
Old Tom - The Killer of Eden

by

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This is the extraordinary tale of Old Tom, a remarkable orca or killer whale. It is a story of exceptional 'mutualism' (cooperation between animal and human), betrayal and tragedy, set within the reach of living memory, in Eden on the far south coast of NSW.

Whaling, Two Fold Bay & Eden

One of the earliest, and most lucrative, industries in the colony of NSW was whaling. It exploited the rich numbers of baleen whales that, between April and November, migrate up the east coast of Australia from Antarctic to sub-tropical climes to mate and give birth. Soon after the establishment of Sydney Town, visiting whalers arrived from Britain and America to exploit this rich natural resource. It wasn't long before local, shore-based, whaling operations began to crop up all along the south-eastern coast of the mainland and down to Tasmania. One of the earliest, established in the 1820s by Captain Thomas Raine, was at Two Fold Bay; the site of the modern town of Eden.

By the 1860s the Eden-based Davidson family had established a whaling station that proved to be the longest operating station in Australia, and the last of its type to close. Its success and longevity was in large part due to 'Fearless' George Davidson and his special relationship with an orca named 'Old Tom', the leader of a pod of killer whales. At Eden, it would seem, a mutual interest in baleen whales brought together the apex predators of land (humans) and sea (orca) for a common, bloody purpose - whale hunting.

A Fearsome Business

There is nothing attractive about the bloody, fearsome business of whaling. The best that can be said is that it represents an epic struggle of life and death and, in the era before modern whaling, a

more equal contest between an enraged 20 metre long, 48 tonne baleen whale and equally desperate men armed with hand-thrown harpoons in flimsy oar-powered open whaling boats. The history of whaling is littered with tales of doomed whalers, tossed from their capsized boats, dragged to a watery grave by harpoon or tow rope or reduced to pulp by the 'hand of God' (a term for when a whaling boat was smashed by a whale's flailing tale).

At Eden, the killer whales swung the odds considerably in favour of the whalers. Eyewitness



accounts document the extraordinary role played by the killers. It began when a killer whale, usually Old Tom himself, swam ahead of his pod to alert Fearless George that they

had ambushed a whale and were driving the beast into Two Fold Bay. Old Tom would swim in sight of George's house which overlooked the bay and smack his tail on the water to give off a noise like a 'rifle shot' as a signal for George to rouse his crews, man the boats and follow. If the whalers were too slow, Old Tom would grab the boat's tow rope and propel them headlong into the hunt. Unusually, the whalers would even launch their boats at night or in the fog knowing that, if they got lost, all they need do was to slap the water with their oars and Old Tom would circle round and guide them on their way.

Once the whales had been driven into the bay, the killers would cut off their escape to the safer (and deeper) waters of the open sea. The killers then commenced harrying their prey so as to bring the whale to the point of exhaustion. This achieved, the killers handed their prize to the whalers who enacted the end-game of harpoon, chase and the final dispatch of their quarry.

All this was a spectacular show. When the hunt was on, hundreds of Edensiders would line the cliffs overlooking the bay to watch the drama - killers hurling themselves into the baleen whales, the spray of whales breaching, the blood in the water and the

moans of wounded beasts and the cries of men. And then there was the closing chase, where a harpooned whale would drag the whaling boat after it in its desperate final escape dash before being dealt death blows at close quarters.

The Law of the Tongue

After the kill, the whalers would anchor the whale and leave it for the night. This was when the killer whales got their reward. Unlike the whalers, they were not interested in the oil rich blubber of whale flesh, but rather the tenderest meat - whale tongue and lips. The next morning the whalers would row out and retrieve the whale carcass, now denuded of lips and tongue, and set to the backbreaking work of towing the dead creature back to the station for dismemberment and processing. This arrangement between whaler and the orcas came to be known as the 'Law of the Tongue' and it underpinned the relationship of trust and respect between the men and the killers of Eden. However, the relationship between Fearless George and Old Tom grew to be more than a mere contractual one. Over the years the killers of Eden were named, known for their personalities and idiosyncrasies and became very much part of the family of the whalers and townsfolk of Eden. The bond grew deeper. In Eden there are many stories of how the killers saved whalers from drowning or being devoured by sharks. There appears to be a genuine empathy and understanding between the orcas and their brother whalers.

Betrayal

In 1900 the relationship between the killers and the whalers began to unravel when a non-local, who knew nothing of the bond between the orca and men of Eden, encountered a member of Old Tom's pod that had beached in the bay whilst chasing a minke whale. Before Fearless George could come to the orca's rescue the stranger, Harry Silks, shot the poor beast in view of both George and the pod of killers that were circling offshore.

The town of Eden went berserk. The Aboriginal Yuin people, for whom the killers were a totem of their nation and a kindred spirit, along with half the townsfolk of Eden went on the warpath wanting to kill Silks for the outrage he had committed. Luckily the police got to Silks first and ran him out of town. But the damage was done. The Yuin people, in distress,

departed Eden altogether, and with them went many of the best whaling crews in the industry. The killers also took note; within the year most had left the waters of Eden and only Old Tom and those with the longest relationship with the Davidsons stayed on to hunt with the whalers. It would appear that Old Tom could distinguish between Fearless George and the likes of Harry Silks.

A Final Betrayal

In the next 20 years whaling continued. However overharvesting had diminished the annual take from around twenty whales a year down to but a handful. To add to this stress, in 1927 there was one final betrayal of Old Tom's trust.

A new player had entered the whaling scene - an arrogant and overbearing grazier by the name of John Logan. It had been a bad year for whaling. Logan, with fearless George as a crew member, on board the former's motorised yacht, had taken a whale with Old Tom's help. A storm was approaching and Logan, fearing the catch might be lost if it were anchored overnight in the inclement weather, broke 'The Law of the Tongue'. Contrary to George's counsel, Logan tried to tow the whale carcass to shore before Old Tom had taken his share. Old Tom grabbed the tow rope in his teeth to protest. Logan gunned the engine, but Tom held on. When the orca refused to let go, Logan marched to the rear of the yacht and bludgeoned Tom. Old Tom held firm. Logan laid a further blow to the orca's face, dislodging Old Tom's tooth and driving him off. At that point the gravity



of his act dawned on him. Logan cried to a horror stricken George, 'Oh God, what have I done.'

In 1930 Old Tom died. He washed up on the shores of Two Fold Bay. He had perished of starvation. The abscesses from where his teeth had been knocked out by Logan may have contributed to his slow demise. Fearless George was heartbroken and Logan, filled with remorse for what he had done, tried to make recompense by building a museum and arranging for the bones of Old Tom to be displayed there as a lasting memorial to a remarkable creature and the trust and friendship that had lasted 40 years between the men and orcas of Eden.

Photo credits: Eden Killer Whale Museum.