

Bloomberg

Last update: 12:19 PM ET, May 10

Cannibals, Oily Heads Enliven Burns's Whale Story: TV Review

By Dave Shiflett - May 10, 2010



An untitled painting depicts a whale hunt. "Into the Deep: America, Whaling & The World," by Ric Burns, traces American whaling from its start in Colonial days through its height in the mid-1800s. The film airs on PBS May 10 at 9 p.m. Source: PBS via Bloomberg

Before I watched [Ric Burns](#)'s new documentary, most of what I knew about whales came from reading the CliffsNotes version of "Moby-Dick" in college.

"[Into the Deep: America, Whaling and the World](#)," which airs tonight on PBS at 9 p.m. New York time, offers a fascinating look at the giant marine mammals and their role in American history.

The two-hour film includes the horrifying story of the Essex, a ship rammed and sunk by an 80-ton sperm whale in 1820 in the South Pacific. Twenty men crammed into three small boats, but only eight survived. Some who didn't were killed and eaten by their shipmates.

The incident was one of the inspirations for Herman Melville's "Moby-Dick," the most famous whale story this side of Jonah.

When Melville was a young man, whaling was a huge U.S. industry.

While early fishermen settled for stranded or beached whales, the big breakthrough came around 1712 when a New England crew was blown out to sea in a storm and encountered a sperm whale, which was killed and butchered.

To the crew's amazement -- and many a sperm whale's regret -- the head contained hundreds of gallons of oil that was "clear as vodka" before it oxidized and got clouded.

Whaling Boom

That oil became the "heart-blood of American commerce," according to author [Nathaniel Philbrick](#). During whaling's heyday in the 1840s, 70,000 people made their living from the mammals, including 20,000 seamen who departed U.S. ports on voyages that could last three to four years.

Burns, whose distinguished documentary career has been overshadowed by that of his older brother Ken, powerfully conveys the danger, violence and exhilaration of whaling. It was not an occupation for the faint of heart, or stomach.

The action began when a sailor in the crow's nest saw a whale exhale and shouted "Thar she blows," which sent the crew in pursuit in oar-powered boats. The whales produced an "awful stench" when they breathed, though that was nothing compared to what they emitted when harpooned and their lungs were lanced.

Blubber Oil

Whalers were often drenched in blood and grime as the whales vomited squid in their death throes. Later the carcass would be towed back to the ship, where its blubber was stripped away and boiled into oil.

That's when all went smoothly.

The tale of the Essex, woven through the film, is recreated in stunning and sometimes nauseating detail.

The doomed ship left Nantucket on Aug. 12, 1819. After rounding Cape Horn the crew headed into the vast Pacific, where their ship was rammed by a whale roughly its own size about 3,000 miles off the South American coast.

The ship soon capsized, sending survivors scurrying into rescue boats. Three men got off on a nearby deserted island but the rest decided

to head for South America, fearing other islands would be inhabited by hungry cannibals.

Survivors Rescued

In an ordeal that makes Captain Bligh's post-mutiny excursion seem like an ocean cruise, the seamen traveled 4,000 miles over the next three months in a movable feast of horrific proportions. Rescuers eventually found five men adrift, some of whom were sucking the bones of their deceased mates. (The three men who stayed on the island also survived.)

Melville came across the story in 1841 when fellow seaman William Henry Chase, son of Essex first mate Owen Chase, gave him a copy of his father's account of the catastrophe.

"Moby-Dick" received mixed reviews when it was published and wasn't a commercial success. Melville fell into obscurity and died in 1891 after a career as a New York customs inspector.

Whaling was also a shadow of its former self by then, its death blow delivered in 1859 when oil was discovered in Pennsylvania. The search for oil then shifted from the heads of whales to the bowels of the earth, where it remains a messy enterprise.

Rating: ***1/2

What the Stars Mean:

**** Excellent *** Good ** Average * Poor (No stars) Worthless

([Dave Shiflett](#) is a critic for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)

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