

THE AUCKLAND SCOW

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Over most of seventy years (roughly 1870-1940) many Auckland people took a notable pleasure from the sight of their port's fleet of smaller vessels. If the Islands' traders had pride of place, some of the coastal ships or trans-Tasman vessels were scarcely less regarded. More than a simple pleasure was afforded by these ships. They were objects of parochial pride. They were of course also a significantly commercial feature. As Dr R.C.J. Stone (1973:35) writes:

The 1881 census brought out the maritime character of the Auckland province in a striking way. Although less than 10 percent of the colony's railway employees were in the province, it had 35 percent of the sailors and ships' officers, 38 percent of ships' engineers, 41 percent of the watermen and boatmen, and 62 percent of the lumpers. In a context of that sort, it is not surprising that before long the impulse of local pride should find that it needed some special, some singular, case to fix on, as it did. In newspapers and periodicals of the late nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century, as in reminiscences of the period, readers today will catch the move towards locating the particular example, and the subsequent assertions that Auckland was peculiarly the place of the *scow*. As a boy, because of my father's associations I was quite often around the wharves or builders' yards, and grew up with the firm understanding that the *scow* was a contriving of Aucklanders, designed explicitly for the needs of Auckland provincial shipping, the vessel's shallow draught being a local answer to shallow waterways, its usual bluntness an answer to the demands made by beachings for handling cargo. This was near the end of the time when scows were a common sight, and consequently when force of legend or folklore was maximized.

That *scow* was a name which in the circumstances might be at all odd was something which went unchallenged. A few years later, when I was a student interested in words, when there was any talk of loan words *yacht* was fairly likely to be instanced, but as far as I recall *scow* was passed over. It had the sense of being indigenous. Local variations on yacht-design abounded, and local namings (*patiki*, *mulety*, *fourteenfooter*, *zeddy*) were coinages which conceivably reinforced the conviction that *scow* too was local, a belief not open to be shaken by any other currency of *scow* as applied to any type of vessel than the one which we were familiar with. As far as we were concerned, the native-born, there was only one kind of *scow*. To labour the point, all other possible significances, whether of North Europe or North America, were lacking. There must exceptionally have been people who knew of those significances, in having specialised interest in small ships or in view of the varied backgrounds of the maritime community, but it seems safe to say that in general *scow* had a narrow significance locally. Of that general condition, what strikes me from old newspapers seems to support the claim. Moreover, I cannot recall from my own reading coming across *scow* before the later part of the last century, which is an impression only and worth no more credence than any other impression. However, as will be seen below, *scow* was apparently missing from the lexis of Aucklanders when the local prototype was built in the 1870s, and such enquiries as I have made among my contemporaries point firmly to one only understanding of *scow* and to thorough ignorance of the word ever being applied to any but the one type of vessel.

Given that there was one predominant sense of *scow* for Aucklanders, were those Aucklanders at all warranted in believing in a local peculiarity of the craft? Put otherwise, as a point of enquiry for this article, was there anything distinctively *an Auckland scow*, one more item to be added to the various *scow* compounds which appear in dictionaries? If Aucklanders were in error in believing in the singularity of their vessels, were they wholly wrong?

Conviction or disposition arising out of familiarity is mentioned above. The force of familiarity is possibly hinted in the language used by an historian of coastal ships, P.A. Eaddy, although Eaddy (1939:15) recognised that his Auckland-based vessel was anticipated elsewhere:

The idea of using the flat-bottom scow type of vessel as a cargo carrier originated either in the great freshwater lakes of Canada, or in some parts of the United States.² Eaddy here suggests that Auckland vessels somehow differed from North American prototypes, implying the existence of a distinctively Auckland type of *scow*, further implying

that the name held some local sense of differentiation. Admittedly, his phrasing is not entirely explicit, yet one possibility recognisably attaching to it is that 'the scow type of vessel' signifies that *scow* is to be construed in terms of what Aucklanders first, other New Zealanders subsequently, thought of as "a scow".

