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ABSTRACT

The whale oil lamp tells us – in the twenty first century – that the past from when it came was not a simple time. An examination of predominately recent secondary sources and an analysis of the historical consumption of oil lamp fuel through the current historiography on the period of 1840 to 1870 through a post-colonial lens reveal some of the complexity of the whale oil lamp and the ways in which it exemplified colonial relationships and social hierarchies. Explorations into historical topics, items and issues, can highlight our inherited colonial / settler-colonial / imperial relationships to land and people (objectified as merely resources), and allow us to better understand the multiplicity, complexity, and violence of those relationships. The whale oil lamp thus functions as a frame to examine the nineteenth century as demonstrated by aggressive American whale hunting practices, and colonial relationships with Inuit peoples in the arctic, during the same period as whale oil was being gradually replaced with petroleum based kerosene.

KEYWORDS
Oil Illuminant; Post-Colonial History; American Imperialism; Inuit / Whaler Relations

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From the earliest days of settlement the colonists had supplemented firelight with open lamps, usually of wrought iron, of a type that had been used time out of mind. The very simplicity of such an arrangement, with a cotton or tow wick resting in almost any kind of illuminant, from fish oil and kitchen grease to the better kinds of whale and vegetable oils, encouraged its use until well into the nineteenth century. (Davidson 32)

The quaint whale oil lamp with its warm, dim, flickering, scented light was only one form of illumination available to North American settlers in the mid-nineteenth century. What does this object tell us, in the twenty first century, about the era from when it came beyond a nostalgic reach for a fictitiously ‘simpler’ time? An examination of predominately recent secondary sources and an analysis of the historical consumption of oil lamp fuel through the current historiography on the period of 1840 to 1870 through a post-colonial lens reveal some of the complexity of the whale oil lamp and the ways in which it exemplified colonial relationships and social hierarchies. The whale oil lamp thus functions as a frame to examine the nineteenth century as a settler-colonial and imperial period of extraction, domination and consumption, as demonstrated by aggressive American whale hunting practices, and colonial relationships with Inuit peoples in the arctic, during the same period as whale oil was being gradually replaced with petroleum based kerosene.
The period of 1840 to 1870 was incredibly important in the history of North America. For Canada, it was a time of transition from a colonial possession of Britain to a state with independent control over its internal affairs. The Dominion of Canada was only a small fraction of its current geography. It comprised only four provinces, “and Quebec and Ontario had only a third of the territory they would later possess” (Hillmer 3). The young dominion was only “‘an eelskin [sic] of settled country’ – close up to the United States” (Hillmer 3). The Dominion of Canada as of 1867, like its predecessor British North America, persistently struggled with the “apparent paradox of independence and ‘Americanisation’ on the one hand, and recolonisation and ‘Anglicisation’ on the other” (Veracini 22).

As a nation, Canada was still in its infancy, and so, with the steady rise in national sentiment, Confederation along with the ensuing Canadian-American relationship would be the subject of myth-making. The nineteenth century would be imagined as a nostalgic era of peaceful negotiations, ‘progress’ and development:

> North America’s peaceful character, its penchant for arbitration over warfare, was largely a myth. There had been wars, rebellions, bloodshed, and strife aplenty as the relations between the two peoples sorted themselves out. But if nations need myths, and they do, surely it was better to believe the peaceful ones than those that were redolent of conquest and violence. (Hillmer, xv-xvi)

Colonial structures relied heavily on these myths as a means of concealing these distressing elements. These myths also functioned to ease the burgeoning nationalist imaginings and to deflect from the evident disparities between the two neighbouring countries (Hillmer xvi).
For the United States, it was a period of conflict and civil war. Yet, despite – or, perhaps, because of – these events for political, national, and economic independence and union, colonial and imperial world views persisted, if not flourished. America experienced “a triumphant settler colonial circumstance” (Veracini 22); a shift from a settler-colonial nation to an imperial one (Domosh 453). American imperialism was not merely the Manifest Destiny of the westward expansion, but it was also expressed through bourgeoisie capitalist expansion as the whale oil lamp exemplifies. It was an “informal imperialism - a form of imperialism by which control was established through the ostensibly peaceful means of free trade and economic integration” (Domosh 455).

