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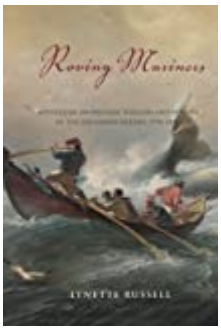

Lynette Russell. *Roving Mariners: Australian Aboriginal Whalers and Sealers in the Southern Oceans, 1790-1870.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012. xiv + 221 pp. $80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4384-4423-9; $29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4384-4424-6.

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The Hybrid World of Whaling and Sealing

The whaling and sealing industries that emerged in the Pacific and Southern oceans from the late eighteenth century have attracted significant interest from historians over recent decades. A particular focus has often been on the relationship between the whalers/sealers and indigenous groups they encountered and interacted with on a frequent basis. But that represents something of a false binary. It has long been known that New Zealand Maori and other Polynesian and South Pacific communities took an active part in sealing and whaling work.

Now, thanks to Lynette Russellâs short but impressive work, we also need to account for significant Australian Aboriginal engagement with both fields of employment. And the ironic thing is that the particular Aboriginal communities most heavily involved were among those usually considered the greatest victims of colonization and something approaching genocide (or what might be seen as a form of âethnic cleansingâ).

Russell does not deny the tawdry and tragic history of European onslaught in Australia. But she does ascribe a form of âattenuated agencyâ to those Aboriginal men and women at the heart of her book. They might not have been free to choose from a range of ideal options. But they did have some choices. And for some Aborigines, life in the sealing and whaling communities offered a kind of relief from the relentless racism otherwise directed at them.

As Russell notes, skin color mattered less in the multiracial, multilingual world of sealing and whaling than elsewhere. Competency was what counted, and Aborigines could gain respect and status that might have eluded them elsewhere. Indeed, profitability and safety depended upon diverse men (and women) learning to get along with one another.

Take William LannÃ©. Erroneously known both in his lifetime and subsequently as the last Tasmanian Aboriginal male, LannÃ© was among a small group of Tasmanian Aborigines to avoid removal to the Flinders Island Aboriginal settlement, before being captured and taken there as a seven-year-old with the rest of his fam-

ily in 1842. Having been moved to the Oyster Cove settlement, LannÃ© gained a measure of financial independence and status when he took up whaling as a young man, traveling to New Zealand and throughout the Pacific. LannÃ©âs life has been overshadowed by his death, and in particular the gruesome mutilation and dissection of his body that then followed. However, Russell argues that such a focus ignores the extent to which LannÃ© was able, during his lifetime, to assert his autonomy and seek out the opportunities that colonization offered.

Other Aboriginal men pursued similar opportunities. Tommy Chaseland, who famously settled in southern New Zealand and married into the local Maori community, is perhaps the best-known example. Yet where Russellâs work really impresses is in its efforts to recover the otherwise largely invisible role of Aboriginal women in the sealing industry. Conventionally portrayed as the unfortunate victims of violence at the hands of European men, such women took an active role in sealing in their own right. Both Aboriginal men and women resisted and adapted to the newcomers in complex and sometimes subtle ways.

In some respects whaling and sealing proved less disruptive of Aboriginal ways of life than other forms of European intrusion. Aboriginal women customarily hunted seals. Meanwhile, ancient rock art suggests that some Aboriginal communities had been harvesting beached whales for thousands of years. As Russell points out, shore-based whaling generated vast amounts of whale meat that was unpalatable to many Europeans but attracted large numbers of Aborigines to the fringes of whale stations. In this way, whaling actually helped to buttress and reinforce customary forms of feasting and exchange. And Aboriginal men who had spent many years developing their skills with spears sometimes became highly valued as harpoonists aboard the whaling ships.

The hybrid world of whaling and sealing was also one in which the newcomers were often willing to learn from, and even adopt aspects of the lifestyles of, their hosts. Some Europeans adopted customary healing practices involving whales, for example, and cultural influences extended in both directions. Both ânativeâ and ânewcomerâ were transformed by their encounters with one another, Russell argues, and new social forms that drew on both cultures emerged as a result. Some European sealers were regarded as âworse than savagesâ or otherwise considered difficult to distinguish from Aborigines. Conversely, Chaseland came to be regarded as âcivilized.â

Russell succeeds in telling a story beyond the familiar one of Aboriginal dispossession. Her work serves to highlight the way in which nineteenth-century racial categories that can all too often seem fixed and immutable were in some circumstances more slippery and nuanced. That Australian Aborigines were in general victims of colonization seems undeniable. But in revealing another side to that history through the story of Aboriginal engagement with whaling and sealing, Russell reminds us that the exceptions and complexities of cross-cultural interaction are also important.