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William Scoresby

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William Scoresby (1789-1857) made his first voyage in the whaler Resolution from Whitby to the Greenland Sea, west of Spitsbergen, in 1800. Three years later he was formally apprenticed to his father and another three years saw him promoted to chief officer. On 5 October 1810, his twenty-first birthday, 'the earliest at which, by reason of age, I could legally hold a command', his father moved to Greenock and another ship, relinquishing the Resolution to his son. Another ten years would see the publication of what has been described as 'one of the most remarkable books in the English language', his two-volume An Account of the Arctic Regions, with a History and Description of the Northern Whale-Fishery (1820). Even before he took command of the Resolution, two developments had occurred that, when combined with his seamanship and whaling skill, were to make that book 'the foundation stone of Arctic science' and cause the journals of his annual voyages to be remarkable accounts in their own right. First, Scoresby had studied, during two brief winters at the University of Edinburgh. Teachers such as John Playfair and Robert Jameson had made him aware of the scientific importance of his arctic experience. Together with Sir Joseph Banks, the president of the Royal Society, they encouraged him to observe, experiment and record, and provided opportunities for his data to be published. Secondly, this encouragement, and the study habits he developed at Edinburgh, led Scoresby to expand the logs of his arctic voyages into lengthy journals that contained scientific records and social and religious comment as well as detailed descriptions of navigation and whaling.

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