



GARY COLLINS

THE GALE OF 1929

A TRUE STORY OF ADVENTURE
ON THE HIGH SEAS



The Gale of 1929

Let me end my days somewhere where the tide comes
in and out Leaving its tribute, its riches; taking nothing,
giving all the time Pieces of wood, pieces of eight
Seaweed for the land, logs for the fire
Seashells for pleasure, skeletons for sadness.

Nicholas Monsarrat

Behold also the ships, which though they be so great,
and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned
about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth.

James 3:4

The Gale of 1929

GARY COLLINS

FLANKER PRESS LIMITED
ST. JOHN'S

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Collins, Gary, 1949-, author
The gale of 1929 / Gary Collins.

Includes bibliographical references.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-1-77117-309-4 (pbk.)-- ISBN 978-1-77117-310-0 (epub.)--

ISBN 978-1-77117-311-7 (mobi.)--ISBN 978-1-77117-312-4 (pdf)

1. Shipwrecks--Newfoundland and Labrador--History--20th century.
2. Shipwreck survival--Newfoundland and Labrador--History--20th century.
3. Schooners--Newfoundland and Labrador--History--20th century.
4. Windstorms--Newfoundland and Labrador--History--20th century. I. Title.

FC2170.S5C64 2013

971.8

C2013-902906-0

C2013-902907-9

© 2013 by Flanker Press

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. No part of the work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means—graphic, electronic or mechanical—without the written permission of the publisher. Any request for photocopying, recording, taping, or information storage and retrieval systems of any part of this book shall be directed to Access Copyright, The Canadian Copyright Licensing Agency, 1 Yonge Street, Suite 800, Toronto, ON M5E 1E5. This applies to classroom use as well.

PRINTED IN CANADA



This paper has been certified to meet the environmental and social standards of the Forest Stewardship Council® (FSC®) and comes from responsibly managed forests, and verified recycled sources.

Cover Design: Adam Freake Illustrated by Clint Collins

FLANKER PRESS LTD. PO Box 2522, STATION C ST. JOHN'S, NL CANADA

TELEPHONE: (709) 739-4477 FAX: (709) 739-4420 TOLL-FREE: 1-866-739-4420

WWW.FLANKERPRESS.COM

17 16 15 14 13 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Canada



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
du Canada

Newfoundland
Labrador

We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDP) for our publishing activities; the Canada Council for the Arts, which last year invested \$157 million to bring the arts to Canadians throughout the country; the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, Department of Tourism, Culture and Recreation.

*With deepest admiration and respect
to the women of seamen who wait on the shore
then and now*

Also by Gary Collins

Cabot Island

The Last Farewell

Soulis Joe's Lost Mine

What Colour is the Ocean?

Where Eagles Lie Fallen

Mattie Mitchell: Newfoundland's Greatest Frontiersman

A Day on the Ridge

Contents

PREFACE	ix
INTRODUCTION	xi
1 <i>Water Sprite</i>	1
2 <i>Northern Light</i>	19
3 <i>Gander Deal</i>	51
4 <i>Merry Widow</i>	71
5 <i>Catherine B.</i>	91
6 <i>Janie E. Blackwood</i>	113
7 <i>George K.</i>	143
8 <i>Effie May Petite</i>	163
9 <i>Lloyd Jack</i>	181
10 <i>Jennie Florence</i>	203
11 <i>Neptune II</i>	217

AFTERWORD	255
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	257
APPENDIX: SCHOONERS CAUGHT IN THE GALE OF 1929	258
SOURCES	259
INDEX	261

Preface

WHEN I TOOK MY first serious look at the story of the gale of 1929, the first image that entered my head was a wonderful childhood one. I quickly learned there were as many as eleven schooners involved in that famous gale. All of them were sailing schooners, all left the old port of St. John's on the same day, and all were caught, at around the same time, in the same hurricane.

