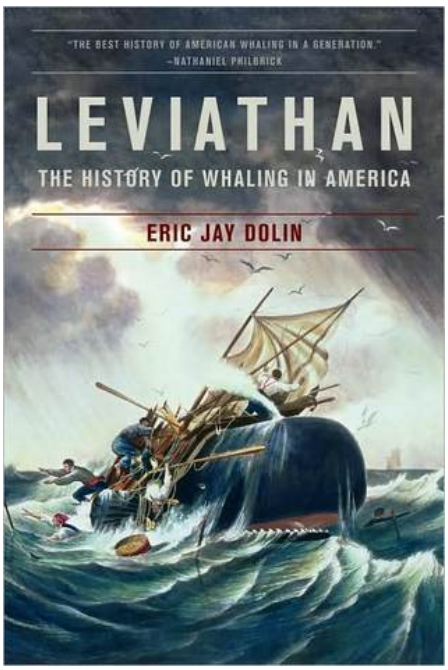

Leviathan: The History of Whaling in America

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A *Los Angeles Times* Best Non-Fiction Book of 2007

A *Boston Globe* Best Non-Fiction Book of 2007

Amazon.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 industry—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.

Leviathan: The History of Whaling in America Details

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From Reader Review Leviathan: The History of Whaling in America for online ebook

Matt says

The risk in giving your opinion about a book is that people may think you're an idiot. Worse than that, people may find out that, indeed, you actually *are* an idiot. This risk usually only runs with books that are acknowledged classics, or books that are trashy. For instance, you will definitely get concerned looks when you say you really hate *The Great Gatsby* or really love *The DaVinci Code*. (No offense to Dan Brown-o-philes).

This was my plight when I said I really disliked *Moby Dick*. Since these reviews are voluntary on my part, and since I'm no longer an indifferent high school student writing a five-paragraph theme based on borrowed Cliffs Notes since it's 1998 and my parents only have a dial-up AOL connection, I try very hard to avoid using the descriptor **boring**. The word doesn't mean much; if it means anything, it's usually that the person speaking it doesn't have much imagination. But with *Moby Dick*, despite much hemming and hawing, I eventually was left with that conclusion: I was bored. The book bored me. There, I said it.

Whenever I give this opinion, people invariably respond: "You just don't get it."

First, thanks for the vote of confidence, you condescending jerk. And second...Well, you're probably right. I don't get it. And I'm not going to waste my time trying again.

To quench my lingering thirst for whale blood, I picked up Eric Jay Dolin's *Leviathan: The History of Whaling in America*. I have two main things to say about this book. (1) This is a very *good* book about whaling. (2) This is a very good book about *whaling*.

Leviathan takes a chronological approach to its sweeping subject. It starts in the 1600s, with a rather pointless discussion about John Smith (yeah, that one) and the whales and ends in the 1920s, when most of the whales have been slaughtered and the human race had turned to raping Mother Earth for its oil. Sorry, I'm just bitter that I have to work on Thanksgiving.

Dolin is an engaging writer, and he is an explainer, so that there are tons of interesting factoids and stories with which to wow your wife/life partner/dinner guests/the guy standing next to you at the bar. Just make sure to space these things out, because no one wants a bunch of whale facts all at once. Dolin is at ease tackling subjects as varied as whale biology (with a side-focus on whale penises), types of harpoons, industry economics, and the gory, step-by-step processing of captured whales.

The book's scope encompasses many decades. However, because whaling is an industry, rather than a single historical event - or even an series of historical events - the nature of *Leviathan* is rather anecdotal. Though each time period is discrete and unique - in terms of economic climate (whalers did well in peace, and poor in war) and utilized technologies - the template is always the same: dozens of stories stitched together with background information. There are stories about successful hunts, and unsuccessful hunts; there are stories about rampaging whales and shipwrecks; there are ships stuck in the ice, and mutinies at sea, and attacks by angry natives that seem to leap straight out of a semi-racist Technicolor film from the 40s or 50s.

I've always kind of liked anecdotal books. There's nothing better than a good story, and if you're drunk while telling that story, or listening to it, then all the better. Of course, one man's anecdote is another man's aimless

digression, and this makes for a read that is hit and miss. When the stories are lame, or seem off topic, the book is a drag. But when the stories are crisp, and exciting, and involve mutineers taking their whaleboats and attempting to escape into the Australian Outback, the pages just fly.

