

REVIEW

BRITISH WHALING IN PERSPECTIVE

[A review by Clive Holland* of Gordon Jackson's *The British whaling trade*, London, Adam and Charles Black, 1978, xvi, 310 p, tables. £7.50.]

As Mr Jackson makes quite clear in his introduction, his book is primarily an economic history of British whaling. There is none of the excitement of the chase, the adventure, or the human and animal suffering that we normally associate with whaling yarns. Nor does he consciously provide ammunition for either side in the conservation battle. In this book, whaling is scaled down to life size and the whale is put in its more mundane setting alongside vegetable oils, mineral oils, patent umbrella steel and other competing products in the market place.

The whaling industry may sound dull in such a setting, but there is nothing dull about this book; it is too well written and offers too many new insights for that to be possible. For one thing, the author's steady awareness of historical context teaches us more about the precarious nature of our whaling history than any of the more usual stories of the exploits and hardships of whalers; we are required to consider the successes and failures of the industry not only in the context of atrocious polar weather conditions and the elusiveness of the whale, but also against the background of our wars, our industrial upheavals, and our burgeoning textile industry's stubborn (though apparently justified) preference for rape seed oil. The economic approach helps us, too, to see some of the over-exposed aspects of whaling in their proper perspective. The great abundance of books and articles on Arctic whaling in the 19th century, for example, is shown to be no guide to the importance of that phase of the industry's history; for Mr Jackson, this is merely the period of 'Decline in the north' and is dismissed in two short chapters.

The book covers three and a half centuries of British whaling, from 1604 to 1963, dealing in turn with the rise and decline of the industry in each of the major whaling grounds (which were mainly concentrated in the polar regions) and discussing the impact of developing whaling technology and the exploitation of new species, as well as the market pressures. The author has drawn on a wide variety of unpublished material in the Public Record Office, the British Museum, and in other collections throughout the country. He set out with the dual intention of providing the first complete history of British whaling from beginning to end, and of filling the gap between the stories of adventure and the more scientific records. He has achieved both objectives and, in doing so, has given us a book that will be of value for many years.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF CHARLES WILKES

[Review by H. G. R. King of *Autobiography of Rear Admiral Charles Wilkes, US Navy, 1798-1877*, edited by J. Morgan, B. Tyler, J. L. Leonhart, and M. F. Loughlin. Washington DC, Department of the Navy, Naval History Division, 1978, xxii, 944 p, illus. \$13.50.]

The career of Charles Wilkes was a remarkable one, spanning a period of American naval history from the years immediately following the War of 1812, to 1866. In the face of two courts-martial and his involvement in the *Trent* affair, he scaled the ladder of promotion from midshipman to rear-admiral. For the polar historian Wilkes' place in history is secured by his controversial leadership of the United States Exploring Expedition of 1839-42, during the course of which significant land-falls and appearances of land were reported along some 3 000 km of Antarctic coastline between longitudes 160°E and 98°E, evidence enough to justify his claim that Antarctica was nothing less than a continent. Wilkes was indeed the first to add the name 'Antarctic Continent' to the charts. Alas, his discoveries were to be challenged not only by his own countrymen, who court-martialled

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him on his return, but also by his British rival in the field, Sir James Clark Ross, and were subsequently discounted by the British geographical establishment. Not until the 1950s did Australian surveys suggest that Wilkes' observations were conceivably more accurate than had hitherto been recognized.

Wilkes' autobiography, now published for the first time, adds nothing substantial to our existing knowledge of these historic events. A detailed narrative of the exploring expedition is to be found in Wilkes' own five-volume narrative and in the surviving unpublished log-books. What we do find in the *Autobiography* is a much fuller account of the events immediately before and after the expedition, events which Wilkes had refrained from dwelling upon in his general narrative due to their controversial nature. Wilkes began writing the *Autobiography* in 1871 at the age of 73, principally for the edification of his family. Posterity inherited some 2 800 pages of his appalling handwriting which have served to deter transcribers until the present day. As an historical quarry the *Autobiography* is by no means unknown to researchers; but it needs to be used with considerable caution. The primary sources used by Wilkes in its compilation were his diaries and his memory. The latter sometimes failed him and the consequent gaps were not always completed afterwards.

Wilkes' prose is rambling and repetitive and he is much given to the waging of personal vendettas; but having made allowances for these distractions the *Autobiography* remains a remarkable document. Wilkes was a perceptive observer of both peoples and places and his narrative is as instructive for its account of life in the navy of the youthful American republic as it is for its description of South Pacific islands or high society in Washington during the years before the Civil War. A vast amount of painstaking research and editorial work has been devoted to bringing this hitherto obscure manuscript before the public. The Department of the Navy is to be congratulated on making it possible.

IN BRIEF

WHO DISCOVERED ANTARCTICA?

The long-existing Soviet effort to prove that the Russian explorer Bellingshausen was the conscious discoverer of the Antarctic continent in 1820 has recently been buttressed by a new piece of supporting evidence. Two writers in 1978 (I. A. Fedoseyev in *Priroda*, No 11, p 63, and V. Simonov in *Morskoy Flot*, No 8, p 26), celebrating the bicentenary of Bellingshausen's birth, have quoted James Clark Ross as saying 'Discovery of the southernmost of known continents was nobly won by the intrepid Bellingshausen'. But what Ross actually wrote (in his *A voyage of discovery and research in the southern and Antarctic regions during the years 1839-43*, London, John Murray, 1847, p 187) was this: '... yet these mountains [the Admiralty Mountains] being in our way restored to England the honour of the discovery of the southernmost known land, which had been nobly won by the intrepid Bellingshausen, and for more than twenty years retained by Russia'. Ross was presumably referring to Bellingshausen's sighting of Alexander Island. The reason for the error of the two Soviet writers seems to have been the mistranslation, in the source they quoted (a 1960 Russian edition of Bellingshausen's book), of 'land' as 'continent'.

BOOM TOWN PLEASURE

Next door to 'Diamond Tooth Gertie's' gambling hall in Dawson City the celluloid stories that helped to pass the long boom town evenings have lain buried for nearly 50 years. It was while workmen were preparing a site for a new recreation centre that the cache of 500 motion pictures was unearthed. Samples of the films sent to the National Film Archives indicated that they were of considerable historic interest and work on the site ceased so that the films could be excavated. Those close to the surface were badly damaged by ground water, but as the diggers reached the permafrost relatively intact film was salvaged. The films are on 35 mm nitrate stock and were