

# The Whale Drivers of Newfoundland

by

Russell Fielding

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*And it's quick, pull the string boys and get the tool out,*

*Haul it away, haul it away!*

*But just two years ago you could hear the same shout*

*Where the whales make free in the harbour.*

*Free in the harbour, the blackfish are sporting again.*

*Free in the harbour, untroubled by comings and goings of men*

*Who once did pursue them as oil from the sea, Hauling away, hauling away!*

*Now they're Calgary roughnecks from Hermitage Bay,*

*Where the whales make free in the harbour.*

— Stan Rogers, "Free in the Harbour"

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Harold Woodman remembers well a time when coastal Newfoundlanders did not have to travel to Alberta to be oilmen. They could stay in their own outpost communities—towns such as Dildo, Chapel Arm, New Harbour, and Old Shop (see Figures 1 and 2) and pursue “oil from the sea” in the form of blubber from long-finned pilot whales (*Globicephala melas*). The whales were known locally as “blackfish,” as in the song lyrics above, or more commonly in Newfoundland as “potheads.” Until 1972, Newfoundlanders drove large groups of pilot whales ashore on the beaches of the Avalon Peninsula, killed them with lances (Figure 3) in the shallow waters, and processed their meat and blubber into economically valuable products.

Today, hundreds of Newfoundlanders make seasonal or semi-permanent migrations to the oilfields of northern Alberta, where they work far from the salt air smell of their island home, sending back remittances to their families while trying to save enough to make a return trip possible for themselves (Kunzig 2009). Since the collapse of the Newfoundland cod fishery and subsequent recession of the province's economy, traveling across Canada to find



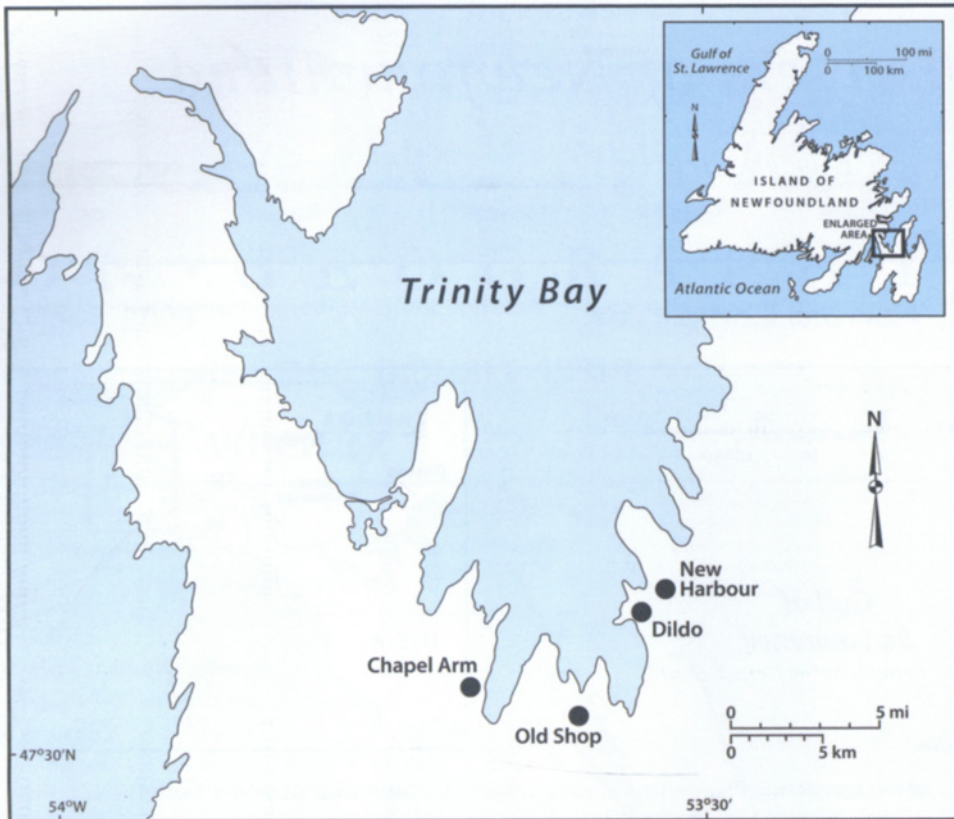
**Figure 1:** Map of the Island of Newfoundland with inset map showing the Newfoundland's position within North America. Cartography by C. Duplechin, LSU Geography and Anthropology.

work has become a way of life for many Newfoundlanders (Milich 1999; Gmelch and Richling 1988; House et al 1990). Newfoundland and Labrador as a province has never been wealthy, but Harold (born in 1921) remembers when local men could supplement their income by participating in a pilot whale drive and earning “a bit of cash then” for their efforts (Figure 4).

