

The Great Hunt

Tiger, 1845–1848

Like many whaling voyages, this one involved a fair measure of human bloodshed and an enormous amount of blubber. The profitable cargo at the journey's end delighted Captain William E. Brewster, but his wife, Mary, expressed no particular sentiment as the *Tiger* entered the harbor of Stonington, Connecticut, on March 8, 1848. "We went in so quickly and so still—We soon left our old home [the *Tiger*] and found our friends all well—and glad to see us," she wrote in her journal.¹ Mary Brewster had certainly anticipated this homecoming for well over two years. She was now a seasoned voyager, a "sister sailor" who experienced the extremes of oceanic conditions and witnessed the gruesome business of whaling as well as the depravity of masculine behavior aboard ship. Very little could now startle this twenty-five-year-old woman, and perhaps this explains her lack of sentiment. It had been a long voyage.

Two years earlier the *Tiger* entered the Pacific with a typical complement of experienced officers, skilled tradesmen and harpooners, and novice crewmen who signed on with varying degrees of willingness. Headed for the Northwest Coast of North America and planning to hunt sperm whales on the way up the South American coast, the *Tiger's* crew was notably unsuccessful through the spring of 1846. Some crewmembers quietly spoke of deserting the ship at the first opportunity. There was "not very good feeling between the officers and boatsteerers," noted John Perkins, a Yale College dropout and twenty-year-old green-hand sailor. Mary Brewster only made matters worse: a woman's mere presence on the ship, Perkins alleged, turned "every danger double."² The *Tiger's* whaleboats chased numerous whales in the southeast Pacific but came up empty, forcing the captain to report "clean"—the whalemens' term for "no oil"—during a stopover in Hawai'i.³



Figure 4.1 Mary Brewster kept one of the most detailed journals of whaling in the Pacific during her six years aboard the *Tiger*, a ship captained by her husband William Brewster. Courtesy of Mystic Seaport Museum.

John Perkins had the best time of his short life in the port of Hilo: “Never have I met with any people who pleased me so much as the Kanakers.” He considered deserting the ship at Hilo and even “wished for [a gale] to ‘stove her up,’” or wreck the *Tiger*. But Perkins remained on the *Tiger* when it left Hawai‘i, only to perish weeks later from a different sort of “stoving.” His journal abruptly ends with a quick entry on June 5, 1846: “Good breeze. Seven months out, no oil yet, all discouraged, no strings for the fiddle.”⁴ Days later, Perkins pulled hard on the oars of one of the ship’s whaleboats in pursuit of a finback whale. The harpooner

struck the sixty-foot-long creature with two irons, at which point the whale turned and lashed the boat with its tail. Perkins's body took the brunt of the blow. What was left of John Perkins and the small boat disappeared in a bloody froth. Mary Brewster watched this horrid scene from the relative safety of the *Tiger's* deck. She described how the whale "struck the boat and stove it," killing Perkins "instantly" before "the waves clos[ed] over him forever concealing his form from our view." Mary retreated to her cabin and, with Bible in hand, inscribed words to her journal from the Book of Matthew: "*Be ye also ready.*"⁵

The *Tiger* sailed on for the "nor'west," though Brewster observed that "not a smile is to be seen and scarcely a loud word." Perkins was soon forgotten in the busy summer of 1846. The *Tiger's* crew killed more than two dozen whales, amounting to fifteen hundred barrels of oil. At times the fire heating the ship's tryworks (the large pots used for rendering the blubber into oil) blazed day and night, covering the deck in greasy gore. Mary gaped at whales in their death flurry "spouting thick blood," and she would later watch the tryworks spewing forth smoke, "the smell [of] which I abominate." These summer months flew by in a "murderous spectacle," and the voyage, at long last, turned profitable.⁶ As autumn arrived and the cold winds closed in on the northern ocean, Captain Brewster sailed for warmer climes.

Bahía Magdalena, Lower California. The *Tiger* arrived at this secluded Baja bay on November 18, 1846. During the previous season two whaleships, the *Hibernia* and the *United States*, had discovered this calving ground for the eastern Pacific's population of gray whales. Whalers called them "Devilfish" for their manner of viciously attacking whale boats; true to form, the *United States* lost two crewmembers in stoving accidents on the very first day of hunting the previous winter. Mary Brewster knew nothing of the impending danger, but her husband quickly learned of the gray's reputation from Captain James Smith of the *Hibernia*, an experienced sea captain later caricatured by Mark Twain as "contemplating the world from over the back of a gnarled crag of a nose."⁷ Mary enjoyed a quiet month at Magdalena Bay before the whales arrived at this southern destination of their annual migration. She took long walks on the deserted beach. She read books from Captain Smith's impressive library, including Charles Wilkes's recently published narrative of the US Exploring Expedition in the Pacific. And she watched as a few other whaleships arrived to join their small flotilla in the quiet bay. On the last day of 1846, the New London ship *Catherine* appeared, captained by Richard Smith, a man widely regarded as the toughest bare-knuckle fighter in the American whaling fleet.⁸ But it would be the gray Devilfish, rather than the whaling men of Magdalena Bay, that tested Smith's pugilistic reputation.

Mary Brewster carefully noted the arrival of gray whales in the latter half of December. A distant spout one day, followed the next day by a pair of whales sighted near the *Tiger*. She described with cool detachment the method by which the crew would capture and kill the grays:

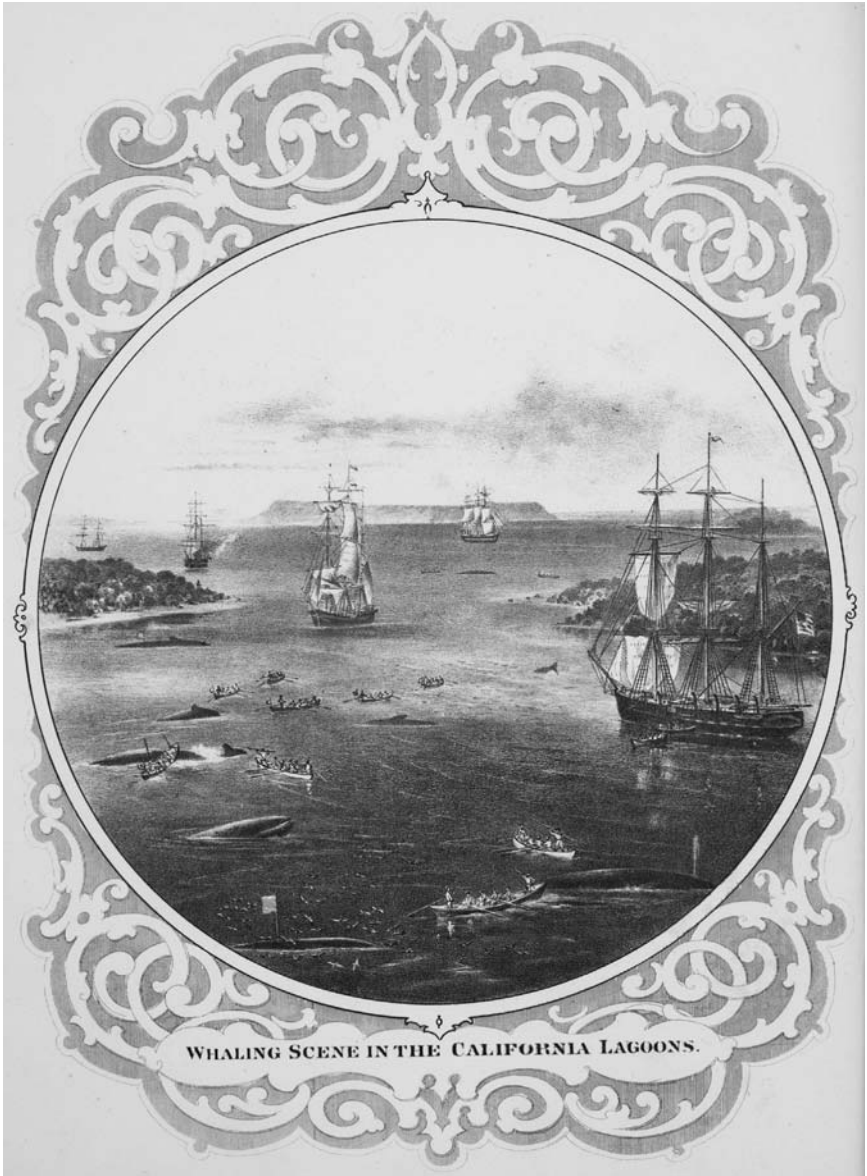


Figure 4.2 Captain, artist, and writer Charles Scammon depicts the opportunities and dangers of hunting gray whales in Magdalena Bay. Courtesy of the Huntington Library.

These whales frequent this bay once a year to calve and can only be taken when they have a young one which [the harpooners] fasten to and by this means secure the mother who will never forsake it till dead but try every way to shield it from danger by taking it on her back and endeavor to help them along.⁹

To put it more bluntly, the whalers used the newborn calf as live bait to capture the mother. More and more whales arrived every day in Magdalena Bay—more than a thousand of them by the first weeks of 1847—and the cows gave birth to calves as they had done since time immemorial. Captain Brewster readied the *Tiger's* four whaleboats and sharpened the various harpoons, hand-lances, cutting spades, and other instruments of death. And then the slaughter commenced.