As articulated by “Marx and Engels, ‘The need for a constantly expanding market for its goods chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere’” (Childs 5). This expansion of enterprise and its customer base along with a search for low cost labour played a major role in the development of American imperialism (Childs 5-6, Domosh 456). In the example of the whale oil lamp, Canada was one such market, and the Inuit were labourers in the whaling industry paid predominately in food, tobacco and weaponry.

Even in the arctic among the Inuit, having ones ship dragged through the choppy waters by a harpooned whale was known as a “Nantucket sleigh ride” (Eber 13). Based predominately out of New England cities of New London, New Bedford, Sag Harbour and Nantucket (Eber 23; Moment 262, 263), the “Americans were the pre-eminent whalers in the world” (Eber 11). There were several species of whale to hunt, but the most popular were the right whales (the arctic bowhead is one large type of
right whale) and the sperm whale also known as the cachalot. Both types were hunted for their fatty oils which burned smoothly in lamps or were used to lubricate machinery. A single bowhead whale could provide twenty to thirty tons of oil and a ton or more of baleen (Eber 16). Oil from right whales was frequently more affordable for consumers than that of sperm whales, but right whale oil did not burn as nicely as sperm whale oil (Bardi 299; Moment 265).

Right whales were also a source of baleen, unlike the toothed sperm whales. Baleen and whale boning was strong and yet flexible, therefore it was a highly desired substance for producing women’s corsets, umbrella ribs, hooks, whips, and walking canes. Whale boning was later replaced with steel as the metal became globally available between 1870 and 1880 (“The Corset and Its Manufacture”; Bardi 302; Moment 265.). The sperm whale, on the other hand, was hunted not just for its quality oil but also for spermaceti; a waxy liquid found in the whale’s large head. The spermaceti candle had been George Washington’s favourite type of candle for its long life and low odour (Davidson 35; Moment 264). Sperm whales were also a source of a substance called ambergris which was used as a stabilizer in woman’s perfumes (“Ambergris”).

Products and their consumption were intrinsically tied to the social hierarchies of class within this industrial and colonial era of the mid-nineteenth century. Most “people spent their evenings at home by the sputtering light of a tallow candle or the comparative brightness of a whale oil lamp – inevitably displaying their poverty or wealth by the glow from their windows” (Baldwin 751). The whale oil lamp was only one of the many products where “if one believed that correct consumption could transform culture, then foreigners’ consumption of American products would make
them, effectively, less foreign” (Domosh 458). Class distinctions – and how “civilized” one was – were apparent in the quality of lighting that could be afforded.

Additionally, street lighting distinguished the illuminated, wealthy neighbourhoods from the impoverished homes obscured by the blackness of night. The presence of light ensured public order while licentious behaviour was expected to occur under the cover of darkness (Baldwin 752). The nocturnal landscape of mid-nineteenth century American and Canadian cities were drastically altered by the propagation of street lighting which was frequently limited to the downtowns of urban centres with great variations of the types of products used by region and cost. Lighting with gas derived from coal was becoming common, but it too served to distinguish between the upper and middle classes by the way it made “oil lit streets appear gloomy in contrast” (Baldwin 752). Price, novelty, and demonstrations of wealth were considerable factors in consumer choices over which illuminating substances that they chose or could afford.

In literature and newspaper stories – mediums accessible to the middle and upper class – whaling was expressed as adventure lore tied to American national pride because it was equally a glorification of American industry and economic imperialism (Moment 261). Similar to other depictions of other adventures and explorations whaling was expressed with romanticism and situated in places of the sublime, as Edmund Burke once expressed in 1787:

> Whilst we follow them among the tumbling mountains of ice, and behold them penetrating into the deepest frozen recesses of Hudson's Bay, and Davis's Streights [sic], whilst we are looking for them beneath the arctic circle, we hear that they have pierced into the opposite region of polar cold,
that they are at the antipodes, and engaged under the frozen serpent of the south. Falkland Island, which seemed too remote and romantic an object for the grasp of national ambition, is but a stage and resting-place in the progress of their victorious industry. (Burke 20)

As the commerce of American and British whaling expanded, the populations of whales diminished, and whalers had to explore into further waters of both the Arctic and Antarctic. It was a pursuit of profit which was embedded within the culture of imperialism, settler colonialism and advancing industrialization that drove whalers into the pristine waters followed by embellished narratives of their adventures reported upon their return.

