Praise for *In the Heart of the Sea*
“*In the Heart of the Sea* brings a wrenching tale of death and destruction magnificently to life. In addition to being an incredibly gripping tale of survival, Philbrick’s book is an amazingly intimate and detailed look at life aboard a nineteenth-century whaling ship. Much as Melville did in *Moby-Dick*, the author takes the reader and makes him part of the crew.”

—Atlanta Journal-Constitution

“Reading of the disaster in Philbrick’s book, you don’t wonder why Melville was captivated by it: What happened to the *Essex* and its men is fodder for an adventure story as nerve-wracking as the ill-fated expeditions that make modern bestsellers like *The Perfect Storm* and *Into Thin Air*. It is suspenseful, heartbreaking and sickening, rife with the kind of human folly and cultural hubris that allow readers to imagine how they would escape such a horrid fate, and make young novelists recklessly philosophical.”

—L.A. Weekly

“[A] fabulously well-told story . . . *In the Heart of the Sea* turns out to be much more than just a sea story, though it would stand tall on that basis alone. And what a story. *In the Heart of the Sea* would have been a page-turner if it had been fiction. As a real-life adventure, it’s compelling and chilling from start to finish.”

—Wilmington News Journal

“Compelling . . . Philbrick does an admirable job of bringing to life not only an engrossing story of endurance, but also of the whaling tradition itself. He records the crew’s increasingly dismal prospects for survival in a language worthy of Melville’s best foreboding prose.”

—The Houston Chronicle

“As both a historical companion to *Moby-Dick* and perhaps the most thrilling sea tale of all time, *In the Heart of the Sea* speaks to the same issues of class, race and our relationship to nature that permeate the classic works of Melville.”

—Tampa Tribune & Times

“If you loved *Titanic* and gobbled up *The Perfect Storm* then *In the Heart of the Sea* by Nathaniel Philbrick is just for you. It’s a seat-of-your-pants, real life tale . . . These pages rock and roll as good as any contemporary action yarn . . . a grand tale of derring-do, of guts and gumption and of starvation and survival . . . While the tale is tragic, reading about it is a voyage that’s well worth taking.”

—New York Post

“Both historically thoughtful and highly entertaining . . . he weaves a fascinating discussion of Nantucket’s history into the *Essex* drama.”

—Pittsburgh Gazette

“A splendid yarn.”

—The Orlando Sentinel

“Mesmerizing . . . a story even sweeps week would find hard to top . . . [this] is one book you wouldn’t vote off a deserted island.”

—Rocky Mountain News

“This is heady stuff, a surefire formula for an engrossing book . . . much more than another disaster story tailored to the interests of prurient readers. Accompanied by
helpful maps, ample notes, a bibliography and index, it’s a work of masterful scholarship that never intrudes on the high adventure quotient of the narrative.”
—Raleigh News & Observer

“A superbly written, tension-filled book . . . Whether as a brilliant follow-up to Moby-Dick or as an exciting and harrowing sea story all its own, this is an epic that deserves classic status.”
—Parade

“Nathaniel Philbrick’s admirable telling of the Essex story gains its power from his adherence to the simple brutal facts . . . all this Philbrick shows with a clarity and an economy that in no way slows his narrative, but lends it an awful, mounting inexorability . . . [told] with verve and authenticity, sure to become again what it has been from its earliest whisperings—a classic tale of the sea.”
—San Francisco Chronicle

PENGUIN BOOKS
IN THE HEART OF THE SEA
Nathaniel Philbrick is the New York Times bestselling author of In the Heart of the Sea, winner of the National Book Award; Sea of Glory, winner of the Theodore and Franklin D. Roosevelt Naval History Prize; Mayflower, finalist for the Pulitzer Prize; The Last Stand; Away Off Shore; Why Read Moby-Dick?; and Bunker Hill. He lives on Nantucket.
To access Penguin Readers Guide online, visit our Web site at www.penguin.com.
In the Heart of the Sea

THE TRAGEDY

OF

THE WHALESHIP

ESSEX

NATHANIEL PHILBRICK

PENGUIN BOOKS
And in the greatness of thine excellency thou hast overthrown them that rose up against thee: Thou sentest forth thy wrath, which consumed them as stubble. And with the blast of thy nostrils the waters were gathered together, the floods stood upright as a heap, and the depths were congealed in the heart of the sea.