## Artisanal Whaling in the Atlantic

The image usually conjured up by the

mention of whaling are the long south seas voyages memorialized in *Moby Dick* or the controversy of Japan's so-called “scientific” whaling in Antarctic waters (Melville 1851; Abdulla 1995; Gales et al 2005). In contrast, there exists another genre of whale hunt that has persisted throughout the history of the Atlantic. *Artisanal whalers* pursue small cetaceans (dolphins, porpoises, and whales) in open boats, using methods that have been handed down for generations and sometimes incorporating modern innovations to provide products of



**Figure 2:** Map of Trinity Bay showing the four communities in which this research was conducted. Inset map shows the position of Trinity Bay within Newfoundland. Cartography by C. Duplechin, LSU Geography and Anthropology.

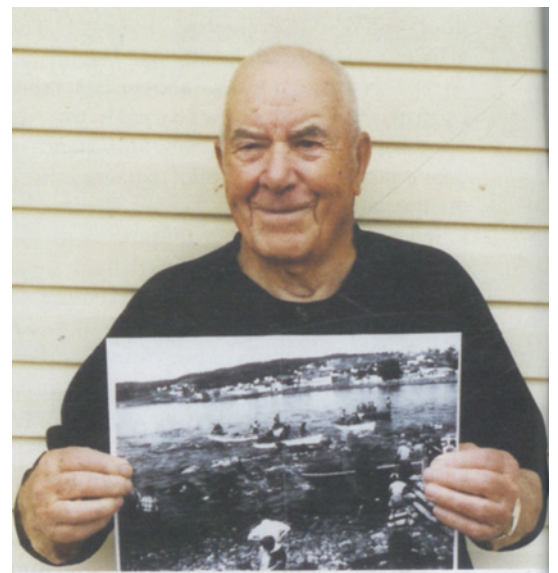


**Figure 3:** Period photograph from the 1950s showing a pilot whale drive in Trinity Bay. Used by permission of Gerald Smith.

economic utility to the people and households in their local communities.

Whaling declined worldwide throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By the late 1960s, Newfoundland was one of only a handful of remaining artisanal whaling cultures. In 1972, the government of Canada issued a moratorium on all forms of commercial whaling, which put an end to the Newfoundland pilot whale drive, although the event was already rare by that time (Dickinson and Sanger 2005, 131). The government took this action to protect declining whale stocks, which had been especially noted in Newfoundland waters, and as a response to anti-whaling sentiment as part of the growing international environmental movement.

Today, a few former whale drivers still live in the small outpost towns of Newfoundland's Avalon Peninsula. They are clustered in tiny, sea-facing communities around a series of bays, the names of which recall the history of Newfoundland's multinational exploitation by European fishing industries—Trinity, Conception, Notre Dame, and Bonavista—these elderly men remember the days when their own livelihoods depended upon their collective efforts to extract the resources that the land and the sea could provide. Occasionally, they would supplement their incomes by working in a “pothead drive.” It is from these retired fishermen, truck drivers, and school teachers, who were all formerly opportunistic whalers as well, that I learned firsthand the story of the Newfoundland whale drives.



**Figure 4:** Harold Woodman, retired fisherman and whaler, holding a photograph from the 1950s of a local pilot whale drive. New Harbour.



### *The Capture and Processing of Pilot Whales*

Pilot whales are social animals, traveling together in large groups known as “pods,” typically consisting of 50-200 individuals, although much larger pods have been recorded. Their primary prey in the eastern North Atlantic is the northern shortfin squid (*Illex illecebrosus*), which the whales follow inshore during spring and summer when the water temperature is increasing (Abend and Smith 1999). In a whale drive, the whales' social cohesion and the physical shape of the coastline are exploited as entire pods are driven ashore by a dozen or more boats. The whales are herded between the steep banks of the bay and in front of the flotilla of boats. The only direction left open to the whales is toward the shore. As the boats advance, the whales are forced to beach themselves and are killed with lances in the shallow water. The water of the bay turns red with their blood, and the carcasses are hauled onto dry land, where they are processed for meat and oil (Figures 5 and 6). The average pilot whale consists of 36 kilograms of meat and 240 kilograms of blubber, enough blubber to render 27 liters of whale oil (Dickinson and Sanger 2005). Put into petroleum terms, it takes the blubber of six pilot whales to produce one barrel of oil. In Newfoundland, the oil was processed locally and sold to supplement the incomes of the fishermen turned whalers. There were no full-time pilot whalers in Newfoundland, but many men from other occupations participated in opportunistic whale drives when they occurred (Figure 7).