One may say positively that Aucklanders did not think so before 1873. The evidence strongly indicates that *scow* with any differentiating significance attached did not become truly established before about 1880. In that decade usage was confirmed. Contrariwise, positive movement towards eclipse can be pretty surely dated to the period of the Second World War, for the military supply services took away into the Pacific a drastic part of a dwindling fleet, which did not return. In itself, this withdrawal was hardly the beginning of the end. That effectively began when shipowners gave up commissioning new scows, in the 1920s. Few remain today, although not so long ago I saw three together at the shipyard haul-outs in St Mary's Bay where probably they were waiting their annual Marine Department certification. Asking about *scow* among first year students of English at this university (not all of whom are Aucklanders) seems to show that for the majority *scow* is actually or virtually meaningless. One or two have it as a literary word, something you read about. Some have no response at all. Few get only to the minimal level of *scow* 'boat'. Fewer still reach to any kind of detail. Except for those with a specialised interest, the ending of *scow* is well under way.

That is scarcely to be wondered at. The building of scows was almost ended by 1914. Thereafter, according to Hawkins (1960:170-99, Appendix II, a table of Sailing Vessels built in the Auckland Province), only three vessels described as scows were built (in 1921, 1924, 1925). Commonly, a scow had long life, and when obsolescent was likely for conversion. A handful of students gave as answer *scow* 'barge', which locally and lexically was the beginning and (sadly) materially the ending of a number of these little ships.

The scows of Auckland were the outcome of a process of recapitulation, modification, and innovation. Wright (1904:265) gives a dialect *scow* 'A small boat, esp. a flat-bottomed boat, a barge, punt', which usefully indicates the basis for variation. An *O.E.D.* quotation records Lord Hatherley in a judgment of 1877 equating *scow* 'large barge'. From other examples will be seen the variation acceptable for the size of a *scow*; and variation in one feature, whether the vessel was decked or not. If decked, the barge-character is emphasised; if undecked, the punt character.

The *O.E.D.* bypasses *scow* in British English dialects, leaning to North American examples. It takes from Jefferson (1780), 'A large flat-bottomed lighter or punt', and an equation of *scow* 'bateau', which compares with Carlton (1843), quoted by Mathews (1951:1475), *scow* 'pirogue'. Guillet (1966:11) writing of the upper St Lawrence traffic about 1820-30 refers to 'scow-like Durham boats' but extends the sense when writing about the Assiniboine River at 1862 (Guillet 1966:113) and a ferry which was 'a scow drawn by rawhide ropes at both ends', which 'could take no more than a single cart and ox at one time'. Whether decked or undecked, the examples recur to the feature of the flat bottom. Thus, Simcoe (1795) quoted by Avis *et al* (1967:666) defining *scow* 'a vessel with four sides, an oblong square, in length forty to fifty feet, in breadth thirty to forty, and from four to five feet deep, flat-bottomed' stresses the flatness and implies a shallow draught. Allan (1884), in *O.E.D.*, is the source of a 'scow or flat-bottomed boat' in canal service in the United States. The unhandiness of Simcoe's vessel is mooted again in Grove, Webster's *Third New International Dictionary* (1961): 'A large flat-bottomed boat with broad square ends that is used chiefly for transporting sand, gravel, or refuse'. A like awkwardness is inferred, for the kind of *scow* up to one hundred or so feet in length, which is variously reported for the Yukon.

Dictionaries and source-books, regardless of Wright's gleanings, give more weight to a North American provenance than to metropolitan English, whatever the ultimate source, so the lack of *scow* in the Auckland area in 1873 is not incongruous. By the same token, as will emerge, the introduction of *scow* into maritime usage is, in the circumstances, quite in keeping.

The drift of the definitions above is towards statements about shape of the hull. With modification in means of propulsion, definitions follow in relation to the rig and, to anticipate, when rigged, some further modification was needed to facilitate handling the unwieldy hulls.

Something easier to handle than, say, Simcoe's 'oblong square' developed on the Great Lakes in the 1840s. Harington (Megill 1966:172) has written of traffic of the second Welland

Canal, 1842-5, that 'schooners predominated, with a following of barques, brigs, sloops and scows', which recalls Bret Harte (1878), quoted in *O.E.D.*, 'a long, low, sloop-rigged scow', suggesting that the rigging of scows was not uniform, as indeed was the case if we look to Bartlett (cited *O.E.D.*) quoting from 1848: 'On Lake Ontario they are sometimes rigged like a schooner or sloop, with lee-board or sliding keel, when they make tolerably fast sailers'.