—EXODUS 15:7-8

This is the end of the whaleroad and the whale
Who spewed Nantucket bones in the thrashed swell . . .
This is the end of running on the waves;
We are poured out like water. Who will dance
The mast-lashed master of Leviathans
Up from this field of Quakers in their unstoned graves?

—ROBERT LOWELL,
“The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket”

Table of Contents

Praise for In the Heart of the Sea
About the Author
Title Page
Copyright Page
Dedication
Epigraphs
PREFACE

CHAPTER ONE - Nantucket
CHAPTER TWO - Knockdown
CHAPTER THREE - First Blood
CHAPTER FOUR - The Lees of Fire
CHAPTER FIVE - The Attack
CHAPTER SIX - The Plan
CHAPTER SEVEN - At Sea
CHAPTER EIGHT - Centering Down
CHAPTER NINE - The Island
CHAPTER TEN - The Whisper of Necessity
CHAPTER ELEVEN - Games of Chance
CHAPTER TWELVE - In the Eagle’s Shadow
CHAPTER THIRTEEN - Homecoming
CHAPTER FOURTEEN - Consequences

EPILOGUE
Photographs
NOTES
SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY
Acknowledgments
INDEX
LIKE A GIANT BIRD of prey, the whaleship moved lazily up the western coast of South America, zigging and zagging across a living sea of oil. For that was the Pacific Ocean in 1821, a vast field of warm-blooded oil deposits known as sperm whales.

Harvesting sperm whales—the largest toothed whales in existence—was no easy matter. Six men would set out from the ship in a small boat, row up to their quarry, harpoon it, then attempt to stab it to death with a lance. The sixty-ton creature could destroy the whaleboat with a flick of its tail, throwing the men into the cold ocean water, often miles from the ship.

Then came the prodigious task of transforming a dead whale into oil: ripping off its blubber, chopping it up, and boiling it into the high-grade oil that lit the streets and lubricated the machines of the Industrial Age. That all of this was conducted on the limitless Pacific Ocean meant that the whalemen of the early nineteenth century were not merely seagoing hunters and factory workers but also explorers, pushing out farther and farther into a scarcely charted wilderness larger than all the earth’s landmasses combined.

For more than a century, the headquarters of this global oil business had been a little island called Nantucket, twenty-four miles off the coast of southern New England. One of the defining paradoxes of Nantucket’s whalemen was that many of them were Quakers, a religious sect stoically dedicated to pacifism, at least when it came to the human race. Combining rigid self-control with an almost holy sense of mission, these were what Herman Melville would call “Quakers with a vengeance.”

It was a Nantucket whaleship, the Dauphin, just a few months into what would be a three-year voyage, that was making her way up the Chilean coast. And on that February morning in 1821, the lookout saw something unusual—a boat, impossibly small for the open sea, bobbing on the swells. The ship’s captain, the thirty-seven-year-old Zinmi Coffin, trained his spyglass on the mysterious craft with keen curiosity.

He soon realized that it was a whaleboat—double-ended and about twenty-five feet long—but a whaleboat unlike any he had ever seen. The boat’s sides had been built up by about half a foot. Two makeshift masts had been rigged, transforming the rowing vessel into a rudimentary schooner. The sails—stiff with salt and bleached by the sun—had clearly pulled the boat along for many, many miles. Coffin could see no one at the steering oar. He turned to the man at the Dauphin’s wheel and ordered, “Hard up the helm.”

Under Coffin’s watchful eye, the helmsman brought the ship as close as possible to the derelict craft. Even though their momentum quickly swept them past it, the brief seconds during which the ship loomed over the open boat presented a sight that would stay with the crew the rest of their lives.

First they saw bones—human bones—littering the thwarts and floorboards, as if the whaleboat were the seagoing lair of a ferocious, man-eating beast. Then they saw the two men. They were curled up in opposite ends of the boat, their skin covered with sores, their eyes bulging from the hollows of their skulls, their beards caked with salt and blood. They were sucking the marrow from the bones of their dead shipmates.

Instead of greeting their rescuers with smiles of relief, the survivors—too delirious with thirst and hunger to speak—were disturbed, even frightened. They jealously clutched the splintered and gnawed-over bones with a desperate, almost feral intensity, refusing to give them up, like two starving dogs found trapped in a pit.