The world's greatest hunt for marine mammals began in the North Pacific during the mid-eighteenth century and continued throughout the eastern Pacific for the next hundred years. A brutal campaign of extermination, the hunt shifted by geography and species according to market value, technological innovation, and remaining—yet killable—animal populations.¹⁰ The great hunt culminated in the near-annihilation of three marine mammals that held distinct historical meanings for the eastern Pacific. The sea otter (*Enhydra lutris*) commanded the world's highest fur prices and therefore served as the initial attraction for Russian, American, and British traders. Fur seals (including *Callorhinus ursinus*, *Arctocephalus townsendi*, and *Arctocephalus philippii*) existed in extraordinarily large numbers from the Aleutian Islands to the Juan Fernández Islands off the coast of Chile; the manual slaughter of these lesser-value marine mammals utilized the brute force of proto-industrial production rather than the skilled techniques and rituals of indigenous sea otter hunters. Finally, the taking of gray whales (*Eschrichtius robustus*) in their Baja California calving bays shows how European and American demand for whale oil led to a worldwide peak of whaling activity in the Pacific by the mid-nineteenth century. American whalers were not simply a variant on the maritime fur trade. Given the tremendous size of the US whaling fleet, they represented an advance maritime guard for US imperial goals in the Pacific. The fleet's brutal work also provided American textile factories with the crucial industrial lubricant of whale oil, which in turn drew upon expanded cotton production in the slave South. In this sense, whaling in the distant Pacific Ocean was inextricably connected to the major territorial and industrial ambitions of mid-century America.

The great hunt for marine mammals was both a function and byproduct of the expanding commerce that transformed the eastern Pacific, as examined in chapter 1. But here the commercial focus shifts to the involvement of specific groups—the hunters and the prey. Similar to the land-based fur trades of North America and Siberia, the killing of marine mammals appropriated and in some instances demanded indigenous skills. This was clearly evident during the early period of the hunt for the taking of sea otters, and it remained true to a lesser extent in fur seal hunting and whaling.¹¹ The targets of the hunt carried very different economic values, and, ironically, the smallest of them (an individual sea otter pelt) could bring more profit than the largest (the gray whale, rendered to

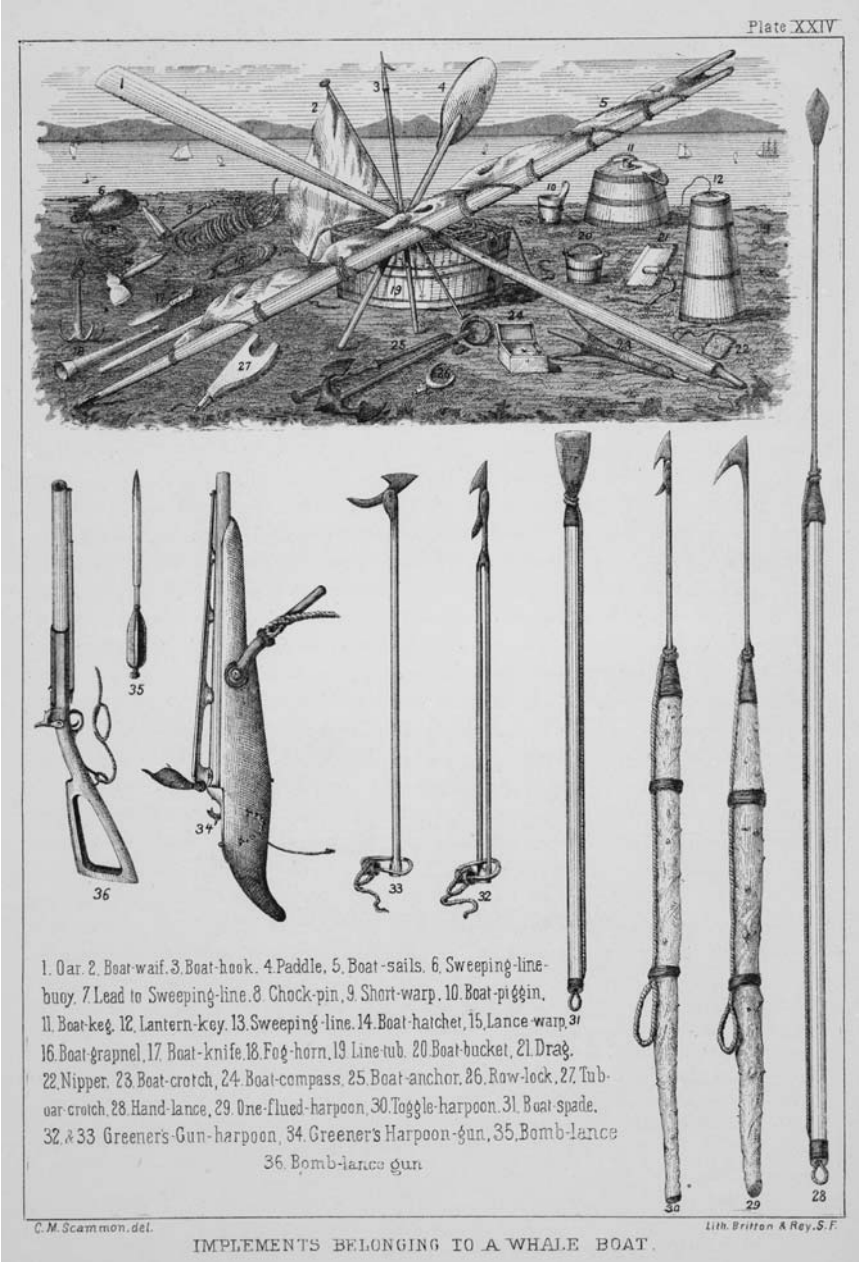


Figure 4.3 By the late 1840s most whale ships would carry an extensive arsenal of killing instruments, including the newly invented “Greener’s Harpoon-gun” and “Bomb-lance gun.” Charles Scammon illustrated the array of weapons in his 1874 publication, *The Marine Mammals of the Northwestern Coast of North America*. Courtesy of the Huntington Library.

oil). Regardless of the prey's size, the hunters had to track them to certain locales where they gathered in large numbers, reproduced, and birthed their young. These sites were typically very isolated, even by the standards of the mostly uncharted eastern Pacific coastline.

What transpired in these remote localities illuminates something concealed by larger scales of history: the great hunt contained a level of violence and carnage that was thoroughly veiled by the worldwide marketplace. Furs, skins, or oil represented valuable and bloodless commodities for individual and industrial consumers who were likely grateful for the “obscured connections” back to the natural species from whence they came.¹² Yet, the moments when those mammals became lifeless carcasses on distant beaches or bays involved tremendous—and largely thoughtless—brutality.

Sea Otters: A Short History of Extirpation

The *Tiger's* journey down the North American coastline in the fall of 1846 traversed some of the most productive sea otter hunting grounds: Vancouver Island, San Francisco and Monterey bays, the Channel Islands, and at the southern end of the sea otter range, Baja California. Mary Brewster mused expansively in her journal about this southbound journey once the *Tiger* arrived in Magdalena Bay. However, she never once mentioned the “soft gold” of sea otter pelts for a simple reason: hunters had reduced the species to near-extinction by the 1840s. A few remnant otter colonies survived farther to the north, but Baja's lonely coastline—described by a previous visitor as “the most obscure corner of the World”—contained none.¹³

Baja's coastline would be one place to uncover the work of the sea otter trade, but an equally obscure starting place would be the trading posts of Kiakhta and Mai-mai-ch'eng on the Russian-Chinese border, just south of Lake Baikal. The coastline from Baja to the Siberian port of Okhotsk aligned with the historic range of the sea otter, and it was from Okhotsk that Russian traders began transporting the pelts inland to Kiakhta following Vitus Bering's voyage to the Aleutian Islands in 1741. Bering never returned from this voyage, and yet those sailors who survived the scurvy and other maladies brought back some exceedingly beautiful otter pelts described by the voyage naturalist Georg Steller: “The gloss of their hair surpasses the blackest velvet.”¹⁴ Well before Canton's ascendance as the Pacific's primary fur market, Kiakhta and Mai-mai-ch'eng flourished in the otter trade, linking the brutal expansion of Russian *promyshlenniki* across the Aleutian Islands with the consumer demands of the Chinese luxury fur market.

The bulk of the Russian sea otter harvest passed through these two remote trade towns prior to the 1790s; estimates vary from one-quarter to one-half million pelts

sold, ranging in value from \$10 (Spanish dollars) to well over \$50 a piece.¹⁵ This was a veritable fortune in soft gold, each pelt stripped from the carcass and transported thousands of miles for sale at staggering prices. No other sea or land mammal pelt came close to the value of sea otters. Prime silver fox pelts were the second most valuable, at one-quarter to one-third the price of sea otter pelts.¹⁶ Russia's eastern expansion into the North Pacific spelled disaster for two populations: the sea otters of the North Pacific, and the indigenous Aleut and Kodiak hunters who were forced into "a state of abject slavery," according to one sympathetic chronicler.¹⁷

The hunt for sea otters in the Pacific and the fur market's global reach should not mask an essential truth about the otters themselves: they lived exceedingly local lives. *Enhydra lutris* never ranged far from its island or mainland tidewater home. Sea otters neither migrated nor found cause to travel any great distance from their "raft" (a term for the otter's colony, which describes the manner of linking together their floating bodies). Despite some explorers' optimistic reports that sea otters were as numerous as seals, the original population was quite small, numbering under four hundred thousand across the wide geographic arc from Baja California to the Sea of Okhotsk. Sex and reproduction patterns help explain this limited population size.¹⁸ Females produced at most one pup a year, and the annual reproduction rate for the entire population was below a meager 15 percent. Furthermore, males and females typically lived in sex-segregated rafts, and the females exerted constant control over reproductive behavior: eager males approached and attempted awkward foreplay (rubbing, nuzzling, and sniffing the female body) while the female pondered her level of interest. "If the female is unreceptive," wrote one close observer, she "pushes him away with her flippers and paws, or snaps at him. Before departing [the male] may snatch whatever food items she has on her chest."¹⁹ No small wonder the females chose to segregate themselves with their pups.

