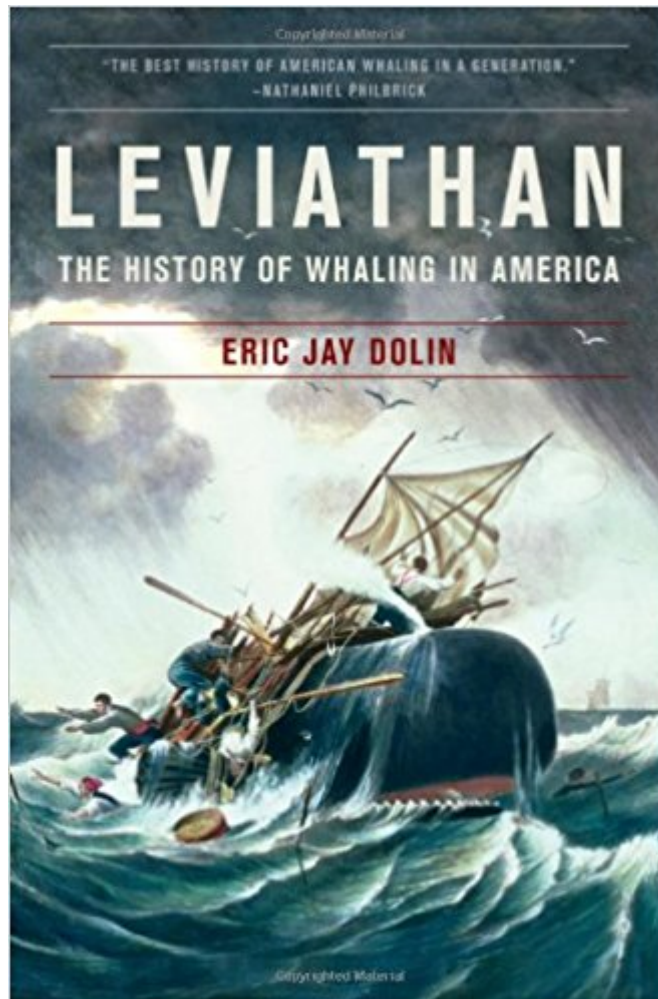


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Leviathan: The History Of Whaling In America



Synopsis

A Los Angeles Times Best Non-Fiction Book of 2007 A Boston Globe Best Non-Fiction Book of 2007 .com Editors pick as one of the 10 best history books of 2007 Winner of the 2007 John Lyman Award for U. S. Maritime History, given by the North American Society for Oceanic History "The best history of American whaling to come along in a generation." •Nathaniel Philbrick The epic history of the "iron men in wooden boats" who built an industrial empire through the pursuit of whales. "To produce a mighty book, you must choose a mighty theme," Herman Melville proclaimed, and this absorbing history demonstrates that few things can capture the sheer danger and desperation of men on the deep sea as dramatically as whaling. Eric Jay Dolin begins his vivid narrative with Captain John Smith's botched whaling expedition to the New World in 1614. He then chronicles the rise of a burgeoning industryâ from its brutal struggles during the Revolutionary period to its golden age in the mid-1800s when a fleet of more than 700 ships hunted the seas and American whale oil lit the world, to its decline as the twentieth century dawned. This sweeping social and economic history provides rich and often fantastic accounts of the men themselves, who mutinied, murdered, rioted, deserted, drank, scrimshawed, and recorded their experiences in journals and memoirs. Containing a wealth of naturalistic detail on whales, Leviathan is the most original and stirring history of American whaling in many decades.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Growing up as I did in southeastern New England - a childhood that included well-remembered trips to Mystic Seaport in Connecticut and the Whaling Museum in New Bedford, Massachusetts - whaling has long been part of my personal fabric of the historical past. Eric Jay Dolin's "Leviathan: The History of Whaling in America" meticulously details that part of the past. In his preface to the book, Dolin (trained in environmental studies) sets out his purpose as being to "re-create what whaling was, not to address what it should be now." And similarly he warns that "this book does not pass judgment on American whalers by applying the moral, ethical, and cultural sensitivities of modern times to the actions of those who existed in a bygone era." Dolin succeeds admirably in re-creating historical whaling, going back to early English and Dutch whaling efforts and discussing whether coastal American Indians actually engaged in anything beyond "drift whaling" (i.e., opportunistically making use of the carcasses of whales washed ashore). Although Basques had crossed the Atlantic as early as the mid-Sixteenth century to pursue "shore whaling" (rowing out from shore installations to hunt and kill whales), it was in particular the English colonists of northeastern America in the Eighteenth century who particularly made an art of deep-sea whaling, sailing out into the Atlantic on long voyages to pursue their prey. Whaling became a major source of economic tension in the decades leading to the American Revolution. Although the years of war (and the War of 1812 a few decades later) for a time diminished the strength of the American whaling industry, it grew dramatically by the time of its "Golden Age" in the 1840s, although various factors including the ready availability of petroleum from newly discovered oil wells soon thereafter sent whaling into a severe decline from which it never recovered. "Leviathan" is well-written, both comprehensive in scope and yet at the same time vividly detailed, examining the romance of whaling in the South Seas (a romance particularly enjoyed by those who were safe and dry on land) and the dirty, harsh reality of spending months and even years at sea hunting the great creatures. Whaling was not a good way for the typical seaman to earn a fortune; indeed, at the end of a long voyage a man aboard a whaler was likely to make barely enough money to get riotously drunk before shipping out again. Dolin carefully examines the bleak economics of whaling and the political complications that sometimes accompanied it (such as the precarious and uncomfortable position occupied by the great whaling center of Nantucket during the American Revolution and the War of 1812, faced with the overwhelming might of the Royal Navy and the necessity to make a living almost exclusively through an industry that inevitably exposed its ships and men to capture or death at the hands of the Royal Navy. And Dolin explores life on whaling ships with its great demands and dangers and its everyday facets. Like Herman Melville, Dolin does not neglect writing about the whale himself, weighing the relative qualities of such whales as the right, the sperm, and the

bowhead.