Whatever the currency of *barge* or *lighter* around Auckland, *scow* was lacking. 'Scows began to appear in the New Zealand coastal trade in the eighteen-seventies, but they were not called scows then, for in the newspaper files of those years we find them entered as barges', said Eaddy (1939:24).

The first "scow" was completed early in 1873. Launched in April, she arrived in Auckland, 26 June 1873. Hawkins (1960:146-7) quotes from an Auckland newspaper, the *Southern Cross*. I give two extracts here, the first of 26 April 1873 and the second of 27 June 1873:

- (a) There was recently launched from the shipbuilding yards of Messrs Meiklejohn, Omaha, a vessel which for peculiarity of build is quite a novelty in Auckland. The vessel, which is being rigged as a fore-and-aft schooner, is in the shape of a punt-bluff at both ends. She is 60 feet long; and her beam amidships is 16 feet 6 inches, and at the stem and stern she has a beam of 15 feet 6 inches. The depth between her bottom and deck is four feet. The vessel is decked over, and has a bulwark of between three and four feet high. No cargo is to be carried below deck, everything being placed above: in fact, no hatchways, etc., are to be provided. She will be fitted with a centre-board (on the American principle — swung from one end). The vessel, or monster punt, is to be employed in the timber and firewood trade, and is expected to carry about 80 tons cargo. The idea of building a vessel of this description is to enable the owners to run the vessel up the shallow creeks, and take in her cargo direct from the mills, instead of having to lie off at some distance, as is so frequently the case with cutters and schooners, and so save the lightering off by small punts, etc. The new vessel may be expected in Auckland in about a week's time. She has been very appropriately named the *Ark*.

The *Ark* was apparently a nickname. The vessel was registered as the *Lake Erie*. It should be said, for the benefit of non-Aucklanders, that the place of building, Omaha, is a Maori place name and only coincidentally North American:

- (b) The new schooner Lake Erie, built at Omaha, and on the same principle of the wood-carrying vessels on the lakes in America, arrived in harbour yesterday morning. The vessel carries the whole of her cargo of wood on deck, the hull of the vessel being completely watertight. It is intended to run the vessel in the firewood trade, for which she was specially built.

Even if the reporter picked up a bit of information (about the Great Lakes wood-carriers) he plainly lacked a word for the bastard barge-punt. From the phrasing 'the lakes in America' Eaddy inferred the Great Lakes.

That inference gets support from the names of early craft built by 1876: the *Lake Erie*, 1873, at Omaha; the *Lake Superior*, 1875, Pakiri, not far north of Omaha; the *Lake St Clair*, 1876, Mahurangi, not far south of Omaha; The *Lake Michigan*, 1876, Omaha. The regional character of the location of the yards is noticeable. So too is the pointed reference to the Great Lakes, with which *Lake St Clair* is consistent. (The lake lies between Lake Erie and Lake Huron.) The outsider of the set is the *Lady of the Lake*, 1876, Mahurangi, the first of a number of Sir Walter Scott names of vessels of the sort.

Four builders were involved. Darrach (the *Lake St Clair*) was an immigrant from Prince Edward Island; Dunning (the *Lady of the Lake*) was probably Nova Scotian; Sharp (the *Lake Superior*), not known; Meiklejohn (the *Lake Erie* and the *Lake Michigan*), son of a Scotsman, migrant ex Nova Scotia, ex Prince Edward Island, ex Sydney. The colouring of Scottishness, eastern Canada and timberworking, is apparent. So too the suggestion that a consciously (locally) new class of vessel is introduced under the influence of 'the wood-carrying vessels' of the Great Lakes, to serve local timber and firewood interests.