Though amphibious, sea otters spend most of their time in the water, which, especially in the frigid waters of the North Pacific, accounts for the unique splendor of their fur. This smallest of marine mammals compensates for its lack of body fat by wearing the densest coat in the animal kingdom: 650,000 hairs per square inch, glossy black and silky to the touch when dry. The American fur trader William Sturgis once extolled the sea otter's beauty in this way: it was "more pleasure to look at a splendid sea-otter skin, than to examine half the pictures that are stuck up [in museums] for exhibition." Except for a "beautiful woman and a lovely infant," Sturgis continued, sea otter pelts were "the most attractive natural objects" to be found.²⁰ Sturgis knew of what he spoke; he had transported well over ten thousand pelts across the Pacific to China during the twenty years following his first voyage in 1798.

Even Sturgis had arrived late to the sea otter hunt, at least so far as the majority of the species in Russian Alaska were concerned. The Russian hunt—conducted by Russian *promyshlenniki* and their conscripted indigenous hunters—cleaned out sea otters to such an extent that by 1792, according to naturalist Martin Sauer, “Sea otters are almost forgotten here . . . [due to the] havoc made among them by the hunters.”²¹ Jean François de Galaup de La Pérouse arrived in the North Pacific just as this first stage of the hunt waned and new participants plotted the next stage. La Pérouse heard of the *promyshlenniki*’s brutal relations with their conscripted native hunters, and through his meeting with Tlingit at Latuya Bay, he learned of the diminished number of sea otters in Russian-held territory. The Tlingit still had furs to exchange with La Pérouse, but this was only by virtue of their violent opposition to Russian incursion.²² In Alta California, La Pérouse caught wind of Spain’s own plan for a lucrative trade through a Crown-sponsored “Philippine Company” headed by Vicente Vasadre y Vega. “It is practically certain that the new Company will try to capture this trade, and this is the best thing that could happen to the Russians, because it is in the nature of monopolies to bring death or at least sluggishness to everything associated with them,” La Pérouse commented.²³

La Pérouse’s assessment of the situation proved partially correct. The Russians *did* “bring death” to the northern sea otter colonies and rapid depopulation to Aleut hunters (mostly from disease and violent encounters), while Vasadre delivered thousands of otter furs harvested from the Alta California coast to Canton between 1786 and 1790.²⁴ But the Spanish plan to capture the coastal trade failed for reasons La Pérouse could not have foreseen. Spaniards in Alta California lacked trained indigenous hunters who could pursue otters in the off-shore waters, while a temporarily glutted fur market diminished Vasadre’s profits due to simultaneous English, American, Russian, and French fur shipments from the Northwest Coast. Intense competition for sea otter pelts suddenly materialized on the Northwest Coast during the late 1780s and 1790s, especially due to the influx of American traders.²⁵ By the 1800 season “Boston men” dominated the exchange of furs with indigenous hunters. As the otter hunt moved down the coastline during the next few seasons, the circumstances for California’s sea otters turned bleak.

The most significant period of the sea otter hunt in terms of international connections and collaborations transpired between 1803 and 1812. Coordinated action brought together the contract labor system of the Russian-American Company with the maritime prowess of American traders to solve a specific problem: how to hunt sea otters in California given the absence of skilled indigenous hunters? Native Californians had proven themselves adept at killing only small numbers of sea otters during the 1780s and 1790s—primarily at the behest of Spanish authorities, and mostly by means of capture (and bludgeoning) on

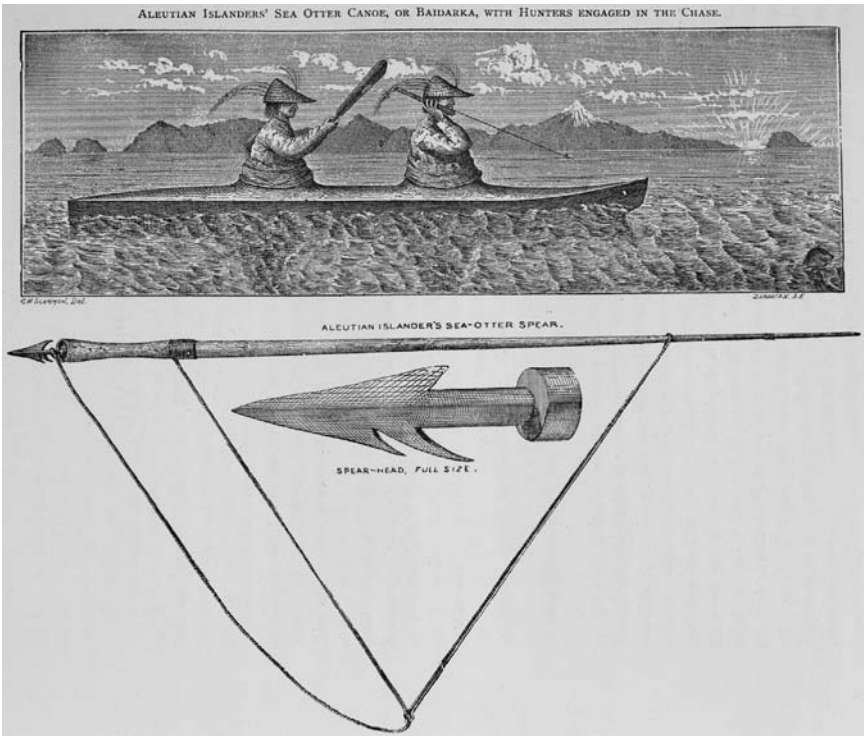


Figure 4.4 The Great Hunt for marine mammals in the eastern Pacific began with the wholesale slaughter of sea otters in the late eighteenth century. Russian and American traders conscripted the most skillful hunters, Aleutian and Kodiak islanders, to conduct the work along the North American coastline from Baja California to the Arctic Ocean. Courtesy of the Huntington Library.

the seashore. Yet hunting sea otters was in no way a traditional practice for them as it was for Northwest or Alaska natives. The answer to the California hunting problem was the importation of Aleut and Kodiak hunters along with their entire hunting complex (weaponry, *baidarkas*, Russian overseers, and in some instances female skimmers) to California's coastal shores, bays, and islands.

The American captain Joseph O'Cain sailed to Alaska in 1803 and proposed this plan to Aleksandr Andreevich Baranov, governor of the Russian-American Company (RAC). Baranov's reputation for brutality was only surpassed by his determination to continue company rule over the North Pacific fur trade. O'Cain found Baranov in the company town of Three Saints Bay on Kodiak Island, where indigenous hunters and Russian traders had met each fall since 1784 to exchange furs for trade goods. Their agreement established a formula adopted by other American traders during the next nine years. Baranov supplied equipped hunters and Russian overseers (known as *baidarshchiks*) while O'Cain provided the transport to Alta California because, as one Russian navy lieutenant freely

admitted in 1804, the existing RAC ships lacked “everything necessary for proper and safe sailing.”²⁶ The two parties would split the take of furs. In agreeing to O’Cain’s proposal, Baranov hoped to rejuvenate the company’s finances by continuing its access to the most valuable fur in the Pacific. However, he was also following recent “Secret Instructions” from RAC officials in Irkutsk “to extend our claims” down the Northwest Coast—a coast that, if followed far enough, led to California.²⁷ In this plan lay the dream of a Russian colony in Alta California.

Aleut hunters proved instrumental to the temporary American-Russian business alliance. Despite their position of “abject slavery” during the early decades of Russian expansion, Aleuts had nonetheless displayed persistent resistance to submission and also irreplaceable skills in the hunting of the *promyshlenniki*’s most desired commodity. Even with the Aleut’s ongoing population decline, they remained the most successful sea otter hunters, killing them to the point of near extinction.²⁸ By 1803, when O’Cain and Baranov agreed to terms for the California hunt, the Aleuts likely viewed their involvement as the best option among markedly diminished choices: colonialism had led to community crisis and even “forced resettlement” by the RAC, while the hunt offered a means to survive.²⁹

Two months after meeting with Baranov, O’Cain sailed south with twenty double-hatched *baidarkas*, forty hunters, their provisions (including dried fish and “train,” or whale oil), and at least two Russian *baidarshchiks*. One of those *baidarshchiks* was Timofei Tarakanov, the young indentured employee who would struggle for survival as a captive on the Northwest Coast five years later. Tarakanov had gained the respect of Aleut hunters by protecting their interests, weaponry, and especially their lightweight *baidarkas*. Handcrafted from driftwood, whalebone, and sealskin by an Aleut hunter over a period of many months, *baidarkas* were built with an almost mystical precision, such that “not even a mathematician could add very much or scarcely anything to the perfection of its nautical qualities,” wrote the Russian Orthodox priest Ivan Veniaminov.³⁰ Tarakanov had never traveled so far south, and he watched the unfolding of California’s coastline with amazement. The Spanish authorities warned the *O’Cain* out of San Diego harbor in December 1803, so the captain sailed almost two hundred miles farther south to a tiny Baja port with suitably lax governance, San Quintín.

