



Dead and injured sealers from the Newfoundland being carried to the Belleventure (Archives and Manuscripts, Queen Elizabeth II Library, Memorial University, coll 115 16.04.038).

The Newfoundland Disaster

- Robert Cuff

This event occurred when 132 sealers, crewmen of the S.S. *Newfoundland*, were stranded on the sea ice at the Front during a winter storm of 31 March 1914, while attempting to return to their vessel from the S.S. *Stephano*. Although the storm had abated by the afternoon of 1 April, through a series of misunderstandings (and also due to the fact that the *Newfoundland*, unlike most other vessels at the hunt that year, was not equipped with a wireless) it was not known that the men had become stranded before they had spent an unprecedented second night on ice. The survivors were rescued¹ on 2 April. Of the 132 stranded, 78² died.

The *Newfoundland* disaster is the Province's second-largest sealing disaster, exceeded only by the 173 who died in the loss of the S.S. *Southern Cross*, which sank with all hands while

¹ Principally by the crew of the S.S. *Belleventure*.

² Although some sources put the loss of life at 77 (Greene 1933:64), this figure discounts one man who died after being landed at St. John's.

returning from the seal hunt in the Gulf of St. Lawrence during the same 31 March/1 April 1914 storm. This double tragedy resulted in 1914 becoming known as the “disaster spring”³ at the seal hunt. Hence the historic impact/importance of the two coincident events must in some respects be considered together. However, while the loss of life on the *Southern Cross* was the greater, the historic impact of the *Newfoundland* tragedy on the Province is unique. Whereas the *Cross* was lost virtually without a trace, the landing of the injured and the frozen corpses of the *Newfoundland* dead at St. John’s on 4 April, the rescue and dramatic accounts of the survivors, widely-circulated photographs, and the controversy over whether Captain Abram Kean of the *Stephano* was to blame for the stranding, all contributed to an oft-told and stirring tale.

The seal hunt was a rich source of our collective oral history, given that it brought together men from outports all over Newfoundland. Our two best eyewitness accounts of sealing after 1914 (England 1924 and Greene 1933), both describe the dramatic story-telling sessions below decks that preserved graphic details of the disaster. In my own family lore, two of best-known tales have to do with my grandparents’ own small involvement in the tragedy (although this was before they met) – grandmother joining the crush in the Famish Gut [now Fairhaven] telegraph office as the names of the victims were read off the wire, and grandfather watching from the Signal Hill fever hospital as the *Belle* come in through the Narrows with the bodies. It was the richness of the oral tradition, from such a variety of perspectives, that made Cassie Brown’s *Death on the Ice* (1972) so compelling.

Images of the tragedy, from the rescue to the frozen bodies stacked “like cordwood” on the hatch of the *Belleventure*, were widely circulated as postcards and thus have seared the collective memory even as the events have dropped from living memory with the close of the 20th century.

The question of who was to blame for the tragedy has also endured. “[T]he immediate focus of attention was Abram Kean, who had sent the men back out on the ice in uncertain weather. He became in many eyes, and certainly in [F.P.U. president William F.] Coaker’s, the villain of the piece” (O’Flaherty2005:269). Captain Kean status as the “Commodore” of the sealing fleet ensured that even as his legend grew, the whispered undercurrent of controversy remained.

³ Hogan (2008:27-34) provides a concise, well-researched, account of the events.

Consequently, the drama of the *Newfoundland* disaster remains one of the best-known episodes in our history and one that has endured in our artistic expressions and collective memory.

“Although the *Newfoundland* disaster resulted in fewer deaths than that of the *Southern Cross*, its shocking details sparked a more intense and emotional response from the public” (Higgins 2007).

The historic context of sealing disasters

The "Greenland Disaster" became a turning point for Newfoundland society. For the first time people expressed their concern publicly over the risk to lives in the seal fishery. They were no longer satisfied with the view that disasters were "Acts of God" for which no mortal was to blame (Ryan 1993: 37).

“Oh! The story of those who suffered and lived/And those who suffered and died,” from Maurice Devine’s contemporary poem, “the *Greenland* Disaster,” (Ryan and Small 1978:53).

The vessel-based spring seal hunt is inherently dangerous. History is replete with losses at sea from winter storms and vessels being crushed in the ice. As the size of vessels increased throughout the 19th century, pursuing seals farther from shore with larger crews, the potential for significant loss of life increased.

Arguably, the first “great” sealing disaster was the loss of the sailing vessel *Huntsman*, out of Bay Roberts, which ran aground during a sudden storm off the Labrador coast on 28 April 1872, with the loss of 43⁴ out of a crew of 62. Three years later another Bay Roberts-based vessel, the auxiliary steamer *Tigress*, was lost at the ice with 25 of her crew when her boilers exploded. The next⁵ great sealing disaster was the “Trinity Bay disaster” of 1892, when more than 100 landsmen were swept out to sea with the ice-pack (24 killed). Each highlights a different hazard of the 19th century seal hunt.

