

# “Grytviken, South Georgia”

An excerpt, based on real-life events, from the novel *The Princess of the Bottom of the World* by Dan Linehan\*

We landed on the southern edge of Grytviken Whaling Station and stepped over littered whale bones as numerous as weeds. A white picket fence surrounding a small rectangular cemetery greeted our approach. Inside, the bones of the dead were not so scattered about. The grave of Sir Ernest Shackleton formed its centerpiece. In 1915, after ice in the Weddell Sea ended Shackleton’s expedition by capturing and crushing his ship the *Endurance*, he and his crew made one of the most remarkable escapes in history from the deep-frozen clutches of Antarctica’s brutal weather.

With their ship lost and supplies drastically limited, the men used sleds and tiny boats to cross over treacherous stretches of ice—sometimes moving from iceberg to iceberg. When they finally reached stable ground, only Shackleton and five other men sailed across the wildest open ocean on the planet in what amounted to a covered rowboat with makeshift sails. He hoped that the prevailing current might land them on South Georgia, something like facing away from a dartboard, throwing the dart backward over the shoulder without looking, and expecting to hit the bull’s eye—three times in a row. Shackleton eventually reached the far side of South Georgia just as a hurricane hit, faced down a wave first thought to be a mountain in the distance, landed ashore, crossed a mountain range at the time believed impassable, found help, and then returned to Antarctica to save the remainder of his stranded crew. When he died many years later, he was buried here. This monument to him was without question well deserved.



Sir Ernest Shackleton's grave stands at the edge of Grytviken, South Georgia (photo: Dan Linehan).

However, where were the monuments to the hundreds of thousands of whales that were slaughtered in this region? Yes, the scattered bones were necessary reminders. But there were no monuments to acknowledge how badly people fucked up. Eerie pieces of abandoned metal and machinery only admitted Grytviken was a ghost town. I read a sign that had a map of the whaling station revealing the locations of all the derelicts: flensing plan, blubber cookery, meat cookery, bone cookery, separator plant, meal plant, ships, jetties, villa, office, stores, accommodations, church, the shipwreck of the whale catcher *Petrel*, workshops, freezer plant, livestock, the shipwreck of the transport *Louise*, power plant, and cemetery.

I imagined the smell of whale death, of blubber being boiled, of whale meat being carved, of whale bone being pulverized, of blood flowing into the aqua blue water and turning it purple.

I imagined breathing through my mouth not because the air was so cold but because I didn't want to smell the foul, dank air drenched, soaked, and saturated with oil vapor that once belonged to the largest creatures to ever roam Earth. I wanted to spit but couldn't produce saliva. I want to vomit but was incapable thanks to modern medicine and the patch behind my right ear.



**Chains used to drag whales ashore to be flensed stretch in front of a corroded cookery (photo: Dan Linehan).**

I imagined the sounds of machinery launching, hooking, dragging, pulling, tugging, clanking, blowing, sliding, switching, cranking, rolling, turning, rotating, ringing, spinning, revolving, cutting, separating, extracting, sorting, chiming, slicing, dicing, mixing, churning, pumping, grinding, tooting, burning, boiling, reducing, cooking, steaming, and freezing.

Now all that remained was the cold, rough, and rusty metal weaponry of massacre and greed. The whaling station itself decayed like a whale with its blubber flensed. Its metalwork and machinery corroded with the color of old, dried blood. I stared at a vat of some sort, the size of a furnace you might see heating a large building. It had a gauge with the word “Titan” on the dial. It looked like it was used to measure pressure or temperature. Impossible to tell which one. Next to it was a small window viewport where I could see what appeared to be the teeth of a large gear. I tried not to think what this was for.

I didn’t intend to take so many photographs at a place like this. But I was really pissed off and feeling deeply wronged. So I took photographs of harpoons, of launchers, of lances, of



**The Sun and wind weather a giant whale skull (photo: Dan Linehan).**

spears, of sickles, of gaffes, of hooks, of barbs, of winches, of cranes, of rollers, of cable, of chains, of belts, of compressors, of conveyors, of shovels, of scoops, of dollies, of carts, of boilers, of incinerators, of vessels, of tanks.

As I moved on, I came upon a whale skull neatly arranged on the ground next to a harpoon. I needed to get away from all this. I needed to elevate. I’d reach the boundary of the whaling station soon at the base of the mountains and just keep going.