“My son, when you sees the potheads comin,' you stops fishin',” Harold told me in a Newfoundland brogue so thick that I had to consult a local while transcribing the tape recording of his interview. Whale oil carried a much higher value than anything for which the men had been fishing, and they knew a better catch when they saw it. When the water at the mouth of the bay churned with the fins and flukes of a pod of pilot whales, the men knew that a drive was imminent and that it was time to put down their fishing gear.

#### *History and Early Practice*

For several centuries prior to 1900, whale drives were conducted in the bays of Newfoundland on a subsistence basis (Abend and Smith 1999, 8). Dickinson and Sanger call these early drives “an extremely wasteful traditional practice” (2005). The facilities for the processing and storage of



*Figure 5: Period photograph from the 1950s showing pilot whales being flensed in Trinity Bay. Used by permission of Gerald Smith.*



*Figure 6: Period photograph from the 1950s showing pilot whales being processed in Trinity Bay. Used by permission of Gerald Smith.*



*Figure 7: A small boat and lobster traps on shore near Trinity Bay.*



whale oil were not yet in place, and much of what was taken was lost to spoilage. Additionally, pilot whale meat was not as economically valuable as the meat of larger baleen whales and in the early days of the whale drive was often left to rot on the beach once the valuable blubber had been stripped for processing (Cranford and Hillier 1995). Oil, produced by cooking down, or "trying out," whale blubber cut into small pieces, brought a high price and a comparatively large sum of money to the men who participated in its production. An 1848 newspaper article described a recent whale drive as "a famous windfall," in which each man earned "about £15 a head" (Cranford and Hillier 1995). At the time, according to the article, a schoolteacher worked for six months to earn £15 (Martin 2006).

The method of whale driving in Newfoundland has changed very little throughout its history. Crews of ships, often while scanning the water surface for the spouts of larger whales, would sight pods of pilot whales at the mouth of a bay. A pair of these whaling ships, or several mid-sized motorboats, could then drive a pod into the bay by pursuing them at a distance, while men on deck fired shots from rifles at the whales without actually hitting them. The report of the rifle shots served two purposes. First, the sound would frighten the pilot whales and cause them to start swimming away from the boats and toward the shore. Second, the shots would alert men working on the shore to the impending drive and would summon them to the boats to help. Soon a semicircle of at least a dozen boats would form on the seaward side of the pod, leaving only one direction of escape—into the gradually shallowing waters of the bay. Under the direction of a foreman, the flotilla would slowly advance toward the beach, driving



**Figure 9:** Fred Woodman, Jr., fish plant manager. New Harbour.



**Figure 8:** Period photograph from the 1950s showing young boys playing and helping after a pilot whale drive in Trinity Bay. Used by permission of Gerald Smith.

the whales forward (Cranford and Hillier 1995). As the whales moved closer to the shore, men and often young boys in the boats would throw stones or rattle tin cans to make noise and keep the whales swimming toward their fate (Figure 8).

Fred Woodman, Jr., was one of those young boys, and he remembers well going out with his father to drive the whales. He is now the manager of Woodman Sea Products in New Harbour (Figure 9). "There was no way they were leaving the wharf without me," Fred said. "It was like ranching really. You'd have a herd of potheads and you'd round 'em up. Dad had

the only outboard motor in New Harbour. That would give him the element of speed, the same as you'd use a border collie with sheep."

As they approached the beach, boatmen and whales were usually met by a large crowd of spectators (Figure 10). According to one former participant, people would come out "in their Sunday best" to watch the whales be killed in their local harbor. Period photographs usually show men, women, and children watching intently from the shore as the whales were killed in the shallow water. Sometimes whale drivers would stretch a long net



**Figure 10:** Period photograph from the 1960s showing a crowd on the beach watching a pilot whale drive. Used by permission of Fred Woodman, Jr.