Captain O’Cain fabricated a story of necessary ship repairs for the Spanish authorities in San Quintín—and likely offered generous bribes—while Tarakanov prepared and set loose the Aleuts in their two-man *baidarkas*. They disappeared north and south of the small bay in pursuit of sea otter rafts, working in teams described by one of the ship’s officers, Jonathan Winship:

The moment an otter was seen floating on the water the alert Indians fixed their eyes upon it, and trembled like the eager dog at the sight of

game! Swiftly but very silently the canoes approached from the windward. When within shooting distance, while the man at the stern guided the boat, the nearest Bowman raised his dart, and with sure aim threw his pronged bone spear with incredible accuracy. For twenty minutes or so the otter submerged, his course being marked by a bladder attached to a long cord. When the animal arose to the surface for air a screaming hunter was on hand to finish him.³¹

Apart from the racialized caricature of semi-wild natives hunting their prey, Winship's celebration of Aleut skill, patience, and determination echoes numerous other descriptions of their unique talent. No other hunters could take sea otters with such quiet and precise resolve. Within two months the hunt had produced over one thousand furs, certainly enough to satisfy O'Cain and Baranov on this first joint venture.

One Spanish authority reported the illegal hunting to his superior and noted his inability to do anything about it. "There is not an otter left from Mission Rosario to Santo Domingo," wrote José Joaquín Arrillaga on March 4, 1804. Furthermore, he confessed, "there is no other way to prevent them except to tell them not to hunt and to this they pay no attention."³² The well-armed Tarakanov ensured against any Spanish interference with their quick business. The Spanish authorities and missionaries likely carried on active trade with the American captain, despite Arrillaga's claims to the contrary. By May the ship was under sail for Kodiak Island, where Captain O'Cain delivered half the furs to Governor Baranov, while the Aleut hunters received wages in the form of food, trade goods, and tobacco.

More than a dozen American-Russian joint voyages headed south from Kodiak Island or Sitka in the next eight years on Boston ships, including the *Mercury*, *Isabella*, *Peacock*, *Derby*, *Eclipse*, and the *Albatross*. Aleut and Kodiak Island hunters came south in increasing numbers accompanied by *baidarshchiks* like Timofei Tarakanov, who also spent his time recruiting hunters for the ongoing ventures. The need for hunters quickly expanded: in 1806 four Boston vessels—the *O'Cain*, *Peacock*, *Derby*, and *Eclipse*—jointly carried well over two hundred hunters and their *baidarkas* to the Alta and Baja California coast. The ship captains also complemented their labor force with Aleut women and children, who would skin the otters, cook, and generally serve as a mobile support staff.

O'Cain and the other American captains targeted Alta California's otter herds, which they could accomplish so long as the ships avoided the formidable Spanish garrisons of San Diego, San Francisco, and Monterey. The *O'Cain* landed at Trinidad Bay (well north of Spanish settlements) and set up a temporary onshore camp, but because of pressure from Yurok villagers "it was necessary to land the field pieces [loaded with grape shot] to protect the camp." The Yurok traded their own small supply of pelts with the foreigners, while they simultaneously

sought to prevent the Aleut hunters from pursuing otters in their coastal waters. The *O’Cain* continued far down the coast past San Quintín to Cedros Island, Baja California. Once there, the ship began depositing groups of hunters at different islands and coastal inlets, essentially blanketing the Baja coast with outfits of hunters, *baidarkas*, and female skimmers.³³ The three other American vessels operated on the Alta California coast. The *Peacock* established a base at Bodega Bay and sent dozens of hunters immediately south into San Francisco Bay where “the valuable sea-otter was swimming in numbers about the bay, nearly unheeded,” according to Georg Heinrich von Langsdorff’s account.³⁴ The ship returned to Sitka after six months with over twelve hundred otter pelts, including more than five hundred yearlings and pups (whose slaughter held obvious repercussions for the population’s decline).³⁵ Captain William Heath Davis of the *Mercury* followed a different strategy altogether, buying furs from Alta California missionaries (who likely secreted away otter pelts in hopes of trading for valuable supplies) while dispatching small groups of Aleut hunters in the vicinity of the more remote missions. The *Mercury* left California in August 1806, with a cargo of almost three thousand otter pelts.³⁶ The *O’Cain* departed for Russian Alaska with over “200 souls” on board, pelts valued at \$136,310 in Canton, and two pregnant Aleut women who gave birth during the voyage north.³⁷

The profits derived in Canton from these American-Russian ventures remained high for the years between 1803 and 1812, averaging over \$25 per sea otter pelt, a veritable fortune for those traders fortunate enough to cash in. The cost to California’s sea otter population was higher still. Though not completely destroyed, the main herds of Baja and Alta California were reduced to mere remnants struggling for survival. And the hunt staggered on well after 1812. By the late 1820s the hunt resembled a desperate contest to bag the final fur. The American fur trapper George Nidever teamed up with Allen Light (an African American hunter nicknamed “Black Steward”) and “one Kanak” in 1835; together they scoured the once-plentiful otter grounds of the Santa Barbara channel. They used long rifles and bagged a couple dozen sea otters. Nidever noted with incredulity the “early times” when sea otters must have been “so abundant that the Indians killed them with spears.”³⁸ What a waste of this valuable commodity, he intimates with envy.

Miraculously, *Enhydra lutris* survived as a species. It survived the proto-historic hunting by indigenous groups who wore sea otter pelts to weather the North Pacific’s long winters, and the species survived the hunt conducted at the behest of profit-driven Russian, American, and British traders. A few sea otters even endured the mid-1830s assault by shoreline sharpshooters—highly trained riflemen who roved the coast and picked them off one by one. They survived, living in a handful of small and isolated colonies removed from human reach until the International Fur Seal Treaty in 1911 banned the hunting of sea otters, ending a decade when sea otter pelts could sell at auction for over \$1,000 apiece.³⁹

Fur Seals: “A Club Is Commonly Used”

The slaughter of sea otters represented but the tip of an iceberg. The hunt for all furs and pelts—both land and sea mammals—reached epic proportions in the eastern Pacific during the decades around 1800. This was especially true in Alaska, where the RAC’s survival depended on the export of furs. Virtually everyone employed by the RAC recognized this economic imperative, and Baranov’s successor Leontii Gagemeister articulated it to company overseers: “Advantage and profit of the company depends vitally on increasing the hunting of furbearing animals, and not on the increase in land.”⁴⁰ Animal furs, in this way, became the *raison d’être* in Russian America, a strategy that eventually led to the empire’s withdrawal from America due to the near-extinction of those mammals.

The Russians quantified their hunting success on a yearly basis and occasionally tabulated the cumulative kill. The RAC’s first published history, *A Chronological History of the Discovery of the Aleutian Islands, or, The Exploits of Russian Merchants* (1823), authored by the Russian naval lieutenant Vasilii Nikolaevich Berkh, offered a crude summary of Russian fur exports for the years 1743 to 1823:⁴¹

Animal	# Exported
Fur seals	2,324,364
Sea otters	200,839
Sea otter tails	143,689
Blue foxes	108,865
Red foxes	57,638
River beavers	58,729
Cross foxes	44,904
Black and black-brown foxes	30,158
River otters	22,807
Sables	18,121
Mink	5,349
White foxes	5,130
Bears	2,650
Lynx	1,819
Wolverine	1,234

Despite the seeming precision of Berkh’s numbers, one can only guess at the real number of animals actually killed by the company’s hunters. The number of sea otter pelts listed, for instance, appears to be short by almost half according to most scholars.⁴² Far more remarkable in Berkh’s table was the sheer variety of

species slaughtered during the fur trade: sea- and land-based mammals, seals and foxes and bears and wolverines—it was a truly wide-ranging assault on any animal unfortunate enough to carry a marketable fur.

Berkh's accounting for Russian Alaska illustrates a fact that applies elsewhere in the eastern Pacific: the great hunt cut broadly across the animal kingdom, and it cut deeply into certain species because of their value or the relative ease of hunting them. If the sea otter represented the high-value fur, difficult kill, and limited original population, then fur seals were the opposite in each way. Furthermore, the method of taking fur seals in the decades around 1800 reveals a brutality masked by both the commodity market and Berkh's statistics. The taking of fur seals closely resembled an industrial slaughterhouse—gruesome in practice, workers knee-deep in gore.

