

Russell Fielding, *The Wake of the Whale: Hunter Societies in the Caribbean and North Atlantic*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2018. 352 pp. (Cloth US\$27.95)

It may come as a surprise to many academic readers that cetaceans are still hunted in the Caribbean. I confess that I felt *very* sorry for the whales and dolphins killed in this book; but I am also squeamish about the Hemingway-esque deep-sea sport fishing engaged in by tourists. The splatters of red on the cover are forewarning that blood will be spilled. We find ourselves in the “wake” of whale pods being chased down by excited hunters, or perhaps in a more funereal wake for the possible extinction of some species or the never-quite-arrived proclamations that whaling itself is dying out. Unlike Christina Sharpe’s sensitive reflections on living in the wake of slavery in her acclaimed book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, however, there is little connection here to deeper questions usually pursued in Caribbean studies. Instead the author is in pursuit of whaling, and redeeming traditional hunters.

Russell Fielding, an assistant professor of environmental studies, sets out to tell the story of whale hunting cultures in the Caribbean islands of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and in the Faroe Islands of the North Atlantic. The opening chapters of *The Wake of the Whale* alternate between the very different techniques of whaling in these far-flung archipelagoes and unique cultural contexts. In the Faroe Islands, for more than a millennium, entire pods of long-finned pilot whales have been driven up onto rocky beaches and killed by hundreds of participants during a defining communal event called a *grindadráp*. In St. Vincent and the Grenadines, smaller-scale subsistence whaling occurs offshore in open boats from which a few men harpoon whales or dolphin, in a tradition that is about a century old and mainly concentrated in the town of Barrouallie, and on the nearby Grenadine island of Bequia.

Fielding describes the unfolding of *grindadráp* in graphic gorey detail, with color photographs. He describes the excitement around the spotting of a whale pod and the call to gather; the blowhole hooks (*blástrarongul*) used to haul the whales up onto the shore; the traditional whale knives (*grindaknívur*) and newer spinal lances (*monistungari*) used to kill them; and the division of the whale meat and careful management of the entire event. In St. Vincent he joins a small-boat whale hunt that comes back with a Risso’s dolphin, describes the tools of the trade and tasting the dried “blackfish,” and speculates on the origins of the hunt in Yankee *Moby Dick*-style baleen whale hunts in the nineteenth century.

It is not until Chapter 6, having established the reader’s sympathy for the “artisanal” hunters, that he finally begins to address laws regulating whaling, including the role of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature,

the International Whaling Commission, and the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling. In contrast to those who have sought to ban whaling altogether, Fielding draws on the concept of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) to argue that in both places “TEK is a major factor in the conservation of cetaceans through the establishment of culturally embedded conservation strategies” (p. 161). He links this to the making and distribution of food products from the whales, which he describes as “a kind of wake for the whales—a vigil kept to ensure that post-death behaviors are conducted correctly” and hence conservation is assured (p. 162). In St. Vincent food processing is carried out almost entirely by women, who dry cut strips of cetacean meat on bamboo racks by the beach and boil blubber, and then use the oil released to fry the blubber cubes into crisps.

The thrust of the argument is that if whale species are under threat of extinction, as antiwhaling campaigns argue, it is not due to traditional subsistence hunting such as that carried out in St. Vincent and the Faroe Islands, but rather to the plastic, methyl mercury, global warming, and other pollution of the world’s oceans by those urbane metropolitan places of high consumption where whaling might be frowned upon. You, dear reader, are possibly more responsible than the whale hunters.

If anything, this book will set your moral compass spinning and challenge your implicit biases. I recommend reading it alongside the evocative account of the 1970s sailing and boat-building cultures of the Caribbean (including Bequia) in Douglas C. Pyles’s *Clean, Sweet Wind: Sailing with the Last Boatmakers of the Caribbean* (1998). And for an even more enticing ethnography of the sturdy island cultures of the North Atlantic, try Laura Watts’s theoretically sophisticated *Energy at the End of the World: An Orkney Islands Saga* (2019).

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