital plane. It stretched over a mile out to sea and remained unevenly dispersed; the majority, a thick nucleus of life, came around to make their approach every eight minutes.

The audible soundtrack of my journey could never be duplicated. There was no sound emitted from the entire population other than the slow, graceful wing movements as they occasionally sliced sharply through the air. Like a crow flying directly overhead in the stillness of a morning, yet slowed to the rate of a gannet's flight, and increased in decibels to the point where it was like placing your ear directly above a colony of termites.

The smell of ammonia was thick in the air. The cliffs were spottled white from centuries of nesting birds. Occasionally a barrage of waste would descend like droplets of gelatinous paint onto the surface of the water surrounding me.

My earlier companion remained stoically by my side. Gradually the sight of the forthcoming headland came into view; there was a mile stretch between the point and us. I looked on in stunned, disbelieving wonder. How was it possible that this tantalizing glimpse of Nirvana could be improved upon? For before us lay yet another remarkable sight. A pod of thirty or forty Humpbacks lay in our path, casually feeding and breaching. From the shore extending almost a mile off it was a literal minefield of megaton sea mammals.

What to do? I couldn't hold up and simply wait with the hopes that they'd disperse. After all, I was in the process of rounding one of the most exposed, dangerous headlands on the face of the planet. The ocean had calmed to permit me a safe voyage. Who's to say when she'd awaken to put a few disrespectful *homo sapiens* in line?

My guardian angel beside me continued, unperturbed, towards the group of Humpbacks. It was elementary that I was expected to follow. Slowly we approached the outer fringe of the pod, and while a thousand gannets continued to soar overhead, one of the largest animals ever to grace the planet and I entered the party. Incredibly, we were permitted a respectful passage and continued on, unhindered by the group of feeding whales around us. Where once they had seemed immense in their size, they were now dwarfed by the gargantuan mass of my escort.

Surrounding us, the pod seemed unaffected by the faint interruption to their early morning feeding.

To encounter this pod alone would've been an incredible event. The environment I found myself in that morning was nothing short of miraculous, and, without question one of the most spectacular paddling experiences anyone has ever encountered. Yet the experience was not yet complete. Once we'd navigated through the thickest section of the group, we periodically encountered others as we crossed the entirety of Golden Bay. There were many spectacular displays of tail flukes as they descended into the depths for an extended dive.

We were rounding a small island to set my course for the final point and I felt the pinnacle of life had been left behind. I turned and looked back toward the cape. The majority of the birds had returned to the cliffs, and the pod of whales had continued their feeding. As many as twelve blows could be seen simultaneously, as the rising sun emphasized their mist-enshrouded surfacings from the distance we'd put between them and ourselves. I turned to proceed, an overwhelming glow in my heart, and quickly found myself back-paddling as I was forced to focus on the scene before me.

I'd nearly paddled into an incredible, baleen-filled mouth as it came forcibly out of the water. Dozens of capelin broke the surface with the whale's head. Displaced water and fish were being thrown high into the air as I stopped completely, and marveled. A mother and her calf were before me and I soon discovered that she was teaching her young one to feed. I watched in continued wonder as she dove deep and then reappeared straight up, mouth wide to catch all the capelin that she'd schooled together. She did this three times and then, following a quick turn to herd more fish together, her calf joined her.

I simply waited and enjoyed, confident that fate would decide all things. This early morning tour would be completely uninterrupted without any concerns of impending weather, a place to land, a girl to marry or even a government to denounce.