

The Last Fish Tale – The Fate of the Atlantic and Our Disappearing Fisheries
by Mark Kurlansky.
Jonathan Cape 2008.

Mark Kurlansky's books Cod and Salt were the first biographies of 'things' rather than people that made the best seller lists, and his subsequent books have maintained the high standard that he set from the start. He researches his subject meticulously but then makes it his own and writes about it in an approachable and entertaining way.

All his qualities as a writer are to the fore in The Last Fish Tale, which has twin themes; the first being the story of the Massachusetts fishing town of Gloucester, the second the fate of the fish they catch, together with the fishermen of many other nations, which are now showing signs of massive, and possibly irrecoverable, decline. Interspersed in the story of both are a number of recipes, both from Gloucester and its sister town of Newlyn in Cornwall.

The history of Gloucester is fascinating, both in terms of its relationship with the sea and also its internal relationship with the waves of immigrants that have settled in it and contributed to its life; as well as fisherman, especially from Portugal and Sicily, Gloucester is also renowned for its artists, among them Charles and Emile Gruppe, William Meyerowitz and the sculptor Charles Grafly.

Underpinning the entirety of the Last Fish Tale are the fish themselves and the vicissitudes of fishing; these latter embrace the dangers of fishing in the north Atlantic in sailing schooners, the ultimate price paid by the members of so many Gloucester families as they pursued the fish, and the apparently irreversible decline in some species which have been the staples of Gloucester diets – and those further afield – for centuries. As quotas have bitten deep more and more fishermen are finding it impossible to make a living and the character of fishing towns like Gloucester is changing as traditional trades are squeezed to death.

The Last Fish Tale is both a splendid work of history and a parable for our time and shows Mark Kurlansky at the very top of his form.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh