Review


The longstanding seal hunt off the northern coast of Newfoundland and Labrador became increasingly controversial in the second half of the twentieth century. Opponents mounted a sustained campaign against the hunt which, combined with changing economic and social changes, ultimately contributed to its closure. The much hyped media campaign, often featuring emotive images of the killing of young whitecoat seals, focused on the alleged brutality of the hunt, and ignored the dangers and privations of the hunters in the icefields, many of whom depended on this work as part of their often meagre livelihood. From the early eighteenth century, the seal hunt, or seal fishery as it was locally known, formed an important element in the subsistence of the settlers and developed into a substantial part of the colony’s economy. As early as the 1720s seal oil was already being exported to England, where it was used for lighting and soapmaking, as well as for culinary and numerous other purposes. The sealskins were exported for use in leathermaking and the fur trade, and until recently seal meat was a staple of the colony’s diet.

By the 1950s the industry was already in terminal decline, and its long history remained largely uncharted. Fortunately, its significance was recognised as part of a major initiative at the Memorial University of Newfoundland to investigate and document the history, language, and traditions of the island and of Labrador. Shannon Ryan, a Professor in the University’s Department of History, took up the challenge of researching the province’s sealing industry, and over the years he has become firmly established as the leading expert in this hitherto neglected field of maritime history. His comprehensive and magisterial account of the history of sealing (*The Ice Hunters*, 1994) traced its development from the beginnings up to 1914, drawing on a wide range of mainly documentary sources and setting the industry in its wider regional and international context. The study is recognised as the definitive work on the subject.

In parallel with this research, Professor Ryan proposed and developed an oral history project to collect information on the seal hunt from surviving sealers. Beginning in 1986, this was a timely and urgent initiative, as the numbers of those who had participated in these annual voyages “to the ice” or had hunted seals around the coastal perimeter were dwindling rapidly. The tape recorded interviews (originals now deposited in the University’s Folklore and Language Archive) generated a wealth of firsthand oral testimony of individual experiences of the hunt. The long and arduous process of transcribing, organising, and creating an archive database of this unique material then began. The present volume, *The Last of the Ice Hunters*, represents the outcome of the project as a whole. It not only complements and extends the account in *The Ice Hunters*, but does so through the vivid
vernacular voices and the immediacy of the speakers’ accounts, which transport us directly onto the sealing ships themselves, and into the extreme conditions and constant dangers of the icefields, not to mention the inevitable carnage of the hunt itself and the squalor endured on board the vessels. The living voices speaking here reveal the obverse of the images of the hunt presented in late twentieth century media reports. This was brought home to me as I interviewed a former sealer in Newfoundland who described his own life-threatening encounter with the largest of seals, an old dog hood, on a small pan of ice – a face to face struggle in which the threatening animal, highly mobile on the ice, could well have had the advantage by attacking and pushing him into the freezing Arctic water.

It is accounts such as these which reveal the stark realities of the hunt, and those gathered together in this book paint a very different picture from the stereotypical views presented by the media. After all, for more than 250 years the seal hunt was an economic necessity for many Newfoundlanders, as is amply demonstrated in these collective oral accounts. The Introduction to the volume sets the testimonies in their historical context. This is followed by a series of long interviews, each packed with detailed information on specific aspects of the topic. The reader soon becomes familiar with the names of vessels and skippers predominant in the twentieth century seal hunt, and this helps orientation in the main body of the work – a fascinating and wideranging selection of extracts from the interviews, arranged alphabetically by theme/topic, such as Accident, Berths, Conflict, First Trip, Flippers, Gunners, Hood Seals, Ice-Blindness, Kean (Captain Abram), Landsmen, Money, Newfoundland Disaster, On the Ice, Pelts, Religion, Storm, Strike, Towing, Uploading, Viking Disaster, Wheelsmen. Here again the voices of the sealers ring true, as if they were actually speaking to us – which, of course, they are, and in a colourful, natural, and convincing way which written sources rarely if ever achieve. The effectiveness of this characteristic quality is echoed by Shannon Ryan in the brief but insightful Conclusion: “By having the sealers to speak for themselves, the reader can better appreciate their lives and work-efforts.”

While the author modestly acknowledges that there is still further work to be done on the seal hunt, this book is not only a worthy successor to The Ice Hunters, but also a major contribution to the history of Newfoundland and Labrador and to maritime history and oral history in general. The publishers are to be congratulated on the high quality of the production, and at a price which makes the book easily accessible both to the scholarly community and to interested members of the public.

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