Reading *Leviathan* by Eric Jay Dolin was indeed a treat. This book tells the tale of the History of Whaling in America with precise details and in such a narrative form that one is intrigued by reading the volume. I truly did not want the chapters to end-as the writing was so well done. The comprehensive foot notes for each chapter, were in themselves a treat to read and the knowledge that they contained was indeed valuable and enhanced the reading of the book. I grew up in New Bedford, MA, once the whaling capital of the world, and took a course in the History of Whaling many years ago--and much of what Dolin tells I had never heard. Kudos to Mr. Dolin. I cannot wait for his next book to appear

If you have read Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, you have an accurate idea of what American whaling was in the middle of the nineteenth century. Melville did not just tell the story of mad, doomed Captain Ahab, but included one chapter after another about whales, the history of whaling, the process of capturing and processing whales, and much more. It is a wild book for a wild enterprise, and for all its magnificent pessimism, it was published in 1851 when American whaling was booming. Melville must have thought that whaling would go on forever, but technology and economics changed vastly only a few decades after his masterpiece came out. His book was badly received and forgotten until the 1920's and will never be forgotten again, but American whaling, upon which much of our economy and even our democracy was based, will never come back. The great industry has a big and entertaining profile in *Leviathan: The History of Whaling in America* (Norton) by Eric Jay Dolin. Dolin is an environmentalist who has written books on wildlife refuges, but this is certainly not a "Save the Whales" treatise. Whether whaling ought to continue (by other nations, of course) is not covered here, nor whether Americans should have been involved in so gross a slaughter for so long. Whalers could not have had our ecological credentials; they were merely taking part in an industry of fishing in an extreme form. They also could not have expected that their particular enterprise would be so influential to American history, one of Dolin's themes here. The passengers of the *Mayflower* itself saw whales playing off the beach of their new land, and learned from the Indians that the shoreline could be combed for cast-up whale carcasses. These "drift whales" (usually pilot whales) could be cut up and boiled for oil to be burned in lamps. Refusing to wait for the next whale carcass to be cast up, the colonists took up shore whaling, whereby they set out in open boats with harpoons to kill the whales and bring them back ashore to process the oil. Eventually, they had picked the off-shore regions clean of most of the whales and

had to look further out. The technology of such ventures was improving, so that larger ships could be used, eventually with their own on-board tryworks to render and barrel the oil. Just as whalers had to venture further and further to accomplish shore whaling, so they had eventually to sail all over the world to find sperm whales. It was a tough occupation. The hunt was not the only danger, although a sperm whale could turn a whaleboat into splinters with its tail. The process of rendering a whale involved the sharpest of instruments, often wielded on sixteen foot poles, while the ship tossed on the waves. There was a constant danger of fire from the tryworks, or simple bad weather that could wreck a ship, or even vengeful whales, which existed in reality as well as fiction. Twenty years after the heyday of the time of *Moby Dick*, American whaling was spiraling downward. Dolin cites many factors in its eventual demise. There was disruption from the Civil War. There was outdated technology; American whalers were slow to take up explosive harpoons or harpoon guns because they were not part of whaling tradition. Whales were getting harder to find, even in the wide-ranging voyages of the nineteenth century. But Dolin reproduces an 1861 cartoon showing the main culprit. The cartoon has happy whales improbably clothed in formal dress, at a Grand Ball in honor of the newly discovered oil wells in Pennsylvania. A banner in the background reads, "We Wail No More for our Blubber". Other means of lighting were coming from the ground and not the sea, and the strips of baleen (not found in the jaws of the sperm whale but in others like the bowhead) lost their market once fashions became corset-free around the turn of the last century. The American whale fishery is no more, but will be preserved forever in Melville's great work. Dolin's is less epic, but is quite as entertaining as a factual volume can be. He reports on the great fishery, but does not make moral judgment about the rectitude of the slaughter, nor does he have much to say about the whaling trawlers that can now take as many whales in a year as a New Bedford whale ship could take in its working lifetime. Here is a great whale miscellany, with stories of mutinies, military war waged against whalers, killer whales, Nantucket tycoons, stench, grime, ships entrapped in polar ice, women sailors disguised as men, prostitution, scrimshaw, the opening of Japan, foreign policy intrigues, and more. Dolin's book has a great bibliography, and splendid illustrations, and presents a long and complicated history full of engaging details on every page.

I'm giving the book five stars for content: many other reviewers have covered the book's qualities more than adequately. My review is strictly about the Kindle edition. There are two serious problems with the Kindle edition: 1. There are no links to access the end notes. Given that it is very cumbersome to access end notes in Kindle without links, and given that this book makes extensive use of end notes, I consider the lack of links to be inexcusable. 2. There are no images. The printed

editions have numerous high-quality black and white illustrations, which would be a natural to include in the Kindle book. However, there is not a single illustration in this Kindle edition. Based on these two problems, I'd say the publisher tried to cut corners in creating a Kindle version of this book. I will be requesting a refund, and I recommend that people hold off on ordering this book for Kindle until the publisher releases a version that is functional and complete.

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