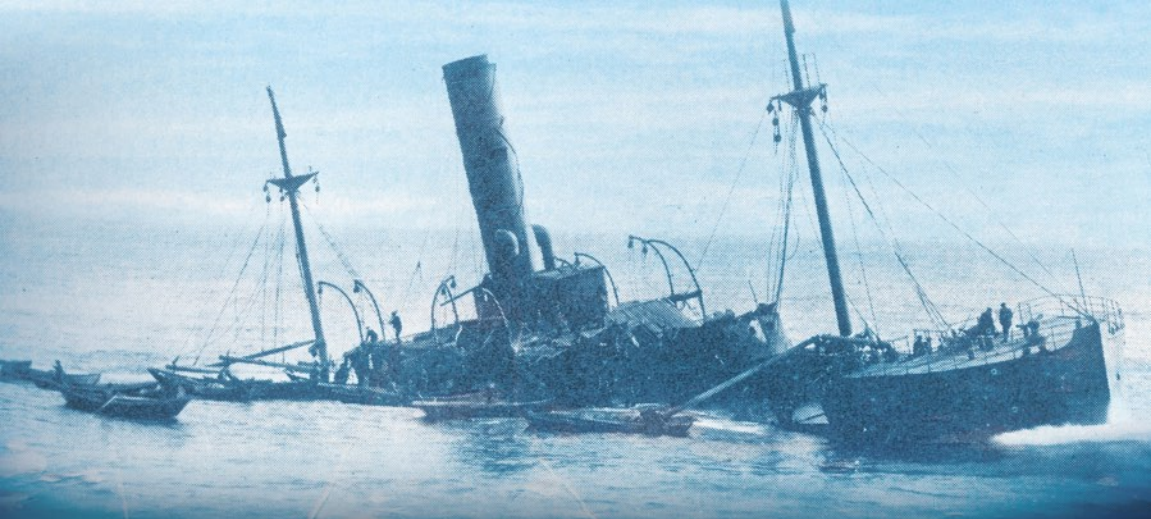




CAPTAIN KEAN'S SECRET

A TRUE STORY



T. C. BADCOCK

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T. C. Badcock

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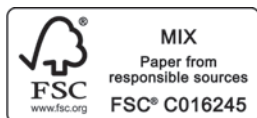
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For Liz,
who has even taught the cats to be quiet when I'm writing.

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PREFACE

I first became aware of the *Newfoundland* sealing disaster of 1914 when I was a student at Carleton University in Ottawa. We were given an assignment, to read Cassie Brown's book *Death on the Ice* and to write a book report.

I read the book in one sitting because I simply could not put it down. When I finished it, I just sat for the longest time and I became very upset, partly because of the horrible events surrounding the death of the sealers, but mainly because of the fact that, here I was in Ottawa, Ontario, in 1980, only then being made aware of such a tragic event in my province's history. I learned that it had become part of the curriculum of the English program in Newfoundland schools in 1974.

The next time I was exposed to the book was in 1987 in Gander, Newfoundland, when my oldest daughter had been assigned a similar assignment, as a high school student, as I had been given as a university student seven years earlier. I was pleased that students were being exposed not only to an integral part of our history but also to an excellent piece of writing.

Since 1980, I have read *Death on the Ice* several times. I have a tendency to do that with books I enjoy. I have an original copy, printed by Doubleday Canada Limited in 1974, which sold for the whopping sum of \$2.50.

At no time had I ever considered writing anything to do with the tragic sealing event. That was until I was contacted by Linda Olmstead, granddaughter of Charles Lewis. For the last thirty years of his working

life, Charles was chief engineer on the SS *Eagle*, a boat owned by Bowring Brothers of St. John's. Charles was friends, if that is the right word, with many of the principals directly and indirectly involved with the sealing industry of the day, and they visited his home on Pennywell Road in St. John's regularly. His daughter Jessie kept a diary in which she recorded, in great detail, meetings held at their home between these principals both before and after the disaster. Diaries were also kept by her sister Anne, and her mother, Anne Laura, who was sometimes referred to by her husband as Laura.



Anne Laura, Charles Noble,
Annie's sister Florence, and Bill
Gordon, circa 1905.

The diaries kept by the Lewis family started with John Lewis, who arrived in Bay de Verde from England in 1799. He had his own ship and 154 men. Unfortunately, Giles, Linda's cousin and Jessie's son, has the bulk of the diaries and fiercely protects them for reasons known only to him. Anne copied, because they were fading, the older diaries and kept her own. I did not have access to most of these diaries, so I had to rely on Linda to provide me with the copies she had. Also, it appears that, during the copying process, parts written at different times were bulked together and were combined in an

incorrect chronological order. The diaries were given to a university student and she was asked to transcribe them. Unfortunately, her command of the English language and her ability to organize them left much to be desired.

