

A history of whaling

by Wallace M. Olson

for the Tundra Times

I warn my students to beware of a book that claims to be *the* history of anything. In the case of *Whales, Ice & Men: The history of whaling in the western Arctic* by John Bockstoe, however, this is *the* book on whaling in the Western Arctic.

Bockstoe is a man of many talents. In addition to being a trained anthropologist and historian, he has been a member of an Eskimo whaling crew for many years. Most of all, he writes well.

He spent more than 10 years researching his subject, and the results are obvious in this excellent book.

For instance, when he speaks of the weather, currents and old villages, he speaks from 6,000 miles of travel in a skin boat along the northern coast. He read all the available logbooks of the whaling ships, extracting information from 66,000 days of observations — that's comparable to 180 years of data.

The quotations he has selected from these logbooks give the reader a first-hand account of events. Finally, the historical photographs provide a whole new dimension to the text.

His writing is clear, honest and straightforward. Oftentimes we are given the impression that all the whalers were evil, demoralized exploiters who destroyed Eskimo culture.

What emerges, in fact, is that they were both good and bad. They were simply men trying to make a living at a very difficult occupation — hunting whales in the Arctic.

They weren't the best of men, and they weren't the worst. Some disasters were not the fault of any one individual. For instance, in 1879, two-thirds of the people on St. Lawrence Island starved to death.

The simplistic explanation was that the people got drunk that winter and never hunted. According to

Bockstoe, it was a combination of a terrible winter and ice conditions that made hunting impossible.

In addition, the whalers had killed thousands of walrus, depleting the Eskimos' food supply. Liquor may have played a part in the disaster, but it was not the sole cause. In his account, he corrects several other misrepresentations.

Chapter Six tells of another important bit of Alaskan history. The last sinking of Yankee ships in the Civil War took place in the Bering Strait. The problem was these sinkings took place months after the War was over!

The captain of the Confederate ship "Shenandoah" did not learn about the end of the War until Aug. 2, 1865. By that time, they were legally pirates and had to sneak back to England to avoid being captured themselves.

Then there are the adventures of the steam-whaling ships that went into the Beauford Sea, wintering at Herschel Island. They eventually turned to fur trading. In 1936, the last whaling ship, under the command of Capt. Pedersen, steamed into San Francisco. It was the end of the whaling era.

Whales, Ice & Men is not only a good work of history, it also supplies much needed data on the numbers of whales and walruses taken. It traces the effects of acculturation on the Eskimos and their whaling crews today.

For anyone interested in Alaskan history, *Whales, Ice & Men* will prove to be a standard reference for many years to come. For those who just enjoy a good book with lots of photographs, maps and adventure stories this is probably one of the best books of the year. Highly recommended.

The book is from the University of Washington Press of Seattle, 1985. It contains 141 photographs, eight maps, and index and sells for \$29.95.

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