

**In the Wake of Tønnessen and Johnsen:  
Trends in Whaling History Research after 1970**

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**Abstract**

In 1970 the fourth and final volume of Arne Odd Johnsen and Joh. N. Tønnessens's *Den moderne hvalfangsts historie* was published. The work represented a milestone in the writing about the development of the 20<sup>th</sup> century whaling industry. This paper reviews the literature that has been published in Norway and internationally on the history of modern whaling after Johnsen and Tønnessen, and analyses the focus, trends and direction in the research and writing on whaling history in the period.

## In the Wake of Tønnessen and Johnsen: Trends in Whaling History Research after 1970

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In 1970 the fourth and final volume of Arne Odd Johnsen and Joh. N. Tønnessen's *Den moderne hvalfangsts historie* was published. Books on the history of modern whaling had been published before, both in Norway and elsewhere, but this was beyond doubt the most comprehensive effort so far. The books were written from a scholarly perspective and represented a great leap forward in the "academization" of historical writing on this industry. The volumes also covered in detail an impressive amount of topics. As we wrote in the introduction to *Whaling & History* (Basberg, Ringstad and Wexelsen (eds.) 1993), the younger historians in the field - after discovering an interesting piece of archival material or coming up with a fascinating question - often discovered that Johnsen and Tønnessen had already found it, and given the answers. So, their volumes have been - and will be - a basis and a starting point for research on the history of whaling. There were lacunas, of course, and new generations of historians will have their new perspectives. The aim of this paper is to review how this has been dealt with by historians during the more than thirty years that have passed since Tønnessen and Johnsen's work was published.

*Den moderne hvalfangsts historie* coincided with the decline of Antarctic large scale whaling. Since then we have seen new trends in our attitudes to whales and whaling. A growing interest in conservation, the environment and wildlife has created phenomena such as whale-watching and save-the-whale movements. The focus over the years has definitely shifted from *whaling* to *whales*. The history of the whaling industry has been something that many people wanted to forget about. However, when we look into the research and writing on whaling in this period, the contributions are nevertheless numerous. In the following review, I do,

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented as the Opening Lecture at *The Second Symposium on Whaling & History*, Com. Chr. Christensen's Whaling Museum, Sandefjord, September 2005.

A first draft was compiled some years ago, but never completed or published. One important source of information then, was a volume of *Research in Maritime History* (No. 9, 1995) edited by F. Broeze that reviewed the research in the maritime industry in a number of countries, also countries involved in whaling. Of particular interest were the reviews by Hull (Australia), Scholl (Germany) and Bruijn (the Netherlands). I also received valuable input on the earlier version from Klaus Barthelmess, Lars U. Scholl, Anthony Dickinson and late Per Thoresen.

however, not intend to review all this literature. I will only survey publications on modern whaling, the period that started in Norway in the 1860s and 70s, and had its heyday throughout the twentieth century in Antarctic waters. Consequently, I will not deal with American whaling, although it continued well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> I will also limit myself primarily to *the economic history* and *general history* of the industry, the genre that Tønnessen and Johnsen themselves belonged to. Consequently, I will not deal with research and writing on biological issues or social science issues like international negotiations concerning whaling. There is, of course, a vast literature in these areas, much of which has been published by the *International Whaling Commission* and its Scientific Committee.<sup>3</sup>

Tønnessen and Johnsen wrote in Norwegian, which, of course, limited the accessibility of their work. They did, however, later provide an English one volume version of their publication; *The History of Modern Whaling* (1982). This made their research available to a wider group of readers. The book was also updated on the development in Antarctic whaling throughout the 1970s in a short new chapter 36; *The Whaling Industry, the Environment and Natural Resources, 1972-1978*. However, as Tønnessen emphasised in the preface, the book was an abridged version of the original Norwegian four volumes, omitting sections of mainly local and personal interest in Norway, but also references and notes. Those were quite extensive in the Norwegian version, so this is still necessary reading for scholars.

