



Who Killed the Great Auk?

Jeremy Gaskell

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Who Killed the Great Auk? Jeremy Gaskell

Part scientific mystery, part cultural history, part intellectual archaeology, *Who Killed the Great Auk?* vividly tells the story of the extinction that helped launch the first conservation movement.

The Great Auk was a large, flightless bird with tiny wings and an enormous beak. Its clumsy, erect gait on land made it an easy target for sailors and landsmen alike, who hunted it for its ample flesh and soft down, and eagerly gathered its eggs. Over time, the Great Auk began to appear less frequently; then rarely; then never again. By the end of the nineteenth century, even the most intrepid explorers could no longer find this once-common bird. Gaskell shows how the Great Auk's disappearance became a cause celebre. It sparked a frenzy among collectors, fascinated writers such as Charles Kingsley, and obsessed such influential ornithologists as John Wolley and John James Audubon, who helped push for the first legislation to protect seabirds. But as Gaskell shows, the extinction of the Great Auk was not a straightforward tale of overhunting. In this subtle, nuanced book, he reveals the ways in which its fate was inextricably bound up with the social, economic, and political history of the time.

Who Killed the Great Auk? is nature writing at its best. From the journey of Audubon to Labrador to the hardships of life in early Newfoundland, it takes readers on a tour of some of the wildest and coldest places on earth. And at the end of the story, we understand a little more clearly how we came to value even the oddest inhabitants of the natural world.

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