Gulliver and his adventures in Lilliput came immediately to mind. You remember the story. The intrepid adventurer Gulliver finds himself not only stranded, but also held prisoner by the nation of Lilliput. Among the six-inch-tall people, Gulliver is a giant. He is soon freed and becomes their gigantic friend. Trouble eventually brews with Lilliput's sworn and bitter enemies, the Blefuscudians. Attack by sea is eminent. The Lilliputians, who have no sea power, are doomed.

Gulliver wades across the sea—which only reaches to his knees—and under the cloak of night steals the Blefuscudians' empty ships away. He ties them one at a time to a string, the ends of which he slings over his massive shoulder, and tows the entire argosy—not unlike the schooners from St. John's—down over the slope of the sea.

After I had done all the research and collected the mounds of pages needed to write this manuscript, I was taken by the number of

lives affected by a single, unrelenting storm, and by the untold misery they had endured on the jealous, unforgiving sea. It reminded me of another mythical figure: Homer's Odysseus, the wandering Greek.

For years Odysseus suffered on the sea around the storied shores of the Mediterranean. His recorded tales of the attempts to return to his beloved wife, Penelope, are among the best adventures ever written. The centre of all of his woes was the salt sea. In one particular moment of suffering at the hands of the mocking sea, Odysseus vowed that when he returned to dry land, he would place an oar on his muscled shoulder and walk inland away from the sea, until someone asked him what it was he was carrying.

I mention this to you, the reader, hoping you will find inside these salty pages another all too real Newfoundland sea adventure.

I also encountered what for me was a literary problem very early in my writing of this tale. All eleven schooners left the same harbour on the same day, and all encountered the same storm. The schooners were also, without exception, all powered by sail. My misgivings began after writing about the first couple of vessels. How was I going to tell all similar stories, yet make each of them sail under their own canvas?

I have tried my very best to make the tale of each schooner as unique as I believe they all were. I will leave the final decision as to my success in this most challenging of endeavours to the most respected judges of all: my readers.

Introduction

RED-SKINNED PEOPLES HAD COME here to this sheltered harbour ages before, paddling quietly along the seacoast, following any opportunity the hundreds of coves and inlets provided. Below the grey ramparts they slipped. Only nesting seabirds watched from the cliffs as leather-clad men, dark-eyed and ever seeking, sought safe haven from a darkening ocean. Some paddled through the narrow passage that allows the sea, and, seeing no promise, left the land undisturbed after a time, leaving behind fragments of their wonderful existence yet to be discovered.

Others came, with pale skins. Drake the Englishman passed the sheltered cove and maybe missed “the Notch,” or more likely considered such a barren land not worthy of his presence. Drake was the favourite of the British monarchs: navigator, privateer, and slaver. The Spanish called him El Draque. In Latin his name meant “dragon.” He died off the coast of the Spanish Main from nothing more glorious than dysentery.

The buccaneers sailed by this rugged land. Lawless cattle thieves, they were, from the far-off western plains, who got their name from the word *boucan*—a method of preserving meat by smoking with animal fat. They fortified the island of Tortuga—the turtle—and founded

the brotherhood known and feared as the Brethren of the Coast. Pirates and thieves all.

They all sailed by and sometimes entered the old harbour of John the Saint. Henry Morgan the Welshman sailed here long before he had plundered Spanish ships in the Indies and had taken the “Cup of Gold,” the Spanish town of Portobello on the isthmus of Panama and the lady of legend, La Santa Roja, the red saint; long before his name was feared even by his own kind. And Pierre La Grand claimed to be first of the pirates who came seeking fortunes that were not his own, on the Spanish Main.

Others came who hadn’t honest toil in mind. They were simply masters of strange ships who sailed away again. After all, what was a respectable pirate to do with a shipload of smelly fish? They sailed south, to warmer and more prosperous climes.

Peter Easton was the exception. With as many as thirty-seven ships under his command, he was more powerful and more feared than any other pirate of his time. Using the island of Newfoundland as his base, he roamed as far to the east as the Barbary shores of West Africa as well as south to the West Indies. Easton was intelligent enough to realize that the riches to be gained from the island of Newfoundland came in countless tons from the cold sea. And to his great advantage, for the most part he was the only sea-roogue willing to ply his nefarious trade in these northern waters. Despite the British and Spanish courts’ endless pursuits, he was never captured. He spent his aging years a wealthy man in the district of Savoy in France, where he eventually became no less than the Marquis of Savoy.