Later, once the survivors had been given some food and water (and had finally surrendered the bones), one of them found the strength to tell his story. It was a tale made of a whaleman’s worst nightmares: of being in a boat far from land with nothing left to eat or drink and—perhaps worst of all—of a whale with the vindictiveness and guile of a man.

EVEN though it is little remembered today, the sinking of the whale-ship Essex by an enraged sperm whale was one of the most well-known marine disasters of the nineteenth century. Nearly every child in America read about it in school. It was the event that inspired the climactic scene of Herman Melville’s Moby-Dick.

But the point at which Melville’s novel ends—the sinking of the ship—was merely the starting point for the story of the real-life Essex disaster. The sinking seemed to mark the beginning of a kind of terrible laboratory experiment devised to see just how far the human animal could go in its battle against the savage sea. Of the twenty men who escaped the whale-crushed ship, only eight survived. The two men rescued by the Dauphin had sailed almost 4,500 nautical miles across the Pacific—farther by at least 500 miles than Captain William Bligh’s epic voyage in an open boat after being abandoned by the Bounty mutineers and more than five times farther than Sir Ernest Shackleton’s equally famous passage to South Georgia Island.

For nearly 180 years, most of what was known about the calamity came from the 128-page Narrative of the Wreck of the Whaleship Essex, written by Owen Chase, the ship’s first mate. Fragmentary accounts from other survivors existed, but these lacked the authority and scope of Chase’s narrative, which was published with the help of a ghostwriter only nine months after the first mate’s rescue. Then, around 1960, an old notebook was found in the attic of a home in Penn Yan, New York. Not until twenty years later, in 1980, when the notebook
reached the hands of the Nantucket whaling expert Edouard Stackpole, was it realized that its original owner, Thomas Nickerson, had been the *Essex*’s cabin boy. Late in life, Nickerson, then the proprietor of a boardinghouse on Nantucket, had been urged to write an account of the disaster by a professional writer named Leon Lewis, who may have been one of Nickerson’s guests. Nickerson sent Lewis the notebook containing his only draft of the narrative in 1876. For whatever reason, Lewis never prepared the manuscript for publication and eventually gave the notebook to a neighbor, who died with it still in his possession. Nickerson’s account was finally published as a limited-edition monograph by the Nantucket Historical Association in 1984.

In terms of literary quality, Nickerson’s narrative cannot compare to Chase’s polished account. Ragged and meandering, the manuscript is the work of an amateur, but an amateur who was there, at the helm of the *Essex* when she was struck by the whale. At fourteen, Nickerson had been the youngest member of the ship’s crew, and his account remains that of a wide-eyed child on the verge of manhood, of an orphan (he lost both his parents before he was two) looking for a home. He was seventy-one when he finally put pen to paper, but Thomas Nickerson could look back to that distant time as if it were yesterday, his memories bolstered by information he’d learned in conversations with other survivors. In the account that follows, Chase will get his due, but for the first time his version of events is challenged by that of his cabin boy, whose testimony can now be heard 180 years after the sinking of the *Essex*.

WHEN I was a child, my father, Thomas Philbrick, a professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh and author of several books about American sea fiction, often put my brother and me to bed with the story of the whale that attacked a ship. My uncle, the late Charles Philbrick, winner of the Wallace Stevens Poetry Prize in 1958, wrote a five-hundred-line poem about the *Essex*, “A Travail Past,” published posthumously in 1976. It powerfully evoked what he called “a past we forget that we need to know.” Ten years later, as it happened, in 1986, I moved with my wife and two children to the *Essex*’s home port, Nantucket Island.

I soon discovered that Owen Chase, Herman Melville, Thomas Nickerson, and Uncle Charlie were not the only ones to have written about the *Essex*. There was Nantucket’s distinguished historian Edouard Stackpole, who died in 1993, just as my own research was beginning. There was Thomas Heffernan, author of *Stove by a Whale: Owen Chase and the Essex* (1981), an indispensable work of scholarship that was completed just before the discovery of the Nickerson manuscript. Finally, there was Henry Carlisle’s compelling novel *The Jonah Man* (1984), which tells the story of the *Essex* from the viewpoint of the ship’s captain, George Pollard.

