OCEANS

Gigantic Losses

Michelle E. Portman

The publication in 2007 of several serious and well-researched books about whaling—including works by Eric Dolin, Peter Heller, and James Estes *et al.* (*1–3*)—attests to our fascination with hunting the largest animals known to have lived. This fascination is undoubtedly what drew many men to the wretched business of whaling, with its perils and inhumane conditions. What stands out about Andrew Darby's *Harpoon* is that he spares nothing in his descriptions of the butchering of whales. Whereas Dolin relates an objective history of whaling, Darby clearly stands in defense of whales and for the vilification of their hunters. He makes a good case.

The book gives readers the sense of being let in on a secret world of high-stakes conservation politics being played out through international diplomacy. Darby (an Australian environmental journalist) provokes this same sense of otherworldliness as he describes whale hunts and the means by which whalers slaughtered whales. In traditional Japanese coastal whaling, men in flimsy boats would drive their prey into nets, entangle it, and eventually clamber aboard to "cut through the dying whale's nasal septum and tail, tie it off, then finish it with long swords. Or wooden plugs were driven into blowholes so that the whale suffocated."

Harpoon
Into the Heart of Whaling
by Andrew Darby
Da Capo (Perseus), Cambridge, MA, 2008. 320 pp. $25, C$26.95, £14.99. ISBN 9780306816291. Paper, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, Australia, 2007. A$29.95. ISBN 9781741146110.

Darby bases his arguments for whales on their intelligence, and he describes how others have built that case. His central characters include heroic and at times outlandish figures from the hunting profession and the anti-whaling movement. For example, Jean-Paul Fortom-Gouin—"the jetsetter with the hazily explained cheque book" who backed Australian protests in 1977 and "was briefly Panama's commissioner on the IWC [International Whaling Commission]"—carried a model of a sperm whale brain into meetings, "parading [it] sombrely around the room." Some of these efforts were successful: quotas increasingly gained acceptance and, more important, compliance. Nonetheless, current populations of several species contrast greatly with their former abundance.

No sanctuary. Two whales killed in Antarctic waters are hauled aboard the factory ship Nisshin Maru (January 2008).

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Part of the problem in understanding the effects of whaling on populations is the shoddy records from most of the industry's heyday. Darby reiterates how whaling parties—the sources of most historical survey data—had great incentives to overestimate populations and misreport takings. In the more-distant past, they wished to generate funding for continued expeditions or, as in the case of the Soviets, support raised quotas and avoid reprimand. Also, historical catch figures do not include fatally wounded whales that fled or sank at death. Coalescent models of mitochondria DNA sequence variation indicate that the current genetic diversity requires much greater pre-whaling populations than previously estimated (*4*).

More than anything, Darby's tale is one of failed regulation and management—sound familiar? The author goes back and forth on the IWC, berating it as a "circus" yet never completely giving up on its potential. Early on, the IWC agreed on measures that made a sustainable catch of whales difficult if not impossible. A fundamental mistake was setting an annual quota for Antarctic baleen whales of 16,000 Blue Whale Units (equivalents), an approach that encouraged taking the largest whales possible. The quota also set up a race among fleets to kill the most whales first, a common flaw of industrywide quotas in fisheries management (*5*). Since its early steps, the IWC has been mired in controversies over a myriad of topics related to the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling and questions as fundamental as the role of science in stock management (*6*).

The IWC may be disappointing as a conservation institution, but it is also criticized for protecting certain stocks that can clearly support sustainable harvest. The commission has been highly polarized since the 1982 imposition of a moratorium on commercial whaling, with both sides encouraging like-minded countries to join. Japan, frequently on the verge of withdrawing, leads the pro-whaling faction. It carries out scientific whaling programs in the North Pacific and in the Southern Ocean. Darby agrees with researchers who believe that this science—largely focused on proving that whales are responsible for declining fish catches (*7*)—is questionable.

The book suffers some from its organization and lack of clarity. Each of the five sections focuses on the plundering of a different whale species. Thus, the sections are somewhat repetitive, and readers will be left confused about what, if anything, distinguishes one demise from another. In addition, the divisions among chapters within sections seem arbitrary. Nor does the flowery or overly theatrical language help. Although few things are more dramatic than the taking of one of these sea giants, in other places (such as the discussions of diplomatic maneuvering) the style complicates an already hard-to-follow situation. And Darby repeatedly fails to frame his references to whale population and kill numbers; time periods, geographic regions, and distinctions among subspecies are blurred and confusing.

Nonetheless, Darby covers a lot in *Harpoon*, including whale evolution, baseline population estimates, whale anatomy, and the political histories of whaling and anti-whaling activities. He also illuminates the larger picture of how whales became an icon of the international conservation movement. But more than anything, his vivid descriptions make palpable, even for the most dispassionate reader, the hard-heartedness of whaling.

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