To give the reader an appreciation of the value that Jessie put on her diaries, when she was admitted to hospital with diphtheria in the summer of 1916, she wrote extensively while she was ill. After she was cured and discharged, her diary, like everything else, was quarantined and she was not allowed to remove it. So, she got another person to hold them up to the hospital window while she copied them from the outside.

The diaries begin with Captain John Lewis, who settled in Bay de Verde in 1799. They give great insight into early Newfoundland life. Other perspectives are recorded in the diaries of Charles, Anne, Jessie, and Anne Lewis. The diaries give an insight into the reactions to the 1914 sealing disaster as well as the many conversations and meetings she recorded during that period. It also tells Jessie's story of unrequited love.

* * *

In 1914, Jessie Lewis was eight years old. Her father, Charles Noble Lewis, was a chief engineer working for Bowring Brothers in St. John's. Charles and his wife had thirteen children. The living room of the Lewis house at 53 Pennywell Road was a meeting place for many of the principals of the Newfoundland sealing industry. They included William Coaker, Captain Abram Kean, his sons (captains Joe and Wes Kean), John Munn (managing director of Bowring's), and crew members and sealers from many ships.

Jessie was a prolific diary writer. She didn't know it at the time, but she was seeing the development of the Sealers' Union and one of its greatest influences, the SS *Newfoundland* disaster of 1914.



Anne Lewis, Jessie Lewis Muir, baby Giles, Olga Davis, circa 1945.

She diligently wrote about the visitors to her living room, encounters on the St. John's docks, and conversations with surviving sealers' families in the outports. Her observations include a large spectrum of reactions, from those defending their power and riches, to the destitute begging for food.

Jessie's son Giles kept the diaries for many years and at one point contracted with a university student to have them transcribed. I was given access to the transcripts and I have taken some licence in correcting obvious errors. I was also given access to photocopies

of the diaries. As you will undoubtedly see in the following excerpt, spelling and grammatical errors were prevalent, especially in the diaries of Jessie's sister Anne. Clearly, corrections and changes were made during the transcription process. However, whenever I used an actual diary entry, I only made minor corrections.

Dates and locations when and where the diaries were written were not easily determined. Also, considering that Jessie was only eight years old when some of the portions that I am using were written, it was sometimes difficult to interpret them. Although her grammar and spelling left a great deal to be desired, she was nevertheless able to express her feelings with an incredible talent. I often read what she had written with tears running down my cheeks and over the course of this project developed a deep respect for her.

When I felt it was necessary, I provided comments and background information. When dates and locations were not identified, I had to make calculated assumptions. Nevertheless, there are spelling and grammatical errors, and for that I alone am responsible. Following is a sample from one of Anne's diaries:

We have no worry about that Dads pay is fix the same all the time and Mom allread got to cheeks from Browring this month. Theses woman wear so worn out from lose of money, no food to give there children. Thay seemed like thay wear half dead to me. Thay wear alive, but watching them trucking through deep snow with chrildren crying and pulling and there hands and coat tailes while thay carried one child in there arms half pulling trying to stay upright in the deep snow, the womans eyes wear always filled with tears, and pain and worried. Sometime thay would just walk up and down pennywell Rd wandered blindly. Thay seemed like thay wear ready to go mad. That's how i saw it. Diary

I saw her as a strong diplomat who she
 possess the power of objectivity.
 and I know that was difficult to find when
 it is needed. one of her greatest gifts
 was to help others. this was very true of
 my grandmother she always kept a clear
 measure of her deeper nature. I remember
 her strong self-esteem. she always told me
 never measure your worth by the wishes of others
 or I would feel unstable.
 she would help me set goals for my personal
 security. she would to maintain a strong
 sense of self in the midst of an ever changing
 world to believe in my dreams and myself.
 and her peaceful loving energy reflects in
 so many how loved and know her
 she told me Charles was her perfect partner.
 her eternal love. I remembered her high
 ideals and her image of perfection was second
 to none. she read a whole book in church,
 and Mr. Aire of Aire and Sons stood up
 and said "her ^{her own words} ^{with a solemn} under full memory
 for such a little girl.
 She always found ways to affirm her
 own value as an individual while keeping
 positive personal boundaries allows her to
 create life on her own terms.

