

Whales and Seals

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Whales and Seals

I SUSPECT THAT MOST READERS of this journal have given relatively little thought to the question of the relationship that ought to exist between humans and animals. We are probably aware that there is a spectrum of attitudes extending from chill indifference to animals at one end to animal-rights vegetarianism at the other, and that we fall somewhere, vaguely, on what we hope is the liberal end of the scale. We deplore cruelty and useless killing, and support the general notion of ecological balance. We abhor the extinction of any species and shudder at the amorality of those big businesses to whom national parks represent wasted natural resources. On the other hand, we would not accept the idea of equality with other animal species, contentedly eat meat and wear leather, and make no fuss about animal experimentation. Animals are there to be used and enjoyed. Most of us are town dwellers, and in that environment animals come either pre-packaged in supermarkets or in the shape of pets — whether in the house or in the zoo, the aquarium, the safari park or Walt Disney specials.¹ Urban people seek to domesticate the wild — or rather, perhaps, to perceive it as domesticated — and have difficulty with rural people who depend on animals in a neutral, matter-of-fact way. The feedlot and the abattoir are conveniently forgotten.

In recent years this inconsistent sensibility has extended to include marine mammals, the cetacea and pinnipeds. We like animals that seem to have something human about them, with whom a relationship can develop, and it is now thought that whales, seals and their relations can fit into this category. Tourists are taken out to sea to commune with whales and dolphins, and to the ice pack to cuddle seal pups. They have become a species of pet, as rewarding in their way as chimpanzees and dogs. As a result the hunting of these mammals has become a controversial and highly emotional issue. In North America and Europe they have become the test cases around which the argument about the proper treatment of wildlife has become to a great extent articulated.

Students of the history of man's exploitation of marine mammals should begin with some basic biology. An admirable introduction to such animals as inhabit Newfoundland and Atlantic Canadian waters is *Wet and Fat* (St. John's, Breakwater Books, 1985), written by Jon Lien and other members of the Memorial University Whale Research Group. Superbly illustrated by Don Wright, it is by design and intent a guide for seal and whale watchers. Geared to high school students, it can nevertheless be read and used with profit by those of us who have trouble distinguishing a square flipper from a hood, or a humpback from a minke. Each section deals with a specific type of whale or seal, and describes its characteristics, distribution and natural history. Local facts and

1 Keith Thomas calls nature parks and similar places "fantasies which enshrine the values by which society as a whole cannot afford to live": *Man and the Natural World: A History of the Modern Sensibility* (New York, 1983), p. 301.

stories are included where appropriate, and there is a bibliography and glossary. No cliff walker should be without it.

Breakwater has also produced a competent and concise introduction to the history of the most important branch of the whaling industry in Canada with Daniel Francis' *Arctic Chase: A History of Whaling in Canada's North* (St. John's, Breakwater Books, 1984). He describes the development of the Davis Strait fishery by Dutch and then by British whalers, and its extension to the western side and into Hudson Bay, where American vessels predominated. He goes on to discuss the later growth of the western Arctic fishery in the Beaufort Sea, and devotes space to the impact of whaling on the Inuit as well as on southern Canadian consciousness of the North. Francis has clearly learned much from the important work on whaling, principally in the east Arctic, produced over the years by W. Gillies Ross, whose latest book is *Arctic Whalers Icy Seas: Narratives of the Davis Strait Whale Fishery* (Toronto, Irwin, 1985). This is an elaborate, glossy production, packed with photographs, but it cannot be dismissed as a mere coffee table book. The introduction and commentary are scholarly and valuable, and the narratives intelligently arranged and chosen. Complementing each other, they cover the different phases of the fishery in the 19th century and its several aspects. W.E. Cass, a medical student on the *Brunswick* of Hull in 1824 was fascinated by the ice, while David Duncan, master of the *Dundee* of London in 1826 describes its dangers. The surgeon on the *Thomas* of Dundee in 1834 gives a detailed account of flensing. Others provide accounts of interaction with the Inuit, and of appalling sufferings from shipwreck, frost-bite and scurvy. Clearly, Ross admires his whalers. It was, he writes, "an impressive economic operation" and "a magnificent human adventure" (p. 243). Yet the 3,000 voyages he has counted to Davis Strait in the 19th and early 20th centuries killed out the whales and so destroyed what might have become part of the modern Arctic economy. As the industry consumed itself, a renewable resource was unthinkingly and inexcusably exterminated.

