

In the Heart of the Sea



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Directed by Ron Howard. Produced by Ron Howard, Brian Grazer, Paula Weinstein, Joe Roth and Will Ward. Co-Producer William M. Connor. Production Design by Mark Tildesley. Cinematography by Anthony Dod Mantie. Screenplay by Charles Leavitt. Story by Charles Leavitt, Rick Jaffa and Amanda Silver. Based on *In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex* by Nathaniel Philbrick. Editing by Daniel P. Hanley & Mark Hill. Music by Roque Baños.

Cinematic length: 122 minutes. A Warner Brothers Feature. Presented by Village Roadshow. Cinematic Release: December 2015. Rating varies PGR to R

Rating ***** 80%.

Cast:

First Mate Owen Chase: Chris Hemsworth

Captain George Pollard Junior: Benjamin Walker

Second Mate Mathew Joy: Cillian Murphy

Old Thomas Nickerson: Brendan Gleeson

Young Thomas Nickerson: Tom Holland

Peggy Chase: Charlotte Riley

Herman Melville: Ben Wishaw

Mrs Nickerson: Michelle Fairley

Seaman Owen Coffin: Frank Dillane

Boatsteerer Thomas Chappel: Paul Anderson

Boatsteerer Benjamin Lawrence: Joseph Mawle

Seaman Isaac Cole: Jamie Sives

Seaman Barzallai Ray: Edward Ashley

Seaman Richard Peterson: Osi Khile

Seaman William Wright: Luca Tosi

Seaman Seth Weeks: Nick Tabone

Steward William Bond: Gary Beadle

The Spanish Captain: Jordi Mollà

The *Essex*'s Owner Paul Macy: Donald Sumpter



Chris Hemsworth as First Mate Owen Chase

In the Heart of the Sea is a well-made, engrossing film that does not have scrappy or cheap special effects, does not overburden itself with famous faces, meander or become a schadenfreude film; the four most likely pitfalls considering the epic feel and the topic matter. Unfortunately it apparently falls into another pitfall. Any film (such as this one) that purports to be revealing the historic reality behind a famous fictional work must stick with what are known historical facts. While many of the survivors gave slightly differing accounts, unless entries in the Smithsonian, Wikipedia and many other internet sources are wrong and this film's sources are corrections to historical fallacies, this film makes many changes to history. Some of those changes are listed after this review. I admit to not having yet read the book this film is based on, so the film could be correct on what look like errors, but not with the easily found, detailed evidence currently available.

The film begins in Nantucket in 1850 when a young man who is researching a book turns up at a boarding house with money for an interview with an old man.

The young researcher turns out to be Herman Melville, (Ben Whishaw) the book he is writing will be *Moby Dick* and the old man is Thomas Nickerson (Brendan Gleeson). He was once a cabin boy on the whaling ship *Essex* and (in the film at least) he is the last survivor of the horrific voyage and Melville wants to pay him for his story - but the story he gives must be the truth, not a repeat of the cover-up that emerged at the board of enquiry. Initially Nickerson angrily refuses to give his story, but his wife (Michelle Fairley) warns him that this could be a chance to resolve the tormenting problem which started on the *Essex* and now drives him to drinking himself to death. So, the retelling starts and the film goes back and forward between the events of 1820/1821 and the retelling in 1850, with most of the story being set in the earlier period.

Trouble begins before the voyage as First mate Owen Chase (Chris Hemsworth) has been promised the captaincy of the *Essex* by whaling magnate Paul Macy (Donald Sumpter) but he finds that Macy has reneged and given the captaincy to George Pollard Junior. (Benjamin Walker) He is a young scion of a prominent whaling family but he knows little about seamanship and less about getting on with people. He deliberately humiliates Chase in an attempt to control him. The second mate Mathew Joy (Cillian Murphy) sides with Chase and together they ameliorate the effects of several of the captain's disastrous decisions – but not the most important one, which is to go over a thousand leagues from the nearest land on the Spanish captain's story of massive whale numbers – and to ignore the warning of the danger of a great white whale that destroys boats and their crews.