Even after I’d read these accounts of the disaster, I wanted to know more. I wondered why the whale had acted as it did, how starvation and dehydration had affected the men’s judgment; what had happened out there? I immersed myself in the documented experiences of other whalemen from the era; I read about cannibalism, survival at sea, the psychology and physiology of starvation, navigation, oceanography, the behavior of sperm whales, the construction of ships—anything that might help me better understand what these men experienced on the wide and unforgiving Pacific Ocean.

I came to realize that the *Essex* disaster had provided Melville with much more than an ending to one of the greatest American novels ever written. It had spoken to the same issues of class, race, leadership, and man’s relationship to nature that would occupy him throughout *Moby-Dick*. It had also given Melville an archetypal but real place from which to launch the imaginary voyage of the *Pequod*: a tiny island that had once commanded the attention of the world. Relentlessly acquisitive, technologically advanced, with a religious sense of its own destiny, Nantucket was, in 1821, what America would become. No one dreamed that in a little more than a generation the island would founder—done in, like the *Essex*, by a too-close association with the whale.

**CREW OF THE ESSEX**

**CAPTAIN**  
George Pollard, Jr.

**FIRST MATE**  
Owen Chase

**SECOND MATE**  
Matthew Joy

**BOATSTEERERS**  
Benjamin Lawrence · Obed Hendricks  
Thomas Chappel

**STEWARD**  
William Bond
SAILORS
Owen Coffin • Isaac Cole • Henry De Witt
Richard Peterson • Charles Ramsdell • Barzillai Ray
Samuel Reed • Isaiah Sheppard • Charles Shorter
Lawson Thomas • Seth Weeks • Joseph West
William Wright

CABIN BOY
Thomas Nickerson

Sail Plan of the Whaleship Essex

Deck Plan of the Whaleship Essex
IT WAS, HE LATER REMEMBERED, “the most pleasing moment of my life”—the moment he stepped aboard the whaleship Essex for the first time. He was fourteen years old, with a broad nose and an open, eager face, and like every other Nantucket boy, he’d been taught to “idolize the form of a ship.” The Essex might not look like much, stripped of her rigging and chained to the wharf, but for Thomas Nickerson she was a vessel of opportunity. Finally, after what had seemed an endless wait, Nickerson was going to sea.

The hot July sun beat down on her old, oil-soaked timbers until the temperature below was infernal, but Nickerson explored every cranny, from the brick altar of the tryworks being assembled on deck to the lightless depths of the empty hold. In between was a creaking, compartmentalized world, a living thing of oak and pine that reeked of oil, blood, tobacco juice, food, salt, mildew, tar, and smoke. “[B]lack and ugly as she was,” Nickerson wrote, “[I would not have exchanged her for a palace.]”

In July of 1819 the Essex was one of a fleet of more than seventy Nantucket whaleships in the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. With whale-oil prices steadily climbing and the rest of the world’s economy sunk in depression, the village of Nantucket was on its way to becoming one of the richest towns in America.

The community of about seven thousand people lived on a gently sloping hill crowded with houses and topped by windmills and church towers. It resembled, some said, the elegant and established port of Salem—a remarkable compliment for an island more than twenty miles out into the Atlantic, below Cape Cod. But if the town, high on its hill, radiated an almost ethereal quality of calm, the waterfront below bustled with activity. Sprouting from among the long, low warehouses and ropewalks, four solid-fill wharves reached out more than a hundred yards into the harbor. Tethered to the wharves or anchored in the harbor were, typically, fifteen to twenty whaleships, along with dozens of smaller vessels, mainly sloops and schooners, that brought trade goods to and from the island. Each wharf, a labyrinth of anchors, try-pots, spars, and oil casks, was thronged with sailors, stevedores, and artisans. Two-wheeled, horse-drawn carts known as calashes continually came and went.

It was a scene already familiar to Thomas Nickerson. The children of Nantucket had long used the waterfront as their playground. They rowed decrepit whaleboats up and down the harbor and clambered up into the rigging of the ships. To off-islanders it was clear that these children were a “distinctive class of juveniles, accustomed to consider themselves as predestined mariners. . . . They climbed ratlines like monkeys—little fellows of ten or twelve years—and laid out on the yardarms with the most perfect nonchalance.” The Essex might be Nickerson’s first ship, but he had been preparing for the voyage almost his entire life.