When it comes to other extensive reviews, no works have been published comparable to Johnsen and Tønnessen, although a few authors have written large general overviews much more accessible and popular than their work. For example, Francis', *A History of World Whaling* (1990) covers both old-style and modern whaling (that he labels "Industrial whalers"). The same is the case with Sanderson's very personal account *A History of Whaling* (1993). Ellis' *Men and Whales* (1991) is a more scholarly written book not only about whaling, but about whales and man's historical involvement with them. A German parallel is Weidlich (ed.) *Von Walen und Menschen* (1992). The already mentioned *Whaling & History* also covers a long time span and a wide range of topics from a number of

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<sup>2</sup> There is a continuous and diversified flow of publications on American nineteenth century whaling, from bestselling novels like N. Philbrick, *In the Heart of the Sea* (New York 2000) (dealing with an ill fated whaling voyage and cannibalism...) and S.J. Naslund, *Ahab's Wife* (New York 1999) in one end, to econometric history focusing on technology in general and the relationship to economic growth; Davis, L.E., Gallmann, R.E. and Gleiter, K. *In Pursuit of Leviathan: Technology, Institutions, Productivity, and Profits in American Whaling, 1816-1906* (Chicago 1997).

<sup>3</sup> A recent volume which deals with a number of such topics is Pétursdóttir (1997).

researchers and reflects the state of research at the time of publication. Most research and writing, however, are limited to specific whaling grounds, specific whaling nations, whaling companies and owners, or specific other topics. In the following, I will organise the survey according to such categories.

## **Research and writing focusing on whaling nations and companies**

Tønnessen and Johnsen covered the development of the whaling industry world wide, regarding catching grounds and participating nations. But inevitably the main focus was on the Norwegian part of the industry. There was a “Norwegian perspective” throughout the volumes. Tønnessen himself was aware of this, and wrote in the preface of his volume II (also translated and included in the English version):

Even though the work aims to comprise the history of modern whaling throughout the world, Norwegian whaling has been accorded pride of place, both because it was the Norwegians who initiated modern whaling and exercised a hegemony for seventy years, spreading it thorough out the world, and because of the inevitably greater accessibility to the author of the source material in Norway. Writing in similar detail of whaling all over the world would indeed have been the work of a lifetime.

The fact that Johnsen and Tønnessen’s volumes were especially detailed on the Norwegian development is probably one reason why there later has not been published extensive Norwegian research monographs covering the development of the entire industry. There are books, like Bakka (1992) and Jacobsen (2003), but they are more popular and abundantly illustrated accounts. They are also dealing only with aspects of the history; Bakka focusing on the expeditions, companies and the vessels, Jacobsen focusing on the whalers themselves.

Some of the most important writing in the wake of Tønnessen and Johnsen has not surprisingly, been studies of other whaling nations and companies that at some point were active on the Antarctic grounds and elsewhere throughout the modern whaling era. Indeed, the first Antarctic whaling company was established in Argentina; *Compañia Argentina de Pesca Sociedad Anónima*, and a milestone in the research on the Antarctic whaling industry has been Hart’s recent book on this company (2001). As a whaling nation, however, Britain was more

important, and the most significant historical writings from 1970 and onwards have no doubt been related to British Antarctic whaling. The single most important contribution - and one of the most important contributions in recent whaling history research - is Jackson's *The British Whaling Trade* (1978). The book covers both traditional and modern twentieth century whaling, and was the first complete account of Britain's involvement in the industry. Vamplew's (1975) history of the Scottish Salvesen company - at one time the world's largest whaling company - is a second major contribution to the history of British modern whaling. The book covers the period from the establishment of the business in Leith in the 1850s through the active years of Antarctic shore station and pelagic whaling.

In addition to these major contributions, I will mention the following publications contributing to the history of British modern whaling. Smith (1993) has shed new light on the Scottish whaling by interviewing former whalers. Elliot (1998) has given a valuable addition to the history of Salvesen's whaling operations seen through his own experience as a manager and co-owner of the company. An autobiography from the other end of the company's hierarchy is Gordon (2004). Although not an active nation in modern whaling, let me also mention Fairley's (1981) contribution on Irish whaling.

