

*Leviathan: The History of Whaling in America.* By Eric Jay Dolin. New York: W. W. Norton, 2007. 460 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, illustrations. Cloth, \$27.95. ISBN: 0-393-06057-7.

Reviewed by Joshua M. Smith

Whaling is an important topic in American history that continues to hold public and academic interest, as evidenced by Nathaniel Philbrick's popular retelling of the *Essex* tragedy, *In the Heart of the Sea*, and Lisa Norling's important scholarly study of women in whaling communities, *Captain Ahab Had a Wife* (both 2000). Eric Jay Dolin, in *Leviathan*, has joined the legions who have been drawn to tell the tale of American whaling. In so doing, he has fashioned the latest word on an old industry, creating a much needed overhaul of our knowledge about the American whaling industry.

*Leviathan* is a sweeping work that is sure to attract the attention of the serious reading public. Dolin's stated goal is to produce a book that does "justice to America's rich whaling heritage" (p. 12). Dolin refuses to engage in twenty-first-century debates about the morality of whaling: this book is largely a celebration of how whaling influenced American history. Dolin attempts to evade presentism by viewing whales as the whalers did: as "swimming profit centers to be taken advantage of, not preserved" (p. 13). *Leviathan* makes use of scholarly sources, but it is not a monograph with a hard-hitting thesis as much as a narrative about whaling. At that level, it is informative and cleverly written, but not without problems.

The book's main focus is on the whaling communities of Long Island and Nantucket and at New Bedford. The strongest section describes the origins of the colonial whale fishery. Dolin navigates important questions, such as the role of Native Americans in establishing the early whaling industry, and carefully pares folklore from documented facts. His coverage of the important spermaceti-candle trade, arguably the first value-added manufactured product exported from the English colonies, sheds considerable light on colonial business practices. Dolin mines the substantial and growing historical literature adroitly, easily mixing antiquarian works with modern

analytical treatments, and he even ventures into cultural studies by looking at how literary figures and moviemakers viewed whaling. He has a good eye for interesting anecdotes that vividly illustrate how Yankee whalers practiced their craft, both ashore and afloat. His account is chronological, and it winds down at the close of the nineteenth century, utilizing the fate of New Bedford's last square-rigged whaling vessel, the *Wanderer*, as an epilogue. The demise of this ship reflects the decline of the industry, which, although it persisted into the late twentieth century, had ceased to be of importance before the First World War.

The author brings interesting and persuasive credentials to this work, including a doctorate in environmental policy and time spent working for the National Marine Fisheries Service and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Yet this book is not an environmental rant by any means—if anything, it is too restrained in this respect. Dolin could have revisited the whale hunt as another “tragedy of the commons,” but he chose not to. Nor did he extend his historical inquiry into the dawning of the conservation movement. Dolin makes it clear in his introduction that he does not intend to engage in the controversy that surrounds whaling, but his caution results in his book being less interesting than it might have been.

Indeed, there is something a tad unfinished about this work, as though the author was in haste to complete it. While the colonial chapters are polished and carefully documented, Dolin walks away from the twentieth century, which is a pity, because he clearly has the ability to engage readers and to conduct top-notch research. I am thus left with a number of questions, specifically about the Isbrandtsen whaling effort in the 1930s; the international whaling conventions after World War II; the last of the shore whaling establishments in California (which only closed in the 1970s); and the Makah people's struggle to reassert their traditional whaling culture in the 1990s—or, for that matter, about the rise of the whale as the icon of environmentalism. Dolin touches on the idea of whaling as a part of America's “mythic past” in his epilogue (p. 373), but he does not explore the idea except in his discussion of the 1922 film *Down to the Sea in Ships*.

The author's hesitance about entering the twentieth century produces the feeling that this is a book of parts. Dolin's treatment of early whaling, especially shore whaling, and of the part played by Native Americans in the genesis of American whaling, is

important and nuanced. But, like so many maritime histories, this work is mired in the age of sail, betraying an essentially romantic viewpoint. Dolin confesses as much in his introduction when he points out that an image of whalers painted on the lid of an oval box in his possession sparked his interest in the subject. The theme of men testing their courage in combat with marine mammals predominates, but when the introduction of better whaling equipment turned the battle into a lopsided one, making it a mere industrial process, the author lost interest.

*Joshua M. Smith is assistant professor of humanities at the United States Merchant Marine Academy in Kings Point, New York. He is the author of Borderland Smuggling: Patriots, Loyalists, and Illicit Trade in the Northeast, 1783–1820 (2006). At present, he is working in conjunction with the National Maritime Historical Society to create a textbook and document reader for American maritime history.*