

The Weller Brothers

In 1831, British-born Edward, George, and Joseph Weller established a whaling station at Otakou on New Zealand's South Island. Their company supplied essential goods, including luxuries like sugar, tea, and rum, to whalers in the region. Employees of their supply ships were referred to as "wellermen."

The Billy o' Tea

The song mentions the ship "Billy o' Tea." While no historical records confirm the existence of such a vessel, the name likely symbolizes the common practice of naming ships after everyday items or cherished commodities, reflecting the sailors' connection to familiar comforts.

Right Whale

The "right whale" mentioned in the song refers to a species that was highly sought after by whalers due to its high blubber content, which yielded substantial amounts of whale oil. These whales were considered the "right" ones to hunt, hence the name.

Tonguing

In the context of the song, "tonguing" refers to the process of cutting strips of blubber from the whale's carcass to render into oil. This labor-intensive task was essential in the production of whale oil, a valuable commodity during the 19th century.

The Wellerman's Role

The chorus expresses the crew's anticipation for the wellerman's arrival with supplies like sugar, tea, and rum. These provisions were not just luxuries but also served as morale boosters for the crew during long and arduous whaling expeditions.

Modern Popularity

In 2021, Scottish singer Nathan Evans's rendition of "The Wellerman" went viral on TikTok, sparking a renewed global interest in sea shanties and bringing this traditional folk song to the attention of a contemporary audience.