Several other nations gradually became involved in Antarctic whaling, and some of that activity has also been manifested in recent research and writing. German whaling has been extensively covered especially by Barthelmess and Scholl. Barthelmess (1989) has written an in depth analysis of German involvement in modern whaling before 1914. He has also (1992, 1993 and 2005) synthesised the long run development of the industry throughout the twentieth century, and written numerous accounts on German whaling companies and whaling expeditions (1986, 1987, 1988, 1991, 1997, 1998). Scholl in several papers (1988, 1991a and 1991b) gives a new look specifically at German whaling operations in the 1930s. This is also the decade in focus in a book by Winterhoff (1974). Bohmert (1982a and b) has written the history of a major German whaling company; der Ersten Deutschen Walfang Gesellschaft. Reupke (1986) deals with German whaling in the period from 1936 to 1956. Schäfer (1984), in a personal account, describes a whaling season with *Südmeer* in 1938.

Although Japan in the post World War II years became the most active whaling nation in the Antarctic, the recent literature - at least in the English language - is scarce. Kalland and Moeran (1992) have written the most comprehensive account. Although their book is

primarily an anthropological study, it also deals in detail with the Japanese whaling history in general, both in local coastal waters and in the Antarctic. A recent review is Ohsumi (2005).

The Netherlands - with a long history of whaling - also became an Antarctic whaling nation after World War II. The major company of this Dutch re-entry in whaling has been dealt with by Bruijn (1985) and Boot (1987).

Some whaling companies and expeditions had their formal ties with nations that cannot be described as “whaling nations” as such. As in shipping in general, whaling had its “pirates” who operated under Flags of Convenience. The most well known was no doubt Aristoteles Onassis and his *Olympic Challenger* fleet operating in the 1950s. His short lived career in what he is supposed to have described as ‘gambling at its most elemental’ has been dealt with at least in one of his many biographies (Evans 1986), but also more scholarly by Barthelme (1996). Another well known Flag of Convenience-pioneer in shipping, the Norwegian Erling Dekke Naess, actually started his career in whaling in the 1920s and became a pioneer in flagging out Norwegian whaling companies as well as shipping companies. He has given a detailed account of this period of his career in his autobiography (1977).

## **Research and writing focusing on whaling areas and grounds**

The Antarctic became, of course, the main whaling area of modern whaling on which most writing and research have been devoted. The publications relating the major whaling nations that were mentioned, almost exclusively focused on whaling activities in the Antarctic. So, this area obviously has received continuous attention in the wake of Tønnessen and Johnsen. In addition, some grounds within the larger Antarctic area have received more specific attention, for example South Georgia. This island became the well known centre of early Antarctic whaling, and has consequently also attract the attention of historians. Although Hart’s book covers more than the Pesca story, the history of whaling from the island has not yet been written in full. But the history of the island as such, which partly, of course, is the history of the introduction of modern whaling in the Antarctic, has been written by Headland

(1984) - yet another very important contribution from a British scholar.<sup>4</sup> The early legislation faced by the whaling companies is studied by Heyburn (1980). The relationship between South Georgia's whaling industry and the associated sealing industry, has been considered by Dickinson (1993a). Dickinson (1993b) has also studied the Japanese whaling at South Georgia in the 1960s - not a very successful operation which marked the end of the whaling era at that island. A different direction of research on South Georgia is industrial archaeology related to whaling, and the former whaling stations have been surveyed and studied (Basberg et.al., 1996, 2004). The data that have been collected represent a new source of information for further research on these stations both within aspects of economic, technological as well as social history. Whaling at South Georgia has also been chronicled by those involved, from the ex-whaler (Pettersen 1999), to the "Antarctic housewife" (Brown 1971). Even the church in Grytviken and those employed there has now their history written (Hansen 1999).

The South Shetlands were another centre of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century whaling, and a few publications have come out of the activities there (Hacquebord 1992, Rossnes 1996) , especially relating archaeological aspects. The same is the case with Kerguelen (Le Mouël 1994), about which also a more general account of whaling and other activities has been published (Arnaud and Beurois, 1996).

