

International and Comparative

Paita, Outpost of Empire: The Impact of the New England Whaling Fleet on the Socioeconomic Development of Northern Peru, 1832–1865. By WILLIAM L. LOFSTROM. Mystic: Mystic Seaport Museum, 1996. Plates. Maps. Figures. Appendix. Notes. Glossary. Bibliography. Index. xv, 232 pp. Paper. \$24.95.

Paita is a city on the north coast of Peru, the fifth-largest port in the nation. William Lofstrom has written a book about the U.S. presence in this faraway place from 1832 to 1865. For most of his research, Lofstrom has relied on travel accounts and, much more heavily, on U.S. consular dispatches from Paita.

Of the various research documents historians look at, consular dispatches can be perhaps the most fun to read, filled with tales of human folly, little crimes, ambition, big crimes, and small successes. What Lofstrom has mainly done in this book is read the consular reports from Paita and sum up what they say.

Paita once had its hour. Before gas lamps or electricity, people lit their homes with whale oil lamps. Sperm whales provided the best oil, and these creatures roamed mostly in the Pacific Ocean. New England whalers, in increasing numbers in the 1830s and after, left the Atlantic (home to the inferior “right” whales), rounded Cape Horn, and set out into the Pacific to hunt and kill sperm whales. On these lengthy voyages of two to three years, the sailing vessels needed to put into port every three or four months. There they would get fresh water and food, fix things that had broken on their ships, drop off barrels of whale oil for storage until the final trip home, deposit sailors too sick or injured to work, and give the other men an opportunity for recreation. Paita was a place for all this.

Lofstrom set several worthy goals for his study, seeking to explain how Paita served as a “socioeconomic bridge” between Peru and the United States; to consider the impact of the whaling trade on the *espacio económico* of Paita and its hinterland; to explore the history of the U.S. hospital for U.S. seamen landed in Paita; and to see what lessons could be learned by carefully tracing the life histories of each of the consular officers who served in Paita in these years. Mostly, however, Lofstrom admits that his efforts to reach conclusions about these matters were frustrated by gaps in the historical record and by the limits of what consular dispatches can reveal.

This is not a book of large conclusions, but it still has a certain charm. Lofstrom has the ability to sweep the reader away with stories of whaling ships on the high seas, or of young men leaving their homes to try to make their fortunes on the other side of the globe. This is a book about dreams, wild schemes, and some pretty amazing adventures. Readers could do worse than spend a little time with this enjoyable book.

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