

PBS' whale tale is lost at sea

By Mark A. Perigard | Monday, May 10, 2010 | <http://www.bostonherald.com> | [Television Reviews](#)

AMERICAN EXPERIENCE: INTO THE DEEP: AMERICA, WHALING & THE WORLD: C+

Ric Burns' whaling documentary is as choppy as the waters off of Nantucket during a summer squall.

"Into the Deep: America, Whaling & The World," part of PBS' "American Experience," takes three compelling narratives - the rise and fall of the whaling industry in the 19th century, the ill-fated journey of the Nantucket vessel Essex and the hold that horrific voyage took on the imagination of a young Herman Melville decades later - and sails out for two listless hours.

The story of the whaling industry is the story of New England, as first Nantucket, in the 1700s, and New Bedford in the 1820s, rose as economic powers. Mariners chased sperm whales for the precious oil contained in their heads and husks, used to lubricate and illuminate just about every part of the burgeoning Industrial Revolution.

Whales were viewed as "floating profit centers," as one talking head says here. During one "golden year," 8,000 whales were slaughtered for profits of about \$11 million. There was little concern about the species' survival even as ships were forced to travel longer distances for greater periods of time to capture their prey.

The descriptions of harpooning, skinning and decapitating a whale are suitably grisly, as one might expect.

Trying to trap an 80-ton leviathan could be dangerous work, and nothing drives that point home more than the story of the ill-fated Essex, which set out in August 1819.

In the right hands - as in historian Nathaniel Philbrick's award-winning 2001 book "In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex" - this should be a pulse-pounding tale. (Philbrick is one of the many talking heads here.) Here, it's about as tense as a dog-paddle in a kiddie pool. The re-creations reflect either a lack of budget or imagination.

Even a schlock cable channel like TLC would find a way to capture the terror of the crew as their vessel is repeatedly rammed and ultimately capsized by a whale seemingly bent on avenging his fallen brethren.

Some of the survivors, driven mad in the weeks that follow, resorted to cannibalizing each other to survive.

Melville, a whaler himself whose real-life adventures rival any of fiction, chanced upon the tale of the Essex and was inspired to write "Moby-Dick." He thought the book would cement his literary reputation. Instead, the novel was roundly panned and he died years later in obscurity.

American whaling was ultimately sunk by the country's expansion west and the discovery of petroleum in Pennsylvania in the 1850s.

Burns' story has its moments, but it relies too often on static shots and exposition from a fleet of experts. This is one journey that would have benefited from a firmer hand at the helm.

Tonight at 9 on WGBH (Ch. 2).

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