Others, who had ventured far enough to come upon this green isle of mystery, found honest gains of their own. They pulled a great, shimmering wealth of food from the depths and carried it away and exchanged it for lesser values and returned to do it again and again and again, never thinking the jewelled sea would one day lose its glitter.

* * *

Our tale begins in the old seaport of St. John’s, Newfoundland, in November 1929. It is the oldest port in the western world. A fresh,

clean tide-surge of ocean water enters the stinking, dirty harbour. Wooden kegs with broken heads and tilted barrels with bungs missing float around the sheltered shore. From the discarded barrels, narrow, calm streaks of everything, from pork fat to the traces of oil rendered from the livers of cod, follow in their bobbing wake.

Short ends of lumber thrown by dockside workmen bob between piers and slide along the sleek, slubby sides of black-hulled schooners. Brimming slop buckets containing everything from vegetable peels and animal fat to human waste have been dumped over the sides of wooden schooners and steel, rust-streaked ships alike.

All the discards from this busy port have ended up in the bowl of the harbour. The sea is expected to take care of it all. Every ebb tide tries its best to do so, flushing the human issue out through the narrow entrance to the open sea. The returning flood tide always brings cleansing sea water, only to be defiled again and again.

Rotting pieces of timber with protruding rusted spikes hang tenaciously to piers which jut out from the landwash, looking for all the world like a giant hand with too many fingers. Frayed rope ends dangle down from well-used wharves crowding the shoreline. Every inch of shore space on the north side of this busy seaport is in use.

Picture this: Coils of hemp and manila cordage, skeins of brown, scented oakum, opened tar buckets, leaky barrels of rendering cod livers, dripping sewer pipes, steaming mounds of horse droppings, chimneys spewing coal smoke; hundreds of peeled poles—pine for ship masts, spruce for wharf repairs and new construction; men off-loading tons of salted and sun-cured codfish; cooking aromas from harbourside restaurants, mouth-watering draughts from pot-boiling forecastles drifting aloft, as are the foul smells from open, dank bilges; harbour smells of a coastal city that could be just about anywhere in the North Atlantic.

Behold: a thriving seaport!

Ships from European and American as well as southern tropical ports are docked alongside local schooners. Looking down from the streets higher up and away from the waterfront, the collective masts of wooden schooner-rigged as well as square-rigged vessels look like naked winter trees stripped of their summer greenery. The drooping,

tangled rigging between the hundreds of masts are defined like the gossamer webs of spiders in the morning sun.

Many of the ships are steel-hulled. They belch great plumes of smoke from their stacks as they make ready for sea. Most of them have long, rusty streaks oozing from their once brightly coloured walls. The North Atlantic weathers steel just as well as it does wood.

Every tongue, foreign or local, speaks fish. The Newfoundlanders are here to sell fish. The foreigners are here to buy it. Fish that came out of the shallow holds of schooners must first pass through the gaping, dock-facing doors of the brokers before being transferred to the waiting ships of the buyers. The aloof merchants of the oldest city in the Americas peer down from lofty, dust-covered windows as the hard-won cod disappears into the gaping doorways. Handsome profits derived from cod never cross the palms of the simple men of the sea who had reaped the harvest.

Traders of every type of merchandise are at work here as well. Puncheons of molasses, barrels of sweet rum, and hogsheads of sugar and exotic bolts of cloth are purchased. Fine-grained salt, spices, and dried sweet fruits. Apparel for men, women, and children. Sweet-scented soaps and heady perfumes. Baubles of cheap trinkets as well as expensive jewellery. Skeins of scented oakum, bales of hemp, bass, and manila cordage are rolled inside the gaping doors. Barrels of flour are tipped onto their wobbly sides, kicked into motion by burly stevedores, and disappear into the waiting warehouses.

