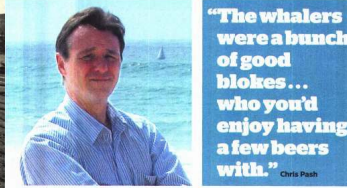




books profile



When whalers were

For decades Albany was an abattoir and whales were hunted down, slaughtered and processed on shore. In mid-1977, activists moved in to close the whale chasers down. Former Albany resident Chris Pash documents those days in his book *The Last Whale*. He talks to **Rod Moran**.

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Clockwise from above

Australian whaling ended when the Cheynes Beach Station near Albany, the country's last, closed in 1978.

Anti-whaling protesters Jonny Lewis and Tom Barber in Albany in September 1977.

Picture: Aline Charney Barber

Author of *The Last Whale*, Chris Pash.

Picture: Blanka Kosak

Chris Pash was a cadet newshound at the Albany Advertiser when Greenpeace launched its first direct-action campaign in Australia. Its aim was to end whaling in WA. Pash recalls their first actions involved following the three locally based whale chasers out to sea in flimsy inflatable boats to interdict and harass them.

The Greenpeace foot soldiers

stayed at the Esplanade Hotel. It was convenient for Pash, both from a personal angle and journalistically. "I lived around the corner and was down there doing a bit of work," he explains. "Also, there was a very nice lady working behind the bar. She was my wife, who was between academic gigs."

But the circumstances of Pash's reporting were not always so convivial.



On one occasion, a motorcycle gang got in on the action. “The press group sat on an old sand dune overlooking the car park,” Pash writes in *The Last Whale*. “I stayed in among the crowd of demonstrators ... trying to snatch a good quote from all the shouting. Local police stood guard at the entrance to the whaling station. On the other side of the wire fence, whaling-station workers were amused to see God’s Garbage. Many of their members worked in whaling or had close connections to the industry. Now we’ll see some action, the workers thought.” But the demo ended peacefully.

While Pash dutifully reported on the tension-filled days as the Greenpeace campaign unfolded, in retrospect he was not satisfied that the full story in its complexities had been told. *The Last Whale* is his reprise on those heady and historic times. “There was a fair bit of

anger, angst and pain, I think, when the industry closed,” Pash says. “I always wanted to write something a bit deeper than I did at the time ... we needed that space of time to let the anger melt. I wanted to explore both sides because I think both are very interesting. I think a lot of the whalers’ grandchildren ask them, ‘Why did you kill the whales, grandad?’ I didn’t want to be an apologist. I just wanted to explore their lives, get it true to their experience and get that on paper.

“At the time I don’t think I did a particularly good job of reporting it. And the reason for that is, one, I was quite young. I’ve got better perspective and skills now. And we were only a twice-weekly paper. Every journo in Australia was here for a couple of weeks covering the story. So you got fobbed off every day, which is a familiar thing to reporters. There was also the fact that the whalers did not have a voice at the time. The

company had a voice, the politicians had a voice. Certainly, the anti-whaling guys were getting a lot of air-play. But the whalers themselves really didn’t get a say.”

Pash was an Albany local. He had a good sense of the community’s chemistry. And he’d been out on the whale-chasers twice. “The whalers were a bunch of good blokes ... who you’d enjoy having a few beers with,” he says. “They were normal sorts of guys for that time. They had a great job, really. A blokey sort of existence, quite attractive. You’d jump on this nice little ship, a 47m steel-hulled job ... you’d go out, a cook there banging out hot food all day. And you’d have a good bunch of blokes to work with. Not for them the tedium of the office. Every day was something different.

“The sad part, of course, was the actual killing bit. And I don’t think any of them enjoyed that. You could detect a note of sadness when they had to kill a whale. I had first-hand experience of that. Things moved a lot faster at that moment of killing. It was like they wanted to put that aside and go off again. They were a bunch of normal guys. They made good money, had families, all the normal stuff. And they didn’t think there was anything wrong with it. They heard the anti-whaling distant rumble. But they didn’t think it affected them.”