Few people described it better than the American captain Amasa Delano, who participated in the initial carnage on Más Afuera Island, one of the Juan Fernández Islands located four hundred miles off the coast of Chile:

When [we] came to this place, about the year 1797, and began to make a business of killing seals, there is no doubt but there were two or three millions of them on the island. . . . The method practiced to take them was, to get between them and the water, and make a lane of men, two abreast, forming three or four couples, and then drive the seals through this lane; each man furnished with a club, between five and six feet long; and as they passed, he knocked down such of them as he chose; which are commonly the half grown, or what are called young seals. This is easily done, as a very small blow on the nose effects it. When stunned, knives are taken to cut or rip them down on the breast, from the under jaw to the tail, giving a stab in the breast that will kill them. After this, all hands go to skinning. I have seen [one man who] would skin sixty in an hour. They take off all the fat, and some of the lean with the skin, as the more weight there is to the skin the easier it will [hang]. This is performed in the same manner in which carriers flesh their skins; after which it is stretched and pegged on the ground to dry. It is necessary to keep it two days in pegs, in fair weather, to make it keep its shape. After this they are taken out of pegs, and stacked in the manner of salted dried cod fish.⁴³

Delano certainly exaggerated the speed with which workers could strip the skins from fur seals—"sixty in an hour" is unimaginable even for a skilled butcher wielding a razor-sharp blade—but he nonetheless captured the ease of rounding up, killing, and skinning this unwary and awkward mammal. The work process called for maximum efficiency and endurance, given the seemingly endless supply of fur seals that populated the offshore islands of North and South

America. Somewhere around ten *million* fur seals were killed in the Pacific in the decades around 1800.⁴⁴

Unlike the sea otter's limited variety (one genus and species: *Enhydra lutris*), the marine mammals called "fur seals" came in great diversity across an extensive geographic area. The northern fur seals (*Callorhinus ursinus*) blanketed the islands of the North Pacific from the Alaskan Pribilof Islands to Baja California, while the southern cousins in the *Arctocephalus* genus came in seven different species and ranged from Antarctica to the Galápagos Islands. Five other genera exist elsewhere in the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. From the standpoint of hunters all these varieties shared two essential characteristics: a dense underfur that gave them value in the marketplace, and a primordial calling to gather on the same rocky islands year after year for mating and birthing. Add to these characteristics their sluggish mobility, and the fur seals of the eastern Pacific became easy prey.⁴⁵

In the North Pacific, Russian *promyshlenniki* began hunting fur seals on the Commander Islands (directly east of the Kamchatka Peninsula) in the 1740s and 1750s. By the 1780s the Russians discovered the fur seal rookeries on the Pribilof Islands containing animals too many to count, certainly in the millions, and therefore profitable by their sheer abundance. The *promyshlenniki* "harvested" over forty thousand seals on the Pribilofs during an initial season in 1786, using "clubs" wielded "at the discretion of the hunter," according to one Russian account.⁴⁶ The number of harvested furs grew every year thereafter, especially in the late 1790s when the Russians imported hundreds of Aleuts to carry out the gruesome work. In the span of a quarter century and despite their initial "unfathomable abundance," the Pribilof seals had "decrease[d] to the point that their future survival was in doubt," according to historian Ryan Jones.⁴⁷

Fur seal hunting in the North Pacific peaked just before 1800, nearly simultaneous to the attack on the southern herds off the coast of Chile. Amasa Delano's account from Más Afuera Island of clubbing, skinning, and drying the skins depicted something that had gone on there since the early 1700s, though these earliest European hunters had taken fur seals numbering in the hundreds, rather than hundreds of thousands. William Dampier, the English three-time world circumnavigator, had never seen anything like the volume of seals blanketing the island called Más a Tierra when he approached it in 1686: "Seals swarm as thick about this Island, as if they had no other place in the World to live in; for there is not a Bay nor Rock that one can get ashore on, but is full of them. . . . Large ships might here load themselves with seal-skins[.]"⁴⁸ Dampier's prediction of "large ships" loading up with fur seals proved correct by the late 1790s. Sealing on these four islands easily challenged the scale of hunting on the Pribilofs in the North Pacific.⁴⁹

British, French, and Spanish vessels all conducted sealing operations on the Juan Fernández Islands during the 1790s, but American ships out of New England quickly dominated the business. They made remarkably quick work of the seal population. Dozens of New England vessels landed hunting parties, who went about their sealing business for months at a time while the seals attempted their own business of mating and birthing. The Boston ship *Jefferson* took a relatively light load of thirteen thousand skins in 1793, the same year that the *Eliza* filled its cargo hold with thirty-eight thousand skins en route to Canton.⁵⁰ Captain Edmund Fanning of the *Betsey* described his crew's work on Más Afuera in 1800 as so productive that "even after the [ship's] hold was stowed so as not to have room for any more, then the cabin, and finally the fore-castle, were filled, leaving just space enough for the accommodation of the ship's company."⁵¹ More than a dozen other ships shared in the carnage on Más Afuera during that season, each taking away tens of thousands of skins. The Juan Fernández Islands were covered with rotting carcasses, an abominable stench, and insects so thick "as Sure as you open your mouth you will Catch it full of flies[.]" wrote the captain of the *Minerva*.⁵²

American hunting parties pursued the hunt on the Juan Fernández Islands for about ten years, transporting hundreds of thousands of seal skins each year. Some voyages secured complete cargoes and earned high returns in Canton, but others did not. It took the *Minerva's* crew almost three years of shuttling between islands, awaiting the seasonal appearance of the surviving fur seals, to claim a cargo of thirty thousand skins. The utterly predictable had happened: "Seals was scarce," wrote the *Minerva's* captain in 1802.⁵³ So scarce, in fact, that within a few years sealing voyages would bypass the Juan Fernández Islands altogether. "We pass'd Juan Fernandez between the hours of ten and eleven oclock in the evening [close to] the Lee Shore," wrote Lewis Coolidge on February 15, 1807. Ten years earlier Coolidge would have heard the nearly deafening roar from a multitude of fur seals, but now he only heard "the noise of the Sea, breaking on the beach[.]"⁵⁴ The silence reflected a staggering change for the Juan Fernández Islands: the killing of some three million seals in little more than a decade.

Lewis Coolidge participated in the next stage of the hunt as it moved north up the American coastline. A twenty-three-year-old senior crewman aboard the Boston sealer *Amethyst*, Coolidge was headed to the one place in the eastern Pacific that still held substantial rookeries: the coastal islands of Baja and Alta California. Fifty-two men left Boston aboard the *Amethyst* in September 1806. Twenty of these men, according to Coolidge, "were afflicted With the Venereal in Various Stages, Some of them very bad." Other maladies soon appeared. A "Northwest Indian" cabin boy, enlisted during the previous voyage to the Northwest Coast, showed signs of ill health ("Strange uncommon fits") a month out of Boston.⁵⁵ He died within a year, as did numerous other crewmembers who succumbed to

scurvy and other ailments. Coolidge remained healthy, but he had to watch helplessly while many coworkers died around him on the islands off Baja California. Those healthy enough worked feverishly to kill more than thirty-five thousand Guadalupe fur seals (*Arctocephalus townsendi*).⁵⁶

Coolidge's journal, which he maintained intermittently during the four-year undertaking, reveals the extraordinarily strange nature of sealing as a venture. First was the isolation: before even reaching the Pacific, the *Amethyst* dropped off a small party of men "to prosecute [*sic*] the business of the Voyage" on Gough Island, an uninhabited spot of land in the southern Atlantic Ocean.⁵⁷ Leaving enough supplies for the sealing party to survive in addition to his pledge to return sometime in the near future (it would be eighteen months), Captain Seth Smith sailed the *Amethyst* into the Pacific bound for Baja California. In the spring of 1807—six months into the voyage—the *Amethyst* reached a group of Baja islands, including San Benito, Guadalupe, Cedros, and Natividad. The captain left a small sealing party on each island. Coolidge watched from the shore of San Benito Island as the *Amethyst* set sail, knowing it would be gone for a year. He worried about the island's lack of fresh water and noted the readily apparent symptoms of scurvy among some men. To ward off loneliness, he began transcribing words in his journal from the Scottish poet James Beattie: "Rocks pill'd on Rocks, as if by magic spell[.]"⁵⁸

At least a dozen other skimmers from the *Amethyst* hunkered down with Coolidge on San Benito and the nearby Isla Cedros. Four or five Hawaiians joined them, men whom Captain Smith had contracted from a passing ship. Illness soon took its toll, with seven of the men (both Americans and Hawaiians) dying from scurvy and various other maladies. Somehow—and his journal offers no suitable explanation—Coolidge and a few others maintained decent health despite the lack of clean water and dietary needs.⁵⁹ Equally odd is Coolidge's lack of comment on the sealing work they finally conducted once the seals arrived on the island. For a period of five weeks the men (only those "being pretty well recover'd from the scurvy") went about the business of clubbing and skinning. Presumably the gory nature of this business had little emotional effect on Coolidge, or, if it did, he distracted himself by jotting down snippets of poetry in his journal (he quoted Addison: "On this first friendly Bank, we threw ourselves down").⁶⁰ They took "about 8500 skins" on San Benito and an additional three thousand on Cedros Island—busy work for a handful of malnourished men who had witnessed many human deaths during the previous months.

Half-starved, sun-baked, and wearing moccasins cut from sealskin, Coolidge's crew must have presented a wretched sight when the *Amethyst* finally returned on May 16, 1808. It had been gone for almost a year. Once again, Coolidge's journal is silent about what one might expect to hear: a report to Captain Smith

about the loss of human life on San Benito or the captain's assessment of this tragic situation, for which the captain bore some responsibility given the lack of antiscorbutic provisions. Instead, Coolidge recounts the big take of skins by all the *Amethyst's* sealing parties. The sealing venture had now turned profitable based on these men's work, and the products of their labor would end up in the bustling market of Canton.⁶¹

By the time the *Amethyst* arrived at Canton in 1809, American voyages to this port had reached a high for the twenty-year period prior to the War of 1812, which would severely curtail American shipping. A total of 154 American ships traded in Canton between 1804 and 1809; approximately one-third of these vessels crossed the Pacific Ocean, and sealskins were easily the most common trade item carried by these Pacific trade ships.⁶² But the seal harvest grew thinner each year due to the ongoing hunt in the North Pacific, the Juan Fernández Islands, Baja and Alta California. And yet, "hunt" is far too dignified a term to describe what transpired along this coastline. More accurately, millions of seals were bludgeoned to death and stripped of their furs by their American, Russian, and indigenous pursuers. Brute force rather than hunting prowess ruled the day.