Ross provides a closer focus in his edition of *An Arctic Whaling Diary. The Journal of Captain George Comer in Hudson Bay, 1903-1905* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1984). Hudson Bay whaling was distinct from that in the Davis Strait, and lasted from the 1860s until the early 20th century. Comer was one of the last American whaling captains to winter in the Bay. His journal shows a curious and intelligent mind and, together with Ross' well-written introduction and meticulous annotation, provides not only a useful picture of whaling, whalers and Inuit, but also an interesting sidelight on the Canadian government's early attempts to establish sovereignty in the Arctic. For in 1903-4 Comer wintered with the *Neptune* under the command of A.P. Low, which was charged with establishing Ottawa's authority over Americans and Inuit alike. Neither was particularly impressed.

Both Ross and Francis argue that whaling should be seen as one of the staple industries which shaped modern Canada. Like the cod fisheries or the fur trade, in its own geographical area it had profound biological, cultural and political

consequences. The same might be said of the Newfoundland seal fishery. Chesley Sanger and Shannon Ryan have shown how the spread of settlement along the island's northeast coast and the Straits of Belle Isle, and its survival through the post-Napoleonic war depression, depended on sealing as much as on the cod-fishery; and they have described how it grew into an important component of the 19th century Newfoundland economy.² Indeed, anyone who investigates the economic history of Newfoundland in that period cannot but be impressed by the fundamental importance of the rise and decline of sealing. And anyone who is interested in Newfoundland at all cannot but be impressed by its cultural legacy.³

Ryan is working on a definitive history of the Newfoundland seal fishery, which should be a work of major significance. In the meantime Parks Canada has decided to publish James Candow's "Of Men and Seals: A History of the Newfoundland Seal Hunt", a competent and well-written research report which, though based on secondary sources, is the only available account of the industry from start to finish. It is both useful and thorough. More immediately accessible, however, is Brinton Cooper Busch, *The War Against the Seals: A History of the North American Seal Fishery* (Kingston and Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1985). Busch provides two substantial chapters on the Newfoundland seal fishery to 1914, but a relatively short account of its vicissitudes since that date. The main focus of the book as a whole is on the 19th century, but the treatment of the Newfoundland fishery does reflect the fact that secondary sources, on which Busch relies, are far more abundant for the 19th than for the 20th century. The main chapters on Newfoundland, while suffering from the problems inherent in compressing and summarizing, are highly readable; and though one might quarrel with specific points of interpretation, they provide a solid and wide-ranging introduction to the subject. The post-1914 material should be used with a degree of caution, since there are a number of inaccuracies. Besides Newfoundland, Busch deals with American sealing in the Pacific, the South Atlantic, Antarctic waters and on the Pribiloff Islands. The broad sweep is ambitious, interesting and valuable, since sealing has long needed

2 C.W. Sanger, "Technological and Spatial Adaptation in the Newfoundland Seal Fishery during the Nineteenth Century", M.A. thesis, Memorial University, 1973; C.W. Sanger, "The Evolution of Sealing and the Spread of Permanent Settlement in Northeastern Newfoundland", in J.J. Mannion, ed., *The Peopling of Newfoundland: Essays in Historical Geography* (St. John's, 1977), pp. 136-51; C.W. Sanger, "The 19th Century Newfoundland seal fishery and the influence of Scottish Whalers", *Polar Record*, Vol. 20, No. 126 (1980), pp. 231-52; Shannon Ryan, "The Newfoundland Cod Fishery in the Nineteenth Century", M.A. thesis, Memorial University, 1971; Shannon Ryan, "The Origin and Early Growth of Newfoundland's Seal Fishery", paper presented to the Canadian Historical Association, 1984. Also useful are two papers by Eric Sager: "Sailing Ships and the Traditional Economy of Newfoundland, 1850-1934", paper presented to the Canadian Historical Association, 1981, and "The Merchants of Water Street and Capital Investment in Newfoundland's Traditional Economy", in L.R. Fischer and E.W. Sager, eds., *The Enterprising Canadians* (St. John's, 1979), pp. 75-95.

3 See, for example, Shannon Ryan, *Haulin' Rope and Gaff: Songs and Poetry in the History of Newfoundland Seal Fishery* (St. John's, 1978).

the broad synthesis that is more readily available for whaling. It fills a gap in the literature, and at the same time provides context.

