

REVIEW: DUNDEE WHALERS

Brian Taylor

Norman Watson, **The Dundee Whalers, 1750 to 1914**, East Linton:
Tuckwell Press, 2003, 230 pp, pb, £14.99, ISBN 1862322074.

‘Yer dad’s away wi’ the whalers!’ As a boy in Dundee, I freely confess I never fully grasped the import of this remark. Equally, however, I was aware that it was meant to be disturbing or even vaguely insulting. From the lips of a juvenile peer, it was intended to annoy. Looking back now, I suppose it was meant to convey one of two interpretations, or perhaps both simultaneously. It was an economic insult, the implication being that your family had to take the roughest, toughest occupation going in search of survival. Or perhaps it was a childish suggestion that you had been abandoned – that your father had left. Think of the conclusion of **Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha** by Roddy Doyle where the reason for the mocking laughter of the title is disclosed. Paddy ‘has no da’.

Even as I write this, I am aware that I am hugely over-analysing a fragment from childhood, one of the half-remembered embers left lying around for our memory to rake through: the sights, sounds, smells and recollections of our upbringing. I reproduce it here only to stress one point in reviewing Norman Watson’s book. Whaling was big business in Dundee. Very big business indeed. Like a passing landslip, it left traces: folk songs, whalebone in the city museum, odd names of Arctic origin for streets and vennels in the older parts of town, childish insults.

When it is acknowledged at all – and don’t get me started on that – Dundee is captioned as the city of ‘Jute, jam and journalism.’ The jute is gone. Likewise the jam. The journalism survives – not least among the many native Dundonians who still practise the rough craft in publications across the

Brian Taylor is the Political Editor of BBC Scotland.

Scottish Affairs

world. Even those who – like me – never worked for DC Thomson will have been subconsciously prompted by their substantial presence in the town. If you're from Peterhead, you're aware of the fishing industry. Dufftown? Distilling ditto. But very few talk of Dundee as a whaling centre, even in the past. Watson tackles that. Dundee, he writes, was far and away the premier Arctic whaling port – yet its contribution is neglected. Watson states his case: 'Not only her ships, but Dundee's masters and crews are unsung heroes of polar exploration.'

To be fair, Watson also deals with the factor which probably contributes to the neglect of this aspect of Scotland's past. The widespread disgust and loathing which the whale trade occasions in contemporary thinking. He acknowledges that 'whaling today is socially, morally and ethically unacceptable to many people'. He describes the unalloyed horror of the associated seal trade in particular. However, he passes on fairly swiftly, anxious to deal with his main topic: an account of the industry and those men who journeyed from Dundee into Arctic waters in search of 'balaena mysticetus', the Greenland Right whale, a docile giant with a mass of profitable bone and blubber.

In truth, I think he passes on rather too swiftly. It would be bogus to expect a narrative which spotlighted the lasting brutality of the trade. Further, Watson specifically enjoins us to consider the Dundee whalers by the standards of the time and not through contemporary eyes.

Would it not have been sensible, however, to have included a chapter or at least a section outlining the controversy over whaling which persists to this day? Watson, I feel sure, would reply that he is telling the past history of an industry which faced no such qualms in its day. Well, yes, but I feel he would have bolstered his appeal for us to transport ourselves to nineteenth century attitudes had he featured a little more about twentieth and twenty-first century moral quandaries.

Watson, however, does not remotely sidestep the grim nature of the industry – nor its legacy. The book's opening words are: 'The wrecks of 40 Dundee whalers lie beneath the ice of the Arctic whaling grounds.' He goes on to describe 'danger, deprivation and death', the customary lot of the whaling crews. The book provides thorough, extensive detail about the ships, the men, the catch, the techniques, the onboard provisions. Again, to be frank, the detail is somewhat too extensive for the general reader. The lists weary the

Review: Dundee Whalers

soul a little. However, Watson plainly feels – and who is to gainsay him too vigorously – that his subject has been neglected and that the gaps should be expeditiously filled.

Much more successful for me were the frequent dashes of local colour, the use of source material from the time to illustrate the real nature of the trade. Consider this from the **Dundee Advertiser** in November 1825, describing the nasal impact of boiling blubber: ‘For several days past, a most disagreeable, suspicious sort of smell has accosted the olfactory nerves of the inhabitants of this town.’ The pedant in me gloried at the language. ‘Olfactory nerves?’ Yes! Today’s headline would probably read: Dundee docksiders kick up a stink. But read between the lines. Discern the attitude: disdainful, yet somehow restrained. A proud ancient burgh that knows it needs the money whaling brings – but dislikes the consequences.

Watson tries too to capture the character of the men who sailed to the Arctic, the families left behind and the Eskimo/Inuit who traded with the adventurous Dundonians. Again, the best material lies in contemporary accounts. How about this from a captain’s log, detailing the circumstances of a ship’s departure from Dundee? ‘At 2.30, took in mooring. Pilot onboard. Steamed down into Camperdown Dock and out into the Tay. Nearly all the crew drunk’. According to Watson, crewmen who had lingered for a last quick one in the pub would sometimes catch up with the ship by leaping off the pier at Broughty Ferry.

There is valuable analysis, too, of the economic aspects. The military victories which displaced the originally dominant Dutch fleet, the sheer, entrepreneurial determination which pushed Dundee to the fore, the financial push for the crewmen who could earn more in a season than in several years in the mills, the link with the jute industry as whale oil was used to soften the raw fibre, the later link with Antarctic exploration as Dundee ships were used to cut through the southern ice.

My taste, I know, but I would have liked a little more on this element: particularly the link with jute. Certainly, Watson records how jute provided the salvation for a struggling whaling trade. He describes how vessels returning empty from the Arctic passed the jute boats which would soon rescue them from economic collapse. However, a little more analysis in this field would have been useful.

Scottish Affairs

Watson concludes with another great story: the *Discovery*, Robert Falcon Scott's Antarctic exploration vessel, built in Dundee and now resting there again. Scott chose Dundee, of course, because of the city's expertise in polar adventures. When his expedition failed, the *Discovery* was rescued by two Dundee whalers, the *Terra Nova* and the *Morning*.

At various points in this account, I have perhaps been a little picky. Again, it is only my intuitive pedantry. Norman Watson has dealt in a bold and empathetic fashion with a significant aspect of recent Scottish history. No doubt he can shrug off my minor grouses in the dismissive manner adopted by his Dundee whalers towards polar exploration. As one of their number noted: 'It is whales we are after, not geographical mysteries.'

March 2004