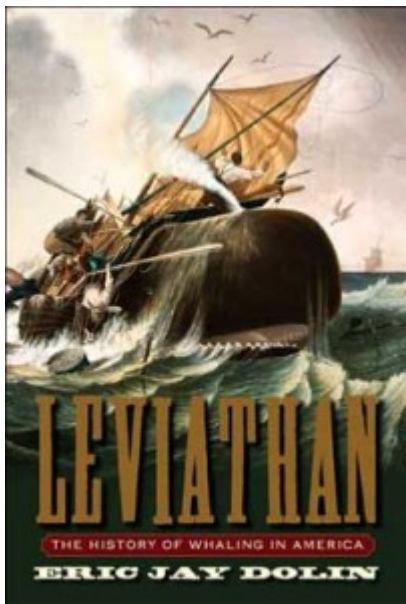


A Whale of a Book



Eric Jay Dolin, *Leviathan: The History of Whaling in America*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007. 480 pp., hardcover, \$27.95.

When not on the hunt but floating about with hours to exhaust, whalemens meticulously notched images or yarn into whichever whalebone pieces were most appropriate to their particular artistic talents and creative intentions. Representing American folk art at its best, scrimshaws were and still are breathtaking sights, for “each stroke, slowly [brought a whalemans] vision to life” (173). In *Leviathan*, Eric Jay Dolin has brought his own impressive vision

of American whaling to vivid life. A new sweep of the American whaling industry as good as this one mustered all of Dolin's imaginative artistry. Grand in its size, as the book's title implicitly suggests, *Leviathan* comes in at nearly four hundred pages of text. Dolin has synthesized an immense amount of detail and source material, both primary and secondary; included beautiful illustrations; and balanced realism with romanticism. All of this makes *Leviathan* a fine and accessible study of American whaling, from the industry's origins to its eventual fall.

Dolin divides the history of American whaling into three chronological periods. American whaling's origins were in New England and areas around Cape Cod; hunters in small watercraft pursued right whales from shore. By the eighteenth century, whaling in Nantucket had become a highly lucrative deep-sea industry, with voyages extending for years at a time and with vessels traveling as far as South Pacific waters. During the American Revolution, whaling went into an economic downswing, just like other American blue-water enterprises. At war's end, the whaling industry began to prosper, out of new hubs on the mainland such as New Bedford, Massachusetts. Whalers took greater economic risks to turn major profits: expanding their hunting grounds and securing foreign and domestic workforces for the Pacific. Ultimately, American entrepreneurs created a mid-nineteenth-century version of a global economic enterprise. This was the golden age of American whaling. From the Civil War through the early twentieth century, the American whaling industry—faced with new, crippling economic competition at home and overseas, along with diminishing numbers of whales—spun towards extinction.

Dolin's book is divided into twenty relatively short thematic chapters. Though they vary in focus, Dolin keeps his entire narrative focused on one simple point: whaling was a capitalist enterprise dedicated to killing large animals. Though he tells much of this story from the standpoint of the hunters, he does not neglect the perspective of the hunted. In a particularly innovative chapter, Dolin focuses on the sperm whales' bodies as sites where hunters and the hunted played out relations of power. Animals of grace and beauty but also raw ferocity, sperm whales demanded the awe and respect of pursuers. With whales as active agents in the chase, Dolin foregrounds the peculiar American relationship between whalers and their prey.

Another strength of this book is its treatment of whaling culture. Whalers' songs and poems that pepper the book give *Leviathan* a homespun quality, one sure to attract popular readers. Whalers yearned for family members, wished for love and sex, drank and caroused in ports, and longed to prosper from any great catch. Scrimshaws had images of whales and songs or poems about the hunt, powerful expressions of the hold the industry had over whalers' imaginations and desires. And the hold whales had over their pursuers never ended. The beasts that were part of a whaler's social consciousness were never forgotten, as men's recollections show. Furthermore, the structure of whaling boats and the nature of the labor, with close quarters and the collective pursuit of whales, brought whalers together as floating communities.

By the nineteenth century, urban industrialism began to undermine whaling's distinct culture. A job many eighteenth-century seaport communities once viewed as a boy's passage—you must try your hand at killing a whale to earn your manhood—came to be deplored as a “wage-slave” job for the working class. With more and more whalers hailing from farther flung places, captains and mates felt freer to abuse their authority. They no longer had to face the scrutiny of the whaleman's family and friends in home ports. The Civil War, much like the Revolutionary War, brought a sharp downturn in the whaling industry. Unfortunately, the prospects of a revival after the war faced severe challenges. Dolin cites several long-term causes that doomed whaling: economic competition, shifting consumer tastes away from whale oil to gas and kerosene for illumination, and severely diminished hunting grounds. One product still brought home some money—the bowhead whales' baleen, used in women's corsets. Soon a better-equipped overseas industry surpassed the American whaling industry's economic output. In the 1920s, the American whaling industry collapsed.

A narrative history can only do so much, particularly a book that covers such a long span of American history. However, Dolin largely neglects ethnicity and race in his study, two important categories of analysis that could have smoothly flowed into his narrative. He discusses the Native Americans involved with the rise of the Nantucket industry, but after that Indians are rarely mentioned, despite the fact that they continued to work on vessels well into the nineteenth century. Given Dolin's respect for Melville's classic, *Moby Dick*, it seems out of place for him to leave out stories about true-to-life Tashtegos and Queequegs. Also absent from Dolin's story are African Americans, despite the fact that freed African slaves in the eighteenth century and African Americans in the nineteenth century filled major roles in American whaling.

One final criticism: to keep the narrative running smoothly, the text is devoid of any quantitative analysis. Considering that *Leviathan* is geared to a popular reading audience, the exclusion of tables is not surprising. Still, an appendix or two revealing numbers of voyages and their profitability (or lack thereof) could have buttressed Dolin's arguments about market fluctuations over time.

Putting such criticisms aside, *Leviathan* is perhaps the best survey of the American whaling industry to appear in some years. In it, readers will find a fast-paced and intellectually sound narrative about the rise and demise of one of America's most important industries.

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