American sealers, like American whalers, roamed the globe in search of new grounds to which, once found, they would return again and again so long as the herds survived. The Newfoundland fishery was somewhere between the American (or Scottish) model of predatory, wholesale exploitation and the aboriginal model, exemplified by the Inuit, of limited exploitation, partly for subsistence and partly for market purposes. The similarity between Newfoundlander and Inuit is that both depended on the seal to sustain their existence in a hard environment. Neither sailed the world, neither had an interest in the extinction of the herds that appeared annually at their doorsteps. Yet Busch points to an essential difference. In Newfoundland, he says, one does not find songs or stories about the seals themselves, only about the men and the ships. It is a contrast that is implicit in Alan Herscovici, *Second Nature: The Animal Rights Controversy* (Toronto, CBC Enterprises, 1985), which places considerable emphasis on aboriginal peoples' holistic view of nature through a case study of the Cree. He attributes nothing similar to Newfoundlanders, with whom he has considerable sympathy. Newfoundlanders came to regard the seal fishery as an important cultural artifact — a necessary *rite de passage* for young men, and a great open stage on which local virtues of hardiness, stamina and an ability to “take it” could be uniquely displayed. They were not, however, a people who saw themselves as a part of nature. The seal, like the codfish, was a medium of exchange: there was nothing spiritual about the hunt or the kill. The seal herds survived off the Newfoundland coast not because of any innate sense of natural balance, but because it was a seasonal, migratory resource, to a degree protected in time by local legislation. Yet survive they did, which is more than can be said of herds exploited elsewhere by other sealing countries, and it is perhaps unfair for Busch to quote with approval Frank Bruemmer's hyperbolic description of the Newfoundland seal fishery as “the greatest most protracted mass slaughter ever inflicted on a wild mammal species” (p. 48).

Not surprisingly, writers on sealing these days feel compelled to state their position even more explicitly than Gillies Ross. Busch thinks it impossible to write about “some aspects of this industry with total dispassionateness: as the reader will discover, my own inclination is to pull for the seals” (xv). As readers of this piece will already have gathered, mine is to pull for the men. Some have done both, of whom the prime example is the prolific Farley Mowat. On the side of the men is the nearest sealing equivalent to Ross's *Arctic Whalers Icy Seas*, Mowat's *Wake of the Great Sealers*, illustrated by David Blackwood (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1973). This is a genuine coffee table book of little scholarly significance. In full-blooded romantic vein, Mowat celebrates the exploits of the proud, independent sealers of Newfoundland through contrived first-person narratives written in an approximation to local dialect. Blackwood's prints, though sometimes melodramatic, transmit with some power an intense atmosphere of cold, isolation, and of human subordina-

tion to elemental natural forces. They are better value than the text. Those who want more genuine descriptions of what sealing was like should read those by J.B. Jukes, who went to the ice in the late 1830s, and by George Allan England, who went in the 1920s and produced a classic book describing his experiences.⁴ And there is, as well, Cassie Brown's fine account of the 1914 S.S. *Newfoundland* disaster.⁵

On the side of the animals was Mowat's *A Whale for the Killing* (Boston, Little, Brown, 1972). A whale became trapped in a salt water pond near Burgeo, on Newfoundland's south coast, where Mowat lived in the late 1960s. It was harassed and shot to death by some of the local inhabitants in spite of Mowat's frantic attempts to save it. The episode was clearly traumatic. Mowat had settled in Burgeo because of his respect for what he mistakenly understood to be the traditional, untouched Newfoundland. Those who killed the whale he viewed as manifestations of Smallwood's new Newfoundland: men who had been away or who worked in fish plants, and had become as a result alienated from their roots and degraded into dependent wage slaves. To them the idea of a "natural" relationship between man and animals had become meaningless. In contrast, Mowat elevates the whales — or the "whale nation" as he likes to call them — into superior creatures, akin to men, but understood only by those uncontaminated by crass modernity.