For instance, there is a section on whaling during the Civil War. The entire chapter is devoted to two Confederate Raiders wreaking havoc on the American whaling fleet. Now, I know - because I checked - that a lot of folks who read this book loved this section. I thought it was pointless. It has absolutely nothing to do with whaling, other than the victims were whalers. Obviously, the whaling industry was effected by these events, but Dolin tells the story from the point of view of the predators (the Confederates), not the victims (the whalers). Really, what Dolin is doing is filling pages with something he hopes will hold the reader's attention. It's the literary equivalent of Roland Joffre adding an Indian attack (!) to the end of his film version of *The Scarlet Letter*. In this case, the story didn't work for me. But it could work for you.

One major problem I often have with books like this - that is, micro-histories - is that they try to prove too much, or overstate the importance of its subject. Fortunately, Dolin mostly avoids this pitfall. He sticks to the vicarious, exciting, man-against-nature aspects, rather than trying to prove to us that "stabbing whales to drain their precious oils to make brighter-burning candles for rich people" actually changed the course of human events.

The big surprise is that there is very little critical analysis of yesterday's whaling industry - or today's. Reading Dolin's bio, with all his fancy, Ivy League degrees, I figured he'd at least touch on the fact that poorly-paid whalemen, at the behest of giant corporate trusts, practically denuded the seas of an entire species in order to reap a fantastic profit. Alas, there is no such preaching in *Leviathan*. So I added that little sermon for your edification.

One of the best things about *Leviathan* is that it isn't *Moby Dick*. If you want a good whale yarn, here it is! And in modern English! Then again, if you want to push forward with your plans to read *Moby Dick* over the holidays, this makes a good companion. Finally, if you read *Moby Dick*, and loved it, you coud read this book and scoff at its simplistic syntax, and its lack of Biblical allusions. Then you can leave a comment on my *Moby Dick* review telling me what a simple soul I am.

Chris says

It held my interest throughout it's entirety. That's saying a lot from a reader with my ADD

Jonathan says

I love the history of whaling so for me to give this anything less than five stars would be foolish.

Josh Liller says

I ended up with a free copy of this after reading the author's excellent "Brilliant Beacons" and decided to give it a go. I'm vaguely familiar with Moby Dick (I think I read a very abridged version in school), but I did

not know very much about whaling and don't read very much about non-military maritime history. This book is the history of American whaling, from early colonists to the last wooden whaleship in 1924. "Leviathan" and "Brilliant Beacons" are written in a similar format: a fairly detailed chronological history of the main subject's early days with the middle of the book being a series of sub-topics about the hey-day of the main subject, with a short history of the subject's decline. I don't think I would have noticed this if I hadn't read the two books the same year.

This books seems generally well-written and well-researched. Nevertheless, I found it a bit of an uneven read, starting off fairly interesting then becoming a bit mired in lots of political issues that I found kind of dull. I put this book down on two occasions to move on to other books. The book really hits its stride with the Golden Of Whaling. The final act was pretty interesting too.

I'd give this 3.5 stars if I could, but given the strong content I'll round up for this one. I recommend it, although whether strongly or mildly could vary greatly depending on the reader. But if you want to read exactly one book about historical whaling this is definitely it.

Sara says

Amazing history that is very dense with research. Dolin presented a tome that detailed some background of whaling in Europe and America before colonization, but the bulk is from the Pilgrims through the next three centuries. Every facet of whaling was chronicled, including events of a certain era and how those events impacted the industry. This is also a book that should not be read with modern eyes as it is very detailed on life on the ships.

Trisha Yeager says

A good, comprehensive history of American whaling, with engaging stories of whaling feats to make up for the drab economic parts. I loved getting the increased depth into what I thought were familiar historical events.
(Note for the audio listeners - this reader does not read with the vigor of the story, and I found him fairly bland.)

Sonya says

Excellent history of whaling in the U.S. My only complaint is that the narrator (who was a bit boring to listen to) didn't pronounce many place names as someone who lived in Massachusetts would.

Shayna says

A very comprehensive history of whaling in America, particularly Euro-American with the most focus being on the east coast. It’s such a huge picture that there isn’t much room for the author to get as detailed in some areas that you might want to know more about, but I felt like he at least touched on so many really

interesting, important points in this history.