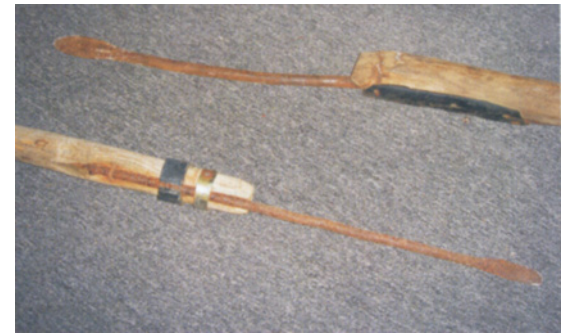
**Figure 11:** Period photograph from the 1960s showing men and boys lancing pilot whales from shore. Used by permission of Fred Woodman, Jr.

behind the pod to prevent the whales from swimming back to the sea. To kill the whales, men would thrust lances into their bodies, aiming for the heart or lungs but, as can be seen in films taken of the event, often missing the whales' vital organs completely (Figure 11; see also National Film Board of Canada 1957).

The lances were long wooden poles with iron blades fastened to the tips with rope or bands of metal (Figure 12). They were locally produced and stored in boatsheds and barns, the same as other fishing, farming, and hunting equipment (Figure 13). Whales died in the water, either of blood loss or because of the rupture of their vital organs, and were hauled ashore in the early days by hand and later by winches attached to trucks. If a drive occurred during the late evening, the whales were almost always contained behind the net and killed the next day. Often, whalers would not work on Sundays, so if the drive occurred on a Saturday night, the whales would not be killed until Monday morning.

In the shallow water, the whales would become disoriented and begin to swim erratically. When struck by the lances, they would whip their tails violently and dangerously (Figure 14). "I mean there's danger all the time because you didn't know when a whale was going to come down," said Gerald Smith, a former whaler from Dildo (Figure 15). Wooden boats were occasionally broken when a whale's flukes came down, but no one I interviewed remembers a man being injured or killed, even though injury was not an uncommon occurrence in other former whale-driving locations, such as the Shetland Islands and the Faroe Islands (Sandison 1896; Joensen 1976).

One of the regular spectators at whale drives in Chapel Arm was Bridget Power (Figure 16), born in 1918 and author of a local history that includes reflections on the whale drives and features a pilot whale



**Figure 12:** The ends of two lances used for pilot whale drives, now part of the collection at the South Dildo Whaling and Sealing Museum.



**Figure 13:** A boatshed on Trinity Bay used for storing fishing and whaling equipment.



**Figure 14:** Period photograph from the 1960s showing a wounded pilot whale thrashing in the shallow water at New Harbour. Used by permission of Fred Woodman, Jr.

**Figure 15 (below):** Gerald Smith, tour guide and curator of The Whaling and Sealing Museum at South Dildo.

**Figure 16 (right):** Bridget Power, writer, holding a pilot whaling lance. Chapel Arm.



silhouette on the cover (Power 1994). Bridget remembers that she "didn't like the whale drive," in which her father, brothers, and sons were active participants, and that she "didn't think it was right." In her later years, Bridget has grown to see whaling as "a way of life [in which] there is no difference in going down to bring in whales and bringing in a load of fish." In the worldview of many residents of the whale-driving outport communities of Newfoundland, the moral and philosophical differences between fishing and whaling are few. There are, however, exceptions. A 1954 letter on file in The Rooms (Newfoundland and Labrador's provincial archives) states the case of Donald A. Mercer, member of a local branch of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, to Clive Planta, then deputy minister of fisheries. Mr. Mercer explains that witnesses to a recent whale drive were "shocked" and that the kill was conducted not with specialized tools but with "boards, picks, and forks." The letter does not call for a cessation of the whale drives but rather for regulations that would insure a quick and humane death for the whales.

### **Industrialization and Demise**

During the 1950s, whale drives increased in frequency as the demand for whale meat was driven by a new local industry: captive-raised mink and fox farms. How fur animals came to be raised on farms in Newfoundland is directly related to the whale drive. A 1955 *Evening Telegram* newspaper article relates a story about the arrival of the first mink ranchers from Manitoba. Subsequently, mink and foxes arrived in the following months and years from Canada's prairie provinces. Their arrival was encouraged by media-driven marketing campaigns stating, among other laudatory phrases, that "whale meat, of course, you can count on getting in [Newfoundland]" (used as feed for mink and fox). These advertisements were given official support by the province's Premier, Joseph R. Smallwood. Against the recommendations of whale conservationists, he promoted the fur industry in Newfoundland by offering incentives to fur farmers who relocated to the province and by supporting specially fitted vessels to hunt pilot whales offshore as a supplement to the artisanal whale drives occurring in the inshore bays (Dickinson and Sanger 2005). Previously, mink and fox had been given feed derived from the wild horse stocks in Manitoba and

Saskatchewan, but these stocks had become depleted, a foreshadowing of what was to occur in the waters around Newfoundland.

