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Four Stories: The Last Killer in Eden

Abstract

The Last Killer in Eden: one of four stories published in *Current Narratives*, 4, 2014.

The Last Killer in Eden

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Whale off the Eden Coast. Image: Peter Whiter

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“Is it Peter, or Pete?” He looks at me and smiles through his white beard. “Pete. I always say when I’m called Peter I’m in trouble.” He returns to dislodging the Grey Duck from the trailer. He shimmies the raft into the water of the bay and the grey rubber hits with a slap. The motor starts and he glugs off to a distant jetty.

In the absence of the Grey Duck and the bearded man, the only sounds in Snug Cove are the creaks of old trawlers and the splashing of water on the rocks. Then Anna arrives. “You better put this on,” she says, “Or you’ll be red as a beetroot.”

We ride out of Twofold Bay and towards the continental shelf. From the water the coastline of hazy mountains melts into the clear skies. Green hills tumble into the ocean. On these hills are the homes and fishing houses of Eden. The town rests on a rolling promontory in the middle of Twofold Bay; the headlands on either side of it made of red rock and shale and pink sandstone that erupt and twist out of the water at severe angles.

Out in the open water, Pete and Anna scan the horizon, searching for whales. They are looking for ‘footprints’, patches of flat ocean made by the pressure from the whale’s flukes pushing through the water underneath. “You’ll see a series,” says Pete, “And you can tell: ‘Well that one’s dying, so it’s going that way.’” He casts one eye over his shoulder as he searches. On his glasses there is a spot of sunscreen, smudged by a fingerprint. “It’s really suck it and see,” he says. He scratches his white beard. “It’s a bit spare out there.”

“Say, Pete,” Anna speaks up. “Tell him about the story of Old Tom.”

It is the turn of 20th century and the cold light of dawn breaks on the shadow of Boyd Tower. The lookouts are asleep, and the waves churn against the red rock beneath. Under the waves glides a dark shape, past South Point, past Boyd Tower, and into the mouth of the Kiah Inlet. The shape stops. He slaps his tail against the water, hard. Slap. Again. Slap. Then he tightens his muscles, pulls down, swivels up, crashes through the water and comes back down again. Boom. It rings out for miles.

The sound of Old Tom crashing in the inlet wakes the men. Old Tom hears them shouting and sees them descending the hill. “Rush-o! Rush-o!” The men scramble into two long canoes, six to a boat. Five long sweeps shoot out and grip the Southern Ocean. They see Old Tom’s tall dorsal fin, as tall as a man and sharp and straight and ink black. Then the whale and the two whaleboats tear off into the scarce dawn.

In the deep of Twofold Bay a pack of killer whales is harrying a monster whale. Old Tom’s tall fin cuts through the waves and the men arrow after it, toward the fray. George Davidson, the headman, the whale-killer, pricks his ears for distant cries. Damn, a humper. Wicked fighters.

Davidson’s green canoes approach the humper and the killers become excited. They are holding the humper in the pocket of the bay; Stranger, the matriarch of the pack is at the head; Big Ben and Montague nip at the humper from underneath to stop her diving. Charlie Adgery grapples with her lips and fins and tail flukes. And now Old Tom, the humorist, rejoins the hunt and leaps onto the humper’s blowhole to drown her.

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Davidson steers to the behemoth. The harpooner sits forward and readies the making-fast harpoon. If it latches onto the humper, then the hours of struggle will begin. The harpooner hurls it into her and she howls and curves her spine to dive. “Starn all!” The whaleboat tilts and floods with water. The killers rush the monster and take great bites from her as she dives. The one hundred feet of harpoon line runs taut and the men brace against it. Then the water churns and she bursts through the surface again.

Slowly, slowly, the oarsmen wind the line in at each moment that the rope slackens. They avoid her thrashing and her breaches and the killers continue to slam and block and bite the humper and keep her trapped in the bay.

She tires. George Davidson readies the killing lance. A humper with her overlapping ribs is nasty to kill. The hardest throw of these modern Bay Whalers is set down at five fathoms thirty feet. George’s father John Davidson asserts that he made successful seven and eight fathom shots in his day.