The film has many moments of great visual beauty that contains elements of danger





Brendan Gleeson as Thomas Nickerson in 1850.



Ben Wishaw as Herman Melville

The conflict with that whale leads to a harrowing tragedy which few survive, but after depicting that with a restraint that does not evade sordid realities, the film concludes with an optimism about the human spirit. *In the Heart of the Sea* should not be considered as history, either the history of the *Essex* or as part of the origins of *Moby Dick*. One aspect that it could be considered as is an elegy to whaling as a way of life. This is implied in the film's last words when Nickerson and Melville muse on what to them is the extraordinary fact that oil has just been discovered on land. Within less than twenty years that discovery would put the whaling way of life on the wane. Through the film references are made to the necessity for oil and how it is used. An elegy is not a paean; this film shows the ugliness, the brutality, the suffering and deaths for both humans and whales that getting that oil costs.

In the Heart of the Sea also shows that humans can overcome anything, even their own disastrous mistakes.

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Chasing the whales in the longboats

The Errors

The *Essex* began its voyage in 1819 not 1820 and Thomas Nickerson was fourteen when the voyage began, not seventeen in 1820.

Herman Melville already knew much about the *Essex* tragedy as Owen Chase had written an account that he had read years before. When he visited Nantucket in

1852, after writing *Moby Dick* he conferred with Captain Pollard, whom he found to be impressive, unassuming and even humble. Melville did not press Pollard on matters he found distressing. *In the Heart of the Sea* shows Melville as pushing Nickerson for his story in 1850, getting inspiration for his not yet written novel. Did he ever really meet Nickerson?

In an 1850 scene Melville addresses Nickerson as “the last survivor” of the *Essex* tragedy. Pollard would live to 1870, Chase to March 1869. Perhaps others among the other five survivors were also alive then.

Mathew Joy is shown in a long scene as electing to stay on Henderson Island. In reality only three men stayed there. Joy went with the boats and died at sea two weeks later.

Coffin did not shoot himself rather than shoot his cousin Captain Pollard, who is shown drawing the fatal straw that meant he was to die. Coffin drew that straw, accepted his fate and was shot by his friend. Pollard did offer to go to his death in Coffin’s place, but Coffin rejected it.

Chase, Nickerson and Benjamin Lawrence did not drift into a Latin American port as the film shows. They were rescued by a British whaler at sea.

The film has Melville trying to find the truth beneath the cover-up. Actually well before 1850 several of the survivors had written accounts that while differing in details, mentioned the essential aspects.

The Omissions

Pollard was not always the weak and foolish bully that he appears to be here and Chase was far from being tough seafaring wisdom incarnate. After the sinking Pollard wanted to sail for the nearest land, the Marquesas, but Chase led the crew into refusal as they incorrectly believed the islands to be populated by cannibals. The Marquesas were 1,200 kilometres away. Chase’s choice meant a 1,600 journey south to catch the westerlies that would take them to South America – after 4,800 kilometres more drifting, rowing and sailing. This was a total journey of 6,400 kilometres. This totalled over five times the distance of the journey to the Marquesas. The westerlies did not blow and twelve of the twenty crewman died. Melville believed that if they had sailed for the Marquesas they would have survived: very likely. When they reached Henderson Island they were 170 miles from Pitcairn Island, which was populated and had abundant supplies. If they had sailed west instead of east everyone would have survived.

In 1876, encouraged by a visiting writer, Nickerson wrote his account of the events, but his manuscript was mislaid by the writer, found in 1960, put through an extensive verification process and published in 1984.

After the rescue and the enquiry Pollard is depicted as a failed sea captain later in life while Chase becomes a captain and eventually owns his own boat. True enough, but this was not the end of their real stories. After being rejected for further commands, Pollard went on to become the Nantucket nightwatchman who impressed Melville with his qualities. Chase's wife died after his return and he married again, twice. He retired from the sea in 1840 and lived in Nantucket. In old age Chase became obsessive, haunted by headaches, nightmares and fears and habitually hoarding food. He was eventually institutionalised. The two antagonists came to very different ends than those suggested by the film.

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