

# Ghost of the Southern Cross



INSPIRED BY TRUE EVENTS

NELLIE P. STROWBRIDGE

# Ghost *of the* Southern Cross

BY NELLIE P. STROWBRIDGE

Maiden from the Sea

Catherine Snow

The Newfoundland Tongue

The Gift of Christmas

Far From Home

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*inspired by true events*

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Nellie P. Strowbridge

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Dedicated to the memory of Great-Uncle James Maley and other sealers of the SS *Southern Cross* who lost their lives in the 1914 sealing disaster. Also dedicated to the victims and survivors of the SS *Newfoundland*.

Remembering Jacob Taylor Kennedy and Elizabeth Emma Maley Kennedy, my grandparents, and Maggie Taylor, a pseudonym for James Maley's sweetheart, all of whom found their way into this novel, a novel inspired by true events and the love of two women for their men who loved the sea.



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*From eternity, in the beginning  
He created me, and for eternity  
I shall not cease to exist.*

Sirach 24:9

*As long as we have memories, yesterday remains.  
As long as we have hope, tomorrow awaits.  
As long as we have love, today is beautiful.*

Author unknown





*part one*

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# Prologue

*FOXTRAP IS A TRINITY OF LAND, SKY, AND SEA FRAMED IN ONE LOOK. You cannot see the land without the sky and sea, and you cannot see the sea without the land and sky. There is a jumble of dwellings down lanes and in turns: saltbox houses and cottages, all painted bright colours, beside barns, sheds, and stores, some ochre red, others weathered grey.*

*Many people take farming seriously and keep a kitchen garden in front of their house and a larger garden at the back. Sometimes they grow enough vegetables to stay them through the winter. Sometimes not. Since the sea is close to their doorstep, some farmers keep a punt or flat tied to a stagehead hung out over the water, legs deep in rocks holding them in place. Residents use their boats to fish for a winter supply, and later to cut wood on Kelly's Island. Sometimes they use them to go for a jaunt to Bell Island, a short distance across the water. Full-time farmers, whose fathers before them staked acres of land, often harvest a bountiful crop, enough to sell to residents of the meandering southern shore outlined by sandy and rocky beaches.*

*People along the shore hold steady against inclemency, asking for mercy, praying for westerly winds when northeasterlies sweep across the land and roar over houses, howling down chimneys, scattering wispy dark smoke. Houses shudder but hold strong, keeping the families inside safe and warm.*

*Sounds echo through the land and across the water from Monday morning to Saturday evening. Early Sunday mornings, after residents*

*have spent six days of toil and turmoil on the sea or on the land, silence is a sound in itself, a calmness that can be heard fizzing in one's ears. The morning holds its breath as sails of clouds drift across the sky and the sea ripples away from the land and returns to nibble the beaches. The morning breaks open and people stir and heed the call of church bells pealing across the land. Church is a place God-loving people go regardless of their circumstances, the place other people go because of their circumstances. It is the place most people have gone many times because of tragedy. Graveyards tell the story of loss. A loss will come for which the church will offer solace, the graveyard none.*

# 1

MAGGIE TAYLOR WAS in the habit of watching Matthew, her father, take his boat out on the water, it squaring away before the wind, its gaff topsail full as he sailed across to Kelly's Island to cut wood or to bring home a load of fish to sell to farmers who had no time to fish. She hoped he'd find a pirate's treasure, on the island named after a pirate, and they'd be rich. Then her father could stay home and jig fish off the stagehead all day long. Some days she ran through woodbine, stirring its honeysuckle flowers, their perfume spraying the air as she hurried in bare feet over the gravelled path to the beach. Other days she lay in long grass out by Windsong Lane and daydreamed of pirate Kelly's gold hidden on the small stretch of Kelly's Island. If there was a scud of cloud in an uneasy sky and rumbles through the great throat of the sea she didn't notice. Nothing was going to keep her father from coming home.

One Monday in July 1897, dark clouds baffled above Foxtrap Beach where Maggie played. The nine-year-old, though slight, looked tall as she stood against the sky on a wall of smooth stones: sea treasures pushed up from the deep. She had spent much of the afternoon on the beach waiting for a glimpse of her father's small, black boat on the horizon. Most days he was home by suppertime. She had often waited for him as he steered the boat against the glass eye of a noon sun, and other times under the furrowed brow of evening, amidst the traffic of other boats, birds, and pothead whales. Sometimes she ran back and forth across the beach, tossing a small stone into the air and catching it on the back of her hand. She dropped the stone and picked up a leafed

string of knotweed and put its tiny, white flower to her nose. "I'd bring Mam the flower if she was good to me."

