

In the Wake of Madness: The Murderous Voyage of the Whaleship Sharon

Joan Druett

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This book would make a wonderful movie. A true story of madness and murder aboard an American whaler in 1841, it summons such maritime classics as *Mutiny on the Bounty*, *Billy Budd*, and *Moby Dick*—indeed, Herman Melville himself was aboard a whaler in the same waters at the very time the events recounted here were unfolding, and he was doubtless familiar with the grim tale of the *Sharon*.

Among the most sensational and notorious episodes of the era, it featured the slaying of Captain Howes Norris by three South Sea islanders, and the subsequent, single-handed recapture of the ship by a young mate named Benjamin Clough. Yet despite widespread contemporary coverage, the full story of the *Sharon*'s ill-fated cruise never emerged; now, using the recently discovered journals of two crew members, a well-regarded maritime historian recreates a dark voyage predestined to end in tragedy.

Druett is the author of a number of prize-winning works on life at sea, including *Rough Medicine*, *She Captains*, and *Hen Frigates*. Here she paints a detailed portrait of an unhappy, unlucky ship, commanded by a man who was brutal even by the harsh standards of 19th century seamen. Secretive and suspicious by nature—and increasingly frustrated by his lack of success on the whaling grounds—Captain Norris resorted to floggings and eventually focused his rage on a black steward, nearly provoking outright mutiny before he beat the man to death. Mass desertions ensued, forcing Norris to recruit replacements from among sailors who had jumped other ships, as well as the natives who would kill him at the climax of this horrific account.

In the Wake of Madness combines a dramatic story with a first-rate (if sometimes slightly sketchy) account of the American whale fishery, from its earliest days when colonists hunted whales with the Indians of Long Island and Massachusetts to its height. Now and then readers may wish that the author had chosen to incorporate more detail in her body text—for instance, a vivid account of the harpooner's job, drawn from Melville, is consigned to the endnotes—but on the whole she stays close to her sources, who are apt to be terse in the manner of seamen everywhere. The notes and sources are in themselves a wonderful resource for anyone interested in whalers, whaling, and life at sea.

PEYTON MOSS (July / August 2003)

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