Next to codfish, bread is the staple at every outport table. Butter, tea, and sugar share the same table. Expensive coffee is to be had, although it is rarely found in the cups of many hard-working fishermen. Barrels of dried beans and split peas, red apples, and sweet, dried prunes and apricots. Cases of canned foodstuffs. Clothing, dainty and simple. This seaport on the very edge of the North American continent has it all. The well-stocked stores just up from the noisy harbourfront offer an array of items that would be the envy of a busy Arabian souk.

Everything the land and sea can provide is readily available for the people who live here on the island of Newfoundland. Several species of berries are gathered in season. Deer meat and the skins of small

mammals are at hand for the hunter-gatherers. Several species of sea-birds, most of them by the thousands, have passed by their coastal homes and swelled their larder. Salmon and trout are in every river and stream. All of the natural resources are there for the taking.

But cod is the mainstay, the sole reason for the existence of most of the coastal villages. Still, it is not enough. The arable soil on the northeast coast of this island is sparse, to say the least. It can barely sustain subsistence farming. By the end of each long winter, most root cellars show bare boards, and long arms are needed to scoop flour from ever deeper barrels. On their kitchen tables are base food staples from countries these simple people will never see. And cod pays for it all.

Outside every headland, just beyond each sheltered community, swims the world's richest source of protein. Schools of fish to suit any palate swim in abundance. Some live near the ocean surface, pelagic fishes that shoal in such visible abundance they are scooped from the surface, their quantity counted not by quantity but by weight, in tons. Great black whales follow them along with swift, darting mid-water fishes. Man hunts them all. But the ocean bottom-dwelling cod is the prize most sought.

Two ships, one at each end of the port, are off-loading tons of coarse salt. Every merchant who deals with the fish business buys and sells coarse salt. It is the lifeblood of the codfish industry. No salt, no cod.

Apart from winter's natural refrigeration, there is no way to preserve the summer-harvested cod. Men wheel the white king of all spices up bending ramps into black warehouse interiors. Men wheel it back out to waiting schooners. Men work below in steel ships and shovel it out. Men below wooden decks shovel it in. This crystalline substance, which makes the world's oceans undrinkable to humans, sustains the richest life forms on our planet. Some might think it strange that it can also preserve it in death.

It is in this busy seaport on the east coast of Newfoundland our story really begins. It is November 29, 1929. Only thirty-five days ago, on October 24, the world stock markets had fallen below recoverable levels. The excessive, opulent Roaring Twenties had come to an abrupt

end. The fallout from the financial turbulence thousands of miles away had a dramatic effect on the lives of fishermen in Newfoundland, most of whom understood nothing about stock markets and foreign exchanges. They did understand falling fish prices, though. Now the merchants of St. John's have something to blame for the unheard-of low fish prices they pay out for fish. They are vindicated.

It is out of their control, they tell the skippers, who stand cap in hand and listen in disbelief. Many of the schooner captains will barely break even. Some will not, their badly needed winter provisions stripped to the bare essentials. There will be no extras, and so the men will keep their wives' hopeful, pencilled notes hidden inside empty pockets.

The explanations from overdressed merchants mean nothing to most of these simple fishermen. They only knew their hopes of a good year have been put aside again. The merchants, though, seem as prosperous as always. Nothing ever changes.

1

Water Sprite

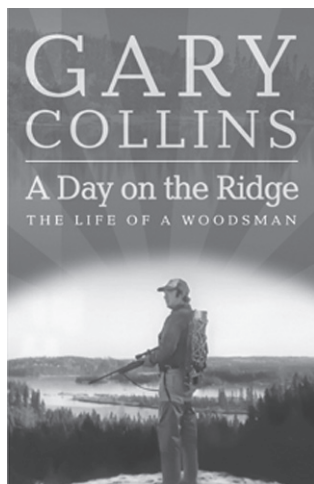
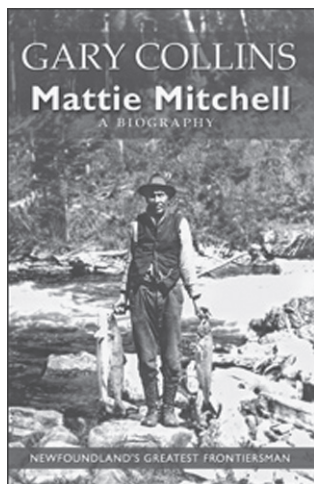