As the use of steam vessels at the seal hunt became common, (1863-1880), a significant added risk was the practice of “panning.” More powerful vessels allowed captains the option of

⁴ Various accounts put the loss of life from the *Huntsman* between 42 and 45. There were also three smaller sealing vessels lost during the same storm, for a death toll approaching 100. The previous “record” for a single loss of life was the *Deerhound* tragedy of 1868, when 28 men were lost when a storm came on while they were away from their mother vessel, pursuing the seals in punts. By some accounts as many as 90 men died in the “Spring of the Wadhams” in 1852, when more than 50 small vessels were crushed by the ice.

⁵ The *Lion*, lost with 28 hands while en route from St. John’s to Trinity to outfit for the seal fishery in 1882, is also sometimes listed among sealing disasters.

dropping off portions of the crew at each “patch” of seals sighted. The sealers would pile the pelts on an ice pan marked by a ship’s flag, for later collection, and move on to the next patch, potentially moving farther and farther away from their ship as the day went on.⁶

Panning played a significant role in the loss of life in the *Greenland* disaster of 1898, when 154 sealers became separated from their vessel while panning and were forced to spend a night on the ice. The 48 killed established a “record” in an industry (some would even say national sport) tracked by a myriad of statistics, from the number of pelts taken, to the lifetime tallies of the “jowlers,” to the common sealers’ “bill.” The *Greenland* is the *Newfoundland*’s only rival as the greatest of sealing tragedies.

The relative significance of the *Newfoundland* disaster

This was a stunning blow to the country... The stories were poignant, heroic, painful to hear or read, some grisly. The colony was enveloped in sorrow and incredulity... all added a dark colouring to the spring and early summer of 1914 (O’Flaherty 2005:268-269).

The “significance” of a historical event is clearly subjective. However, for the purposes of the Provincial Historic Commemorations Program some relative measure of the significance of the *Newfoundland* is necessary. Although the Program is a new initiative, two other events involving loss of life are among the three events commemorated to date: the 18 November 1929 Burin Peninsula tsunami (27 killed) and the 4/5 September 1942 U-boat attacks on ships loading ore at Bell Island (29 killed). By the facile measure of loss of life involved, clearly the *Newfoundland* disaster is more significant than either. Indeed there have been very few marine disasters in Newfoundland’s history with greater loss of life than the *Newfoundland*: the wrecks of the *Anglo-Saxon*⁷ (237 killed, 1863), *Pollux* and *Truxtun* (203, 1942), *Southern Cross* (173, 1914), *Caribou* (147, 1942), *Florizel* (93, 1918) and the *Ocean Ranger* (84, 1982). The 1982 loss of the oil rig *Ocean Ranger* is a “living-memory” event of comparable impact – a peacetime marine disaster with significant loss of life that called into public question safety practices in one of the Province’s core industries. Rather than try to summarize for the Board the personal impact of the

⁶ Candow (1989:86-91) addresses historical developments in health and safety conditions at the seal hunt, stating that panning led to a marked deterioration on conditions both on the ice while sealing and on the ships themselves. In 1914 the log of William Coaker records that on initial report of the *Newfoundland* disaster the men were universal in ascribing the loss of life, like the *Greenland*, to the practice of panning (Baker 2010:237).

⁷ It is possible to consider that the loss of the *Titanic* (1517 killed, 1912) was a “Newfoundland” event, even though it was lost well out to sea. While the *Anglo-Saxon* was also a transatlantic passenger liner with no intention of landing in Newfoundland, it wrecked on land and the rescue effort was a local affair.

century-old *Newfoundland* disaster on contemporaries, perhaps it is as well to recall the impact of the *Ocean Ranger* tragedy on our own lives, both at the time and 30 years on. The impact of the *Newfoundland* disaster can also be compared to what has often been identified as the blackest day in our history, 1 July 1916, the first day of the Battle of the Somme. Taken together, the loss of 251 lives from the *Newfoundland* and *Southern Cross* in 1914 comprise the greatest documented⁸ marine disaster, with a tally comparable to the 255 lives lost⁹ on 1 July 1916 at Beaumont Hamel.

A survey of the three most-recent general histories of Newfoundland¹⁰ demonstrates academic and popular consensus that the *Newfoundland* disaster is certainly one of the most remarkable and significant events in our collective memory.

The *Newfoundland* disaster in art and literature

It seems to me as something broke in the heart of our island that spring of 1914, and never rightly healed in after times (Captain Llewellyn Kean, cited in Mowat 1989:167).

The *Newfoundland* is also of recognized significance in our artistic tradition and expression. The disaster permeates the early work of one of Newfoundland and Labrador's most prominent visual artists, David Blackwood, whose *The Lost Party* series of 50 etchings is one of the largest and critically acclaimed thematically linked series of prints in Canadian history. The series is further a landmark in Newfoundland and Labrador's development, acceptance of, and public appreciation for, professional visual art and artists.

