

The War Against the Seals: A History of the North American Seal Fishery. B. C. Busch.

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REVIEW

The War Against the Seals: A History of the North American Seal Fishery. B. C. Busch. Kingston, Ontario: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1985, pp. 374.

CHESLEY SANGER

FOR MORE THAN two decades the Eastern Canadian seal fishery has attracted a great deal of comment. All too often, however, fact and reason have been lost in the emotionally-charged rhetoric of public debate and the mutual recriminations of proponents and opponents of the hunt. A comprehensive, thoroughly researched, objective, and well written "general history of the North American sealing industry," therefore, is long overdue.

With a principal title which describes commercial sealing as a "War Against the Seals", and the confession that his "own inclination is to pull for the seals", Busch's book is arguably not what is needed here, although the author insists that the views of those committed to the continuation of the industry receive fair and equal consideration. In dealing with the Eastern Canadian sealing confrontations of the 1970s, for example, he states that it was his intention to "give as much sympathy and understanding to the 'swilers' of Newfoundland as to the Greenpeace cadre at their Vancouver headquarters who told me how wrong the sealers were." Is this book, then, the necessary publication which will go a long way towards covering the neglected middle ground separating the widely divergent positions of the polemicists in the sealing debate?

The War Against the Seals traces the growth and decline of all significant seal fisheries in which North Americans have been participants. The first chapter deals with the wide ranging New England sealing industry of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The next two examine the evolution of the Newfound-

land seal fishery over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, while Chapters 4 and 5 repeat the process for the exploitation of the Alaska or Northern fur seals on the Pribilof Islands. Chapters 6 and 7 consider North American involvement in "lesser-known but also significant sealing in the Californias, Alta and Baja, Australia and New Zealand . . . and the Indian Ocean." Chapters 1 through 7 follow what is essentially a descriptive, chronological format. In the final chapter, Busch provides limited analysis and offers what he claims is an objective commentary delivered with, as he puts it, "the detachment expected of a professional historian."

That the volume represents a substantial investigative effort, there is no doubt. More than 800 books, theses, monographs, and articles were consulted and listed separately in a two-part bibliography. Unfortunately, however, citations for information provided by "unpublished documents, logbooks, journals, and correspondence," are restricted to individual references in chapter notes. Essentially, though, *War Against the Seals* is a collage. Busch has drawn upon a relatively few major publications to establish a matrix which cements together the often copious details from more specialized sources. While this approach enables the author to outline the basic elements of distinctive sealing phases, his treatment in many instances swings erratically from place to place, time to time, and incident to incident. The hurried, almost breathless, pace of the more general background information is intermixed with large portions of text which provide minute detail of what, in the context of a serious history of sealing, must often be considered mere trivia. Despite the large number of documents and publications cited, the choice of sources in certain cases must be questioned as to their appropriateness and reliability. Rather than using the many official documents of the Federal Government to explain Canada's "standard defenses of sealing", for example, Busch prefers information published in the March 19th, 1979 edition of the *New Zealand Herald* (a clipping, in fact, drawn from a Newfoundland Historical Society file). Nor has the author coped very well with the compression of argument necessary in a summary volume of this sort: although, to be fair, it is perhaps unreasonable to expect a book which attempts to cover so vast and complex a topic to be fully comprehensive.

At a more technical level, McGill-Queen's University Press, despite editorial errors such as reference notes 42-44 missing for Chapter 8, have produced a high quality, attractive book. While the volume is well illustrated with interesting and informative photographs, the maps are not integrated into the text and thus lose much of their potential value. Placed near the end, they are neither adequately used nor properly explained.