In sum, the killing of fur seals left a perceptible void in the eastern Pacific's coastline and offshore islands, to say nothing of the ecological consequence of near extinction (the Guadalupe fur seal still remains a listed endangered species after a nadir population possibly in the dozens).⁶³ The change was remarkable: in the late 1700s fur seals had blanketed the coastal islands in deafening rookeries, but those rookeries were eerily silent three decades later. The product of this great hunt, namely millions and millions of sealskins stacked in the holds of ships and transported to distant commodity markets, masked the degree of violence required to secure it. Lewis Coolidge seemed to cope well with the odd juxtaposition of slaughtering thousands of fur seals by hand and the "lovely and Sublime" desert island surroundings of San Benito. "My hut was so situated as to command an extensive view," he wrote of the beautiful outlook from his small shelter. Then, without any mention of the surrounding carnage, he scrawled a line from the British Gothic novelist Ann Ward Radcliffe: "Beauty sleeping in the lap of horror."⁶⁴

Return to Magdalena Bay: The *Tiger* versus the Gray Whales

Mary Brewster observed a similar horror from the deck of the whaleship *Tiger* four decades later and farther south down the Baja coastline. During January and February of 1847 she witnessed whaling as it had rarely been practiced anywhere in the world. In the confines of Magdalena Bay, the crews of seven vessels pursued

over a thousand female grays that were busily birthing and nursing—and simultaneously forced to protect their calves and themselves from the harpooners’ strikes. It could hardly be considered a fair fight given the whales’ “motherly affection” to safeguard their young, nor did this practice of slaughtering nursing cows square very well with the masculine image of man versus whale on the open sea.⁶⁵ *Moby-Dick* this was not. Instead, Mary Brewster and the crew of the *Tiger* participated in the zenith of the world’s whaling industry, which coincided with the crucial decades of US territorial and industrial expansion. Those whaleships pursued Leviathan from the open ocean to the coastal bays where cows birthed the future of the species.

The factory-like ships of the American whaling fleet provided the nation’s nascent industrial factories with two vital products: fuel for illumination and lubricants for fast-moving machinery. Household and urban uses for whale and sperm oil certainly gained the most public attention. As early as 1785 John Adams boasted to John Jay in London that sperm oil “gives the clearest and most beautiful flame of any substance that is known in nature, and we are all surprised that you [in London] prefer darkness, and consequent robberies, burglaries, and murders in your streets.”⁶⁶ England, of course, did not prefer darkness and murders in its cities and towns; instead, the country carefully prioritized the sperm and whale oil produced by its own whaling industry for use in the textile factories where it was most needed. When its whaling industry declined in the early 1800s, US exports filled the ever-increasing demand.⁶⁷

American use of sperm and whale oil was also concentrated in New England’s textile mills by the 1830s, soon followed by more widespread applications in urban workshops-turned-factories and railroad engines. Sperm oil, the cleanest and most expensive oil rendered from sperm whales, lubricated delicate and costly machinery, while whale oil greased the moving parts of heavy machinery. The supply of sperm oil began a steady decline in the mid-1840s due to the success of the whalers’ kill in the Pacific. Prices rose quickly and many factories had to make due with the lesser-quality but widely abundant whale oil.⁶⁸ By the time the seamen on the *Tiger* were slaughtering gray whales in Magdalena Bay, even the inferior gray oil was in great demand.

Whaling peaked as a worldwide phenomenon between 1835 and 1855, and by this time US whalers had far surpassed their European counterparts in tonnage and yearly kill, especially in the Pacific. By 1850, some seven hundred US ships in the Pacific comprised over three-quarters of the world’s whaling fleet.⁶⁹ The Pacific Ocean had fundamentally transformed the whaling industry. According to the most comprehensive study, the Pacific contained over 1.8 million whales prior to extensive hunting. The Atlantic and Indian Ocean populations paled by comparison, with 346,000 and 544,000 whales, respectively.⁷⁰ The scale, scope, and character of the industry changed in order to meet the challenge of

Pacific whaling, including the duration of voyages (generally ranging from thirty to fifty months), the cost of outfitting a ship (approximately \$20,000, excluding labor and the value of the ship), the diversity of the workforce (Hawaiians and Maoris became the most numerous recruits), and technological advances (such as swivel-mounted harpoon guns). Alongside these changes emerged a print media devoted to whaling, such as the weekly *Whalemens' Shipping List* (New Bedford) and the *Friend* (Honolulu), both of which Captain Brewster received from passing vessels during the *Tiger's* voyage.

The first week of whaling in Magdalena Bay proved dramatic for everyone involved. The *Tiger* sent out four boats, Mary Brewster noted, taking “all on board save [her] brother James who is both cooper and carpenter, the cook and Steward and cabin boy.” Captain Brewster also stayed on board the *Tiger* and conveyed to Mary the strategy he had most likely learned from Captain Smith of the *Hibernia*: to use the newborn calf as bait to capture the mother. Braced with this knowledge, Mary began listing the killing of whales by the *Tiger's* different boats (“Larboard Boat, 35-barrel whale,” “Waist Boat, 30-barrel whale,” and so on), but she stopped these notations once the novelty of counting whale carcasses wore off.⁷¹ A different list soon appeared in her journal: that of wrecked whaleboats and human casualties. “Bow boat badly stoven,” Brewster wrote on January 8, 1847, though the boat’s crew avoided injury.⁷² From this day forward the ship’s carpenter—Mary’s brother, James—was kept constantly busy with the repair of shattered boats.

The Devilfish attacked the whaleboats and crews every day. The first serious injury involved the third mate of the *Hibernia*, “who got his leg broken” when a fifty-foot gray splintered the boat with her tail. Days later a seventeen-year-old green-hand sailor from the *Trescott* named Ledger Wilkinson was killed by a whale that had multiple irons stuck fast. Mary Brewster memorialized the “melancholy” episode in her journal: “A young man belonging to the *Trescott* was killed this morning by a whale which stove the boat and hit him, the boat upset and he sunk before they could reach him.”⁷³ A quick search for Ledger Wilkinson’s body proved futile. Two weeks later his remains washed ashore and Mary remarked on his final resting place: “He was buried . . . a little ways back [from shore] where 5 which were killed last season were laid desolate and alone.”⁷⁴ The makeshift Magdalena Bay graveyard gained more residents in early February after a gray attacked one of the *Catherine's* boats. Two young men did not survive this stoving and one of their bodies never resurfaced. William Henry Hassell of the *America* never made it to the graveyard either: “Drowned,” reported the *Friend* of Honolulu, two months later.⁷⁵ “Thus ends the life of many a young man with the Ocean for his grave,” wrote Mary Brewster in early February.⁷⁶

Despite the daily wreckage of whaleboats and battering of men, the 1846–1847 season at Magdalena Bay chronicled by Brewster contained fewer deaths

than the previous season. That inaugural year of whaling in the bay was little short of a disaster if measured by the loss of human life—and certainly a disaster for the California gray whale as a species if one considers the explicit strategy of killing cows and leaving the calves to starve, since their bodies contained little blubber. Only two ships participated in this first season at Magdalena Bay, the *Hibernia* (New London) and the *United States* (Stonington). Of these two ships, the *Hibernia*'s success contrasts sharply with the ill fate of the *United States*, a ship that may have lost as many as five men in Magdalena Bay and returned home only partially filled with whale oil. Furthermore, a sperm whale took revenge on the *United States* two years later near Tonga, stoving the ship (now converted to a passenger vessel) with such force that it sank in minutes. The crew and nine passengers made it safely into the boats; four children went down with the ship.⁷⁷

The *Hibernia* and *United States* had entered Magdalena Bay in late 1845 probably on a lark. Neither ship had acquired much oil after more than a year of chasing whales across the Pacific Ocean, and both captains could surely sense the anxious grumblings of their crews. Information had only recently begun to circulate about the gray whale population and its annual migration: "10,000 California whale in sight," according to one exaggerated account from the whales' summer feeding grounds in the Bering Sea, while the winter "nurseries" for cows and calves (including Magdalena and two other Baja bays) were only made known a few years earlier by French and British survey parties.⁷⁸ From the Bering Sea to Baja was a long migration—perhaps *the* longest for any mammal in the world—and the gray whales, upon reaching their Baja calving grounds, had absolutely crucial business to conduct.⁷⁹ The grays' life cycle as well as the species' survival depended on it. Captain James Smith of the *Hibernia* and Captain Joshua Stevens of the *United States* knew little in advance about the gray whale's behavior in the Baja lagoons, but nicknames such as Devilfish and "Hardhead" already coined for grays by whalers in the North Pacific certainly gave the two captains some cause for alarm.⁸⁰

The ample depth of Magdalena Bay allowed the whales to "sound" far below the surface and then "peak" like an "animated torpedo," according to one observer. "Every seat in the boat [was] an anxious seat," he continued, "very much like being over a powder-magazine about to explode."⁸¹ The boat commanded by the *United States*'s second officer, "Mr. Nichols," exploded in just this fashion when upended by an enraged whale. Nichols, who likely stood at the bow grasping a ready harpoon, took the full force of the blow. A nearby whaleboat quickly recovered all hands from the water, including the broken body of Nichols, who died three days later. The ship's first officer also received the wrath of an angry whale that day when his boat was stoven and all men aboard flew into the water. The man's body must have been horribly mangled; Captain Stevens could only report that the first officer "would probably recover" when the ship arrived in Maui two months later.⁸² Such stoving accidents contributed to a pronounced

gallows humor among whaling crews, with one young man writing: “This being knocked 15 feet into the air and coming down alongside of his jaw by a whale’s rooting is not what it is cracked up to be.”⁸³