In her pocket was a sand dollar, the flowery outline of the seashell traced by her fingers over and over as she gazed past the head of Kelly's Island, her green eyes fervent with longing and dread. It would happen sometimes that her father had to put in to a small inlet for shelter from a sudden storm or rogue sea. Other times when it was past dark and there was no sign of his boat, she would give in to the pull of her stepmother's voice and hurry up the path, stopping to look back. She would giggle with delight when she spied a speck of light from the lantern swinging on the boat's bow. The boat would sail near enough for her to see her father, and her arm would swing into the air. When it was close enough for him to hear her, she would call, "Pappa." Her father's rosy face would open in a generous smile; he would lift his arm straight up and wave. She would dance along the shore, hitching up her dress, and run into the waves, her laugh resounding across the cove.

Her father was home! She was safe from Myrtle, her stepmother. Together they would go up to supper smiling.

Now, time and again, she glanced at the sky as if fearing the light would fade and darkness would cover the world. Other children had gone home and she was left alone on the beach. Night settled over her like a black cloud obscuring her view of the ocean and the land. Still, she stayed, ignoring a grating voice like a line with a fish hook pulling on her ear. Her stepmother would be waiting, angrier than ever that Maggie's father had not come home with wood for her fire and a cod for supper. Finally Maggie gritted her teeth, turned and started up the path to the house, her feet like two heavy stones.

Two days passed and her father had not come home.

Elizabeth Maley, another child who sometimes played on the beach, hurried over to Maggie, who was standing alone, the tail of her dress shivering though the air was warm. She caught hold of her hand and squeezed it tight. "Your pappa will come home. You'll see." Then, as if sadness in the other little girl's eyes was too much, she ran off to her own house. Maggie stayed, swishing her toe in the frilly seaweed that trailed through water.

Mary Jane and William Maley lived in a peaked two-storey house up from the ocean and had a clear view of children playing on the beach. Caroline Maley, their sister-in-law, who had dropped in from next door for a visit, leaned on the window leaf and shook her head. She tutted above the sound of Mary Jane's knitting needles clicking in and out of a half-knitted sweater. "I don't know what to make of that poor streely child," she said. "Never a needle put to the rips in her clothes or a loose button tightened."

Mary Jane rested the knitting on her knees and looked up at her sister-in-law. "Someone should take that child away from the stepmother who cares not a bit about her. There she is, then, with the tail of her dress between her teeth, and not a show of interest in anything on land while she dawdles in the water."

Rebecca, Mary Jane's daughter, chided, "Now, Mamma, you and Aunt Caroline got better things to do than cast your eyes about the place like a man with a jigger seeing what he can haul in."

Mary Jane ignored her daughter and went on. "The father likely got blown into some cove, and no one there was eager to pass the news, least of all him if he's been taken with a younger woman." She murmured, "Out with the old, in with the new."

Rebecca shook her head. "But the child, he—"

"Since when did a child keep a man in his place?" Caroline asked.

Rebecca knew her aunt was thinking of how her neighbour's husband had gone in his boat to the fishing grounds, how neither his hair nor hide was found, and she mourning herself all to pieces, sick in bed for days. Weeks later someone spotted him in a St. John's public house with a young woman on his arm, and they laughing to kill themselves. *Too handsome for Ida Snow to keep* was whispered around the place. However, Rebecca knew that Maggie's father was so struck on his little girl he would not abandon her.

Sometimes Maggie came to the house with Elizabeth, Rebecca's half-sister. Mary Jane smiled thinking of a spring day when the timid little girl had sidled into the house past William, who'd let out a grunt as she passed.

"Have some cream on your bread, rich cream from the cow's aftermilk," Mary Jane had offered.

Rebecca shook her head. "It's Lent, sure."

"No odds, me child, if it is, but it's not," Mary Jane said. "The Holy Season is long gone. No one told you, I s'pose." She spread a generous helping over the bread. "Here! What goes into your body won't hurt your soul. Enjoy what you can get."

