



Lynch, Jack

SWORD

Harpooning Swordfish off the New England Coast, and its Demise

GaelForce (178 pp.)

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Catching swordfish using harpoons was a long-time practice of New England fishermen until the early 1960s, and Lynch's book offers true tales describing in detail that lost practice.

Lynch writes about a venerable tradition of commercial swordfish fishing by harpoon that was once centered on Block Island, R.I. Through a series of true stories about various captains and crews spanning the years from 1941 to the late '60s, Lynch essentially pays homage to the last years of a harpooning tradition replaced by long-line net-fishing capable of more productive catches with less

labor. Harpooning gargantuan swordfish, menacing to fisherman and boats in equal measure, was an art demanding that fishermen had remarkably clear vision, daunting hand-eye coordination and sheer courage under pressure. The financial rewards for successful fishing were generous since swordfish have long been considered a "money fish." But Lynch's stories suggest that the majority of swordfish harpooners were in the trade at least as much for the daring adventure as for the financial gain. Risking injury and death trying to spear such leviathans also conferred a princely status upon these fishermen from their peers who risked far less life and limb with nets suitable for going after calmer species. Accidents involving serious injuries and the loss of a fishing boat were not uncommon, and when one woman was eventually allowed to become a member of a harpoon crew during the '40s, she had to prove her mettle alongside her rugged, male co-workers. Inspired by paintings by H.D. Wetherbee, a Greenwich Village transplant who glowingly (if stiffly) painted vignettes of the harpooner's life on Block Island, Lynch has re-created a sense of what harpoon fishing was like in its last hurrah. But due to his limitations as a penetrating storyteller, the harpooners emerge largely as one-dimensional characters devoid of clear motives or complex feelings. But this deficiency is overcome through the action-packed evocation of the titanic struggles between fishermen and their prey. Dropping assumptions that these stories will have any trace of Melville-like literary grandeur, readers will discover that Lynch, through his literal, plainspoken prose, enjoyably offers a panorama of what the thrill of harpoon fishing was all about.

A clearly conveyed record of a thrilling, bygone era.