An awareness of the gray whale’s destructive potential quickly dawned on the two ships’ captains and crews. As the harpooner L. H. Vermilyea confided years later, “they are probably the worst whale to fight in the world.”⁸⁴ Vermilyea’s account shows one new strategy adopted by the *Hibernia* and *United States*: the whaleboats would chase the cows with their calves into the shallow waters of the shoreline where the whales had less maneuverability and the calves could easily get stranded. This tactic showed signs of success, especially for the *Hibernia*, which captured whale after whale close to the shore. The whaleboats tried to stay as far away as possible from the “she-whales,” occasionally using an already hooked calf as bait to lure the mother into the shallows. Charles M. Scammon, the most successful whaling captain in the Baja bays during the 1850s, described the procedure of “run[ning] a line to the shore and hauling the calf into as shallow water as would float the [calf].” The distraught mother would attempt to stay near “her troubled young one,” offering the harpooner “a good chance for a shot with his bomb-gun from the beach.”⁸⁵

The “bomb-gun” mentioned by Scammon may account for the different outcomes of these two ships in Magdalena Bay. This newly invented weapon (also known as a “bomb lance” or “harpoon gun”) allowed the harpooner to strike the whale’s “vital parts” at a relatively safe distance, while the explosive charge at the tip of the iron could accomplish some of the bloody finishing work otherwise done by the harpooner wielding a long “hand lance.” The bomb-gun was first used in Magdalena Bay in 1846, according to Scammon, and it was surely the *Hibernia*’s harpooners who employed this new technology.⁸⁶ The *Hibernia* captured almost two dozen whales in less than two months of constant work, enough to fill over one thousand barrels with “fine clear oil.” The *United States*, by contrast, took only ten gray whales in the same period and arrived in Maui with a deeply shaken crew who mourned the loss of four or five men.⁸⁷

The promising yet cautionary reports of gray whaling in Magdalena Bay brought to Hawai‘i by the *Hibernia* and *United States* caused at least a handful of ship captains to take interest, including Captain William Brewster of the *Tiger*. He decided he would try his luck in Magdalena Bay the following season. Mary and everyone else aboard the ship would not have had a vote in the matter. Mary relished the months spent in the bay; she read from Captain Smith’s collection of books, ate fresh oysters and lobsters on many warm nights, and prayed for the safety of the *Tiger*’s crew. But she also witnessed the darker sides of a whaling voyage: the broken bones, the drownings, and what she considered the shameful immorality of sailors: “I see I am not the only female in the bay,” she angrily noted after hearing of three young women “kept on board”

another vessel for sexual purposes. She offered no details about their condition or origins—prostitutes or captives, local to Baja or imported on a ship—but she did spot one of the women “in a boat passing our ship bound to a neighboring one with the skipper by her side.” From this incident, Mary could only conclude: “Oh shame, shame is not felt here, if actions which are so public is what we must judge from, and they speak louder than words.”⁸⁸

Clearly, Mary Brewster drew moral boundaries for men and their social relations, and she appeared deeply affected by transgressions of those boundaries. And yet she remained strangely unaffected by whaling as a violent encounter between humans and marine mammals: the lancing, the dismemberment, the boiling pots, and the way her shipmates specifically targeted and slaughtered female gray whales with their young. She remarked:

A plenty of boats stove every day and they all say these are the worst whale to strike they ever saw. The only way they can get fast [or harpoon a female whale] is to chase the calf till it gets tired out then they fasten to it and the whale will remain by its side and is then fastened too. Brother James has been in the boats a few times. [H]e said he saw a calf fastened to and the whale came up to it and *tried to get the iron out with her fin* and when she could not she took it on her back and endeavored to get it away. [F]requently the iron will kill them. [W]hen this is the case the whale . . . finding her young dead will turn and fight the boats.⁸⁹

The idea of a whale trying desperately to free her calf from a harpoon appeared to not bother Brewster in the least. Nor did the “cutting in” and “trying out” process trouble her by this late stage of the voyage. In fact, dismembering each whale and boiling down the blubber translated to more filled barrels, bringing the *Tiger* closer to its return voyage. The sight of the blubber-filled try pots blazing at night struck Brewster as almost majestic. “The moon is nearly full,” she wrote one night from her cabin. “5 ships boiling . . . and it seems to me they were trying to see who would make the greatest light. At times the blaze is so high the ships look as though they were all blazing.”⁹⁰

Here, Brewster touched on the central event described by all sailors who kept a diary or subsequently published a personal account of their experiences: the Herculean task of capturing, killing, and “cutting-in” a mammal larger and more powerful than a steam locomotive. Only twelve years old and a passenger on board the whaleship *William Lee* in 1839, Sereno Edwards Bishop described the roping in and dismembering of a sixty-foot whale.⁹¹ “She was an enormous creature,” he wrote, “[but] they made her fast to ship by passing a slip knot on her tail and leading the rope over the bow.” Bishop closely followed the tricky procedure: the sailors fastened large tackle blocks

to the mainmast and ran two-and-a-half-inch-wide ropes around the whale; one man “then went down on the whale with a rope round his waist and set a large hook” deep inside the carcass, and he next made large cuts with a spade in order to unwind the blubber.⁹² This “operation,” wrote another narrator, “somewhat resembled the unwinding of a lot of tape from a long bobbin.”⁹³ The men “hoisted up” massive strips of blubber with rope pulleys and this process “gradually rolled the whale over” against the ship’s starboard side. “It took two hours to roll the whale over once,” Bishop observed, at which point “they cut off the head” and fastened it to the ship for rendering the next day.⁹⁴ Bishop ended his description at this point; perhaps he found the “cutting in” and rendering process too dreary. But other people found it fascinating.

The first time Mary Brewster witnessed this procedure she “seated [her]self in a boat [on the deck] and spent the whole afternoon in looking on. . . . All hands looked happy and greasy.” She described the various positions of men on the deck, some of whom sliced the blubber into manageable strips before placing it in the boiling trypots. One man, she continued, “keeps constantly on the [try] works to mind the fire and to keep the oil from burning by constantly stirring and to dip it into the coolers when the pots get full. [The] Cooper was busy in fixing casks” for the oil once it was set in copper coolers.⁹⁵ The entire production was conducted with factory-like orchestration, according to crewman Thomas Atkinson. Men cut the massive “blanket pieces” into arm-length “horse pieces,” and these were spliced into narrow strips by the “mincers” for placement in the sixty-four-gallon iron boilers (or trypots).⁹⁶ Life-threatening dangers accompanied every stage of this process. Even the blubber itself could kill, as evidenced by the case of Captain Edward Copping of the whaleship *Aladdin*, who met his end when an enormous dangling slab of blubber dropped from an overhead “fluke chain” and crushed him to death.⁹⁷ An odd way to die, for sure, but other accidents involving blubber were quite common, including limbs severed by razor-sharp cutting spades, sharks attacking the men who cut into the shipside whale carcass, and countless harpoon injuries. And yet these men were undoubtedly “happy,” according to Mary Brewster, because each pot of rendered blubber translated into more pay (or “lays”).⁹⁸

In late February 1847 the *Tiger’s* crew readied the ship for departure. The oil was “coopered” in barrels, the lances and harpoons safely stowed, and the men’s gore-encrusted clothes soaked in pots filled with their own collected urine (the high ammonia content cut the grease). Mary watched these preparations and quickly scribbled letters to her friends for dispatch on those ships “homeward bound” to Connecticut. “We poor souls to stop out a year longer,” she wrote about the *Tiger’s* continuing voyage.⁹⁹ The *Tiger* had filled more than five hundred barrels with whale oil during January and February, while the six other ships from New England fared equally well. This small fleet killed upward of 150

full-grown female gray whales in two months; a similar number of gray whale calves were either harpooned or died from starvation. The calves represented collateral damage—no blubber to “flense” (or strip) from the carcass. A few men had been lost, and yet the gray whale had lost the security of one primary calving lagoon. The species as a whole now entered a downward spiral threatening extinction.

Magdalena Bay’s calving population would have easily recovered from these two seasons of hunting if no ships had returned in 1847–1848. But this was not the nature of the great hunt for marine mammals in the eastern Pacific. Instead, somewhere between two and three dozen vessels descended on the bay during this third season for what Charles Scammon described as an “aquatic battle-scene” against the whales.¹⁰⁰ Somewhere in the neighborhood of five hundred gray whales and their newborn calves never left Magdalena Bay at season’s end for their annual migration up the coastline, and only a small population returned the following year.¹⁰¹

The larger outside world intervened in this remote bay just as the ship captains readied their vessels for departure after this third season, in late March 1848. From California—now firmly in the hands of the US military—came news of a rich gold strike. Sailors quickly pondered their options and the most adventurous or disgruntled among them decided to jump ship. In late March seven sailors from the *Bowditch* slipped away at night in a whaleboat.¹⁰² Other deserters followed this poorly conceived strategy for getting to California, likely with tragic results. The more patient crew of the *Bramin* waited until their vessel reached Honolulu; when their captain went ashore the crew immediately commandeered the entire ship for a quick sail to San Francisco Bay.¹⁰³ Working on a whale ship never led to riches, but fleeing to a gold rush just might.

