CHAPTER SEVEN

WHALING AND FISHING

Tsushima Strait, flowing south of the Tsushima Island group with the Japanese main island of Honshū to the east and Kyūshū to the south, has served since prehistoric times as a migration route between Korea and Japan and a corridor for invading armies, most notably the Mongolian fleet thwarted by a typhoon – the archetypal *kamikaze* (‘divine wind’) – during a bold attempt to conquer Japan in the thirteenth century. Over the years the strait also nurtured an indigenous Japanese whaling industry. When villagers spotted a whale from the coast, they scrambled aboard boats and raised a din with drums and cymbals, chasing the animal into a submerged net and using hand-thrown spears and swords to make the kill. The whale was hauled ashore and dismembered, every last part being consumed or implemented for various purposes. The great blessing of the whale catch is illustrated by the Japanese saying *kujira ittō de nanaura uruuso* (‘One whale enriches seven villages’). This early method gradually disappeared in the nineteenth century when American and British whaling vessels began to operate off the coasts of East Asia, capturing whales before they reached Japanese waters and collecting the valuable blubber.

The next important event in the Japanese whaling industry was the adoption of the harpoon gun, a cannon-like device installed on the whaling vessel and used to fire a spear with a grenade at the tip that exploded inside the whale after penetration. Developed in Norway, this innovation dramatically increased the efficiency of the catch and made Norway a leading force in the international whaling industry. It also led to the construction of modern whale catchers, the first of which – the *Spes et Fides* (Hope and Faith) – reached completion in Christiana (Oslo) in 1863.¹

The first entrepreneur to successfully implement the Norwegian method in Japanese waters was H.H. Kejzerling, a former Russian naval officer who had served on the *Pamiat Azova* when that ship carried the future Tsar Nicholas II to Nagasaki in May 1891. Kejzerling established the Pacific Whaling Co. in 1894 with facilities in the port of Kaidamark near

Vladivostok and began operations along the coast of the Korean Peninsula using two steam-powered whale catchers – the *Nicholai* and the *Georgie* – built at the Akers Mekaniske Verksted in Christiana. The whales harvested during the winter were hauled to Nagasaki and sold whole in local markets, where the demand for whale meat was insatiable. After a successful run in the winter of 1896, Kejzerling arranged for the two ships to be repainted at the Kosuge Ship Repair Dock south of the Nagasaki Foreign Settlement. The editor of *The Rising Sun and Nagasaki Express* took the opportunity to view the ships and reported as follows on their unusual trappings:

In the bows, a harpoon gun, a somewhat curious looking object working upon a swivel, stands above a sloping iron platform upon which the harpoon line is coiled. The head of each harpoon contains a bomb, the explosion of which spreads the barbs of the instrument and embeds them in the whale. A boat is then launched and the animal is brought alongside and secured by some curious looking India-rubber strops attached to the fore rigging and then towed in towards the coast to the steam schooner *Siberia*, where the blubber is removed and ‘trying out’ operations conducted, while the captor rejoins her consort in search of fresh monsters of the deep.²

The following year the newspaper reported that Kejzerling and his crews had captured seventy-four whales from January to May, that all of the carcasses had been brought to Nagasaki for sale, and that a total of 23,000 *piculs* (about 1,390 tonnes) of meat had passed through the local market.³ This commercial windfall was enhanced by an exclusive concession from the Korean government allowing the Pacific Whaling Co. to establish facilities for the landing and processing of whales in three Korean ports. It also aroused the attention of competitors. One of the first entrepreneurs in Japan to contest Kejzerling’s monopoly was, of course, Frederick Ringer. The book ‘History of Norwegian-style Whaling in Japan’ published by the Oriental Whaling Company of Osaka in 1910 states that Ringer was so impressed by Kejzerling’s successes that he established his own whaling consortium with headquarters in the Holme, Ringer & Co. office at No. 7 Ōura.⁴ The consortium is referred to in this book as the *eirojinkumiai*

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² *The Rising Sun and Nagasaki Express*, 17 June 1896.
³ *The Nagasaki Press*, 2 July 1898. A term coined in the British colonies of Asia, *picul* refers to a Chinese unit of measurement equivalent to about sixty kilogrammes, or the amount that a human labourer is capable of carrying in one load.
⁴ Tōyō Hogei Kabushiki Kaisha (ed.), *Honpō no noruweishiki hogeishi* (History of Norwegian-style Whaling in Japan (Tōyō Hoge Kaishisha [Oriental Whaling Company, Ltd.], 1910, pp. 185–7.}