The way that Burke described whaling with romanticism was true to the way that colonisation “over the land sustains fantasies of ‘pristine wilderness’ and innocent ‘pioneering endeavour’” (Veracini 14). These dichotomous images portrayed space as only current metropoles or the frontier awaiting conquest. However, these fantasies functioned to obscure the violence and destruction of colonial relationships which sought to replace indigenous peoples with settlers, forests with resource extraction and wildlife with livestock (Veracini 14, 24, 25; Regan 4, 5). As such, whales were imagined as any other resource ripe for harvest, or mineral for extraction, not as slaughtered animals whose fatty tissue lit up the living rooms of middle and upper class homes.

This was the same mentality that encouraged the gold rushes of the same generation, and so it becomes easier to see why the whales were being hunted to extinction (Purdy 19). Since, the prices of the most popular lamp oil of the 1850s were increasing to unaffordable prices, for whalers and businessmen to profit, further exploration,
investment, or risk needed to be taken (Davidson 39, Laxer 14; Morritt 13; Purdy 15). The structure of American whaling was “characterized by many episodes of agglomeration in specific regions of the oceans” (Hilt 293). Whalers, after having discovered a popular feeding or breeding ground of whales, would pursue and hunt aggressively in these “whaling grounds” and then move to new – more remote – regions once those whaling grounds would become exhausted.

Explorations for whaling grounds brought American and Scottish whalers in contact with the Inuit peoples who lived in the arctic territories and islands that had been claimed by the British. These territories would not become part of Canada until 1880. The Inuit were then referred to by the whalers as Esquimaux or Eskimos who in turn referred to the white men as *qallunaat* (Eber passim; Grant, S. passim). One story of first contact was of terrified Inuit – silent from the shock – who traded belongings for biscuits and tobacco from the intruders. “The Inuit thought the people on the ship had come to murder them,” and it was not until the shamans cast a spell on the *qallunaat* that the Inuit felt safe enough to board the ship (Eber 4-5).

Similar in premise to the oil lamps that brought the whalers north, the small arctic dwellings of Inuit peoples were also lit with lamps fueled by the oil of marine animals. Usually made of stone or clay, with moss or cotton grass wicks, and ranging greatly in size, these lamps were called *qulliqs*. The *qulliqs* required frequent attention, wick trimming, and attention to air circulation, and produced only 11 to 15 watts of light (Dawson 18-24). The design of the *qulliq* was more conducive to the burning of seal oil, as “whale blubber would not burn fully in an Inuit qulliq,” and so Inuit were left asking why it was the whalers wanted the oil and baleen (Eber 29).
The baleen – the bone strips that acted as a filter in the back of the whale’s jaw – was useful to the whalers to sell for the making of springs, carriage wheels, whips, and corset strays, and for the Inuit in the making of bows, arrows, and harpoons. (Eber 29, Moment 265) “The qallunaat wanted it just as much as the Inuit. It was very useful” (Eber 29). The baleen, the bones, and the carcass were all valuable parts to the Inuit, along with their material uses, the less desirable meat could always be used as bait or to feed the dogs. The whale’s skin, maktaaq was “the most prized of all foods, delicious and nutritious” (Eber 29). The Inuit had always hunted whales since a single one could provide subsistence for a year (Eber 16, 22, 29).

It was necessary for some whaling operations to overwinter in various arctic sounds, predominately on Baffin Island, when finding whales became more arduous. This practice of wintering was first started by Americans, from New England, in 1851, and it intensified contact between whalers and Inuit (Eber 11, Keenleyside 1-3). Naturally, co-dependent relationships developed, but so too did colonial ones (Grant, S. 17; Eber 12). Intimidation by, or anger from, whalers could provoke a response of deference or subservience from Inuit that was known as ilira (Grant, S. 16).