Yet, it appears from these reports and from the fact that these craft referred to as "barges" or "punts" were registered as *barges*, there was no class name immediately available for them. The journalist, whose report of 26 April 1873 talks in terms of *punt*, seems to see the *Lake*

Erie as an enlargement of the small punt but is uneasy at the decking. Registration talks in terms of *barge*, but could also have followed the practice of following the terms of rigging; the reporter speaks of the *Lake Erie* being 'rigged as a fore-and-aft schooner'.

In the event, various ways of classifying these vessels emerged regionally. They could be referred to in terms of motive power: *sailing scow* or *auxiliary scow*. They could be referred to in a fashion which compares with North American practice (on which see Mathews 1951:1475) and alludes to usual cargo: *shingle scow*, *firewood scow*, *timber scow*. I have no note on it, but am fairly sure that I heard another style which implied a distinction of the short-haul and markedly shallow-draught vessel from those which might risk longer voyages, the *mud scow* a term which figures in A.F. Chamberlain's list of Americanisms recorded in Ontario 1880-90 (Orkin 1971:25). Chamberlain did not recognise *scow* in his items of Ontario English, indicating an absence which compares with the Auckland case of the 1870s, although he significantly regards *scow* as an Americanism.

For these vessels to be named as *barges* became possible again when they suffered a change of function, and for the sake of economy were not used as independent craft. This reversion gives priority of regard to the hull as determinant for reference, but a variety of namings was possible when the rig had priority. This could and did make *scow* an adjunct of the class *schooner*, or of the class *ketch*. So, there appear in shipping records items *schooner scow*, modified by subclassification to a *topsail-schooner scow* or *three-masted schooner scow*, or modified further by recognised motive power, an *auxiliary schooner-rigged scow*. The last might be modified. For example, a sailing scow could be converted to an engined scow, relying mainly on the motor although retaining minimal sail to aid steering, arriving at an *auxiliary scow*, which in turn became a class name with an adjunct, such as *oil-engined scow* (Ingram & Wheatley 1951:490).

The course of these variants has nothing obviously to do with North America. They seem spontaneous, breeding their own authority and exclusiveness. Although more than enough contact with the Californian coast existed, there was no evident inclination to follow the Californian pattern of *scow schooner*.

The first *scows* of the Auckland area were modelled after Great Lakes craft. By the time the first four builders began production north of Auckland, *scows* were a long established feature of the San Francisco area, with which Auckland had and continued to have contact. The San Francisco *scows* were the first to develop the centreboard, so one authority says, but this would seem to be arguable in light of one way of interpreting the 1848 Lake Ontario reference, instanced above, to 'lee-board or sliding keel'. From the information available, it appears that the San Francisco *scows* were modelled after the Great Lakes vessels, and that the use in the Bay area of the centreboard was anticipated on the Lakes. The San Francisco craft, with shallow draught, decked, with centreboard, designed for delta and river service, inevitably resemble the Auckland craft in the early years. They remained conservative in their building, and ceased to be renewed not so long before the beginning of the end in Auckland. The last San Francisco *scow* to be launched was in 1905.

As for the centreboard, that was introduced otherwise in Auckland building in 1862 and continued in other types of vessel contemporaneous with the early and with the subsequently modified *scows*. Hawkins (1960:154) ascribes the centreboard in Auckland to the example of Great Lakes schooners known to builders who migrated from North America to New Zealand. The antecedents of the *scows* of Auckland were not straightforward, nor were the developments, since the use of centreboards did not eliminate the use of leeboards.

At this point, one may say that from 1873 to 1880 *scow* as a maritime word was a novelty, but the type of craft was known to be not original. If innovatory, it was only so in terms of New Zealand coastal shipping. If peculiar, only in the sense that it was limited to Auckland waters. To recur to the question which was the matter of this enquiry, at 1880 *an Auckland scow* signified little if anything more than the port of registry.