The Antarctic and the Southern Ocean developed into the centre of modern whaling, but there were many other whaling grounds, too. The beginning of the era is closely linked to Finnmark and the Norwegian entrepreneur Svend Foyn. Foyn's biography was written by Johnsen already in 1943, and he also dealt with Foyn in detail in his first volume of *Den moderne hvalfangsts historie*. There has been some historical writing in the wake of Tønnessen and Johnsen focusing on Foyn and the Norwegian whaling grounds. A book where Foyn plays an important part is the biography of Thomas Welcome Roys (Schmitt, de Jong and Winter 1980). Roys and his colleague Lilliendahl were to become one important link between old-style American whaling and modern whaling. But where Foyn succeeded, Roys failed. Johnsen acknowledged Roys' contributions and influence on Foyn, but the Roys-biography represents an important addition to our knowledge about the transition period in the second half of the nineteenth century. The Svend Foyn period has also been dealt with more recently by historians interested in aspects of local history in Northern Norway (Niemi 1987,

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<sup>4</sup> Headland has also compiled a chronology of Antarctic expeditions (1989) where much attention is devoted to the development of whaling, thus offering an extremely valuable reference work on the industry.

1993) or the Vestfold area - where the whalers came from (Thoresen (1995), Thorvaldsen (1996)).

Whaling in Norwegian waters continued after the ban of Finnmark-whaling in 1904, but in a much more limited way than of the heydays in the 1880s and 90s. Arlov (1993, 1996) has dealt with the Svalbard intermezzo. Later, limited shore station whaling again developed on the Norwegian coast. Berger (2004) has studied the Skjelnan station outside Tromsø. Harnes (1986) has written a thesis on Steinshamn (Western Norway) in the interwar years. A more continuous (and in recent years more controversial) activity has been the small-type coastal whaling (minke-whales). This has been a very different activity from the large scale whaling both in terms of technology, organisation of the business and the people involved. While the large scale 'modern' whaling developed into an industry, the small scale whaling remained closer ties to the fishing communities and culture along the coast. There has been some historical writing on this industry that I will not deal with here, other than mentioning Jonsgård's (1992) major contribution.

Already before whaling was banned along the coast of Finnmark, the diffusion to other whaling grounds had started. In the Northern Hemisphere, Iceland was one such area, and Icelandic whaling in the long time span from 1600 to 1939 has been studied among others by Einarsson (1987).

Canadian and North-American whaling grounds were also opened up for the new whaling techniques, and the recent writing on the whaling history in these areas has been extensive. Several authors have written on the Pacific West Coast of Canada. Hagelund published an account in 1987. In 1988 Webb published *On the Northwest. Commercial Whaling in the Pacific Northwest, 1790-1967*. This is a very extensive, in-depth and scholarly written history which has become the reference work of this period and obviously one of the most important academic contributions to whaling history in recent years. More recently, Goddard (1997) has taken a personal look at the British Columbia whalers, focusing on nationalities, minorities and gender.

The Canadian East Coast has also been extensively researched, especially by Sanger and Dickinson. They take a detailed look at the foundation in 1896 and the development of modern whaling in Newfoundland and Labrador. Their work has been published in a series of



papers and recently been synthesised in *Twentieth-Century Shore-Station Whaling in Newfoundland and Labrador* (2005) - another milestone volume on the history of modern whaling in the wake of Tønnessen and Johnsen.

Let me also mention some publications relating other whaling grounds outside the Antarctic. The coast around Australia was one such area. A popular account of the entire history by Colwell appeared in 1969. Later research has focused on Western Australia and Albany. Puls (1970) investigated the early Norwegian companies there. A major recent contribution to the history of the industry in this region is Wolfe (2003). Grady (1982, 1986) has written accounts on New Zealand whaling in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He also deals with New Zealand's involvement in Norwegian Antarctic whaling, both as participating crew and as a base for some of the expeditions. The whaling fleet repair site, Kaipipi Shipyard at Stewart Island is also dealt with specifically by Watt (1989) who describes the community around it and the relationship to whaling in the Antarctic Ross Sea. It is a valuable addition to our knowledge on how the whaling industry affected local communities around the world. Whaling on the east coast of South Africa, with a centre in Durban, has been chronicled by de Jong (1994).

## **New perspectives ?**

Tønnessen and Johnsen had, as we have mentioned, an inevitable Norwegian perspective in their writings. The international literature over the last thirty years on other whaling nations and companies, has obviously contributed to make this perspective less apparent. However, Tønnessen and Johnsen in addition pursued specific thematic perspectives, focusing mostly on economic, political and technological issues. The question we now turn to is to what extent also such perspectives have been challenged in recent research?