The archives of the St. John's *Evening Telegram* show a public and scientific ambivalence on the subject of the drives' effects on whale populations. In 1955, an April article called for the preservation of pilot whale stocks by forbidding drives during the whales' calving season. This call was prompted by the discovery of discarded fetuses on the beach after a drive had taken place. Two months later, a June article in the same newspaper stated that "[t]he present rate of killing is not regarded as being excessive." Even in 1958, when pilot whales were already scarce in Trinity Bay, a scientific report stated that "[p]resent localized killing can make little inroad into the vast stocks present round the coasts of Newfoundland" (Sergeant 1958). The same researcher concluded that a take of 7,000 whales per year would be sustainable. Even if this high figure had represented a sustainable take, it was exceeded in 1956 and 1957.

Newfoundland's supposed "vast stocks" of pilot whales were indeed declining as demand for meat by the fur farms increased. Additionally, the price of whale oil increased throughout the 1950s, providing even more incentive to intensify the number of whale drives that occurred (Dickinson and Sanger 2005). In 1956, drives reached their peak with 9,794 whales and began a steady decline from that year on (Pinhorn 1976). Efforts had not decreased; it was simply a fact that there were fewer pilot whales to be found. Some researchers have attributed the decline in pilot whale stocks to factors such as overfishing of squid, migration, and hydrographic conditions (Abend and Smith 1999). However, most scientists now agree that overexploitation, particularly in the form of the whale drive, was the major contributing factor to the decline of pilot whale stocks in Newfoundland waters (Mitchell 1975; Pinhorn 1976; Abend and Smith 1999; Dickinson and Sanger 2005). From 1941 to 1971, approximately 55,000 pilot whales were killed in drives for meat and oil (Dickenson and Sanger 2005).

By the early 1970s, the whale drive was a rare event in Newfoundland. Vaughn George (Figure 17) remembers the last drive in which he participated, a drive of 72 whales in 1972, which was a marked decrease from the drives of up to 500 whales that were commonplace during the 1950s. "It was 72 in '72," he told me. The same year, the Canadian government enacted a

moratorium on all commercial whaling, including the pilot whale drives of Newfoundland. Since 1972, the only whaling that has occurred legally in Canada is for subsistence among the aboriginal communities of the Arctic by special permission of the Canadian government and the International Whaling Commission.

### **Whaling Memories**

Newfoundlanders who participated in the whale drives look back fondly on this part of their history, but most say that it would be out of place in today's world. When asked about the possibility of ever driving whales in Newfoundland again, most former whalers agree that it will never happen, at least not like it did before. According to Fred Woodman, Jr., [i]t certainly wouldn't look the same as it did back then. It was just brutal, cruel. Today... it certainly wouldn't be a crowd of men in a 14-foot boat stabbing [the whales]. Today there would certainly be a more humane and quicker way. Another former whale driver, Charlie Williams (Figure 18) agrees:

*I would want it to come back but I don't think I'd want it to come back the same as it was. It was awful cruelty, it was. There was times when everything was blood-red. You look out here – it was all red. There's an awful lot of blood in a whale.*

Fred Woodman considers the feelings behind the whale drive and the implications it has for today's more modern society:

*There was no hatred, there was no animosity, no viciousness to the pothead drive. It was 250 animals killed with primitive weapons, which was all they had at the time. It was a time here in this community when people weren't independent and they knew they weren't independent. You had to trust somebody. Now, because of the way we're living, people think we can be independent. I'm not sure we are.*

He places the whale drive firmly into Newfoundland's history books by appealing to another book, "The Bible, I guess it's Ecclesiastes 3, says for everything there's a time and a season." According to Woodman and most of Newfoundland's other former whale drivers, the time and the season for the whale drive has passed. It is now memorialized in a museum (Figure