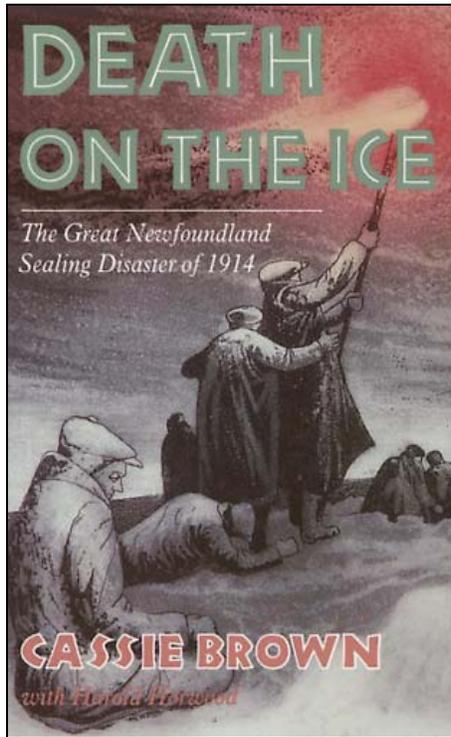
With sales of more than 100,000, Cassie Brown's 1972 account of the disaster, *Death on the Ice*, ranks highly among the most widely-read Newfoundland books of all time. Employed in the Province's schools since shortly after publication, *Death on the Ice* remains a Canadian classic of

⁸ A large number of lives (up to 4000 in some sources) are said to have been lost in Newfoundland waters during the Independence Hurricane of September 1775. O'Flaherty (1999:99) cites a contemporary estimate of 300 lost, but there is no real support for this number either. The Labrador Gale of October 1885 resulted in the loss of multiple vessels, with the figure of 300 lives also being bandied about.

⁹ That is, confirmed killed. Of the 91 who went missing in action that day, the vast majority surely died as well. While the impact of the *Newfoundland/Southern Cross* "disaster spring" was less than that of Beaumont Hamel, it is really the only mass loss of life that is comparable.

¹⁰ Kevin Major's *As Near to Heaven by Sea* (2001:299-301), Patrick O'Flaherty's *The Lost Country* (2005:268-269), and Sean Cadigan's *Newfoundland and Labrador: A History* (2009:185-186). In devoting two pages to the *Newfoundland* each discusses the disaster and its impact at greater length than either Beaumont Hamel or the *Ocean Ranger*.

the genre now usually distinguished as creative non-fiction. Blackwood's etching "the Lost Party waiting," featured on the cover of *Death on the Ice*, is thus one of Newfoundland's most familiar works of art.¹¹ Blackwood's work is also featured in a 1991 National Film Board of Canada documentary, "*I Just didn't want to die*": the 1914 Newfoundland Sealing Disaster.



In the realm of pure fiction, the *Newfoundland* disaster is also pivotal to Wayne Johnston's 1998 novel, *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*. Johnston's fictional Smallwood character travels to the ice as a reporter in 1914 and is profoundly moved by the events of that spring (pp. 109-115). It is while Smallwood is watching pelts from the *Newfoundland* being "skinned" that he is approached by socialist George Grimes, who "converts" the young reporter to his world-view and mission.¹²

¹¹ Although not as widely-reproduced as Blackwood's "Hauling Job Sturge's House," featured on the cover of E. Annie Proulx's 1993 Pulitzer Prize-winning mainstream novel *The Shipping News*. "Hauling Job Sturge's House" is further evidence of the enduring influence on Blackwood's work of sealing themes.

¹² It should be noted that while J.R. Smallwood and G.F. Grimes were real people, and this "conversion" was key to Smallwood's political vision, the events as described by Johnston did not occur. Smallwood did not go to the ice in 1914, at which time he was a schoolboy at Bishop Field College, and did not work as reporter until after he had left school in 1915. The fateful meeting between Smallwood and Grimes actually occurred in 1913, at the office of a St. John's dentist (Smallwood 1973:79, Cuff 2005).

Patrick O’Flaherty concluded his study of Newfoundland and Labrador literature and character, *The Rock Observed* (1979:184-186), with an essay, “the Case of George Tuff,” in which he describes the *Newfoundland* disaster as “an episode of great dramatic power” and a “symbolic moment, rich in meaning” which reveals much about “the true history of Newfoundland, and indeed about the character and motivation of many of those who tried to influence or describe it.” When those words were written, Kevin Major was teaching school, awaiting publication of his first novel, and Wayne Johnston was a 20-year-old cub reporter with the St. John’s *Daily News*. Yet, O’Flaherty’s assessment, that the disaster is central to developing an understanding of Newfoundland and Newfoundlanders, still rings true.



Sealers at the Front, c. 1914, carrying flags and gaffs, the Adventure in the background (James Vey photo, Provincial Archives, The Rooms Corporation, VA 137-3).

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