Maggie swallowed in anticipation. "For your sake I'll take some, but don't tell Mam else I'll have a knock in the side of the head. She thinks it's still Lent."

Unaware of the eyes on her from different windows in the place, Maggie dropped the tail of her dress and ran along the beach, her small, bare feet pressing their shape into the sand. The tide rose and water gurgled its way into her small footprints, pulled sand again and again until the footprints were gone. She kept running until she reached a pebbly part of the beach where her father's stage stood. Wind, sweeping off the water, caught her dress and flapped it like a ship's sail. She stood silent and straight, staring out to sea. Her father had always come home. Her small, white teeth pressed into her lower lip until they drew blood. Still, she stayed, alone and shivering until the sun dipped behind the hill. Its orange afterglow spread across the sky promising a good sunny day, one sure to bring her father home tomorrow. She sidled over to a huge rock known as a logan stone. It lay lodged on its edge and balanced by nature. Maggie had heard her father say that it was like the island of Newfoundland, itself caught on a ledge. Unlike the island, a wisp of wind could dislodge the logan stone, but a man couldn't move it. It was her place to lean when she grew tired of waiting.

Finally, she slid down to a large, flat rock and sat on it, pulling her legs up under her dress. Then she folded into herself, her arms around her knees, her head resting there. She stayed motionless as if fastened like a barnacle. Her eyes had watered from the strain of looking out over the choppy waters. Now they were closed.

"How long is your boat, Pappa?" she had asked him one day as he pushed strings of oakum into its seams with a flat blade and hammer. He finished what he was doing and went to get a mop and bucket to tar his new punt. He lifted his sleeve to wipe a sweaty forehead, and answered, "Long enough for two lops but not long enough for three."

She had screwed up her face. "Uh?"

He explained, "She's long enough to climb two waves. She dips

her nose into the third lop, and spray goes right over her bow.” He grinned and added, “I can handle her.”

Boats belonging to other children’s fathers had appeared on the shifting dark waters and had been collared and anchored long ago.

Now Maggie opened her eyes and whispered, “Your boat must bring you home. You have to save me from *her*.”

She straightened up, pulled her plait to the side of her mouth, and bit on it like a cat playing with its tail. She looked up at the little house, its windows darkening in the fading light, then turned back to the beach. Salty water teased the land with its playful roll, licking dull stones. Flecks of gold, silver, and sunrise pink emerged, showing stones fit for a queen’s necklace. She saw the flash of the evening light on a seagull’s wing as it soared above the ocean, and the silhouette of a boat in the distance, and she felt a rush of excitement. *Could it be Pappa with a load of fish?*

The boat continued on across the bay away from Foxtrap.

Still, she waited. *You have to come!*

“What is the child doing now?” Mary Jane asked.

“She’s still waiting for her father’s punt,” Rebecca said, squinting. “No one has told her.”

Mary Jane tried to be optimistic. “Without a body, no one knows anything. No news can mean good news. The heart of the child is wrapped around her father. She’ll lose her mind, her blood turn. . . .” Her voice trailed.

“She needs to know,” Caroline said.

Elizabeth, coming down the stairs, heard the grown-ups talking. She felt afraid for her friend. “Know what?” she asked.

“Nothing,” Mary Jane said. “Have your drink of milk and be off to bed.”

Once Elizabeth went upstairs, Mary Jane put down her knitting and let out a sigh. “Hope can hold only so long.”

Caroline went home while Mary Jane and Rebecca kept watching.

Mary Jane sputtered, “No one knows what goes on in that house now that there’s no sign of the father.”

Maggie's thoughts bobbed up and down like a corked bottle in water, going to the woman in the house on the hill, and then to her father out on the water. She tried to pull her mind away from her stepmother, who any moment might call her away from the beach, from the constant rush of water in and out anchoring her to a comforting place.

Finally, as the evening closed in, Myrtle's angry voice reached down. Fear like a wild animal cornered Maggie. Her arms fell to her side, hands tight, knuckles white. She began to run, dropped back for a quick glance at the sea, and then quickened her step as if pulled toward the house by the insistent voice. Her suntanned face turned for one moment toward the faces at the window of Mary Jane's house.

Rebecca stood behind her mother taking in the sight of the child. Fine curls at her broad forehead escaped from light hair pulled back in a plait. Her skin was like fine clay, her nose small and upturned just enough to be appreciated.

