

# 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 The author has drawn on a wide variety of unpublished material in the Public Record Office, the British Museum, and in other collections throughout the country.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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