The whalemens know that the moment the whale feels her deathstroke she becomes her most dangerous. A slap from her Hand Of God can crush a boat to splinters.

“Haul line, and lay off!” George stands. He hurls the lance up, like a javelin, five fathoms. “Hold boat!” The crew slack the line. The lance lands and pierces her motley hide and punctures her heart. Her lungs flood. Blood jets from her spout. There is Fire In The Chimney and she is going to die. Her blood soaks the whalemens and the killers taste the blood in the water. They rush in, and in the frenzy Stranger rips at her mouth, pries open her jaw and tears out her tongue. She thrashes about in circles, and then she is dead.

The swell breaks gently on the humper’s body. The crew appears very small beside the mountainous form. The water is red with blood and dancing throughout it are the tall fins of the killers. Sea birds descend on the chunks of flesh floating in the water, and the shark takes his fill.

The whalemens tie a kellick to the humper. Now anchored, they leave the whale – their sweeps reach into the Southern Ocean and they return to the mouth of the Kiah Inlet, and to sleep.

Then the killers take the humper’s carcass by her fins and tail flukes and drag her to the ocean floor.

On the Grey Duck we bounce across the waves of Twofold Bay.

“You know, they are killing machines. Their brain is the size of our torso. And you can see them thinking. You can see the calculation.” Pete waves his hands around in strikes and gestures. “You’ll see this happen and this happen and this happen, and you just go: that was planned, back there. It was all mapped out. ‘I’m going to do this and this-’ his hands fly about again, ‘-And that’s the way it’s going to unfold.’ That is supreme intelligence.”

Anna lowers her skivvy from her mouth for a moment. It is cold in the wind of the rushing Grey Duck, out on the open water. “The orca are very intelligent creatures. I don’t know how you rate a creature’s intelligence compared to another, but–”

“–Compared to an orca,” says Pete, “I would call a humpback dizzy. You know, it’s a blonde.”

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In 1878, Stranger's gang numbered 27 killers. That was also the time George Davidson began whaling, at age 14, under his grandfather Alexander Davidson, and it was the time Old Tom was first written about. Between 1828 when whaling first began in Eden until then, there are stories and reports from every whaling family that built on Eden's shores of killers pushing baleen whales onto the shore or of the killers taking down whales. But the Davidson era was the time that the killers became famous.

The Davidsons learned to respect a long-honoured pact between the local Yuin people and the killers. It was called the Law of the Tongue, and the killers would help them take a whale if they were given the lips and tongue as a reward. Alongside the killers, the whalers' catches went up, and their deaths went down – though it was still a dangerous affair.

"My dad always said they hated whales, but had a healthy respect for them." Anna pulls her hood tight over her face as the Grey Duck races against the wind. "I can appreciate that, yeah. It's a funny thing. I suppose Eden people, we are quite proud of that tradition. We didn't have mechanised whaling boats, there was none of the big boats with the mechanised harpoons." She pauses, "It's not a good thing that we killed whales - but at the time, that's what was happening. There was no electricity, and they needed the oil. But that relationship with the orca, helping like that, it's unreal. It's never been heard of elsewhere and it's fact. It isn't just folklore, they did actually do it."

As the years progressed the humpbacks and right whales and others were fewer in the bay, and industrial whaling elsewhere along New South Wales' coast destroyed family ventures and subsistence whaling. Stranger's pod were numbering fewer and fewer too; in 1902 there were only seven killers regularly loitering in Twofold Bay: Humpy, Hooky, Stranger, Charlie Adger, Young Ben, Kinscher and Old Tom. Towards the end of the Davidson era, George was only taking whales opportunistically. The last official whale hunt was in 1926, and in that year only Humpy and Old Tom ever showed in the bay.

"My pop didn't do a lot of whaling, but he was actually on the last whale hunt," says Anna. "We've been here for years. My side of the family were all fishermen."

The swearing rings out across Leatherjacket Bay. "God damn Old Tom!" The fisherman cries as he watches his line lift from the water and pull taut. With sudden energy the man's fishing launch begins to propel itself across the bay. It goes with such pace that it swamps with water. It fills and Old Tom drops the line and disappears. This was Tom's bad habit, deliberate and mischievous, to kelly up or get across a line and tow the boat about in any direction. He and the rest of Stranger's gang loiter in the calmer waters of Leatherjacket Bay, bored and waiting for the next hunt.