The first *scows* built in the Auckland area were flat-bottomed and square-bilged, square at bow and stern, bluff-built to the water. The hull was decked over, divided within to make sections either by "post and rail" or "solid partition" which ran from bow to stern, according to Hawkins (1960:147), the middle line being set slightly to the side to allow for positioning the centreboard casing and for stepping the masts. Post-and-rail might be combined with solid partition. Crossmembering systems could differ. The locating and placing of the centreboards

– ultimately, there might be as many as three – varied. The rudder was large, awkward, and required (because of beaching) to be moved up and down. Leeboards were a feature of some of the early vessels built about Auckland, recalling the practice of *sailing barges* elsewhere (which Hawkins notices) and the Lake Ontario craft mentioned in 1848. (The 1873 registration of the *Lake Erie* conceivably implies *barge* ‘sailing barge’.)

Local variation and innovation were needed if a particularly or peculiarly *Auckland scow* was to emerge. The variation seems to have come about in 1880 when Gouk built a ‘leeboard barge’, the *Rata*, for timberwork, but unorthodoxly gave her a pointed bow (Hawkins 1960:153). In 1883 the ketch-rigged *Vixen* had rounded bilges and bows although she was flat-bottomed and squared at the stern (Eaddy 1939:25-26). In 1897 an effort was made by the Marine Department to impose a modification on a vessel which, with hindsight, we can now see was evolving, quite unlike the static condition of the Californian craft. The Department made bulwarks compulsory; the trade opposed and overcame this, although bulwarks which could be shipped and unshipped were and had earlier been adopted as a natural course.

Consideration was given previously to the fact that *scow* was classifiable in terms of hull or rig. With the *scows* built by Bailey that either/or classification became qualified. Whatever the orthodoxy of the idea of a *scow*, Bailey moved away from it, by rounding the bilges, using “longitudinal” instead of “athwartships” planking, and by frame building, which is to say over-abruptly that Bailey ships conformed closer in the hull to “schooner” construction. In the 1890s rigging came closer to schooner orthodoxy, hulls were given more sheer, the line of the bow cleaner definition. In the early 1900s sail area was markedly increased and heightened. Some of the craft had three masts. The fairly definable *schooner scow* was attained, decidedly different from the Californian *scow schooner*.

This shift going forward, it is not surprising that after schooner fashion, the hullspace was utilised for cargo-carrying holds even if the vessel still remained shallow-draughted. A distinctive *Auckland scow* was attained, with further distinction to come, in cruising range.

Mixed in their antecedents, these Auckland-built vessels were hybrid in their outcome, a class subsuming sub-classes. Shallow draught remained a feature. Take two late ships from Niccol’s yard, the *Korora* built in 1905, a three-masted *fore-and-aft schooner scow* 121 feet long with a 31 feet beam but drawing only 5 feet, and the *Zingara*, a three-masted *topsail-schooner scow* of 128 feet length and 33 feet beam, drawing 6 feet of water. Centreboarded, the *Korora* carried all her cargo on deck, as did the *Zingara*.

Hawkins seems to distinguish among hybridised vessels. He talks of the *Eunice* built by Darroch (not Darrach) A ‘not a true scow’ because she was a frame vessel, but the truth of a *scow* must remain a quibble. *Scow* of Auckland was a class, flat-bottomed, shallow-draughted, centreboarded, variable as to bilge, bow, stern, rigging, motive power, frame, or partition, carrying on deck or in hold, and variable in range.

If immediate short-haul servicing, carrying firewood, logs, sawn timber, cattle, shingle, were first purposes, the immediate service area was not long in getting extended. From Hauraki Gulf servicing, the range became coastal and in short order involved sailing from one northern coastline to another. In 1879 Darroch’s *Makarau* made a maiden voyage from a West Coast loading around North Cape to Auckland (Hawkins 1960:147). Extended services developed such as, Auckland to the Bay of Plenty, and longer routes were initiated: inter-island services, and inter-colonial services. Trips to the Pacific Islands, to San Francisco, are recorded; even one, of uncertain reliability, to New York. Auckland-built vessels were sold on to the Australian coast.

Among the *scows* of Auckland were some markedly different in build, use and range of service from those of the Great Lakes or of San Francisco. These were the *Auckland scows* which fostered longshore and deepwater legend, the venturesome part of the fleet. Aucklanders, then, were warranted in believing that an *Auckland scow* was special and peculiar. That could very well be; even if that belief was not justifiable for all the *scows* of Auckland.

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