An Inuk may have gone out of his way to appease the angered or threatening qallunaat to assure the safety of himself or his family. Many Inuit / whaler relationships were influenced by ilira;

By Hugh Brody’s interpretation, that response was at the core of all early contact relationships: “The word ilira goes to the heart of colonial relationships, and it helps to explain the many times that Inuit, and so many other peoples, say yes when they want to say no, or say yes and reveal, later, that they never meant it at all. Ilira is a word that speaks to the subtle but
pervasive result of inequality. Through the inequality it reveals, the word shapes the whole tenor of interpersonal behaviour, creating many forms of misunderstanding, mistrust, and bad faith. It is the fear that colonialism instils and evokes, which then distorts meanings, social life and politics.” (Hugh Brody, *The Other Side of Eden*, as quoted in Grant, S. 32)

The first encounters were fraught with tensions of cross-cultural communication and a wariness of strangers (Eber 23-24). The ensuing relationships and mutual dependencies, however, were strained by the whalers’ assumptions of superiority over their hosts (Grant, S. 17).

Conversing in a pidgin of English and Inuktitut, the Inuit and whalers shared with each other knowledge seamanship, labour, food and clothes. “It altered the way Inuit lived and the way whalers whaled” (Eber 12). From 1850 to 1880, arctic whaling proliferated, and afterwards drastically declined into inactivity just before the First World War (Eber 17; Moment 231). By 1880s, whalers no longer came to hunt, only to trade with Inuit who did all of the whaling (Eber 9, 12, Keenleyside 3). Due to circumstance, need, desire, or *ilira*, many Inuit negotiated an exchange of skins, furs, ivory, warm clothing, country food, oil or baleen from their own hunting for Euro-American goods. These goods included guns, ammunition, knives, fox traps, hatchets, cookware, tobacco, musical instruments, and food items such as tea, biscuits and molasses (Grant, S. 14; Eber 7, 9, 12, 23, and 28).

As whaling crews consisted entirely of men, relations with local Inuit were equally complicated by more intimate relationships and the fathering of children who were frequently left in the care of their mothers (Grant, S. 12). Inuit health was negatively impacted by sexually transmitted infections, tuberculosis, epidemics, and dietary
changes (Keenleyside 7-13; Grant, S. 14). The concern of whalers over the health and welfare of Inuit led to the encouragement of Christian missionaries to come to the North (Keenleyside 3).

Euro-American medicines were still tied in this period to the diffusion of Christianity. Cultural and linguistic assimilation guised as civilizing influences were an intrinsic part of continued settler colonial practices which sought “the progressive erasure of the indigenous presence” through a variety of means including genocide and assimilation (Veracini 25). “The Inuit were portrayed in nineteenth century literature and art as an uncivilized pagan race who dressed in animal skins and carried Stone Age weapons but somehow managed to survive the most inhospitable environment” (Grant, S. 18). This characterization was very fitting with settler-colonial portrayals of indigenous peoples as savages – with unfulfilled moral potential – who awaited their transformation by white civilization (Veracini 24-25).

In 1856, a few Moravian priests came to visit arctic villages of Baffin Island to help the Inuit whose health had been impacted by the whalers, but the priests’ interpretation of help also included an effort to covert Inuit to Christianity (Grant, S. 18). “In 1876 Reverend Edmund Peck founded a mission at Little Whale River on Ungava Bay, where he began working on a syllabic alphabet to represent Inuktitut based on one created by Reverend James Evans for use with the Cree Indians” (Grant, S. 18) However, there was no permanent missionary presence on Baffin Island until 1894 when Rev. Peck and the Anglican missionaries – “armed with syllabic prayer books and bibles” (Grant, S. 18) – established their first Baffin Island mission (Eber 16; Grant, S. 18; Keenleyside 3). Their efforts were the result of “a problematic mentality of benevolent paternalism [which] became a rationale and
justification for acquiring Indigenous lands and resources” such as the Inuit’s arctic territories and marine wildlife (Regan 4).