He wasn’t going alone. His friends Barzillai Ray, Owen Coffin, and Charles Ramsdell, all between the ages of fifteen and eighteen, were also sailing on the Essex. Owen Coffin was the cousin of the Essex’s new captain and probably steered his three friends to his kinsman’s ship. Nickerson was the youngest of the group.

The Essex was old and, at 87 feet long and 238 tons displacement, quite small, but she had a reputation on Nantucket as a lucky ship. Over the last decade and a half, she had done well by her Quaker owners, regularly returning at two-year intervals with enough oil to make them wealthy men. Daniel Russell, her previous captain, had been successful enough over the course of four voyages to be given command of a new and larger ship, the Aurora. Russell’s promotion allowed the former first mate, George Pollard, Jr., to take over command of the Essex, and one of the boatsteerers (or harpooners), Owen Chase, to move up to first mate. Three other crew
members were elevated to the rank of boatsteerer. Not only a lucky but apparently a happy vessel, the *Essex* was, according to Nickerson, “on the whole rather a desirable ship than otherwise.”

Since Nantucket was, like any seafaring town of the period, a community obsessed with omens and signs, such a reputation counted for much. Still, there was talk among the men on the wharves when earlier that July, as the *Essex* was being repaired and outfitted, a comet appeared in the night sky.

NANTUCKET was a town of roof dwellers. Nearly every house, its shingles painted red or left to weather into gray, had a roof-mounted platform known as a walk. While its intended use was to facilitate putting out chimney fires with buckets of sand, the walk was also an excellent place to look out to sea with a spyglass, to search for the sails of returning ships. At night, the spyglasses of Nantucket were often directed toward the heavens, and in July of 1819, islanders were looking toward the northwest sky. The Quaker merchant Obed Macy, who kept meticulous records of what he determined were the “most extraordinary events” in the life of his island, watched the night sky from his house on Pleasant Street. “The comet (which appears every clear night) is thought to be very large from its uncommonly long tail,” he wrote, “which extends upward in opposition to the sun in an almost perpendicular direction and heaves off to the eastward and nearly points for the North Star.”

From earliest times, the appearance of a comet was interpreted as a sign that something unusual was about to happen. The *New Bedford Mercury*, the newspaper Nantucketers read for lack of one of their own, commented, “True it is, that the appearance of these eccentric visitors have always preceded some remarkable event.” But Macy resisted such speculation: “[T]he philosophical reasoning we leave to the scientific part of the community, still it is beyond a doubt that the most learned is possessed of very little undoubted knowledge of the subject of cometics.”

At the wharves and shipping offices there was much speculation, and not just about the comet. All spring and summer there had been sightings up and down the New England coast of what the *Mercury* described as “an extraordinary sea animal”—a serpent with black, horselike eyes and a fifty-foot body resembling a string of barrels floating on the water. Any sailor, especially if he was young and impressionable like Thomas Nickerson, must have wondered, if only fleetingly, if this was, in fact, the best time to be heading out on a voyage around Cape Horn.

Nantucketers had good reason to be superstitious. Their lives were governed by a force of terrifying unpredictability—the sea. Due to a constantly shifting network of shoals, including the Nantucket Bar just off the harbor mouth, the simple act of coming to and from the island was an often harrowing and sometimes catastrophic lesson in seamanship. Particularly in winter, when storms were the most violent, wrecks occurred almost weekly. Buried throughout the island were the corpses of anonymous seamen who had washed up on its wave-thrashed shores. Nantucket, which means “faraway land” in the language of the island’s native inhabitants, the Wampanoag, was a mound of sand eroding into an inexorable ocean, and all its residents, even if they had never left the island, were all too aware of the inhumanity of the sea.

Nantucket’s English settlers, who began arriving in 1659, had been mindful of the sea’s dangers. They had hoped to support themselves not as fishermen but as farmers and shepherds on this grassy, pond-speckled crescent without wolves. But as the increasing size of the livestock herds, combined with the growing number of farms, threatened to transform the island into a wind-blown wasteland, Nantucketers inevitably looked seaward.

Every fall, hundreds of right whales appeared to the south of the island and remained until the early spring. So named because they were “the right whale to kill,” right whales grazed the waters off Nantucket much like seagoing cattle, straining the nutrient-rich surface of the ocean through the bushy plates of baleen in their perpetually grinning mouths. While English settlers at Cape Cod and eastern Long Island had already been hunting right whales for decades, no one on Nantucket had had the courage to pursue the whales in boats. Instead they left the harvesting of whales that washed up onto the shore (known as drift whales) to the Wampanoag.

