ability of either government to control its populace throughout the war, along the border with Upper Canada, anarchy seemed the law of the land.

The British supply line was long (as was the American) and subject to frequent interruption on the Great Lakes. This caused untold hardship, not only for the British regulars, but for the Canadian militiamen, their Indian allies, and the civilian population (who were often stripped of their stores of provisions to feed the army). On the American side, the administration, being broke, was trying to fight the war “on the cheap,” which created major shortages and deficiencies for the ground soldier who had little choice but to turn to the local citizenry for food, firewood, and other necessities.

Taylor’s narrative jumps around a fair amount, shifting years and venues, which makes for some confusion, and he tends to reiterate many of his points, causing some tedium in the story. But, on the whole, this is a well-researched and well-written book that offers a totally different perspective on the War of 1812. With the bicentennial approaching, I would certainly recommend it to anyone wishing to be better informed about this period, the politics, or the war.

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The Whaling Expedition of the Ulysses, 1937-38 by Lt. (j.g.) Quentin R. Walsh, edited by P.J. Capelotti (University of Florida Press, Gainesville, 2010, 368pp., illus., appen., biblio., index, ISBN: 978-0-8130-3479-9; $34.95hc)

In April of 2000, P.J. Capelotti did something very fortunate—he interviewed Quentin R. Walsh, retired Coast Guard captain and an expert on modern commercial whaling, just seven weeks before he passed away. As a result, we have Walsh’s firsthand story of the Ulysses and its fleet of killer boats in 1937, and his own later comment on his groundbreaking report, and we have glimpses of Capelotti’s experience, this time in the introductory materials, on the role of whaling in ocean exploration. Furthermore, we have Walsh’s direct insight into the American-flagged Norwegian-run Western Operating Corporation and an understanding of the hunt and the prey from the viewpoint of Norwegian gunners themselves. Thus, we have multiple perspectives and multi-layered contexts—an approach particularly suited to a complex and controversial history.

In 1937, Coast Guard Lieutenant Walsh was assigned to the whaling ship Ulysses to ensure compliance with American whaling regulations. This was no easy task, and yet his official report went far beyond mere compliance. Beginning with a short history of American whaling (thin at times: a one-sentence transition from shore- to pelagic whaling?), the author moves quickly to the advent of the factory ship, modern killer boats, and the harpoon gun. Short chapters follow on modern vessels, technology, and crew, providing unique material not found in mainstream texts, reminiscent of William W. Warner’s Distant Water (Penguin 1984) about the global trawling industry, or parts of John McPhee’s work. Walsh provides a direct look into a little-known world. Photos, diagrams and sketches, and appendices are valuable supplements to the text.

Walsh covers the complex topic of whaling, not as an academic treatise, but as a firsthand tale. You can smell the salt in the air and the stench of whale meat. Readers must note, however: this is a report, not a smoothly flowing narrative. Repetition is a fact, and transitions between topics are rough, or non-existent. Troublesome at first, I have to admit, in hindsight, the repetition and transition now simply seem part of Walsh’s direct and emphatic style. It certainly serves to deeply embed the main points.

Walsh’s description is striking in the extreme, portraying an industry that had evolved step-by-step to the point of ruthless efficiency from a long history of less efficient, but equally bloody, pursuit. His report came at, and indeed was partially responsible for, the end of our involvement in the extinction of the largest mammals on earth, a pivotal transition from persecution to preservation. This sea change in behavior provides an excellent example of marine stewardship. Yet, in our near-celebration of Captain Ahab, a “proud and enduring American legend,” it would behoove us to remember the even darker side of what came next, the industrial scale of mechanized...
grinders, bone pressers, and steam saws, which transformed whales into nothing more than oil, some brown effluent, and spongy bone mass in a matter of minutes. Walsh’s story is striking in its exact relation to the amount of history we have forgotten. Sometimes the truth about marine resource exploitation hurts, but these lessons need to be preserved. Wholly one-half of the book focuses on the location, behavior, and manner of killing and processing the selected commercial prey, hunting them to the ends of the earth. These are the hard truths of the whaler’s world.

And what of heritage? Whaling as part of cultural identity may be more understandable in relation to indigenous hunters and sustainable practices, but the methods witnessed by Walsh were solely driven by profit. Does heritage include using whales as fenders for ships? The instantaneous damage done by the exploding harpoons, and the fact that almost any whale sighted of sufficient size (or not) was a dead whale, seems to render the hunt a soulless harvest.

The Whaling Expedition of the Ulysses includes the author’s own conflicting perspectives. As a government inspector, Walsh is bound by the letter of the law and in numerous instances is ready with suggestions on how to improve the process. Yet it is also clear that he was profoundly changed by the decimation he witnessed and the obvious lack of sustainability. It was an industry in its own death throes, taking the giant mammals down as well. These contrasting perspectives and multiple contexts serve the history of whaling well. P. J. Capelotti refers to Walsh’s report as a “20th-century sequel to Moby-Dick.”

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The title of this book suggests that it focuses on the British East India Company’s maritime service between the mid-eighteenth century and the end of the company’s monopoly on the importation of Chinese tea. Although Jean Sutton does discuss company politics and commercial developments between Britain, India, and China, she indicates in her introduction that her book is really about a single family who participated in the company’s service: “The individual voyages made by successive members of three generations of the Larkins family, from their initial involvement in the Company’s maritime service in 1746 until its withdrawal from commerce in 1834, form the basis of what follows.” (p. 11). Perhaps by trying to accomplish two goals—narrate the company’s story and examine Larkins family affairs—the author has attempted too much.

Sutton discusses many important developments concerning East India Company politics. She examines the various factions that sought to control the eastern trade, and she relates the bitter political battles concerning renewals of the company’s charter. Because she is also trying to tell the Larkins family’s tale, her presentation of the company’s “big picture” is often vague. Other authors have analyzed the East India Company in greater detail—books by K. N. Chaudhuri, Lucy Sutherland, P. J. Marshall, and H. V. Bowen come to mind.

The Larkins family saga also suffers from important weaknesses. Apparently, Sutton is only interested in male family members; most wives are barely mentioned. The impact of company service on family arrangements is completely ignored. This is a major missed opportunity. Lisa Norling’s Captain Ahab Had A Wife effectively examined the problems that long voyages (akin to those the Larkins experienced) exerted on family life in the American whaling industry. Similar insights would have strengthened Sutton’s portrait of the Larkins family. Sutton is also rather sketchy concerning the Larkinses’ financial rewards from company service. It is difficult to determine the family members’ economic success. She provides no context in which to view company service. Could they have profited more by sailing in other trades? Her comments that Captain Thomas Larkins “retired in penury” is hard to accept, given the photo of one of the impressive three-story, Georgian homes that he owned or leased.

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