Cod: A Biography of the Fish That Changed the World
by Mark Kurlansky
294 pages. Paperback, $15

In Mark Kurlansky’s history, Cod: A Biography of the Fish That Changed the World, there’s a quote that sums up the situation best. It’s taken from Sir Walter Scott’s 1816 novel, The Antiquary: “It’s no fish ye’re buying: It’s men’s lives.”

Cod is Kurlansky’s ambitious nonfiction account of how centuries of commercial greed, international rivalries, and disdain for nature’s danger signs converged to all but eliminate a fish that once was so abundant that its extinction was inconceivable.

Cod fishing has been essential to human survival since 985 A.D., when the Vikings made their first of five voyages to America, sustained by cod that had been dried as planks in the winter air. Demand for cod initiated the first trade between Europe and the New World. After the Basques, from Spain, mastered the use of salt to improve flavor and preserve the catch, explorers provisioned with salted, dried cod were able to travel farther in their search for the elusive route to China.

Over the centuries, as the main ingredient of fish and chips, bacalao, chowder, codfish balls, and frozen fish sticks, cod has been a dietary staple in countries from Scandinavia to the Mediterranean, North America and the Caribbean, sustaining the masses and providing steady employment at sea and on land.

Atlantic cod were once enormous—many reportedly weighing more than 200 pounds and measuring five to six feet apiece—and numerous, particularly off the coasts of New England, Newfoundland, and Labrador, writes Kurlansky. In the Gulf of Maine, no fish has approached cod’s importance for most of the past 4,500 years.

Along with advances in shipbuilding, relentless demand for cod spawned new fishing technologies. In recent years, the most notable were the factory ships, whose efficiency in catching and processing huge quantities of fish vastly exceeded what traditional fishing fleets could accomplish. Nature depends on cod to filter saltwater for other species. The nonstop operations of factory ships, however, interrupted the balance within marine ecosystems. Modern nations have imposed moratoriums on cod fishing to give the fish time to return in greater numbers and restore that balance. But here and abroad, it may be too late. For many traditional fishing communities, it may also be too late to preserve a way of life that has endured for generations.

Kurlansky points out that when the Pilgrims left England and landed in America, they were completely unprepared to feed themselves, having neither adequate tools nor the skills needed to either farm or fish. Nearly starving, they survived only after they learned—through a combination of trial and error and from others with whom they came in contact—to catch and preserve Cape Cod’s namesake, and then prospered by trading groundfish to European markets.

Demand for cod has also triggered numerous battles between nations. From the 1950s to the 1970s, commercial interests sparked three international “cod wars.” The first was fought over territorial fishing limits that were extended out to 12 miles by Iceland and opposed by Britain and its allies (France, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, and Spain). Cod-rich Iceland, having won its independence from Denmark, was determined to secure its territorial waters, and eventually succeeded. In 1976, the European Economic Community established a European 200-mile zone and the “wars” were ended.

Since the 1970s, a continuing rise in the world’s per capita fish consumption and the changing economic base of several nations, notably Canada, have increased pressure on the stock. By
1994, in Labrador and Newfoundland, Kurlansky writes, “Canadian cod was not yet biologically extinct, but it was commercially extinct—so rare that it could no longer be considered commercially viable.”

Focusing on culinary and world history, Kurlansky makes a compelling case for heeding the lessons of the past and manages to do so without preachiness. He is a thorough researcher who worked for years in commercial fishing and later as a foreign correspondent in Europe, Mexico, and the Caribbean. He is also a former chef and pastry maker, who went on to write about food history for culinary magazines. This book earned him the coveted James Beard Award for food writing. The numerous recipes in the book, both modern and archaic, were included to illustrate food-preparation techniques in many cultures through the ages rather than excite the palate.

Atlantic cod are hardy, writes Kurlansky. A stable population requires only that two offspring survive from among the millions of eggs produced by each female. Cod will eat almost anything, and are parasite- and disease-resistant. If the young survive a first perilous year, they have many prey and few predators. Their chief predator is man.

Never has there been a more pivotal time than now to consider the plight of a single species as a bellwether for global change. —Janet Mendelsohn

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Revisiting a Classic Sailing Saga

Great Dipper to Southern Cross: A Sailing Saga Revisited
by Edward H. Dodd, Jr.

Continued on page 74—
FEW YEARS AGO I came into possession of several boxes of material related to the early life of my uncle, the painter William Kienbusch. His mother—my grandmother—had dutifully collected school materials, including copies of “The Lit,” a student publication of the Hotchkiss School, a boarding school in Connecticut, which Bill attended from 1928 to 1932.

