

REVIEW

WHALERS UNDER CANVAS

[Review by Bruce Cox* of W. Gillies Ross's *Whaling and Eskimos: Hudson Bay 1860–1915*. Ottawa, National Museum of Man, (Publications in Ethnology, No 10), 1975, 164p, illus. \$11.25.]

Ross's study pursues the implications of an observation by the late Diamond Jenness, the founding father of Canadian ethnology. Jenness concluded that Beaufort Sea whalers had brought considerable harm to the Eskimos of that area. In fact, he added, the whalers had made their winter harbour at Herschel Island 'a hive of debauchery'. Would Jenness's judgement apply to the eastern Arctic? *The cruise of the Neptune* records the course of a Canadian government expedition to the eastern Arctic in 1903–04. Its author, A. P. Low, reported on what he felt were harsh effects of whaling. Speaking of the Aivillik of Roes Welcome Sound, where whalers concentrated, Low concluded that their numbers had first declined, then levelled off: 'There was a considerable decrease for some years after the whaling vessels first frequented [Hudson] Bay.' Therkel Mathiasen, who visited Hudson Bay with the Fifth Thule Expedition, was even stronger in his condemnation. In *Material culture of the Iglulik Eskimos*, he reports a decline in the Eskimo population from the turn of the century, which he attributes to 'severe treatment by the whalers', 'diseases, especially syphilis', and 'excessive drinking of strong liquor'. Gillies Ross set out several years ago to make his own assessment of the impact of whalers on Eskimo life in the eastern Arctic. He discovered logbooks or journals for nearly half the 146 voyages by Bowhead whalers into Hudson Bay. This book presents the results of that research.

Ross found Mathiasen's harsh verdict against the whalers not fully proved. Apart from Southampton Island, there is no clear evidence of population decline. In fact, Ross's figures show that Eskimos on the north-west of Hudson Bay and north Hudson Strait increased during the last decades of Bowhead whaling. Ross allows that such apparent increases in Eskimo numbers may be due to migration, that is, Eskimos evidently congregated where they could work for the whaling ships, and where they were eventually counted. Nonetheless, the available data do throw some doubt on Mathiasen's report. So too do the facts about 'strong liquor', for in fact many of the whaling ships were 'temperance ships', carrying medicinal alcohol only. Evidently none of the New England whalers issued spirits to their crews on any regular basis.

Mathiasen came nearer the mark concerning venereal diseases. Ships' logbooks record that crew members had them. So too did the Eskimos, as the medical report from the *Neptune's* expedition to Hudson Bay shows. Thereon hangs a tale. To profit from a second summer on the whaling grounds most whalers wintered over in their sailing vessels, which made for long periods of inactivity. Thus, there was prolonged contact between the crews and the Eskimos which included sexual liaisons, but was not confined to them. The native people assisted the Whites in whaling, hunting and overland travel. The Whites provided goods which soon became necessities—guns, powder, shot, knives, pots, pans, metal tools, even whaleboats. It is not at all easy to tally up the balance sheet for this exchange. Who gained most? Or who exploited whom? Ross wisely doesn't say.

Those Eskimos who chose to winter near the ships' harbours were obviously profoundly affected by the whalers. So, through indirect trade, were others and Ross has carefully documented these disruptive effects. Nonetheless, he finds that the tasks set by the whalers involved familiar, subsistence-orientated activity, and carried a minimum of cultural baggage. That is, the whalers expected few changes in work-habits, attitudes, religion or even (usually) language. Whalers took the Eskimos as they found them, entering relations of mutual benefit. Clearly, there is much to be said in their favour.

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