Old Tom is incredibly extroverted, even for a killer. George Davidson calls the killer his pet, his dog. The Yuin people say only George Davidson's relationship with Tom comes close to the depth of the bond between Aboriginals and whales.

Once, in a chase, the whaleboat was being towed through the water at a great rate. Davidson is steering. Humpy and Old Tom race alongside the quarry while a half dozen others scout around in a wide circle to prevent escape. The whale tires and rises to blow, and Tom casts

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himself across the blowhole, while Humpy rushes in and snatches the tongue. Then a sharp turn of whale and boat knocks Davidson overboard. The whaleboat, being stuck fast, couldn't return and pick him up. But all the time that he was swimming and floating Old Tom swam round and round until the second boat picked Davidson up. Only then did he make off and join his comrades in the fray.

"It's hardly gospel," Pete told me over the phone a few days ago, "But it seems that they get quieter when there are killers around. It's very much like the Serengeti. The lion wants to eat and it happens. They're all on the same ground and can't go anywhere and every now and then there's a death." Just the day before, killers attacked a baby Humpback at Merimbula, the next town North from Eden.

Out on the Grey Duck, Pete was talking about it now. "The orca came through, Tuesday? Wednesday? Tuesday I think." Anna nods. "They were spotted at Wollongong, then they were spotted at Jervis Bay - they're known as the Split Fin pod because the mum's got a split fin from a propeller strike - and then they were seen at Merimbula just to the north having a go at a humpback calf."

We sit in the sun in quiet for a while, and the Grey Duck bobs gently. We can never sit still for too long otherwise the back of the raft fills with water. On the nearest headland are the ruins of Boyd Tower.

"There's a whale called Blade Runner who has an amazing injury down her full length, there's grooves down the whale where the propeller has just cut her flesh," says Pete.

"Oh, they're incredible. Did we see her last year?"

"Year before. Oh no, no, it was last year!"

"I mean for that whale to survive - the grooves are this deep-" Anna holds her arms vertical, almost a foot apart, "-How the hell did it survive that? And they're deeper at the head, slightly less at the body, she must have been moving away or something." She shudders as she imagines it. "They can survive a lot of injuries. We see quite a few with dints in the back. The other day we saw some which looked like they'd had ropes across their back, they had two white scar marks. It looked definite that it had been entangled at some point." Then she stops.

"Wait, Pete, over there."

"I saw it."

We turn and race toward Boyd Tower.

George Davidson was an old man now, but even today as he joined his friend and neighbour John Logan to fish he brought his whaling spears, ever the opportunist. They were on Logan's motor launch, the White Heather, with his daughter.

It isn't well documented, but this is what we know. At some point, Logan and Davidson take a whale. Maybe a Yuin man is on board as well. There is a storm rolling in. Old Tom is gambolling about the boat. Logan begins to bring in the whale, and either the Yuin man or Davidson becomes agitated: "We can't take it. We can't take it."

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“The weather is getting bad. We’re taking it.”

Old Tom catches on to what is happening. He throws himself onto the launch and nearly tips the boat, and then he takes a line and starts to tow the whale back out to sea. Logan runs to the motor and slaps it into reverse and begins a tug-of-war. But then the jerk of the motor tears the rope from Tom’s mouth and looses a tooth from the jaw. Logan watches the tooth sink to the ocean bottom and sees Old Tom is blank with shock.

John Logan’s daughter says when he realised, he put his hands to his head and said: “My God. What have I done?”

“Straight ahead. Up against the rocks, Pete. There’s a white thing – that’s a calf.”

“You can see the underside of the flukes now,” says Pete. I search the water around the rock wall frantically but can’t see anything. We turn a hard right and bolt toward a rocky outcrop. “Ah, breach!” A white mass leaps out in front of us, as high as the top of the cliffs. We edge nearer and Pete shuts off the motor.

“I think there’s two mothers and calves, possibly.”