John Bishop was feeling uneasy, or maybe it was fear. He wasn't sure. He had never been afraid on the water before. By nighttime Saturday night he was lashed to the wheel on the open deck of the schooner *Water Sprite*. The only semblance of light in that terrible darkness came from the white breaking waves that swept past either side of the hapless vessel. The seas all around them were higher than the *Water Sprite*.

The schooner was living up to her name. Water sprites, or water fairies, were creatures of legend, human females who could breathe air or water. The decks of this very real *Water Sprite* went under water as much as they lifted above it tonight.

Some of the seas seemed to reach the height of her mainmast. Some broke over the tossing bow of the little schooner and flushed their divided weight along the sixty-five-foot length of her deck. At such times only the strong rope around his back kept John at his weary station. He had often heard stories about captains being tied to their helm, but he always thought they were a bit exaggerated. Swash-buckling talk. But it was neither. Here was the only way for a man to hold his footing under these conditions. It would only take one spin of a deserted wheel to heel the schooner away before the gale.

ALSO BY GARY COLLINS

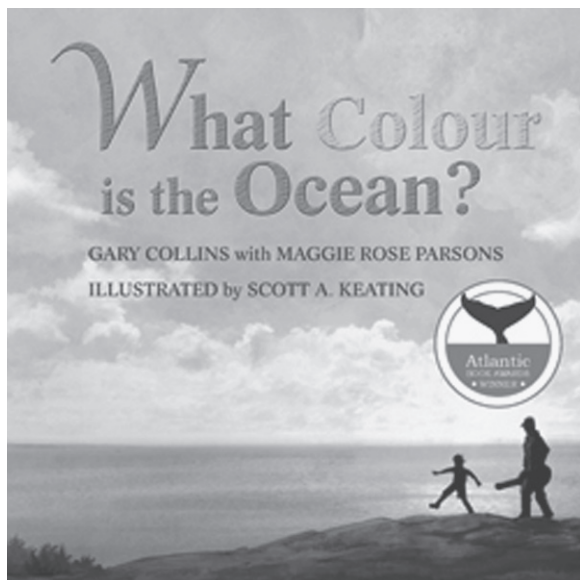


In researching the life and times of **Mattie Mitchell: Newfoundland's Greatest Frontiersman**, critically acclaimed author Gary Collins gleaned much insight on his subject from the diary and other personal papers of Marie Sparkes, granddaughter to the remarkable Mi'kmaq woodsman. Now, for the first time, Mattie Mitchell's legendary deeds are revealed in full, comprehensive detail.

Author Gary Collins has earned a seat at the head of the table as Newfoundland and Labrador's favourite storyteller. Now the "Story Man" from Hare Bay is ready to tell you a little bit about himself. The tales that make up **A Day on the Ridge** are taken from diary entries he recorded during the forty years he spent as a woodsman. Beginning with his childhood, Gary Collins retraces his first steps as a boy growing up in Bonavista North in the 1950s, when his father taught him the skills of an outdoorsman and how to be a leader among men.

WWW.FLANKERPRESS.COM

ALSO BY GARY COLLINS



Maggie Rose loves to sing! And her favourite song is “What Colour’s the Ocean Today,” a song she made up with her Grandy about how the ocean changes colour from season to season. Join Maggie Rose and Grandy through Winter, Spring, Summer, and Fall and see what colour the ocean is today! Parents and children will both enjoy reading (and singing) this book over and over again. With colourful illustrations and sheet music in the back, **What Colour is the Ocean?** is sure to become a family favourite . . . no matter what season it is! (Winner of the 2010 Atlantic Book Awards Lillian Shepherd Memorial Award for Excellence in Illustration)

WWW.FLANKERPRESS.COM