**Figure 17:** Vaughn George, retired whaler. South Dildo.

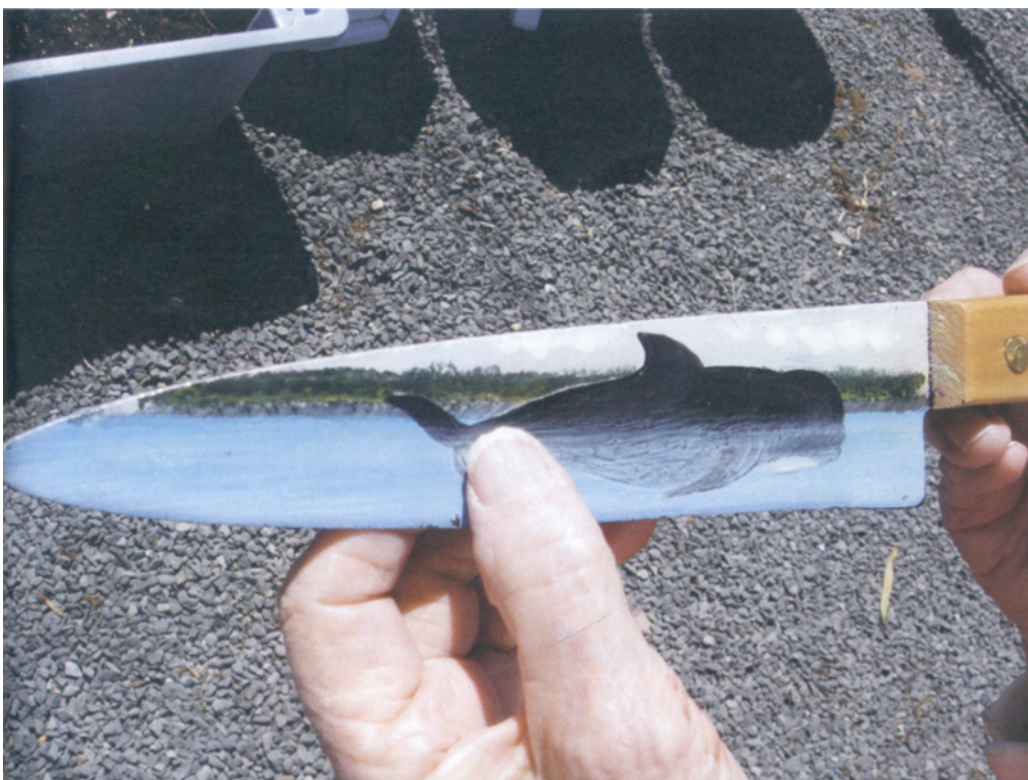


**Figure 18:** Charlie Williams, retired fisherman and whaler. New Harbour.



**Figure 19:** The Whaling and Sealing Museum at South Dildo.

**Figure 20:** Folk art painted on Bridget Power's pilot whale knife.



19), a handful of locally published books, a few pieces of local folk art (Figures 20 and 21), and in pilot whale bones (Figure 22) and memories of whalers scattered through the small towns that line Trinity Bay.

### *Oil from the Sea*

In 1979, the Hibernia oil field was discovered off the coast of Newfoundland, with potential resources estimated at 615 million barrels (Summers 2009). Other fields were found with smaller reserves, and exploration is ongoing. American and Canadian oil companies continue to construct offshore platforms for the extraction of this submarine oil. With these discoveries, some Newfoundlanders gained the opportunity to return from the oil fields of western Canada to work closer to home. While the worldwide future of petroleum is uncertain, the reliance upon whale oil is a thing of the past. Whether working the offshore platforms near home or the vast tar sands in northern Alberta, Newfoundland oil men are carrying on traditions established by their ancestors who participated in the whale drives: traditions of hard work, collaboration, risk, and reliance upon valuable natural resources to make a living.

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Figure 21: Mural at New Harbour, memorializing the pilot whale, or pothead, drive.



Figure 22: Pilot whale bones stacked behind Vaughn George's house in South Dildo.

the Norman family of Torbay were hospitable hosts, offering their homes as bases for my exploration. Parts of this paper were previously published as a newspaper article in St. John's, Newfoundland (Fielding 2007). Thank you to Editor Pam Frampton for permission to use the previously published text as a starting point for this paper. At Louisiana State University, my major professor, Kent Mathewson, and my dissertation committee members, Craig Colten, William Rowe, and Gene Turner, were understanding and supportive in my pursuit of this research, which is related to, but not the main focus of, my dissertation. Finally, heartfelt thanks are due to the former whale drivers and their families who opened their homes to me and shared their memories, photographs, and, especially in the case of Merrill and Pearl Warren, delicious home cooked meals.

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