"Not enough flesh on that child to bait a hook," Mary Jane said.

Maggie stepped into the porch and braced herself against the wall as Myrtle, her face tight and hard, her eyes small and cold, gave her a clout on the side of her head. She scolded her. "Here we is, then, with the clothes all washed and dried and you comes home with your skirt tail sodden with water and seaweed." She shook her head. "When will it be all done, the toil and the weariness of it?"

"When we're dead." Maggie didn't mean to say it. Sometimes something in her mind just popped out of her mouth. She winced even before her stepmother's rough hand hit her cheek. As if that was not enough, she pinched her neck, her sharp nails cutting the skin. Maggie's eyes stung with hot tears as she ran past her stepmother and climbed the ladder to the attic room, a tiny space with a triangular window that framed the sea. She looked out, though she couldn't see anything through her tears. Her father was gentle and attentive to her. She had overheard her stepmother accuse him of spoiling her.

"She's me own flesh and blood," Matthew had answered.

When he wasn't around and Myrtle threatened to knock her head off, she imagined it rolling down her chest, her eyes shaking out of their sockets. When her stepmother said she'd skin her alive, she imagined the pain of it and she cried, afraid her stepmother would get

angry enough to do just that, leaving her looking raw and bloodied like a skinned seal that sealers often brought home from a hunt.

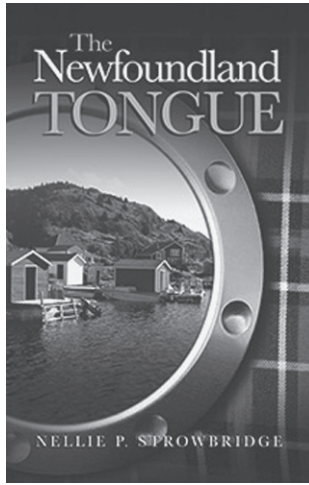
Day after day she watched for her father to come home, scanning the ocean, her eyes squinting against the sun's bright light. She idled away the time gathering stones until her hands and dress pockets were full. Then she sat emptying her pockets into her lap. She had picked up a pure white rock, a lacy patterned one, and a grey rock looking as if it had been dribbled on by white paint. Now she laid aside the rocks and picked up a dark stone with a thick, white ring. It was as smooth as an egg and shaped like one. Her father had told her a story about cruel boys who had gone to all the birds' nests they could find. They had gathered the eggs and carried them to the beach where they mixed them with smooth stones to fool the birds. He said that eggs taken from the nest grew cold and hard and the mother bird rejected them. Now she imagined that inside each oval stone she had gathered was a little bird who never had a chance to fly; if she held the stones tight, they would warm and soften and the baby bird inside would peck its way out and fly away—something she'd like to do.

On Maggie's ninth day waiting for her father, the stones and other treasures in her dress pockets felt too heavy a burden, and she spilled them on the beach. Instead, her clenched fists filled the pockets. Inside one fist she held a god rock: an all-white stone her father said was lucky. She tightened her hand over it, her nails digging into her palm. She sighed and started a slow gait up the path to the house that hadn't seemed like a home since her mother died.

That night she dreamed that a piece of driftwood, something fastened to it, was rolling against the beach. As she got closer, she saw a grey hand and the familiar brown speckled guernsey and stocking cap her mother had knit for her father. She squeezed her eyes tight as screeching gulls swarmed over the body. Sobs gurgled in her throat. Then she screamed, her throat burning with her cries. Rough hands whirled her around, smothering her in her stepmother's rough brin bag apron.

She woke in the dark with her arms wrapped around herself, her bedclothes kicked on the floor. Her eyes widened. *It wasn't real! I had what Pappa calls the darnies!*

The next day Maggie walked from one large round rock to another, her arms outstretched as if she were balancing on a tightrope. Then she



*also by nellie p. strowbridge*

You think you've heard everything about Newfoundland and Labrador, but . . .

Have you had a meal of padre?

Have you ever seen a shalandi?

Have you heard of basket soup?

Would you find the term dry dough offensive?

You've tried figgy duff, but have you eaten cod sounds?

Work your tongue through conversational one-liners and much more! This book is a tribute to Newfoundland's unique culture and way of life. It explores the province's history and folklore, placing a particular emphasis on traditional language, speech, expressions, and dialect. Read, and experience Newfoundland's Old English and Irish roots as they come to the fore!

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