

Nature Boy 2004 Robert Hollingworth [pp 115 – 118]

Arthur Hollingworth Fishing at Lorne

4

Soon after my fifth birthday my father buys a license to operate as a professional fisherman. For three years, when the fishing is good at Lorne, Arthur and his partner Fred Dicker take their boat to sea to catch barracouta and snapper and to set the pots for crayfish. When they return with their catch, the boat is first unloaded on a lower deck of the pier. Late in the afternoon several boats might circle around, their big inboard diesels popping, waiting their turn to unload the boxes of fish. Then the craft is hooked to a crane and winched right out of the sea. It is positioned carefully on the pier and propped upright in its own parking bay and the sight of these two-tonne vessels parked in rows high and dry on the pier is a tourist attraction in itself. Visitors regularly stroll out along the pier careful not to obstruct the trolleys that run on rails one hundred and eighty metres from boat to shore where the Fish Co-op stores, sorts, fillets and freezes the daily catch. They come to see the fishermen, to inspect the rough sea craft, to take in the whiff of the ocean floor exposed to the sun and to watch the boats spectacularly hoisted to the pier.

At the age of six I go to sea with my father and his partner. They bring the boat alongside the pier's lower deck and, timing the rocking craft, I jump aboard. The big inboard throbs loudly, driving the spindle that turns the bronze propeller churning the water white. We rise and fall with the heaving swell, the bow slaps the troughs and the sea spray rises. There's the smell of fish and diesel embedded in the

roughened wood, the slick of oil and fish scales in the bilge, the rope and the twine and the line, the sharp hooks and the ocean's controlling power pitching the heavy craft. I'm consumed by the heady mix of purpose, speculation and uncertainty. And far out at sea, as we motor across the rolling swell, there is only the sublime sense of unlimited space and abandonment, like the gift of flight. And beneath the craft there is a world as deep, dangerous and unknowable as any far-off galaxy.

Far from land the two men trawl the jigs behind the boat. This is all that is needed to catch couta – just a short length of painted wood that has a very large barbless hook wired to it. The men throw salted whitebait as we motor on, enticing a school of fish to rise up from the deep. And then it begins. The couta arrive and immediately go into a feeding frenzy latching onto anything that falls into the sea. Then the men work feverishly pulling the white cord with the jig attached, snatching the flexing fish from the water. For a time it is a scene of immense excitement and the hold is a seething mass of thrashing barracouta, some nearly a metre long. And the men draw the lines again and again, hand-over-hand and each time the jig is returned to the sea, another row of razor teeth clamp upon it. The gulls and terns wheel overhead, the mast rocks like a metronome and I stay well up in the bow out of the way, clear of the fish's thrash and the flashing hooks. And afterwards everything is shimmering with thousands of fine fish scales. Unlike other fish, couta shed their scales as soon as they are pulled from the sea.

My father has a lucky number. It is forty-two because that is the most boxes of barracouta he has ever caught in a day's fishing. On that occasion, they chugged home to the pier with barely a half metre of freeboard and couta almost up to the combings. It is an exciting

moment and the fish are truly abundant. But no-one can see the future; a time when the barracouta will no longer teem the water near Lorne and the fishing boom will come to an end. The need to lift the boats onto the pier because there is no safe anchorage restricts the boats to seven metres. They will not be able to range further and further with bigger, better, equipment as they will do elsewhere.

At first there are thirty-two boats operating from the pier and many others come around from Queenscliff. There are still twenty-seven boats in 1954 when my father chugs home with his forty-two boxes. By the turn of the century just two boats will sit forlornly on the modified pier, pointing south like artefacts from an ancient culture.

Can there be 'regrowth' in the sea just as there is on land? In the future, when there are enough dissenting voices, the government will establish more marine national parks and sanctuaries – no-go zones for any harvesters – and no doubt this will help protect and replenish certain pockets of sedentary sea creatures. But it is unlikely that our coastlines will ever match the one experienced by the first travellers to Lorne in the early 1900s. At that time, locals lured large crayfish from the rock crevices with a length of string and a lump of muttonfish – a local term for abalone. A half a century later the big crayfish along the shoreline will all be gone, but still the fishing craft will not have to venture far to make a fair living.

The fishermen in the fifties see Jack Quick's fleet of trucks take one hundred and five tons of couta from Lorne to Melbourne in a single day. But they do not see a time when the reverse will apply, when the fish that the tourists buy at the Lorne pier will actually come from the markets in Melbourne. They do not imagine a time when there are no couta at all, when the krill that turns the water orange for kilometres ahead of the fish is all gone. Each year in June they see

many thousands of dolphins pass the pier travelling south in schools that stretch to the horizon. It is a spectacle that no future Australian will ever witness and beneath the swell the sea will gradually empty. A future generation will not even notice it; the waves will still crash to shore and the postcards will look the same.