
The Last Whale

— Chris Pash —

First published 2008 by
FREMANTLE PRESS
25 Quarry Street, Fremantle
(PO Box 158, North Fremantle 6159)
Western Australia.
www.fremantlepress.com.au

Copyright © Chris Pash, 2008.
Copyright Foreword © Tim Winton, 2007.
Copyright Photographs remains with the individual photographers.

This book is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright Act, no part may be reproduced by any process without written permission. Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

Consultant editors Ray Coffey and Wendy Jenkins
Designer Tracey Gibbs
Printed by Everbest Printing Company, China.
Production specification: paper 100% recycled; print Certification ISO 14001, no alcohol-based printing techniques; inks vegetable-based; water-based varnish on the cover.

National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-publication data

Publication of this title was assisted by the Commonwealth Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.

*to the
people of Albany,
Western Australia*





Harpoon.
Photograph by Ed Smidt.

1 : The Chaser : 20 June 1977

A target resembling a huge granite rock emerges from the rolling swell of the Southern Ocean. A giant tail rises at right angles to the water and slips cleanly into the sea. Foaming green water covers it over.

In a tiny alcove on the steel-hulled *Cheyne III*, Tom Kennedy, sonar operator, knows what the whale is doing. He waits for it to go deeper. It's hard to track a whale close to the surface; Tom's ears become headphones. Sound travels well in water and the pinging of the sonar bounces off solid shapes. The echoes create an image on a small screen and a jagged line on graph paper.

This whale won't get away.

Tom keeps a picture in his mind; a shadow, a guesstimate fed by experience. He is more than the science of his instruments; he *senses* the whale.

The whale knows it's being shadowed and sends its own sonar 'clicks' and 'burrs' streaming in short bursts at the ship. In Tom's

mind these sounds are angry talk, swearing.

The whale dives, adjusting its body for buoyancy as the water pressure around it increases

Sperm whales don't have vocal cords. The sounds Tom is hearing are made by the whale shifting air between cavities in its head. A sperm whale has an acoustic sense of its world. Whistles communicate to the pod; clicks are for navigating, and deep probing of the ocean looking for squid, its main diet.

The rest of the crew of seventeen are quiet, knowing Tom has a line on the whale. They scan the sea, waiting for it to surface. A big sperm whale can stay deep for thirty minutes or more.

Soon Tom will start calling distance and direction between the ship and where he thinks the whale will breach. He's sure this is a sperm whale of good size, forty tonnes or more.

A light plane buzzes above. Spotter pilot John Bell radios the coordinates of another pod.

Operating the sonar is more art than science. Tom, beginning as a deckhand, learnt his trade from an ex navy man, Ron Day, by listening and watching. But when his chance at the sonar came, Tom was useless. The sounds piped through the headphones were indistinguishable from one another. The company sent him to get his ears checked, but they were working fine.

Tom didn't give up. It took three frustrating months, but eventually he assimilated all the information needed to track a whale underwater.

'There's a hell of a lot of concentration in it,' Tom says. There are a lot of other noises. Could be fish, or you could get a bounce from the bottom. We had operators who came out of the navy after tracking submarines for years. They had no hope with whales.' (Tracking the solid steel of ships or underwater topography was easy because they gave off solid images. Whales are organic, move between the surface and the depths, and give off a more ghost-like image.)

Sometimes Tom has been fooled into tracking large shapes well past the time a sperm whale should have come up for air. 'Talk about the Loch Ness monster. There are things out there — animals or fish or whatever — that put out a graph like a whale or even bigger. We've followed the sods for a couple of hours or more. What they were I don't know.'

The whales themselves know a trick or two. Once Tom chased two whales that were right there on the screen in front of him — and then they were gone. Whales can drop to a different thermal layer, a band of a higher or lower temperature than the surrounding water. This plays havoc with the sonar. Tom thinks there are fast-moving currents at different depths, like the fast lane on a highway. A whale hitting a lane like that will disappear as fast as a rabbit down a burrow.

Mick Stubbs, first mate, is resting off watch in a bunk bed. He feels a subtle change, a vibration in the ship's hull as the engines change tempo. Mick has been up since four am, when the *Cheyne III* left Albany's Princess Royal Harbour.

As a child he went out with his father, whaling ship's master Ches Stubbs, to watch the men catch humpbacks, toothless baleen whales off Albany. It was exciting and Mick couldn't wait to go whaling himself. It was in his blood, and the pay was good. He got his start in 1961, signing



Mick Stubbs, first mate of the *Cheyne III*.
Photograph by Ed Smidt.

on as a twenty-year-old deckhand for the Nor' West Whaling Company at Carnarvon in the state's north-west. Back then, the horizon had been full of humpback whales. But the catches dropped to nothing the following year and humpback whaling stopped in 1963. The whales had been overfished to the point of near extinction as whaling stations on the east and west coasts of Australia took catches and with large ocean-going whaling fleets scooping up as many humpbacks, of any size or sex, as they could.

Mick ended up back in Albany working for the Cheynes Beach Whaling Company, hunting toothed sperm whales. Jobs on the whale chasers were gold in the town of Albany. You were top of the heap when you worked the chasers.

By thirty-six, Mick had made his way up from the engine room to the top deck and was second in charge of the *Cheyne III*. He had worked all corners of the ship and knew every piece of machinery. With a bit of study, and luck, he could be in line for a skipper's job in a few years.

Mick's job now is to ensure the equipment is in perfect order for when the whale they are hunting blows. The night before, he pulled the block out of the harpoon gun and inspected and cleaned the metal casing where the shells are loaded. He packed twenty-four shells with gunpowder — 185 grams each for a full shot. The fifty-five kilogram steel harpoon the explosive drives has flukes to hold a whale fast. Another harpoon without barbs — usually fired at close range to finish off a wounded whale — carries eighty grams for a killer shot. This second charge is smaller to prevent the harpoon cutting clean through the catch. At the tip of a harpoon is a cast-iron fragmentation grenade with a time-delay fuse. The grenade is set to go off inside the whale for a quick, clean kill. Each steel harpoon can be re-used four to seven times. After each time it was fired and hit its mark, the harpoon was sent to the blacksmith's shop to be straightened. Eventually a harpoon, with its flukes removed, would be re-used as a killer shot.

Mick checks and re-checks his equipment. Picking up the trail of a sperm whale is an adrenalin rush. He feels the excitement in the air as he goes on deck. The crew are alert, their movements sharper, determined. Even the ship moves differently. There's more purpose to the path it carves through the swell, pushed by its 1800 horsepower, oil-fired steam engine.

As they close in, Mick marks the distance and direction of the whale on a wall chart. The ship is the centre of the map, the whale a dot in a circle. He moves the marker as Tom calls the distances.

'300 metres and close to the surface ...

'200 metres ...

'150 metres ...

'130 metres ...'

The wind-burnt face of Gordon Cruickshank, the ship's master and gunner, is fixed on the surrounding water. He takes in the information from Tom and gives instructions to the helmsman, who turns a large wheel connected to an oversized rudder, the nautical equivalent of power steering.

A pod must be approached quietly. Rush in and the whales get excited, especially the big bulls, and these are the ones who deliver the most oil. Bonuses are paid on the number of barrels of sperm whale oil produced, much the same as it was when whaling was about longboats and hand harpoons.

Males are the first to react. They flip their tails up, go straight down and are five to six kilometres away before you know it. The cows, the bull's harem, are more placid. They stick around for a bit longer before taking off.

A sperm whale can keep up a ten to twelve knot pace for a long time, before diving deep for thirty minutes or more. A high flick of the tail usually means the whale is heading for the depths; a bend in the tail, a short dive of twenty metres.

Gordon is keenly aware of the rules and regulations. It seems to

him that every man and his dog want to poke their nose into his work. He faces hours of paperwork if he bags an undersized whale. He has to make excuses, in writing, telling why he's stuffed up. Then there's the quota set by the International Whaling Commission on how many males and how many females are allowed to be caught. More bulls than cows can be taken because there are always eager young bulls following the harem, waiting their chance. A pod of two hundred or more females can be governed by one large bull. Sometimes a pod like this will shrink when a young male makes his move and takes off with forty to fifty females.

Gordon can tell the difference between the sexes in an instant. A female has a pointed head, more of a taper, while a bull is squarer and bigger.

The final decision to take a whale is Gordon's. He must judge size and sex and assess the odds. Should he take this one first, or will that scare the others off? In a big swell, a whale might be in one trough and the chaser in another, with the crew getting only glimpses of what they're chasing.

At fifty-one, Gordon has spent most of his life on ships. As a boy in Aberdeen, Scotland, he read tales of adventure at sea and always wanted to join the navy or go whaling. He managed to do both, despite his family's attempts to stop him. His grandfather and great uncle had drowned at sea but Gordon was determined to follow his heart. He saw service as a Royal Navy gunner in the Second World War, then went trawler fishing off Iceland, ending up in a deep-sea trawling venture in Australia in 1949. After getting his skipper's ticket in 1968, he worked as a relieving skipper with the Cheynes Beach Whaling Company, becoming master and gunner of the *Cheyne III* a few years later. His war experience as a gunner came in handy. He could service a harpoon with his eyes closed.

When the weather is good and the chase is on, Gordon will stroll down the catwalk connecting the bridge to the harpoon deck at

the bow, and wait as they close in. But it isn't uncommon for a wave to wash over the harpoon deck, so in bad weather he'll leave it to the last moment.

Based on information from the sonar, he will keep the chaser one hundred metres behind the whale, putting on speed when the whale is around fifty metres from the surface.

The whole crew feels the excitement. Everyone is on duty. They know the money is there.

Gordon likes to have two crew in the barrel — the crows' nest or lookout. Two sets of eyes are better than one.

A shout from the barrel. 'She's on the surface!'

Mick steps in to take charge of the bridge as Gordon runs along the catwalk to the harpoon. Mick tells the engine room the speed he wants, based on hand signals and shouts from Gordon. He also keeps half an eye out for the position of the *Cheyne II* and *Cheyne IV*. His skipper is concentrating on running down the whale, not looking out for the other ships. A collision would be embarrassing.

Gordon grabs the 90mm cannon mounted to the deck and kicks the locking mechanism to the off position. He quickly sights along the harpoon angled out front of the bow, his grey overalls back to the bridge amidships. Beneath the harpoon there is fifty



Gordon Cruickshank, master of the *Cheyne III*, shouts instructions to the helmsman.

Photograph by Ed Smidt.



AIM — FIRE! — HIT.
Photographs by Ed Smidt.

metres of rope, the forerunner. Another thousand metres of heavier line waits in the rope locker below and will roll out when the harpoon fires. If the whale takes off, the forerunner runs through a series of springs to take tension off the rope and stop it snapping.

Muttering under his breath, Gordon shouts and signals instructions to the helmsman. The ship pushes through the waves, closing on the whale.

More frantic hand movements from Gordon. The helmsman changes course again.

The illusion of a black rock is replaced by the shiny wet reality of a sperm whale.

One more course adjustment.

Gordon pulls the trigger. A sharp explosion. The fifty-five kilogram harpoon, with its cast-iron grenade head and metal flukes, flies out of the cannon and finds its mark.

Three seconds. *One — two — three.*

The grenade head explodes and the sea turns red.

The crew always hope for this — a clean shot, a quick kill.

A winch brings the whale alongside. A spear connected to a compressor pumps the whale with air to keep it afloat. The tail is trimmed and a chain is attached. A radio beacon and flag mark this whale as belonging to the *Cheyne III*.

The chaser heads out again, butting the chop, on the tail of another whale.



Reloading the harpoon. *Cheyne III*.
Photograph by Ed Smidt.