The main body of international historical literature still seems to focus on areas like economy, politics and technology, thus representing the same thematic perspectives as Tønnessen and Johnsen. Some research also focuses specifically on issues dealt with by Tønnessen and Johnsen, but going into much more detail. One example is studies of the whaling technology - always a favourite topic among whaling historians.

Harland's (1992) account of the technological development of the steam whale catcher deserves special mentioning here. Covering the period from 1860 to 1960 the book gives an in depth look into *all* aspects of the operation of this most important technology in modern whaling. Others have focused explicitly on the catcherboats, like Somner's (1984) account of the history of the Salvesen whaling fleet. The already mentioned book by Bakka (1992) is another such example. Basberg (1998) has also studied the floating whaling factories from a design perspective. Some of the mentioned literature deals with other aspects of whaling equipment and processing technology.

The early writings of this author on the economic and technological history of whaling began as a direct thematic extension of Johnsen's own work. Johnsen's *Norwegian Patents Relating to Whaling and the Whaling Industry* (1947) recorded the patented inventions and analysed the technological development of the industry. His analysis was to some extent brought further in *Den moderne hvalfangsts historie*, but the post World War II patents were not statistically analysed. A completion of the patent analysis for the entire lifespan of the industry visualized the dramatic technological transformation of the industry in the 1920s and 30s (Basberg 1980, 1982, 1985).

Several recent contributions on the twentieth century whaling history, however, seems to focus on areas where Tønnessen and Johnsen had some deficiencies - where there were lacunas. This has led to new perspectives as we have seen in some of the international literature. It is also the case in the Norwegian history writing, which I will concentrate on in the following.

Tønnesen and Johnsen obviously lacked a focus on social and working conditions among whalers and their families. However, a number of later studies have explicitly related such issues. In particular, the focus of the Norwegian literature has obviously shifted from whaling to the whalers themselves to a degree that we may call it a "new Norwegian perspective"; a social history of whaling. The efforts of Com. Chr. Christensen's Whaling Museum and its staff should be mentioned here as instrumental for this shift. The museum conducted from the 1970s systematic interviews with former Norwegian Antarctic whalers. A large material was made available which still awaits a full scientific analysis. A early contribution, based to

some extent on this material, is Devig's (1982, 1986) studies of the organisation of the labour movement in the whaling industry in the 1920s.

Some of the oral history material was also used by Olstad (1995 and 1997) in his history of the town of Sandefjord - which, of course, to a large extent is a history of modern whaling. Another example is Bernhardt's thesis (2001) on working conditions aboard the floating factory ships - also giving a critical analysis of the interviews as source material. Basberg has focused on the social conditions and work organizations at the shore stations, using some of the interviews (2002). Lalla in his doctoral thesis of 2003 - so far the first and only doctoral thesis written on the history of modern whaling in Norway - has studied the economic outcome for the whalers and in particular the peculiar pattern of work combination between whaling and farming in Vestfold.

A vast archival material at the museum has also been researched over the last years by the museum's own staff, resulting a variety of smaller studies, mostly with an explicit social or labour history perspective (Wexelsen 1993, Falnes 1999, 2001, Børresen 2001, 2002, 2004).

There are a number of other publications that tell the stories of the whalers and their families. Asplin (1974) was in a way a pioneer with his collection of interviews with former Salvesen-whalers. Vesterlid (1992) interviewed the whalers' wives and families at home. Other authors have focused on other geographical areas where whalers came from; from Telemark (Rauland historielag, 2001) to Østfold (Ødegaard, 2002).

Several studies have focused on the whaling industry and its relationship to other industries in the county of Vestfold - the centre of the Norwegian whaling industry. Olsen (1994) wrote a M.thesis on the impact of the whaling industry on other industries in the inter-war years. Vik (1983 and 1984) has shed light on the question of why the shift from whaling to other industries went so smoothly in the late 1950s and 1960s. Lalla's thesis with its focus on the relationship between several part time employments is also an example of such a focus.