If these were the only drawbacks, it would be fair to describe *The War*

Against the Seals as a timely, informative, and very well-priced history of North American involvement in sealing. Unfortunately, there are other serious shortcomings, such as the treatment of the major sealing phases. These may be exemplified with reference to Chapters 2 and 3 which cover topics and issues that fall within the main research areas of this reviewer—the Eastern Canadian Harp seal fishery and the Scottish Northern whaling industry with its Newfoundland sealing connections. In brief, both chapters, “The Schooners of the Outports, 1790-1863” and “The Wooden Walls of St. John’s, 1863-1916,” are prone to errors of fact, omission, and misinterpretation. Many of these are minor. Busch, for example, claims that Harp seals at the “Front” feed primarily “in White Bay” during February and that adults “cut”, rather than maintain, “breathing holes” (43); Bareneed and Little Hearts Ease, outport communities, are referred to as “Base-need” (55) and “Heart’s Ease” (66) respectively; and, on a lighter note for those familiar with St. John’s and environs, he explains that sealers who obtained berths on steamers were expected to provide their own bedding (not always the case) “which might be nothing more than hay from southern hills outside St. John’s” (73).

The War Against the Seals also contains far more serious examples of inaccurate reporting. Busch, for instance, explains that this reviewer “calculated five-year high-low ranges of [income] averages” (76). While his, and my, conclusions are based upon these statistics, his accompanying table gives only the low-medium averages (76). Additionally, Busch, in describing the evolution of the commercial, offshore, vessel seal fishery, contends that the transition from a shore-based operation occurred because “going to the ice always had an element of risk and necessitated the development of vessels more substantial than small open dories.” (48) The truth is that accessibility, rather than risk, was the principal determinant. Landsmen simply utilized, and later modified, existing vessels, shallots in the first instance, in order to gain access to the Harp seal whelping rookeries. Dories were never an important factor in either landsmen or offshore sealing in Newfoundland. The vessel component of the Newfoundland seal fishery, in turn, evolved through a series of distinctive phases. Sailing ships, for example, quickly gave way to steamers after 1863. The introduction of steam occurred largely in response to the appearance of two steam-powered Scottish whalers, the *Polynia* and *Camperdown*, on the Newfoundland sealing grounds in 1862. Scots, however, had not whaled or sealed in Newfoundland waters prior to that date. Neither were Scottish Northern whalers ever less than 200 tons. Furthermore, with the exception of one additional voyage to Newfoundland in 1867, the Scots continued to focus their sealing efforts on the exploitation of the Harp seal whelping patch off Jan Mayen. It was not until the “East Greenland”

stock had been significantly reduced that the Scots returned to Newfoundland in 1876. Nevertheless, Busch categorically states that "Newfoundland sealers had before their eyes the example of larger Scottish whalers (30-50 tons) which occasionally took seals, at least by the 1790s" (48). Similarly, in the following chapter, while discussing the introduction of steamers in the early 1860s, he claims that "steam seemed to promise new rewards in fresh areas—Newfoundland waters, for example, where Scottish whalers had long been active but had not yet entered the seal hunt" (65).

What can most charitably be described as interestingly unique interpretations of fact also characterize the author's attempt in Chapter 8, "The Epilogue," to provide an objective appraisal of the decade and a half controversy that plagued the commercial whitecoat hunt off Newfoundland prior to its demise in 1982 (241-258). Busch, for example, claims that Newfoundlanders who take seals, and many who do not, have often spoken scathingly of preservationists or conservationists who have maligned their vocation without grasping its significance, economic or psychological. Unfortunately, this particularly astute appraisal of the views held by the majority of Newfoundlanders is undermined by his additional claim that "those conservationists may have prevented the virtual extermination of the herd by arousing public concern, and thus, in a further irony, continued to give work to the sealers and lay the basis for further sealer-conservationist confrontations" (248). Moreover, it is not true that Newfoundland researchers have argued, as Busch reports, that "fishing for cod was in some ways an agricultural enterprise meaning that the more the fishermen ate the more they developed the industry . . . and sealing had a similar function" (47:275).

In short, I must conclude that, on balance, Busch fails to provide the fully comprehensive and accurate account of North American sealing that he claims to have given us. He has compiled an immense amount of useful data and a good bibliography, but some of his information, and his use of it, is open to serious question. Indeed, there is real danger that *The War Against the Seals*, far from clarifying the issues in a difficult debate, will perpetuate existing inaccuracies and may even introduce a whole new set of misconceptions.