Around 1690, a group of Nantucketers was standing on a hill overlooking the ocean where some whales were spouting and playing with one another. One of the onlookers nodded toward the whales and the ocean beyond. “There,” he asserted, “is a green pasture where our children’s grandchildren will go for bread.” In fulfillment of his prophecy, a Cape Codder by the name of Ichabod Paddock was soon thereafter lured across Nantucket Sound to instruct the islanders in the art of killing whales.

Their first boats were only twenty feet long, and they launched them from the beaches along the island’s south shore. Typically a whaleboat’s crew was comprised of five Wampanoag oarsmen, with a single white Nantucketer at the steering oar. Once they’d killed the whale, they towed it back to the beach, where they removed the blubber and boiled it into oil. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, English Nantucketers had instituted a system of debt servitude that provided them with a steady supply of Wampanoag labor. Without the island’s native inhabitants, who outnumbered Nantucket’s white population well into the 1720s, the island would never have become a successful whaling port.

In the year 1712, a Captain Hussey, cruising in his little boat for right whales along Nantucket’s south shore, was blown out to sea in a fierce northerly gale. Many miles out, he glimpsed several whales of a type he had
never seen before. Unlike a right whale’s vertical spout, this whale’s spout arched forward. In spite of the high winds and rough seas, Hussey managed to harpoon and kill one of the whales, its blood and oil stilling the waves in an almost biblical fashion. This creature, Hussey quickly realized, was a sperm whale, one of which had washed up on the island’s southwest shore only a few years before. Not only was the oil derived from the sperm whale’s blubber far superior to that of the right whale, providing a brighter and cleaner-burning light, but its block-shaped head contained a vast reservoir of even better oil, called spermaceti, that could be simply ladled into an awaiting cask. (It was spermaceti’s resemblance to seminal fluid that gave rise to the sperm whale’s name.) The sperm whale might be faster and more aggressive than the right whale, but it was far more enriching. With no other means of support, Nantucketers dedicated themselves to the single-minded pursuit of the sperm whale, and they soon outstripped their whaling rivals on the mainland and Long Island.

By 1760, the Nantucketers had practically wiped out the local whale population. But no matter—by that point they had enlarged their whaling sloops and equipped them with brick tryworks capable of processing the oil on the open ocean. Now, since it would not need to return to port as often to deliver bulky blubber, their fleet had a far greater range. By the outbreak of the American Revolution, Nantucketers had made it to the verge of the Arctic Circle, to the west coast of Africa, the east coast of South America, and as far south as the Falkland Islands.

In a speech before Parliament in 1775, the British statesman Edmund Burke looked to the island’s inhabitants as the leaders of a new American breed—a “recent people” whose success in whaling had exceeded the collective might of all of Europe. Living on an island that was almost the same distance from the mainland as England was from France, Nantucketers developed a British sense of themselves as a distinct and superior people, privileged citizens of what Ralph Waldo Emerson called the “Nation of Nantucket.”

The Revolution and the War of 1812, when the British navy marauded offshore shipping, proved disastrous to the whale fishery. Fortunately, Nantucketers possessed enough capital and inherent whaling expertise to survive these trials. By 1819, Nantucket was well on its way to reclaiming and, as the whalers ventured into the Pacific, even surpassing its former glory. But the rise of the Pacific sperm-whale fishery had an unfortunate side effect. Instead of voyages that had once averaged about nine months, two- and three-year voyages had become the norm. Never before had the division between Nantucket’s whalemen and their people been so great. Long gone were the days when Nantucketers could watch from shore as the men and boys of the island pursued the whale. Nantucket was now the whaling capital of the world, but there were more than a few islanders who had never even seen a whale.

In the summer of 1819 people were still talking about the time when, nine years earlier, a pod of right whales was spotted to the north of the island. Whaleboats were quickly dispatched. A crowd gathered on shore to watch in fascination as two whales were killed and towed back into the harbor. For the people of Nantucket, it was an epiphany. Here at last were two of the creatures they had heard so much about, creatures upon which their livelihood depended. One of the whales was pulled up onto the wharf, and before the day was out, thousands of people—including, perhaps, the five-year-old Thomas Nickerson—had come to see it. One can only imagine the intensity of the Nantucketers’ curiosity as they peeked at the giant creature, and poked and prodded it, and said to themselves, “So this is it.”