~~my Autobiography~~
~~Annie Laura Lewis~~ am the
 I Annie Laura Lewis, am the
 daughter of Charles Noble
 Lewis and Annie Laura
 Campbell. Lewis
 I was born July th 2nd 1908
 at the family (rental) residence
 No. 127 Patrick St, St John's
 Newfoundland, removing
 one year later to our
 own newly built dwelling
 75 Pennywell Rd, where we
 have resided entirely
 since, ~~remained~~ and where (my)
 Treatise, of The Human
 Soul, has been completely
 written. ~~been~~ ~~graph~~
~~written~~ ~~autobiography~~
 a autobiography, the written
 story of ones own life. ~~life~~
 Story of ones own
 completely

Anne Lewis diary excerpt.

Captain Kean's Secret

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CHAPTER ONE

In 1907, Newfoundland became the Dominion of Newfoundland, a dominion of the British Empire. It elected its own government led by a prime minister and was basically an independent country under the umbrella of the British Empire.

The year was 1914 and the population was approximately 240,000. Edward Morris, leader of the People's Party, was the prime minister, and as of 1913, the political wing of the Fishermen's Protective Union (FPU), led by William Coaker, was the official opposition. The aim of the FPU was to increase fishermen's incomes by breaking the merchants' monopoly on the purchase and exporting of fish and the retailing of supplies.

The seal hunt was a source of income for fishermen, and it was prosecuted during the spring of each year before they began fishing for cod and other ground species. During the 1800s the sealing industry was deeply ingrained into Newfoundland culture, and since then fishermen from all over the province descended upon St. John's with the hope of getting a berth on one of the schooners heading out to the ice packs.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century, annual catches were in the neighborhood of 750,000 seals, with a fleet of nearly 300 vessels. Small merchants were slowly being forced out of the hunt because of the costs, and a few wealthier merchants enjoyed a monopoly on the seal hunt.

Seal oil was the major product obtained from the hunt, but by the

end of the nineteenth century it had been replaced by other products. Seal hides became the major cash crop of the hunt. As this occurred, sealing declined from thirty per cent to ten per cent of Newfoundland's exports.

By 1914 the average annual catch was approximately 250,000 seals, and there were less than twenty ships involved with the hunt. Steel-hulled ships had replaced the wooden ships, and the three main merchants, headquartered in St. John's, were Bowring Brothers, Job Brothers, and Harvey and Company.

Bowring Brothers was formed in 1811 by Benjamin Bowring and his family. Benjamin was born in 1778 in Exeter, England. After he completed his education, he apprenticed to a watchmaker, whose daughter, Charlotte, he later married. In 1803 he opened his own watchmaking shop.

Always looking for new opportunities, he visited Newfoundland, where in 1815 he opened a watchmaking shop and his wife opened a small dry goods store attached to the watchmaking shop. He later abandoned the watchmaking because of the success of his wife's retail business, and in 1823 he purchased two schooners which he used to transport cod and seal products to England and to transport goods from England back to Newfoundland.

The business was a huge success. He subsequently turned the business over to his son Charles, and the former returned to England. Charles's brothers later joined the firm, and it became known as Bowring Brothers. They established one of the largest retail stores on Water Street in St. John's, with the name of BOWRING BROTHERS prominently displayed. It grew to become one of the leading firms in the cod and seal fisheries and the provision of foodstuffs and manufactured goods to Newfoundlanders. By 1914 they owned several steamers involved with the seal hunt.

Harvey and Company Limited had its origins with the Bermuda Trading Company. When it dissolved in 1767, Eugenius Harvey, an employee of the firm, formed a partnership to create a company that operated under a succession of names. A.W. Harvey, Eugenius's nephew, arrived from Bermuda in 1860 to join the company Harvey and Fox. Shortly after that it changed its name again to Harvey and Company.

The company became engaged in the fish trade, providing goods to fishermen through agents or intermediaries and buying fish through the same sources for export. By 1914 the firm was a major player in the fish trade with a large fleet of vessels.

Another major player in the sealing industry was Job Brothers. The company began in St. John's in 1750 under the proprietorship of John Bulley of Teignmouth, Devon. His daughter Sarah married John Job in 1789 and was given a partnership in the company. In 1809 the company transferred its English headquarters to Liverpool.

