

Tom Bowling

Jim Beever

The article by Maureen Young in the January Journal in which she referred to Tom Bowling Bay has stirred me to add to the good explanation she gave. On my desk is a book, "The Globe Song Folio", published in 1911 in London and containing 106 songs and ballads, all obviously Victorian in origin and aimed at the "Musical Evening" which had been and still was a pleasant way to spend an evening with friends. The songs are naturally quite varied in origin, mainly from England, Ireland, Scotland and the United States and all popular in their time. Among them is the song, Tom Bowling, of three verses.

This is the first verse:-

Here a sheer hulk lies poor Tom Bowling,
The darling of our crew.
No more he'll hear the tempest howling,
For death has broached him to.
His form was of the manliest beauty,
His heart was kind and soft.
Faithful below he did his duty,
And now he's gone aloft, And now he's gone aloft.

It would appear that Tom Bowling had become in some quarters the epitome of the good British sailor who manned the oak bulwarks of the Empire. His song may appear over-sentimental to us but apparently he had become the impersonation of the navy as Tommy Atkins was the symbol of British soldiers in 1914-18.

So it was that the crew of a whaler, needing a pronounceable name for a young Maori shipmate picked on Tom Bowling. Quite clearly the name has now settled down as Tom Bowling but probably had evolved from the bowline, a nautical name for a line or rope which attached a sail to the bow. (See standard dictionaries.) My father who had spent a short time at sea over a hundred years ago showed me how to tie a bowline knot and pronounced the name "bowlin" (bow as in bow and arrow).

Presumably song-writers knowing the weakness of "common people" in dropping the g, supplied one gratuitously when popularising the ballad. So it became Tom Bowling for the mainly non-sailor audience. Modern map-makers probably followed suit but in 1852 an officer on the survey ship H.M.S. Pandora wrote in a diary, or the log, "Pandora Jan 1852 New Zealand, North Cape, Wed 26th. Sailed again this morning but having very little wind, and that little contrary, are now only just off the North Cape at sunset about three miles from the shore. Tom Bowline the native chief of this district came off in a large canoe. He came on board about this time last year when we came here. Tom speaks pretty good English having in his younger days been to sea in a whaler." This officer, perhaps the captain, B. Drury, spelt the name Bowline as he obviously knew what a bowline was. It seems however that in the second half of the century the use of the name in the song Tom Bowling in polite drawing rooms had tempered the earlier pronunciation and spelling. In Cheeseman's time he spelled it as Bowline. Perhaps the N.Z. Geographic Board could tell us how the change occurred.