Nantucket had created an economic system that no longer depended on the island’s natural resources. The island’s soil had long since been exhausted by overfarming. Nantucket’s large Wampanoag population had been reduced to a handful by epidemics, forcing shipowners to look to the mainland for crew. Whales had almost completely disappeared from local waters. And still the Nantucketers prospered. As one visitor observed, the island had become a “barren sandbank, fertilized with whale-oil only.”

THROUGHOUT the seventeenth century, English Nantucketers resisted all attempts to establish a church on the island, partly because a woman by the name of Mary Coffin Starbuck forbade it. It was said that nothing of consequence was done on Nantucket without Mary’s approval. Mary Coffin and Nathaniel Starbuck had been the first English couple to be married on the island, in 1662, and had established a lucrative outpost for trading with the Wampanoag. Whenever an itinerant minister came to Nantucket looking to establish a congregation, he was firmly rebuffed by Mary Starbuck. Then, in 1702, Mary succumbed to a charismatics Quaker minister named John Richardson. Speaking before a group assembled in the Starbucks’ living room, Richardson succeeded in moving Mary to tears. It was Mary Starbuck’s conversion to Quakerism that established the unique fusion of spirituality and covetousness that would make possible Nantucket’s rise as a whaling port.

Quakers or, more properly, members of the Society of Friends, depended on their own experience of God’s presence, the “Inner Light,” for guidance rather than relying on a Puritan minister’s interpretation of scripture. But Nantucket’s ever growing number of Quakers were hardly free-thinking individuals. Friends were expected to conform to rules of behavior determined during yearly meetings, encouraging a sense of community that was as carefully controlled as that of any New England society. If there was a difference, it was the Quaker belief in pacifism and a conscious spurning of worldly ostentation—two principles that were not intended to interfere, in any way, with a person’s ability to make money. Instead of building fancy houses or buying fashionable clothes,
Nantucket’s Quakers reinvested their profits in the whale fishery. As a result, they were able to weather the downturns that laid to waste so many mainland whaling merchants, and Mary Starbuck’s children, along with their Macy and Coffin cousins, quickly established a Quaker whaling dynasty.

Nantucketers saw no contradiction between their livelihood and their religion. God Himself had granted them dominion over the fishes of the sea. Peleg Folger, a Nantucket whaleman turned Quaker elder, expressed it in verse:

The mighty whale, O Lord, create the mighty whale,
That wondrous monster of a mighty length;
Vast is his head and body, vast his tail,
Beyond conception his unmeasured strength.

But, everlasting God, thou dost ordain
That we, poor feeble mortals should engage
(Our wives, our children to maintain),
This dreadful monster with a martial rage.

Even if Nantucket’s Quakers dominated the island economically and culturally, room was made for others, and by the early nineteenth century there were two Congregational church towers bracketing the town north and south. Yet all shared in a common, spiritually infused mission—to maintain a peaceful life on land while raising bloody havoc at sea. Pacifist killers, plain-dressed millionaires, the whalemen of Nantucket were simply fulfilling the Lord’s will.

The town that Thomas Nickerson knew had a ramshackle feel about it. All it took was one walk through its narrow sandy streets to discover that despite the stately church towers and the occasional mansion, Nantucket was a far cry from Salem. “The good citizens of [Nantucket] do not seem to pride themselves upon the regularity of their streets [or] the neatness of their sidewalks,” observed a visiting Quaker. The houses were shingled and unpretentious and, as often as not, included items scavenged from ships. “[H]atchways make very convenient bridges for gutters . . . ; a plank from the stern of a ship—having the name on it—answers the double purpose of making a fence—and informing the stranger if he can be at a loss—in what town he is.”

Instead of using the official street names that had been assigned for tax purposes in 1798, Nantucketers spoke of “Elisha Bunker’s street” or “Captain Mitchell’s.” “The inhabitants live together like one great family,” wrote the Nantucketer Walter Folger, who happened to be a part-owner of the Essex, “not in one house, but in friendship. They not only know their nearest neighbors, but each one knows all the rest.

End of this sample Kindle book.
Enjoyed the preview?

Download Full Version of This Book