In *Sea of Slaughter* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1984) men, almost without exception, appear as the unmitigated villains of the piece. Mowat presents himself as the advocate of wild animals — "We human beings have spokesmen enough" (p. 13) — and describes in relentless, remorseless detail the destruction of mammals, birds and fishes along the northeastern seaboard of North America since the arrival of Europeans. The book is a strong, deeply-felt polemic which leaves the punch-drunk reader, appalled and guilty, ready to sign up at once were a Greenpeace representative to appear. Though historical, *Sea of Slaughter* has no pretensions to being scholarly history, and it would be unfair to judge it as if it were such. It is a work of propaganda which, in its own terms, works admirably. Yet it is worth pointing out that it does contain factual errors,⁶ that the bibliography omits some of the standard works on Newfoundland sealing, that the human history is sketchy at best, and that the motives of those involved are explained simplistically as a quest for

4 J.B. Jukes, *Excursions in and about Newfoundland during the Years 1839 and 1840* (London, 1842); George Allan England, *Vikings of the Ice* (New York, 1924), reprinted, with an introduction by Ebbitt Cutler, as *The Greatest Hunt in the World* (Montreal, Tundra Books, 1969). See also J.R. Scott, "The Function of Folklore in the Interrelationship of the Newfoundland Seal Fishery and the Home Communities of the Sealers", M.A. thesis, Memorial University, 1975.

5 Cassie Brown, *Death on the Ice* (Toronto, 1974).

6 For example, on p. 357 it is stated that by 1830 six hundred vessels and 14,000 sealers went to the ice: in fact, in the early 1830s the annual average size of the sealing fleet was 360, the crews totalling approximately 7,600. The steel steamers were lost to the fleet because they were sold, not because they were sunk by enemy action (p. 364). Jens Munk is confused with Jens Haven (p. 99).

wealth — or, as Mowat puts it, they were driven by “human avarice” (p. 296) and “unadulterated greed” (p. 357). Nevertheless, by the time that one arrives at page 324 and the great sealing controversy, one has received such mental pummelling that one is almost inclined to believe Mowat’s misanthropic views and hence his account of that *cause célèbre*.

Mowat’s chapters on this subject are, as one might expect, selective, biased, passionate and highly coloured. The basic argument is that although scientific evidence showed that the harp seals were suffering severe depletion in the post-war period, and were threatened with extinction, the responsible departments of the federal government were — and remain — willing tools of the business interests involved in sealing, and subject to manipulation by Atlantic regional politicians. Moreover, federal fisheries experts were eager to blame the “seal nations” for the decline in fish stocks, and hence to encourage their extermination. The seals became the scapegoat for the federal failure to control overfishing. The evidence marshalled to support these charges is thin, but they are widely believed: even such a luminary as George Woodcock has endorsed them.⁷ Whether in the current climate they could ever be objectively examined is, unfortunately, extremely doubtful.

The sealing controversy is discussed more calmly and rationally by Herscovici, Busch, Candow, and also by Janice Scott Henke in *Seal Wars! An American Viewpoint* (St. John’s, Breakwater, 1985). Another, still useful, book on the subject is Calvin Coish, *Season of the Seal* (St. John’s, Breakwater, 1979). The best account is probably Candow’s. Though his sympathies as a Newfoundlander are evident, he establishes a clear and detailed chronology, with a fair and adequate exposition of the opposing arguments. Busch, in a short account, carefully takes a middle position between the sealers and the abolitionists. There is a conscious attempt to be fair and even-handed, which, given his earlier declaration of bias, is on the whole successful. Herscovici and Henke are both highly critical of the protest movement. The former is, of course, concerned with the whole subject of animal rights ideology and activism, of which the Newfoundland sealing wars are but one manifestation. His position is that concern for ecological balance and the wise use of animals is essential, but that the animal rights movement is both insensitive and dangerous, and cannot solve a basic contradiction: “by disenfranchising the very people who still have direct commitment to the land, the animal rights philosophy facilitates the growing hegemony of the techno-industrial complex, widening rather than healing the rift between man and nature” (p. 24). The movement’s attacks on sealing, whaling and trapping weaken the northern economies of Inuit, Indian and Newfoundlander alike, and so open the way for interests which are not compatible with the needs of wildlife. This is a thoughtful, well-researched and well-written book, marred only by an oversimplified potted history of animal rights and the nonsensical statement that the Newfoundland soil and climate are so bad that even potatoes will not grow there (p. 24).

⁷ *Saturday Night* (December 1982), p. 9.

