

**LEAVING FOR THE SEAL HUNT. THE LIFE OF A SWILER.** John Gillett. 2015. St. John's: Flanker's Press. xvi + 172 p, illustrated, softcover. ISBN 978-1-77117-413-8. CA\$18.95.  
doi:[10.1017/S0032247415000455](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247415000455)

The Newfoundland seal hunt has for many decades been one of the most controversial marine mammal hunts in the world. Since the 1960s seal hunt opponents have vividly opposed the hunt with large-scale campaigns, resulting in trade bans such as in the European Union in 2009 (see Sellheim 2013).

Little is known about the people conducting the hunt and the dangers they face while in pursuit of seals. Although already throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century accounts on the people in the hunt were produced (see for example England 1924, Mowat and Blackwood 1973 or Dwyer 1998), these have found little international recognition. The present volume by John Gillett is the latest of popular publications on the issue and constitutes a broad overview of Gillett's life as a Newfoundland sealer.

This is a short book and is written in a way that enables the reader to read it through in one day. One of the reasons is the very personal way in which Gillett presents his autobiography to the reader, somehow reminding of a told and not a written memoir. *Leaving for the seal hunt* is therefore a collection of individual autobiographical stories that illustrate how the seal hunt and the life surrounding the hunt in the coastal communities of Newfoundland is shaped by the harsh weather conditions, the life at and with the sea and by outside forces, such as international protesting groups as well as regulatory requirements. Throughout the book the reader is able to trace the transition of the hunt from being a large-scale business to a much more small-scale, family-based endeavour. While several hundred people were sealing aboard a large ship around the beginning of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as the author describes in his first years of sealing aboard *Arctic Endeavour*, in the 1990s ships and crews became much smaller and only a handful of men worked on small vessels. Gillett merely briefly touches upon the legislative framework that led to this development, for example the 1987 ban on hunts for 'whitecoats' that he refers to, but unfortunately not on the ban on vessels longer than 65 feet (approximately 19 meters) that were banned from the hunt in the same year.

In fact, it would have been beneficial to include some basic information on the Canadian seal hunt in the beginning of the book in order to make the information and descriptions brought forth in the volume better accessible for those less familiar with the hunt, the terminology and the conditions in Newfoundland. It seems as if Gillett has taken for granted that the reader knows of the conditions in the seal hunt and the struggles the sealers have to cope with, both environmental and legislative. Similarly, it would have been beneficial to include a description of the different seal species and the associated terminology. For example, on page 32 reference is made to 'bedlamers' or 'bellamers' which the reader might identify as a seal species. This, however, would be leading towards the wrong direction as a 'bedlamer' describes the developmental stage of a harp seal: after a harp seal has moulted its white fur and turned silvery they are referred to as 'beaters', the target of the ongoing seal hunt in Canada. They remain in the 'beater' stage for several months when they undergo another moult and turn browner. Seals in this transition stage sealers refer to as 'bedlamers' or, depending on the dialect in Newfoundland, 'bellamers'. While

Gillett explains on page 51 that 'bedlamers' are 'one- to three-year-old harp seals,' the editors of the publisher responsible for this volume could have paid more attention to the explanation of certain terms when they first appear.

Indeed, the editing of *Leaving for the seal hunt* is what could be criticised most in this book. This comes particularly to the fore when Gillett describes his negative experiences with the unsteady, contradictory and confusing regulations put forth by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO), the ministry responsible for the seal hunt. Describing an incident in which miscommunication of DFO regulations led Gillett having to have his catch be seized in the 2007 sealing season, has the author state: 'What a rotten bunch those Fisheries and Oceans people were!' (page 112). While this is an opinion held by many, it remains questionable in how far it should end up in a book like the present. This reviewer would therefore suggest to the publisher more stringent editing work before statements like these end up in the final version of the book.

That being said, Gillett's account provides rare insight into the personal side of the Newfoundland seal hunt and contains a wealth of information on the dangers seal hunters have to cope with every day. The somewhat dryly depictions of the losses of boats because of environmental conditions or accidents during the hunts and crab fisheries do not cover up the respect and love Gillett has for the marine environment in which he and his often referred-to son Richard, also a fisherman and sealer, have. This very personal account awakens memories of this reviewer's experiences in the seal hunt. For example, the waking up by ice pans hitting against the fibreglass hull of the vessel when lying in the bunk 'level with the outside waterline' when 'ice would scrape and scratch along the side near our heads' (page 57). Also, Gillett makes note of the fact that '[w]e always tried to make a good situation out of a bad one' (page 76) and on many occasions refers to jokes and pranks played among the crew and the cooperation on the sealing vessel. The data provided in the book is certainly of great interest for anthropologists, social scientists and others aiming to understand the human side of the hunt (see also Sellheim in press). At the same time, the reader understands certain aspects of the hunt, for example why sealers put smears of blood on their cheeks: as a means to counter snow-blindness when sunglasses are not available (page 44).

The book is accompanied by a wealth of black and white pictures, also of DFO and Coast Guard monitoring planes, helicopters and vessels. The strict regulatory framework under which the hunt is conducted and Gillett's lively descriptions on the enforcement of and compliance to the regulations debunk the claim of seal hunting opponents of the Canadian seal hunt being unregulated and unmonitored. While the biggest shortcoming of this book is the somewhat lax editing, it is nevertheless a wonderful contribution to the discourse on the Newfoundland seal hunt. *Leaving for the seal hunt* can therefore be recommended to researchers, seal hunting opponents and proponents as well as to those just wishing for a very fun and enlightening read. Gillett's personal style of writing is very enjoyable indeed. (Nikolas Sellheim, Faculty of Law, University of Lapland, PO Box 122, 96101 Rovaniemi, Finland ([nikolas.sellheim@ulapland.fi](mailto:nikolas.sellheim@ulapland.fi))).

## References

- Dwyer, M. 1998. *Over the side, Mickey. A sealer's first hand account of the Newfoundland seal hunt.* Halifax: Nimbus Publishing.

- England, G. A. 1924. *The greatest hunt in the world*. 4th printing. Montreal: Tundra Books.
- Mowat, F. and D. Blackwood. 1973. *Wake of the great sealers*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd.
- Sellheim, N. 2013. *The neglected tradition? The genesis of the EU seal products trade ban and commercial sealing*. *The Yearbook of Polar Law* V (2013): 417–450.
- Sellheim, N. in press. *Morality, practice and economy in a commercial seal hunting community*. *Arctic Anthropology* 52 (1).