Conquest and American Industry

These events in Magdalena Bay spotlight one locality that, by most common metrics, existed far off the beaten track of important historical places and trends. And yet, this isolated lagoon on the Baja coast—where men slaughtered whales and whales attacked boats in a macabre performance—offers an important vantage point on the convergence of three of the most significant historical developments in North America with immediate repercussions for the eastern Pacific: US conquest through territorial expansion, emergent industrialization with its natural resource needs, and the heyday of New England’s whaling industry.

Regarding expansionism, the *Tiger*’s 1845–1848 voyage perfectly overlapped with the central event of the nation’s imperial drive: the US-Mexico War. The *Tiger* sailed in the fall of 1845 just as news of Texas’s annexation by the United

States reverberated across New England's maritime industry. When the US officially declared war on Mexico in May 1846, the *Tiger* had days earlier departed from Hawai'i (a future American possession) for the Northwest Coast. Weeks later, Mary Brewster watched in horror while a whale killed young Thomas Perkins, one day after a motley crew of American settlers misguidedly announced an independent "Bear Flag" republic in California. As the whale men sharpened their lances at Magdalena Bay in December 1846, Mary recorded the exchange of optimistic "War news" between the seven whale ships, which came to fruition when US troops occupied Los Angeles in January and General Winfield Scott prepared his landing army for a siege of Veracruz.¹⁰⁴ Mary Brewster had tea with the proud officers of the US warship *Cyane* in O'ahu just days before the Battle of Mexico City, and the *Tiger* arrived in Connecticut two days before the US Senate ratified the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, ending the US-Mexico War.¹⁰⁵ Thus, the United States seized its continental empire during the thirty-month period that it took the *Tiger* to harvest three thousand barrels of whale oil.

Imperial expansion and whaling went hand in hand, if viewed from a Pacific standpoint. Consider two different perspectives on the Mexican territory eventually claimed by the United States through this war of conquest. Americans—and more specifically, expansionists—saw these far western lands as part of a continental destiny, a vast swath of underutilized real estate that bordered the Pacific and could open the "road to Asia."¹⁰⁶ Expansion could fulfill this destiny for western land and, in a still inchoate sense, incorporate the sea beyond it. By contrast, American maritime interests in the Pacific—of which New England whalers constituted the largest sector by the 1830s—viewed expansionism through a different logic. For them, the Pacific's natural resources and trade opportunities were already a given rather than a possibility; whalers knew this from their decades of activity in the ocean. Acting through their own private initiative, they had beaten the nation to what some people perceived as the end objective. The nation's empire moving west would meet New England's hardy whalers in the eastern Pacific.

Even some of the nation's foremost opponents of territorial expansion lauded the Pacific whaling fleet as an advance guard of economic and political imperialism. The Massachusetts Whig senator Daniel Webster strongly opposed the US-Mexico War and, from the Senate floor, he savagely dismantled President James K. Polk's justifications for the conflict and its likely territorial gains.¹⁰⁷ And yet he consistently lobbied for New England's maritime role in the Pacific, strongly supported the US Exploring Expedition (1838–1842) on behalf of the whaling industry, and authored the Tyler Doctrine (1842), which declared an American sphere of influence over large portions of the Pacific, especially the Hawaiian Islands. In 1842 Webster even asked for Congress to purchase San Francisco Bay and the Strait of Juan de Fuca from Mexico and England, respectively. The day after Congress issued its war declaration against Mexico, Webster implored the

president he loathed to view “our large whaling fleet” as a “vital” wartime asset. He suggested in a letter to Polk that the US naval commander should “make such preparation for [the whaling fleet’s] defence . . . and that the masters should be advised to continue their business through the present season,” at which time the fleet should “rendezvous” in Hawai‘i. Expansionism aside, Webster argued that the business of this “736-ship” fleet valued at “thirty millions of Dollars” was vital to the nation’s industrializing economy.¹⁰⁸

Meanwhile, other opponents of expansion questioned any role whatsoever for the nation in the Pacific Ocean. The South Carolina senator George McDuffie, a noted duelist and pro-slavery firebrand, railed against territorial expansion and the need for Pacific coast ports. “The wealth of the Indies would be insufficient” rationale for territorial expansion, he insisted from the Senate floor. “I would not give a pinch of snuff for the whole territory.”¹⁰⁹ But McDuffie and his snuff-packed cheek were on the wrong side of history. Whalers and other American maritime traders had already revealed the Pacific’s “wealth” to the nation—as well as the necessity of supplying whale oil to the northern textile industry, upon which Senator McDuffie’s southern slave system completely depended. Indeed, the spindle rooms in Massachusetts’s textile factories linked one resource from the slave south with another resource harvested by whale ships in the Pacific. The nation’s economy thrived on the dynamic interaction of these three seemingly disparate production systems.¹¹⁰

Demand for whale oil only increased with its multifold uses. But it also filled a temporary industrial niche: between earlier types of greasy lubricants and the petroleum supplies that came on line in the 1860s, whale oil served the important needs of a rapidly advancing consumer economy. Factories and towns, streetlights and tabletop candles, lighthouses and steam locomotives—they all utilized the oil rendered from whale blubber harvested half a world away. Yet all these uses came at a deadly price, Captain Ahab cautioned his listeners: “For God’s sake, be economical with your lamps and candles! Not a gallon you burn, but at least one drop of man’s blood was spilled for it.”¹¹¹ The US industry produced over 8 million gallons of whale oil and more than 3.6 million gallons of sperm oil in 1848, the year the *Tiger* returned to Connecticut.¹¹² The industry did not keep records on the annual amount of “spilled” human blood.

Conclusion: The Final Gray Whales of Baja California

Upon the *Tiger*’s return to Connecticut, Mary Brewster spent exactly three months and nineteen days “very happily” with friends. Then she and her captain-husband boarded the *Tiger* once again for a three-year whaling voyage in

the Pacific.¹¹³ The *Tiger* did not return to Magdalena Bay or the other Baja calving bays on its second voyage. In fact, only a handful of ship captains hunted whales along this coastline during the next five or six years. The reasons are fairly apparent. The *Tiger*, like most of the seven hundred ships in the American whaling fleet, headed for the North Pacific during the summer months and slaughtered bowhead, sperm, and right whales in tremendous numbers, sending whale oil production to a historic peak in 1849 (sperm oil had peaked a few years earlier). In these halcyon years of whaling, oil processors desired the cleanest oil they could secure, not the cloudy grayish stuff rendered from gray whales. But within five years of this historic peak, oil production entered a slippery decline (almost 25 percent in ten years), forcing oil processors to discriminate less about quality.¹¹⁴ On the eve of the petroleum revolution sparked by an oil well in Titusville, Pennsylvania, in 1859, the whaling industry targeted any killable whale in the Pacific Ocean, including the grays of Baja California. Captain Charles Scammon led the charge.

For a man who devoted his later life to the study and preservation of marine mammals, Scammon's efficient work as captain of numerous whaleships (including the *Leonore*, *Boston*, and *Ocean Bird*) did everything possible to create the need for his latter-day preservationism. During the late 1850s, he hunted gray whales in their winter calving bays of Magdalena, Ojo de Liebre ("Scammon's Lagoon"), and San Ignacio (Ballenas Lagoon). A purely quantitative approach to the gray whale's annihilation suggests that nearly 90 percent of the remaining females were killed in less than a decade of Scammon's arrival on the *Leonore* in 1855.¹¹⁵ The newborn calves of the female grays would perish from starvation, except for a small minority who received protection and nourishment from another cow. The biological endgame was apparent by the mid-1860s: approximately one thousand adult females survived, far fewer calves stayed alive, and the remaining adult males were picked off one by one during their annual migration along the North American coast. In the final years of the hunt, Scammon tabulated the number of whales killed, quantified the barrels of oil, and then pondered "whether this mammal will not be numbered among the extinct species of the Pacific."¹¹⁶

The gray whale population reached a historic low of less than 10 percent its original level before rising again, ever so slowly, in the twentieth century. Other fuels and lubricants took the place that whale oil once held in the American industrial workplace. The size of the US whaling fleet declined rapidly in the 1860s; by the late 1880s, well under one hundred vessels comprised the US fleet and virtually no market remained for whale oil (though sperm oil still found buyers). Other nations—especially Norway, Russia, and Japan—continued to hunt grays and other whales in the North Pacific into the twentieth century. One Russian ship, the prophetically named *Aleut*, killed 623 gray whales in the Arctic

and North Pacific Oceans between 1932 and 1946.¹¹⁷ Nearly two hundred years had passed since the Russian *promyshlenniki* had first conscripted the Aleut people to hunt a much smaller but more valuable prey, the sea otter. In the end, size did not rank in the profit-driven metrics of the great hunt for marine mammals. A three-foot-long sea otter in the eighteenth century carried greater value than a full-grown gray whale in the twentieth century.

The great hunt for marine mammals transpired in some very obscure, one might even say *small*, places. These localities included windswept coastal islands and remote lagoons: Isla Cedros, the Farallon and Juan Fernández islands, the Pribilof Islands in the Bering Sea, and Magdalena Bay, where Mary Brewster kept her journal during the warm winter months of 1846–1847 while the *Tiger's* crew assailed gray whales. Of course, these places were only small and obscure in comparison to the surrounding world's interconnected markets and production networks that ultimately commodified the furs, skins, and blubber—the disembodied matter of the great hunt. And for a brief period of years, depending on the time to near-extinction for each species, these remote places took center stage in the maritime trade connecting Asia, Europe, the Pacific islands, and the Americas.