Even with the acquisition of Inuit knowledge and labour, the whalers struggled to find the very whales that they were slaughtering and exploiting into extinction, and the arctic waters continuously provided additional challenges;

The major effort of New Bedford whaling in the 1850’s was the exploitation of the Arctic whaling grounds, with bowhead whales as the most sought after prize because of the large amount of oil and bone yielded by this kind of whale. This pursuit ultimately led to the “last straw” of American whaling, when, in the 70’s, whole fleets of whalers who lingered too long in the Arctic were frozen and crushed by the ice (Moment 281).

The arctic provided the Americans with riches from the blood, blubber and bones of the whales, but the icy winds and waters claimed whalers in return. Investments into new technologies in attempts to overcome these hurdles were made, but these expenditures would cut significantly into the very profits the whalers were striving to achieve (Bardi 301-302; Keenleyside 4; Moment 267).

In 1864, the largest American whaling fleet was assembled, which corresponds to the peak year in whale oil production (Bardi 299; Moment 262, 280). As populations of whales decreased, the consumer costs for whale oil skyrocketed. After adjusting for inflation and converted to a 2003 American dollar, the price of the most expensive whale oil (1855) was equivalent to $1500 for a barrel,¹ which was approximately nine

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¹ A crude oil barrel consists of 42 US gallons or 159 litres, but systems of measure were not standardized in the mid-nineteenth century. Prices frequently varied more for quality and brand than purely based upon quantity.
and a half dollars a litre (Bardi 299-303). This price was prohibitively expensive for most consumers who then looked for cheaper home lighting alternatives.

As early as 1796, first in Pennsylvania and later throughout the world, there had been experiments with gas lighting derived from coal or oil shales (Davidson 39). Dr. Abraham Gesner was a Canadian geologist, familiar with the tar and shale beds of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia who was living in Long Island, New York, by June 1854 when his patent for Kerosene was approved. Dr. Gesner had experimented with coal and oil shales in the 1840s and by 1846 successfully demonstrated a process of turning these substances into illuminating oil. The illuminate was a brand named from the Greek words for “keros” wax and “elaion” oil; Kerosene,² (Beaton 40, Brantly 155; Finch 19; Morritt 13).

The coal and oil that kerosene could be refined from was both rare and expensive in the 1840s and 1850s (Purdy 20). With the means to refine oil already in existence, it became reasonable, financially, to head out in search of the raw products. In 1858, the first oil well in North America was established in Oil Springs, Ontario at only 15 meters (49 feet) deep by James Miller Williams of Hamilton (Finch 33; Laxer 13-14; Morritt 28, Phelps 10; Purdy 23). In what is now Canada, there were some small petroleum fields in the Niagara peninsula, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and large geographically isolated discoveries in the McKenzie Valley of the North West Territories. The Athabasca oil sands were known by the turn of the century but there

² The name Kerosene was also intentionally close to the name camphene, another popular illuminate of the time which was oil derived from the spirits of alcohol and turpentine.
was no known method for refining it.\textsuperscript{3} Canadian production of petroleum was practically limited to southwestern Ontario (Purdy 25-26).

Further discoveries in oil and gas followed over the following decade, particularly in Pennsylvania State. Petroleum, or as it was also called then “Rock Oil” or “Paraffin Oil,” was being discovered in more and more regions throughout the continent. With the increases in supply in the late 1850s and early 1860s, the costs for kerosene dropped and began to undercut whale oil in the markets for illuminating oils. In 1856, Kerosene Oil Works – Gesner’s business venture – produced an advertisement that compared Kerosene to other oils on the market. The advertisement claimed that Kerosene was 13 times brighter than right whale oil, six times as bright as sperm whale oil. It was priced, then, at a dollar a gallon, the same price as the right whale oil, and less than half the price of sperm whale oil ($2.25 per gallon). There were advertising promises that Kerosene was slower burning than the other oils, burned cleanly and produced no odour (Beaton 43).

Gesner’s patents failed to hold up in court as a registered trade-mark in 1859. So, the brand name Kerosene became the English word for petroleum derived illuminating fluid from any manufacturer. As only very few producers of kerosene had any knowledge of chemistry or geology, the qualities varied greatly (Beaton 51). Some refined products better resembled what is now known as gasoline and were extremely dangerous substances for home lighting.

