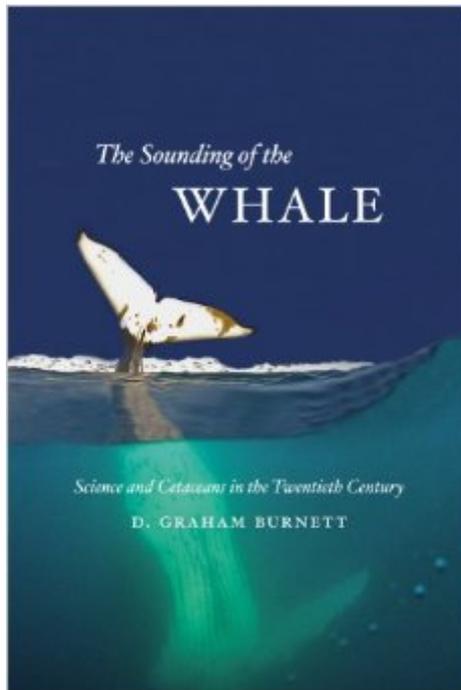


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The Sounding Of The Whale: Science And Cetaceans In The Twentieth Century



Synopsis

From the Bible's "Canst thou raise leviathan with a hook?" to Captain Ahab's "From Hell's heart I stab at thee!", from the trials of Job to the legends of Sinbad, whales have breached in the human imagination as looming figures of terror, power, confusion, and mystery. In the twentieth century, however, our understanding of and relationship to these superlatives of creation underwent some astonishing changes, and with *The Sounding of the Whale*, D. Graham Burnett tells the fascinating story of the transformation of cetaceans from grotesque monsters, useful only as wallowing kegs of fat and fertilizer, to playful friends of humanity, bellwethers of environmental devastation, and, finally, totems of the counterculture in the Age of Aquarius. When Burnett opens his story, ignorance reigns: even Nature was misclassifying whales at the turn of the century, and the only biological study of the species was happening in gruesome Arctic slaughterhouses. But in the aftermath of World War I, an international effort to bring rational regulations to the whaling industry led to an explosion of global research—and regulations that, while well-meaning, were quashed, or widely flouted, by whaling nations, the first shot in a battle that continues to this day. The book closes with a look at the remarkable shift in public attitudes toward whales that began in the 1960s, as environmental concerns and new discoveries about whale behavior combined to make whales an object of sentimental concern and public adulation. A sweeping history, grounded in nearly a decade of research, *The Sounding of the Whale* tells a remarkable story of how science, politics, and simple human wonder intertwined to transform the way we see these behemoths from below.

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Customer Reviews

This is a great book, but maybe not for the reason you think. I thought it was a book about whales (which it is literally) but it's really about humans. Humans hunted whales for money and whale scientists studied the whales. After a few years the scientists realized that the hunters were killing far more than was sustainable. However, the scientists became dependent on the whalers to supply whales for study, and they became convinced that they couldn't demand that the yearly catch be decreased because then the whalers would abandon the International Whaling Commission and there would be no hope of regulation. In the middle of the story most of the whales are killed, and the killing stops (or at least is greatly inhibited) because of a Walt Disney movie for children in which a whale is the hero. Americans (mostly, maybe because they were not hunting whales and thus it was no skin of their backs) launch a campaign to stop the killing, Greenpeace is launched, Lilly writes books about the intelligence of dolphins, and since there is no longer much money in catching whales, it grinds to a slow crawl. The important lesson of this book is that the history of the politics of whaling is very similar to many other international problems, such as cigarette smoking, acid rain, global warming, etc. At first the groups that benefit from the activity deny the facts, then finally come (or are forced) to modify their behavior. Of course the story of global warming has several decades to play out. The book is not an easy read; after the first hundred pages I almost skimmed to the end, but fortunately didn't. The author writes like an academic historian (which he is), and some times the footnotes are 2/3 rds of the page. But soldier on, you will be richly rewarded. Don't be afraid to skim a little (at almost 800 pages even reading half of it is a bargain for the price).

Rating this by number of stars is difficult; I think the rating would depend on the reader. I'm rating it for the general reader, not an academic. I purchased the book because it was given a good review in the NY Times book review. I hoped it would be a crossover book that might be of interest to the general reader. I do not think it is. First, its major focus is really on the history of science, with the whale being the case study. This is overstating it a bit -- there is a lot of "whale" in the book despite the author's caveats about same -- but the author's focus is overtly on the history of science. Books I have enjoyed include Tuxedo Park, The Making of the Atomic Bomb, Einstein, to the recent book about hedda gabler, etc., but this book is a long book....with most of the focus on "history" for lack of a better term. I must admit: Although I like "history of science" as a topic, I was hoping for more on "whale." Second, the book is quite long. Any narrative "thrill" is gone when buried in 750 or so pages.

And long sections on debates at the International Whaling Commission or whatever are far from spell-binding. Third, at least significant parts of it are written in a pretty academic, turgid style. As another indicator: Large quantities of footnotes (bottomnotes) on many pages. So, for a general reader, it was quickly put down. For academics interested in a detailed, chronology of how science has interacted with both business concerns and now environmentalism: the book may be great. If professors or graduate students want to give it 5 stars, or 1, it's up to them. Obviously, the author is a tenured professor at Princeton, so some think highly of him. (though the ratings of his other books on is far from stellar...). For someone who hoped to read something to learn more about whales, and how our evolving scientific or ethical systems may have played a role -- no thanks. Lurking in here may have an interesting book of about 300 pages for a reader who enjoys science nonfiction.

A number of previous reviewers, although not the -listed "official" reviews, state that this book is not primarily about whales, and I believe this is entirely correct. That itself did not disappoint me, since I knew before purchasing this that Burnett was not a biologist, much less a cetologist. There are numerous other books by non-scientists about whales, such as Philip Hoare's superb work, that I have read with greatest pleasure. The very odd aspect of Burnett's book, which in the end I found extremely unsettling, is that you often end up feeling that he actually dislikes whales, or perhaps just considers that much too much fuss has been made over them, when history (and presumably historians) are so very much more interesting. There are too many examples to cite but I will take just one. Toward the end of the book, Burnett is discussing the role that popularization of the vocalization of humpback whales (e.g., the recording "Songs of the Humpback Whale") played in public opinion and in the effort to preserve whales (as wide-scale whaling was still underway.) Burnett, over a number of pages, chooses to disparage the idea that the vocalizations are even songs. Indeed, he can only refer to the vocalization in disparaging terms: whining, to take one example, and worse. Note that he never actually discusses what his criteria would be for judging something as a song - he just, in a remarkably snide fashion, decides that an attack on the aesthetics of the humpback sounds is interesting, pertinent, and/or balanced. This same feeling permeates a considerable part of what turned out, for me, to be a book that was unsettling for chiefly wrong reasons.

I really looked forward to this book and pre ordered to get it as soon as possible. I enjoyed the read and got lots of great information about how we got to where we were in 1979, when I started covering research for National Geographic Magazine. The coverage of Remington Kellogg's role in

early conservation efforts really opened my eyes. I just wish the last 20 years of the century were covered too. We have new tools and great researchers who have kept the study of living whales moving forward. Hopefully this work will be covered in a future book.

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