**I looked out** over the cove to a long sandbar where Ron said a few ships had run aground. Beyond this in the distance, snow from a snowstorm fell like rain. The wind blew the snow in a perfect diagonal from the clouds to the water. We had just come from that direction. Climbing higher, I reached a second cairn. Like I did at the first, I added a rock of my own. Layers of sandstone and mudstone formed much of South Georgia. I had searched for harpoon-shaped stones to fit into the cairns like keystones or the missing pieces of three-dimensional jigsaw puzzles. Not too far off, I reached the third cairn. Each one was noticeably smaller than the last. Now I struggled to find a harpoon-shaped rock but had the view I'd been waiting for. I saw my ship and the whaling station from a height that Shackleton himself would be proud of. Soon I'd return to that small leaf floating in the puddle-sized harbor.

I had promised myself to study global warming first hand. But now I had a harpoon jabbed into my heart. No matter how high I climbed, I could not escape that ache. No matter how many rock harpoon tips I left behind, I still could not yank out the one inside me. What did climate change and whaling have in common? Everything.

There were so many large storage tanks for the whale oil. I could never climb high enough for them to become specks and disappear. And of course, there was the church sanctimoniously blessing these affronts to nature with its steeple shaped exactly like all the rusting, metal harpoon tips scattered over this whaling station. On my way down, I came across a group of sailors from the *Edinburgh*. I asked about Antarctica. But they told me that their ship usually didn't go that far south. They had an icebreaker named after Shackleton that operated in those waters. The sailors said they were taking in some shore leave. But they still carried heavy packs and steel-barreled assault rifles. I could not escape hydraulically actuated saws and anchors and separators and pots. I needed to do something.

This whaling station operated from 1904 to 1965. The first airplane flew only one year before it opened, and men had been flying to space for four years already before it closed. I needed to be alone with my thoughts for a while. The Zodiacs were leaving soon. But back on the ship where could I find a place to be by myself when I had a roommate and every other square inch seemed to be occupied by someone else?



**A harpoon tip and church steeple share a pattern (photo: Dan Linehan).**

**During dinner,** I was a zombie. Impossible to suppress, everyone's emotions had been drained by the whaling station. We talked with uneasiness and awkwardness because it hurt to say something, and it hurt not to say anything.

Over the years, the harbors and coves of South Georgia based whaling stations where more than 175,000 whales were slaughtered. One whaler had personally killed 6,000 whales. Nothing was days-of-yore or bygone times romantic about it, like a whaler on a rowboat with a hand-thrown harpoon chasing after a whale, as did Captain Ahab in *Moby Dick*. No, this so-called tremendous feat was achieved by riding on the bow of a ship, motoring by engine, not sail or oar, and using a gun sight to aim explosive-tipped harpoons launched by a cannon at targets the size of barn sides that eventually ran out of air and surfaced to a death they



**A harpoon launcher rides the bow of the *Petrel* (photo: Dan Linehan).**

were likely smart enough to have known awaited them. What an extraordinary accomplishment to be a marksman at shooting gigantic fish in a barrel.

Mac talked more about all the minke whales and humpbacks that were just hunted this year. As horrendous as this whaling station was, Japan, Norway, and Iceland had not stopped whaling even after the international agreement to ban whaling in 1982. Japan regularly killed hundreds of whales each year. Japan also had the audacity to claim that it was for scientific study, as it used the latest and greatest technology to track and collect its participants, which involuntarily gave up their lives in the name of science.

More than a hundred years ago, shotgun science was a method used to collect specimens for study. This was exactly what it sounded like. If you wanted to study an animal for scientific purposes, you'd load shells into your shotgun and go blasting away. Even John James Audubon, the famous birder, painter, and naturalist, employed this method in the 1800s. But that was a very long time ago. Humans had supposedly learned a thing or two since then.



**The *M/V Ushuaia* , formerly a NOAA research vessel, anchors in the harbor of the abandoned Grytviken Whaling Station in South Georgia (photo: Dan Linehan).**

So, just how many whales does Japan have to kill decade after decade to finally come up with the results of their study? Think about the cost to run such study, traveling so far year in and year out in their massive, specially designed specimen gathering ships. The Japanese must have had very gracious and very patient sources funding this science. A look at the truth revealed that the scientific study conducted by the Japanese amounted to nothing more than taste tests. Somehow, year after year after year, scientific specimens, a.k.a. whale meat, ended up in the grocery stores in Japan. Their science was absolute bunk and a blatant sham. Scientific results should not be published on the pages of restaurant menus.

Despair made me want to fling myself off the stern of the ship into the icy waters below. I only hoped that my writing after this expedition would cause many people to wish I would have taken this plunge. And if I were really lucky, then there would be at least one person willing to come to my rescue.

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**\* The excerpt “Grytviken, South Georgia” from the novel *The Princess of the Bottom of the World* by Dan Linehan was first published in the *Porter Gulch Review* (2015).**

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