Then a whale casts itself in the air and the spray wets the Grey Duck. They surround us. The calf is real curious and comes under the boat. They mill about and lift their pec fins out of the water like great white sails. They slide back into the water and sometimes they come down real hard. “You’ll hear-” Anna begins, and the crash of a fin breaks her speech, “-you can hear the force of the pecs and the flukes as they hit the water.” We stop talking and watch the monsters move through the dark blue. Shadows rise to the surface, the mother’s island bulk rumbles beside the Grey Duck. The rubber raft seems suddenly very thin and inadequate. For a while they pass in and out around the boat before sinking away again.

“That doesn’t happen every time. You got lucky.”

The Argus, Thursday 18 September 1930, page 7

"OLD TOM" DEAD. "KING" OF KILLER WHALES.

More Than 100 Years of Age.

SYDNEY, Wednesday. - "Old Tom," king of the Twofold Bay killer whales, and the last of his tribe, is dead.

For more than a 100 years he and his mates, who at one time numbered 30, gave invaluable service to industry by intercepting whales on their way north, driving them into Twofold Bay, and keeping them there until they were killed by the whalers.

It is said that "Old Tom" invariably went to the river mouth and, attracted the attention of the whalers to a capture by lashing the water with his huge tail.

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A week ago "Old Tom" killed a grampus at Leonard's Island, and, was seen disporting himself with joy, but this morning, impelled by a breeze and the tide, his dead body drifted into Twofold Bay.

Arrangements are in hand to have "Old Tom's" skeleton set up at the whaling station at Kiah River.

The day Old Tom washed up in Snug Cove, John Logan fell to his knees and wept. The crowd around the port were shocked by this display from a hardened military vet. Logan knew when he dislodged Old Tom's tooth it might spell the end for the whale. But Old Tom was also an old killer, old like George Davidson was, probably sixty and certainly at least fifty-two. There at Snug Cove Logan asserted he would save Tom's skeleton and build him a mausoleum.

When George Davidson went to the body of Old Tom, he found that the stomach was empty. In those last days George had taken to hand-feeding the whale when he could. When the whalers saw Old Tom chasing a minke in the bay, they cheered and thought that Old Tom had recovered his health. George checked the mouth of Old Tom and found that his teeth had been worn down to stubs, a common blight for old killers.

You can see the worn down teeth and the missing tooth and the rot it caused in Old Tom's skeleton at Eden. Logan and Davidson did not build old Tom a mausoleum. Instead, they founded the Killer Whale Museum in Eden. Inside is the King of the Killer Whales, and his skeleton is the only killer whale skeleton in the Southern Hemisphere.

Anna and Pete's sun-baked faces crease with smiles.

"It's actually joy." Pete's blue eyes spark as he says it.

"It's everything. I love that horizon line. I love the clouds," says Anna. "If there are whales then that's a bonus. If not... this is our backyard." She leans forward on the Grey Duck. Then she points forward. "I think I saw the back of the whale. But I think it's farther out."

We are still roaming the ocean around Twofold Bay. Our companions have left; a few times they would breach suddenly beside us and surprise us as we chatted, but now they have really left. The big whale cruise boat Cat Balou is out on the waters now too, searching. They are on a radio channel with Pete and Anna to share any found whales.

"I think there was a dark black out there. Still a long way."

The Grey Duck powers on.

"Grey Duck, Grey Duck, this is Cat Balou. Pete you there? We went out to Mowori and East of there – and you have whales?"

"We lost them. Where are you?"

The massive Cat Balou pulls alongside our Grey Duck, the three of us astride it like a motorbike. The decks of the cruiser are full with people hanging from the rails, like in old photos of passengers on tourist trains, arms and legs dangling over the edge. They start to point at the horizon.

"They're pointing Peter."

The radio crackles in. "You see them Pete?"

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The Grey Duck takes off and Cat Balou rushes beside it. Up above on the decks the people gaze determinedly as their hair blows about in the wind. A man's hat flies off. Pete eyes Cat Balou, one eye on the cruiser, one looking for the whale.

"You see him?"

"Nup."

The boats idle. Cat Balou begins to drift away. Then Pete stands. He grabs his camera and holds it in one hand, and with the other he turns the Grey Duck around. The motor starts and the little raft shoots off.

Anna shouts to me through the rushing wind: "You get addicted to it."