Alvestad in her M. thesis in history (1999) offered yet another perspective on the relationship between whaling and other industries, in her analysis of the fishermen's opposition to whaling in North Atlantic communities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

How has whaling been treated in more general histories of Norway? In the fifteen volume *Norges Historie* published in the 1970s, the Antarctic whaling industry was treated rather briefly by Fuglum (vol. 12, 1978) without any new perspectives. However, in the next published large general history of the 1990s, the perspective was different. In Kjelstadli's volum (1994) there is a chapter on whaling titled 'Økonomi og økologi i ishavet' (Business and ecology in the polar sea) where the focus is on the lack of regulations and environmental issues.

The most recent historical overview of the Norwegian Antarctic whaling industry is found in the three volume Norwegian Polar History - *Norsk Polarhistorie* (2004). An entire volume is dedicated the polar industries, and the historian Åsa Elstad has written an extensive chapter on whaling; *Den første oljealderen* (The First Oil Era). She has used some company archives that has not been accessible before, but the chapter is mainly based on Tønnessen and Johnsen. However, the focus is different. As we have seen, environmental issues were taken up by Johnsen and Tønnessen in their 1984 English volume, but in Elstad's chapter it is the main attention. Writing years after Norway's Antarctic whaling and Arctic sealing ended, and after many years of controversies over the coastal small scale whaling, she is also in a position to make comparisons and generalize about this country's politics and management of the polar industries and ask questions like; Norway - a greedy catching / hunting nation?

Elstad does also explicitly focus on social conditions and the working "culture" of whaling and whalers; the whalers background, their life and work onboard, health and illness, food, clothing, recreation. When she writes on the introduction of the hauling-up slipway, she does not focus on its importance for productivity or the performance of the whaling operation as such, but on the improvement of the working conditions for the whalers (flensing became less dangerous etc.).

## Conclusions

The total extent of the literature on twentieth century whaling has never reached the amount written on nineteenth century American whaling. However, there has accumulated a substantial literature on modern whaling as well, both before and after Johnsen and Tønnessen's seminal publications. The number of whalers memoirs from their lives and work in the Antarctic is declining for obvious reasons. Instead, several new perspectives have been introduced in the writing and research over the last two decades that may be summarised as follows. There has been an increased focus on environmental issues, resource management and exploitation - obviously reflecting an increased concern about such issues in the society. There has also been a significant shift in focus from the history of the business and the companies to the social history of the whalers. This is apparent in the Norwegian literature, but also elsewhere. There has been an increased focus on topics like whalers lives and working conditions, injuries and illness, labour organisation, employment conditions and wages, the whalers families and gender issues, and the local communities. Oral history has been widely adopted.

As to future writing and research on the 20<sup>th</sup> century modern whaling epoch, there are gaps in our knowledge that still can be filled. I am sure the attention on social history will last. I would also like to see more historical research on whaling nations other than Norway, in particular Soviet modern whaling - an important participant in post-war Antarctic whaling on which little modern research is available for foreigners. But also in other countries there are relevant archival material not so far utilized by whaling historians. Despite Tønnessen and Johnsen's focus on the business itself and its leaders, I would also like to see more biographies of the vital business agents of the industry, in Norway and elsewhere, and more company histories, especially in Norway where no one has been written recently, despite the availability of company records. Johnsen and Tønnessen's volumes were commissioned by the whaling company owners; the Norwegian Whaling Association. There were obviously unwritten rules as to how critical they were supposed to be. In the aftermath of Anders Jahre's death (1982) and the eventual sales and dissolution of the company Kosmos, there has been TV-series, newspaper articles, books (Jacobsen 1982) and endless legal battles about the remains of his and the companies (hidden) fortunes. The time has obviously come to write an extensive academic biography of this most important businessman of the 20<sup>th</sup> century whaling

industry and his company. We have also seen that there has been some recent interest in Svend Foyn, but it should now probably also be the time to give this very special Norwegian whaling entrepreneur a new look and a new biography.

There is still a broad international interest in a variety of historical aspects of the whaling industry. However, most of the research in whaling history has had an explicit national basis. My final hope is that I would also like to see more international cooperation on projects relating whaling history - maybe a truly international research project that reflects the international or global nature of this historic industry.

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