Pash says he was impressed by the activists, too. He describes them as pure-hearted, long-haired, scruffy knights, driven by an ideal about saving the whales. “And they did some crazy, risky things, putting themselves in danger. I was very struck by that. I wanted to dig into that deeper. Why would people want to go 30 miles (50km) out to sea in an open boat and throw themselves in front of an explosive harpoon? So that was a key question for me.”



Although Pash has extensive experience in journalism, the writing of *The Last Whale* presented him with problems. For some years he has been on the business side of the print media. The rigours and vicissitudes of daily reporting have not been part of his round. In a sense, researching *The Last Whale* returned him to his incarnation as a newshound. "I rediscovered the thrill of the hunt," he says. "Digging up and finding people who don't want to be found. Uncovering facts people don't want you to get. Probably the most difficult thing — and I tore myself up about this — was to get it absolutely right."

"While they call it 'creative non-fiction', I really wanted to get the feelings and the emotions in there. Going back and checking dozens and dozens of times with people, and also double-checking each fact. The other difficulty was that people have memories but often they're jumbled. So they don't quite have it in chronological order. I found that with most of them."

Pash investigated and reflected on the backgrounds of the key antagonists in the campaign, too. One was Johnny Lewis, the chief Australian activist. "He was fantastic source material because he's so open and so honest. He was the son of a NSW premier. He came from a privileged background, if you like. His life was totally different to that of some of the whalers, such as Paddy Hart, who grew up in a very poor family in Ireland. He remembers when his Dad

was out of work for a few years. The issue of eating three meals a day was a big one. So when these blokes came along trying to take his job, he didn't take too kindly to it. You'd have to say the activists probably came from middle-class backgrounds, whereas most of the whalers were working class."

Pash says that both sides have taken the book very well: "Each side, I think, now has a sensitivity and an understanding to the other side. So in a sense it has been like a reconciliation process." One, perhaps quite astonishing, outcome of this reconciliation concerns Paddy Hart, the former master of the *Cheyne II*, part of the Albany whale-chasing fleet. In mid-December 2008 he went to Tokyo, as a guest of Greenpeace, to protest against the Japanese whale hunt. He had met Steve Shellhorn, the CEO of Greenpeace, in Albany at the launch of *The Last Whale*. "They got on quite well," Pash says. "Steve invited him over to Japan."

The Last Whale is also sensitive to the fate of the whalers when the industry finally closed in Albany. It was not just a matter of the economic impact of unemployment. They also lost their status position in the local community. "It was a pretty well-respected job then," Pash says. "They were lost for a number of years and in a fair bit of pain. Paddy Hart, for instance, went from being the master of *Cheyne II* to being a boiler attendant at the wool mills, on about half the pay. He never really recovered."



West Australian
21/02/2009
Page: 26
Section: West Weekend Magazine
Region: Perth Circulation: 192964
Type: Capital City Daily
Size: 508.00 sq.cms
Frequency: MTWTFS-



“Some of the old deck hands I know still treat him like he’s the skipper. When I was researching, a lot of the deckhands would say, ‘Well, you better ask Paddy about that, I don’t know anything about that’. They wanted his permission to talk. So I feel very good about how the book has turned out.”

John-Paul Fortom-Gouin, one of the most central actors in the drama, was the most difficult to track down. Fortom-Gouin is a millionaire Frenchman with a passion for the fate of the whales. He personally financed the whole campaign. Of the estimated \$1 million he donated worldwide, \$100,000 went to the Albany efforts.

“I met him at the time but did not know the extent of his involvement,” Pash says. “He went on to become a leading light in the movement globally. But he disappeared. It was very difficult to find him. But I eventually did through a blog post ... I got an email from him.”

Mr Fortom-Gouin told Pash that he made his money in asset management. “I had clients who let me manage their money in a tax haven,” he says in *The Last Whale*. “And if I got them more than a set percentage I got a significant amount. I was either pretty good at it or pretty lucky.”

Chris Pash will be a guest at the 2009 Perth Writers Festival from February 28-March 2. For more details visit perthfestival.com.au.