Connie says

The sperm whale, what an amazing animal! And man's interaction with it even more so. Colonial American whaling seems to have been overshadowed by the more popular whaling era in the mid 1800's. I am amazed at the whole proposition of chasing a leviathan in a tiny boat (no matter what decade) and have read many books, fiction and non fiction, on the subject. In other books I found no or little mention of the importance of whaling during our country's beginnings but this one has a lot of good information for colonial times. Presented in an historic yet fun tone, the reading is easy. This book is corroborating and expanding on other readings in a human way...lots of good quotes. Starting with shore whaling, to nearby offshore whaling, to longer voyages, I like getting the whole picture of how and why this unlikely pursuit began. My view of this time in our history is getting a new dimension. So far it is quite the yarn; I would recommend.

Todd Martin says

As the subtitle plainly states *Leviathan* is about the history of whaling in America. As we all learned in middle school, whales were hunted for their meat, blubber, baleen and ambergris (a waxy substance used in perfumes). But it was the oil, which burned cleaner and brighter than other substances at the time, that was the real economic driver for the early whaling industry.

Prior to the 1600’s whaling in the continental U.S. largely consisted butchering whales that had been stranded on shore. But by the mid-1600’s New Englanders began open-boat whaling. The preferred technique was to sneak up on the whale and throw or thrust a harpoon into its body. The harpoon was secured to the boat with a strong rope. The purpose of the harpoon was not to kill the whale, but to affix the whale to the boat to prevent it from diving deeply. In an attempt to escape the whale would take the boat and its passengers on a famed ‘Nantucket Sleigh Ride’ exhausting itself in the process, at which point the whalers would close and thrust a lance into the whale in an attempt to pierce the lungs. The measure of success was a bloody spray from the blow hole. With the whale dispatched it could be towed back to shore for butchering.

In the 1700’s the U.S. became a leading exporter as Britain’s demand for whale oil increased and deep sea whaling techniques matured. Trade was interrupted by the Revolutionary War and high tariffs placed on oil by the Brits afterwards caused whaling to founder. The situation improved after the war of 1812 and Nantucket soon became the world’s preeminent whaling port. However, their good fortune was not to last. By 1850, whaling was in decline, and Nantucket's whaling industry was surpassed by that of New Bedford. Though the island suffered great economic hardship, it must have come as no small consolation that the decline in whaling was accompanied by a corresponding rise to prominence as Nantucket became the distinguished subject of filthy limericks around the globe.

U.S. whaling peaked in the mid-1800s, but the introduction of kerosene lamps in 1846 began to take its toll on the demand for whale oil. The Civil War further decimated the industry and by 1895 the New England whaling fleet was down to just 51 ships. The last whaler departed from New Bedford in 1927 (and there was

much rejoicing from the cetacean community).

Dolin goes into great detail of many aspects of whaling - from the long voyages (averaging 4 years), the butchering of whales, shipboard life including the maggot ridden food, hardships, deprivations, living conditions, finances, and injuries suffered, scrimshaw (and scrimshaw porn), hostile natives, mutinous crewmen and rogue whales. He also includes numerous anecdotes such as that of a woman who passed as a seaman for 7 months before discovery, and the techniques used by scalawags to conscript young naifs into whaling service. What is clear is that life for the average whale man was far from romantic and not particularly lucrative, which is why it wasn't unusual for half of a ship's crew on each voyage to desert at the first opportunity.

Of course no whaling book would be complete without a discussion of *Moby Dick* (the literary masterpiece as opposed to something relating to scrimshaw porn) and Dolin goes into some detail about the sources of Melville's ideas for the tale (many of which were based on actual events).

As to the book, it was pretty good. Dolin clearly did quite a bit of research in putting it together and the material, though somewhat voluminous, is presented in a fairly interesting manner.

By way of criticism:
Dolin ignores indigenous whalers entirely. This is particularly egregious given that native Alaskans began hunting whales long before New Englanders did and are currently the only Americans still engaged in the practice (though this is not without controversy). To call the omission of these individuals from a history of American whaling an 'oversight' strikes me as rather an understatement.

In his section discussing the Civil War Dolin speaks in derogatory terms of union soldiers who attempted to disrupt confederate commerce by blockading ports, yet his coverage of rebel warships who plundered and burned unarmed civilian whaling vessels in order to disrupt commerce is positively heroic. It's weird. The only explanation that occurs to me is that Dolin (who, according to Wiki, grew up in the northeast) is a closeted confederate sympathizer.