An editor of “The Lit,” Bill also contributed poems and a number of book reviews. Among the latter was an appreciation of Edward H. Dodd, Jr.’s *Great Dipper to Southern Cross*, an account of a group of five Yale students who decide to sail to Australia following graduation. Intrigued by my uncle’s favorable opinion, I ordered the book by interlibrary loan and proceeded to relive a remarkable journey.

Part of the charm of Dodd’s book is the willy-nilly manner in which the initial decision to sail halfway around the world is made. The five classmates gave themselves two months to find and outfit a boat, all the while finishing up their final semester at Yale. After dismissing several candidates (including the Carrie I. Hirtle of Portland), they settled on *Chance*, a 76-foot Grand Banks fishing schooner built in Shelburne, Nova Scotia, in 1926. In addition to having “grace and poise in her slim body and sturdy sticks,” the boat had the required speed and endurance necessary to make the trip, characteristics, Dodd writes, “evolved from over a century’s experience in boat building for the North Atlantic fishing fleet.”
They set off from New London, Connecticut, on July 12, 1929; the first leg of the cruise, the shakedown, would take the crew of five to Bermuda. And shaky it was at the start: the boat almost didn’t make it to Block Island thanks to a near collision with a steamer in a thick fog. There are quite a few close calls of one sort or another, with a lesson attached to each, as the boat makes its way across the Caribbean to Panama and the Pacific beyond.

Dodd’s account is full of sailing, yet for this landlubber unable to differentiate a mast from a hole in the deck, the prose proved consistently engaging. Describing the “charm of the sea” en route to Bermuda, for example, the author captures a special joy: “Often someone could be seen hanging his head over the fantail to watch the water swirl by the rudder—that crystal clear, translucent water of deep sparkling blue that can be found only under the stern of a sailing ship well out at sea.”

Such eloquent descriptions are the norm.

Especially entertaining are accounts of day-to-day shipboard life. The men learn how to schedule watches and meals, bathe in rainstorms, cook an iguana stew, and clean up after the dog they bring on board in the Galapagos Islands (a gift of Kaare Urholt, a Norwegian, one of many eccentric islanders the crew meets along the way). They mount a memorable campaign against an infestation of cockroaches and manage to roll cigarettes using the blank pages of the Oxford Book of English Verse.

“A ship is certainly a thief of privacy as no other thing is,” Dodd observes at one point, “yet there is no more perfect isolation than to sit with the stars at the top of a swaying mast.”

There’s plenty of “Perfect Storm” action, including a white squall near Tahiti and a string of ferocious gales that nearly destroys the schooner in the final stretch to Sydney, Australia. Here’s an image from the latter: “The whole ocean seemed to have picked up its baggage and was rushing helter-skelter to the other side of the earth.”

The crew’s bible, the Pilot Book, “adopts a venomous tone when it treats

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of the Gulf of Panama” and notes that “desertions and attempted desertions from ships were common” in Tahiti.

Ports of call offer respites from the rolling ocean as the sailors partake of local amenities, from the Royal Bermuda Yacht Club to more primitive digs in the South Sea islands, where the crew adopts the local attire, the pareu, a simple all-weather wrap of red-flowered cloth. A nine-week-long ramble through the Panama Canal region allows the author to describe this bizarre part of the world where so many cultures intermingle—and where vessels range from Byrd’s Antarctic base ship City of New York to the Carnegie, the non-magnetic brigantine operated by the Carnegie Institute (the ship blew up in Samoa in 1931). A couple of members of the Chance crew end up in jail after being caught filching a no parking sign, “worded in florid Spanish,” from a street in Panama City (some college pranks never change).

To a modern-day reader, the amateur anthropological observations may ring of political incorrectness, if not racism. A Jamaican fisherman referred to as a “broad-shouldered darky” seems harmless compared to the following observation, about the natives of New Caledonia: “these burly fellows were the closest we had yet seen to the lowest of low types, the Australian aborigine.” On the other hand, the author recognizes the insidious nature of colonization, at one point noting how the crew felt “irked rather than pleased at the paternal policy of the United States, which has muse-

umized Samoa instead of allowing it to develop in a natural way.” They also end up sharing the skepticism of the South Sea islanders toward misguided missionaries.

Several appendices will thrill the sailor looking for more detail. They include an inventory of supplies; a plan of Chance, a log of the voyage, with average sailing days and distances; and a summary of the ship’s “faults and her virtues” provided by Joseph Roby, Jr., one of the crew. The book is illustrated with around 90 black-and-white photographs.

Let’s let my Uncle Bill sum up: “The reader will be lured into following these five adventurous youths through the varied events of their course and, in doing so, will feel that he too has experienced the pleasures and perils that lay in the path of the Chance and her hardy crew, as they sailed from the Great Dipper to the Southern Cross.” I couldn’t have said it better.

—Carl Little