The company focused on the purchasing and exporting of codfish and importing goods for sale in local markets. In 1839 the company had two operating arms—one in Liverpool and one in St. John's—and for the remainder of the nineteenth century the company went through numerous changes, including name changes, eventually settling on Job Brothers and Company. During the second half of the nineteenth century, it constructed three large sealing vessels as well as plants, to convert fish offal into fertilizer and to cure seal pelts. During the first half of the twentieth century, the firm diversified into timber, mining, and manufacturing.

The ships involved in the hunt were owned primarily by the three main companies. The *Stephano* was owned by Bowring Brothers and captained by Abe Kean. She was a steel ship and the fastest of the seven steel ships owned by Bowring Brothers. She was equipped with the most modern equipment available.

Captain Abe Kean was considered the finest sealer ever to have participated in the hunt. He was born the son of an illiterate fisherman on an island in Bonavista Bay, and at the age of eleven he felt he had enough schooling. He began fishing at age thirteen and married at age seventeen. He fathered eight children and was a foster father to eleven others. The same year he married he went to the seal hunt, and at the age of twenty-seven he captained his first ship. It was a sailing ship, and he got frozen in the ice and didn't get any seals. The following year he got blown ashore, decided that sail was not his forte, and switched to steamers. Two years later he lost another ship and then ran successfully as a politician.



Captain Abram Kean. Centre for
Newfoundland Studies Archives
Coll-115 Memorial University of
Newfoundland.

He launched his own ship, the *Wolf*, in 1889, and landed a record load of fish. His party leader gave him his first command of a steamer he owned, and Kean also set a record that year for the quickest trip to the seal hunt and a return with a full load. In 1897 he was elected to the House of Assembly as the Conservative member for Bay de Verde and he became the Fisheries minister. He had a very short stint: his government was defeated in 1900.

Abe was known to be a very religious man and a very hard man to work for. He wanted to be the best at whatever he did and drove his men to the point of exhaustion. Each year his goal was to catch the most seals in the quickest time possible and to return to port before any other ship.

Over the course of his career, Kean brought home in excess of one million seals. He achieved that milestone in April, 1934. In June of that same year he was presented with the Order of the British Empire.

In 1914 the *Florizel* was captained by Joe Kean, Abe's oldest son, born in 1873, and she was also owned by Bowring Brothers. She was the company's flagship, steel-hulled and equipped with all the modern equipment of the day.

The *Newfoundland* was owned by Harvey and Company and in 1914 was captained by Westbury Kean, Abe's youngest son, born in 1886. Wes did not have a Master's Certificate, so, by law, Captain Charles Green, a navigator, was put on board, but he had nothing to do with the running of the ship.

The *Newfoundland* was an old wooden ship built in 1872. She had no wireless radio. It had been removed by the owners on the basis that it had not resulted in greater catches. As a result, it was not necessary to have a radio operator as part of the crew. Unlike the steel-hulled

ships, the *Newfoundland* could not force her way through the ice. Wes was born in 1886 on Flowers Island, Bonavista Bay.

The people who actually hunted and killed the seals were predominantly fishermen. The seal hunt was prosecuted in March, when the fishermen were not fishing and were without a source of income. The seal hunt provided a much-needed source of revenue for them.

Fishing was barely a subsistence occupation, and the reason for this was the merchants' greed, for want of a better word. The fishermen were scattered throughout the island in places most often only accessible by sea. The merchants created a feudal system that, despite denials by them, still exists today.

Not unlike rival gangs, they divided up the territory and fixed the prices they would pay fishermen. Fish was caught, salted, dried, and sold to the merchants when their ships called into port. Fishermen were rarely paid in cash. Instead, they were paid in a form of script that gave them credit in the merchants' stores. The stores contained all of the food products and other staples that the fishermen's families required, including items they needed for the fishery itself. It was the rule rather than the exception that, at the beginning of each fishing season, the fishermen had credit remaining in the merchants' stores. Instead they were indebted to them, and the vicious circle continued. Therefore, the seal fishery was an opportunity for the fishermen to get some much-needed cash.

However, the seal fishery was not a get-rich opportunity. The crew were paid one third of the value of the catch. The merchants decided the value of the catch irrespective of the market value, and it was set by the merchants prior to the hunt. Once the catch was counted and the value determined, the one-third share was distributed to the sealers. However, before this was done, the crop had to be deducted. The crop was the equipment that sealers were required to have to hunt the seals, and it was supplied by the merchants at a cost determined by the merchants, irrespective of the actual value. There were cases when the sealers ended the season in debt to the merchants because of the crop. To put things in perspective, a good year for the sealers would net them \$30.

Everyone knew the conditions sealers endured to attempt to make

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