Finally - early in the book Dolin states that he intends, in no way, shape or form, to discuss the issue of whale conservation or the disastrous effect that whaling had on the species. I view this as an unfortunate decision. It's certainly the author's prerogative to decide what topics to tackle in their work, and Dolin has chosen to limit his discussion only to that of whaling history in the (continental) U.S. But this is an odd choice given the fact that many species of whale were nearly exterminated, that they only exist today due to whaling moratoriums agreed upon by many of the world's countries and the fact that several species remain critically endangered as a result of whaling to this day. Frankly, I can only view Dolin's choice as an abrogation of responsibility. There was no reason he could not have dedicated a short chapter to a subject that I view to be of much greater importance and relevance today than the one he chose to write about.

Kay says

Four stars, though I admit being torn between three and four stars. Honestly, three and a half. I would happily say four if I hadn't gotten completely bogged down in the long middle section of the book giving the history of American whaling ports.

The political background on the American whaling colonies didn't interest me nearly as much as the material

on whaling itself – the lives and methods of the whalers, details of ships, whaling grounds, and so on. As a result, I put this book aside sometime last year and never managed to pick it up again until about a week ago, when I doggedly ploughed through the (to me) drier middle section into some (again, to me) livelier chapters (chapters 14-19, to be precise) which provided the information on whalers and whaling that I'd hoped to find.

On the whole, I enjoyed the author's approach to the subject, which gave me enough information to understand unfamiliar material but wasn't overwhelming. As a bonus, I've read a fair number of books on overlapping and related events mentioned in this book, such as In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex, and recently have been reading Patrick O'Brien's famed Aubrey/Maturin series along with a few other nonfiction nautical books, which largely account for my decision to pick this book up once again. To put it simply, I'm on a bit of a seafaring book binge.

As another reviewer, Matt, has pointed out, this book tends to be anecdotal, and the quality of the anecdotes varies. While I am, on the whole, usually fond of such books, I do wish there had been some underlying theme to unify these anecdotes in a more cohesive way.

However, having said that, I do have a much better picture of whaling as an industry and a better appreciation for its economic role, a surprisingly significant one, in our nation's history. I was surprised to learn, for example, that in 1846, 735 ships out of a worldwide total of 900 whaling ships were American, and that at the height of the "Golden Age" of whaling (1812 to the late 1850s), whaleships accounted for "roughly of the nation's registered merchant tonnage" and employed approximately 70,000 people.

I have two of the author's other books, Fur, Fortune, and Empire: The Epic History of the Fur Trade in America and When America First Met China: An Exotic History of Tea, Drugs, and Money in the Age of Sail on my to-read list and am looking forward to reading them. All in all, these books by Eric Jay Dolin promise to be fine additions to my growing "commodity history" shelf.

Bill Taylor says

An adequate and serviceable history of America's engagement with whaling
Portions are very engaging but other parts lag
Would have wished the author would have finished with a summary of the ecological impact of whaling upon the the whale population of the early 21st century
Given his studies in environmental policy and biology this should have been a topic he could easily addressed

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Len says

No false advertising here. This book is exactly what it says it is: a comprehensive narrative of American whaling, from the 1600s through (nearly) the present. I give it five stars because it is difficult to imagine an author covering the subject any better than Dolan does.

The highlight of the book is its chapters on the "Golden Age" of American whaling -- from about 1800 to

1850.

Alexander Halladay says

I don't think I've ever read so much about a subject I went in with such little care or regard for. Throughout the book I kept stopping not out of any fault of the book, but out of sheer joy at the absurdity of just how invested I was in the story of whale-oil monopolies in Nantucket, of the story of spermicidi candles creation and embargo in Britain following the revolutionary war, and how the dangers of whale-hunts changed over time in what was in many ways the first major Energy business in the dawn of the industrial age. It can get dull, but the level of work that went into research for this book, and adapting historical archived information into a narrative of the history of whaling makes it one of my guiltiest pleasures that I probably will never recommend to a friend for the pure look of confusion I might get in return.

Chris Bull says

The bottom line

Years ago, I was at a museum and the docent mentioned that whalemen made huge amount of money as sperm whale oil was with a fortune. This book sets the record straight. Yes a large whale might equal $80,000 in today’s currency and perhaps several dozen could be taken. So yes, there was money, but a whaler saw a fraction of that perhaps 1/175th

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