Henke is a journalist, suitably posed on the cover hugging a doggie. *Seal Wars!* could have been both better written and better organized, but she has done some good investigative work, and provides illuminating material on the propaganda strategies and finances of the various organizations involved. There is a particularly effective passage in which Henke gives a description of the harp seal's life cycle derived from scientific literature. It follows a typical effusion written by that well-known gourmet carnivore, Brian Davies of the International Fund for Animal Welfare, with its allusions to the "seal nursery", the return of the seal mothers to the "shattered carcasses" of the young, their "grieving eyes" and "great tears" (pp. 18-36).

An obvious point, made by all the authors under review except Mowat, is that the sealing controversy was in part a clash of cultures. It began, modestly enough, as a protest against actual over-exploitation and allegedly inhumane killing methods, particularly in the Gulf. As it snowballed, the major organizations involved began to use the seal hunt as a means of raising consciousness (as well as money), and moved from demands for reform to demands for total abolition. And in later years, they began to move from humanitarian and ecological concerns towards an animal rights position. As Robert Hunter of Greenpeace has written, "From the theoretical point of view of changing man's consciousness...the annual seal hunt was too tempting a target to ignore".⁸ In the process, Newfoundlanders were subjected to international obloquy. Hunter's account of the Greenpeace campaigns is revealing in many ways. The ecological "warriors" from Vancouver far set off to create as big a media event as possible, hoping in the process to save at least some of "the seal people on their vast birthing grounds".⁹ They arrived eventually in a strange land inhabited by a hostile tribe Hunter calls "Newfies", apparently in thrall to a powerful "union boss". The natives howled defiance at the warriors, who holed up in Ma Decker's boarding house in St. Anthony. There, with great solemnity, they consulted the I Ching.

Newfoundlanders were understandably bewildered and offended. Though there were relatively few sealers left and the industry was largely controlled by Norwegians, sealing remained important to families on the northeast coast, and was seen as a part of every Newfoundlander's heritage. The attacks of Davies, Greenpeace and their followers were seen as an unwarranted and unfair onslaught on a way of life, which resulted in the portrayal of Newfoundlanders as uncouth, savage barbarians — witness the annual deluge of vicious hate mail from animal lovers¹⁰ and the wretched movie of *A Whale for the Killing*, which did much to reinforce the stereotype. Mowat argues that Davies had no choice: he had to manipulate the media and "eschew reason" if he was to win the battle. He gives no thought, as do Herscovici, Henke and Busch, to the damage done in the process. The end justified all.

8 Robert Hunter, *Warriors of the Rainbow* (New York, 1979), p. 249.

9 Hunter, *Warriors*, p. 286.

10 Some of these gems are printed by Henke, *Seal Wars!*, pp. 175-83.

It is a pity that professional social scientists did not take the opportunity to study the seal wars while they were on. We are left with two studies by graduate students. Cynthia Lamson has published her M.A. thesis, "*Bloody Decks and a Bumper Crop*". *The Rhetoric of Sealing Counter-Protest* (St. John's, Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University, 1979), which deals with the expression of counter-protest by Newfoundlanders. As a folklorist, her interest is in the songs, verses and cartoons which appeared in local publications. There is little analysis of the situation as a whole, and the value of the book lies in the record of anger, chauvinism, xenophobia and eventually humour with which local people greeted the anti-sealers. Guy Wright, an anthropology student, went to the Front in 1979 in a vessel that was locally owned and crewed. In *Sons and Seals: A Voyage to the Ice* (St. John's, Institute for Social and Economic Research, Memorial University, 1984) he describes his experiences, brushes with the protesters, and the attitudes of his fellow sealers. Wright is no George Allan England, but the book is well done, and is the only record we have of life and work on a sealing vessel at the end of the industry's life.

In time for the 1985 Christmas market, Mattel Toys, in collaboration with the Humane Society of America, produced a new doll in the form of Snuggles the Seal. Though the whitecoat hunt has gone, the tag allegedly asked "Do you know what they're doing to my brothers and sisters to the north?"¹¹ The seal pup, having become a symbol, is now being exploited in a new way: one might almost think this the result of unadulterated avarice. As for the sealers, they are left with degrading make-work projects, victims of a great ecological test case. Inuit hunting economies in Canada and Greenland have also been damaged, and they — and Indians further south — now face the prospect of a war against trapping. The new sensibility is reshaping the North and parts of Atlantic Canada. Its proponents argue that we must be responsible to all animals, all life. But surely, as Herscovici states, they must also accept a responsibility to members of their own species.

J.K. HILLER

11 *Evening Telegram* (St. John's), 30 November 1985.