Some of the petroleum based illuminating oils have been described as “smelling like Hades” (Grant, H. 292; Lauriston 174). Ontarian oil and gas was very sulphurs and

\textsuperscript{3}[For more information on oil sands see Paul Chastko. Developing Alberta’s Oil Sands; from Karl Clark to Kyoto. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2004.]
had a very strong odour, and as a result was referred to as “sour gas” (“The First Pure Petroleum in Canada”). Pennsylvanian oil was a preferable product as it was “sweet.” The two oil deposits were from slightly different geological formations and Pennsylvanian oil did not possess the same quantity of hydrogen sulphide which was the culprit for the ‘hellish’ sour smell similar to that of rotten eggs. Refining the oil and attempts to remove the foul smell were lucrative when export prices were high, but Ontarian oil suffered greatly when large increases in American oil supplies reduced its cost (Grant, H. 392).

There was a large overseas market for illuminating oils in Europe, and high hopes for profit in the developing Canadian petroleum industry (“Petroleum in Canada”; “Petroleum Trade in Canada”; Grant, H. 392-3; Laxer 85). American oil was of superior quality and cheaper than Canadian oil, and by the mid 1870s Canadian oil was being pushed out of the export market and tariffs became important for Canadian oil to survive domestically (Finch 64; Grant, H. 392-393). The petroleum markets were starting to stabilize in this period, but it was still highly vulnerable to the persistent fluctuations in supply and demand.

Since whale populations had depleted rapidly over the preceding half century, it appeared to be only logical that same could occur for petroleum oils. The sense of depletion fed into a fear of over-consumption which was “one of the primary cultural anxieties of American culture in the second half of the nineteenth century” (Domosh 458). Science articles in the newspapers warned about the dangers of dependence on a substance when the continued availability of such was so uncertain. The scientific study of oil was motivated by both the desire for knowledge and economic growth. Despite the ease of discovery of more oil deposits or innovations in refining practice,
there remained a genuine fear of oil depletion throughout the latter half of the
nineteenth century ("Artificial Petroleum"); "Origin of Petroleum").

The development of the petroleum industry had a large impact on the end of the
whaling industry. As Abraham Gesner once described in 1861:

The introduction of kerosene into the United States gave rise to poetical
descriptions of the long and lasting holiday the whales of the sea would
enjoy from the substitution of oils from coals for oils from animals. It now
appears that the dreams of those who advocated peace with the marine
mammalia [sic] are to be realized. The purified petroleums not only afford
liquid oils but also the solid paraffine [sic] which for candles exceeds in
beauty, and equals in light the pure sperm taken from the heads of the finny
monsters of the sea. (Gesner, 32)

However that poetic holiday did not take into account the new path of destruction
that petroleum energy would leave in its wake. It was an industry that would fuel the
technological advancements for the next century, but would produce not only goods
but also pollution.

The colonial settlers had a relationship to the land that was focused around the
pursuit of profit, extraction and consumption. The subjugation of the land was only a
part of the colonial discourses that made the environment an object to be exploited
for the pursuit of power and industrialization (Morgensen, 56). Oil seekers and barons
saw their conquest of the land in positive and productive terms. Petroleum products
were admired for the technological ingenuity and potential power for personal profit

Over the decades to follow, with the invention and availability of electricity and the light bulb, in 1878, another age of lighting would ensue. There would be a drop in the demand for kerosene and whale oil. However, it would take time for families to acquire access to electricity, and the need for kerosene only slowly waned. Whaling as an American venture would fade away as the century would turn, and the whales would become endangered species forever changed by the quaint lamp with its flickering light that too would be reduced to an uncommon sight.

The whale oil lamp tells us – in the twenty first century – that the past from when it came was not a simple time. The post-colonial lens informed by a fruitful body of secondary literature on whaling and the illumination oils industry reveals to us some of the elements of imperialism which were exemplified through consumption, American Arctic whaling, Inuit/Whaler relations, and economic competition. Explorations into historical topics, items and issues, can highlight our inherited colonial relationships to land and people (objectified as merely resources), and allow us to better understand the multiplicity, complexity, and violence of those relationships.
Bibliography


