

LEFT

to

DIE

The Story of the SS Newfoundland Sealing Disaster



GARY COLLINS

PRAISE FOR GARY COLLINS

Cabot Island

“Collins’ focus on an ordinary event taking place under extraordinary circumstances sheds a tender, respectful light on how strength of character can be forged at the anguished intersection of isolation and bereavement.”

DOWNHOME

“The story is intriguing . . .”

THE CHRONICLE HERALD

The Last Farewell

“The writing here is at its best when the danger and beauty of the sea is subtly described.” — ATLANTIC BOOKS TODAY

“*The Last Farewell* tells a true story, but Collins’ vivid description and well-realized characters make it read like a novel.” — THE CHRONICLE HERALD

“Read *The Last Farewell* not only because it is a moving historical tale of needless tragedy but also because it’s a book enriched with abundant details of Newfoundland life not so widespread anymore.” — THE PILOT

“[*The Last Farewell*:] *The Loss of the Collett* is informative and intriguing, and not merely for experienced sailors or Newfoundlanders.” — THE NORTHERN MARINER

What Colour is the Ocean?

“Delightful rhyming story.”

RESOURCE LINKS

“Scott Keating’s illustrations are an asset to the book. The double page illustrations revealing the colour of the ocean are particularly successful in conveying the moods of the ocean and the land.” — CM: CANADIAN REVIEW OF MATERIALS

“This tale, set by the sea in Newfoundland, is told in a simple repetitive refrain that will capture the imagination of young readers. . . . Illustrations by Scott Keating, award-winning artist and illustrator, capture the beauty of Newfoundland and the many seasons and moods of the ocean.” — ATLANTIC BOOKS TODAY

Soulis Joe’s Lost Mine

“There is a magic in the interior of this island that few will write about or speak of to others—an endless fascination with the land. Gary Collins is entranced in the same way that the allure of rock, tree, and bog seized the indomitable Allan Keats, and before him, his ancestor, the Mi’kmaq Soulis Joe. This book gives voice not only to these men but to the great and wonderful wilderness of Newfoundland. Read it and be prepared for the wonder and love of the wild places. It will grab and hold on to you, too.” — J.A. RICKETTS, AUTHOR OF *THE BADGER RIOT*

“*Soulis Joe’s Lost Mine* is a number of stories in one: it’s a great mystery-adventure; it’s a fascinating look at prospecting for precious metals; and it’s a heart-warming story about the importance of family pride.”

THE CHRONICLE HERALD

“This tale also serves to cement Collins’ status as one of the region’s better storytellers; he has a journalist’s eye for detail, his writing is crisp and lean and the narrative arc runs smooth and seamless and is well-peppered with shakes of home-spun humour.” — ATLANTIC BOOKS TODAY

Where Eagles Lie Fallen

“Some truly breathtaking stories of tragedy . . .”

THE NORTHEAST AVALON TIMES

“A gripping story,
which cuts to the true heart of tragedy.”

DOWNHOME

Mattie Mitchell: Newfoundland’s Greatest Frontiersman

“[Gary Collins] weaves the various threads of the story into a marvellous yarn—all the more marvellous because it is true.”

THE NORTHEAST AVALON TIMES

A Day on the Ridge

“The 22 pieces in [*A Day on the Ridge*] vary considerably: a serious accident to a man canoeing with a friend down a remote and dangerous river; the life and death of a big bull moose; coming home from the woods for Christmas; the New Year’s Day Orange Parade and getting caught in an otter trap—and escaping from it. Every one of these pieces is exciting and well worth reading; each is well-written, too. This may be Collins’ best book, though his other six rank high, too.”

THE PEI GUARDIAN

The Gale of 1929

“This book is gripping . . .”

THE PEI GUARDIAN

“Not unlike the seasoned schoonermen battling the famous gale, Collins manages to navigate his way around each story as seen through the eyes of the characters involved. It may be that I, myself, had an affinity for the characters, having been through a similar situation on a 115-foot schooner. But, it felt to me like Collins took me up and down each wave, and let me inside each heroic task of survival.” — ARTS EAST

Left to Die

THE STORY OF THE SS NEWFOUNDLAND SEALING DISASTER



ILLUSTRATION BY CLINT COLLINS

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GARY COLLINS

FLANKER PRESS LIMITED

ST. JOHN'S

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Collins, Gary, 1949-, author

Left to die : the story of the SS Newfoundland Sealing
Disaster / Gary Collins.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-1-77117-328-5 (bound).--ISBN 978-1-77117-329-2 (epub).--

ISBN 978-1-77117-330-8 (kindle).--ISBN 978-1-77117-331-5 (pdf)

1. Newfoundland Sealing Disaster, Newfoundland, 1914. 2. Sealing--
Newfoundland and Labrador--History--20th century. I. Title.

SH362.C64 2014

639.2'909718

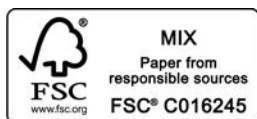
C2014-900117-7

C2014-900118-5

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PRINTED IN CANADA



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Cover Design by Graham Blair Illustration by Clint Collins Maps by Albert Taylor

FLANKER PRESS LTD.
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ST. JOHN'S, NL
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WWW.FLANKERPRESS.COM

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Conseil des Arts
du Canada

**Newfoundland
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We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDP) for our publishing activities and the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, Department of Tourism, Culture and Recreation. We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, which last year invested \$157 million to bring the arts to Canadians throughout the country. *Nous remercions le Conseil des arts du Canada de son soutien. L'an dernier, le Conseil a investi 157 millions de dollars pour mettre de l'art dans la vie des Canadiennes et des Canadiens de tout le pays.*

For my wife, Rose, who has all of the human attributes so prevalent throughout this book: Loyal. True. Noble. Faithful. Friend. Mate.

Ever-loved.

Now go, write it before them on a tablet, and
inscribe it in a book, that it may be for the time
to come for ever and ever.

Isaiah 30:8

Preface

“*T*HEY DIDN’T DIE LIKE FLIES, you know, like I’ve heard some reporters say over the years. Oh no, it wasn’t like that a’tall. The men who died didn’t just drop like flies. There was nothing quick or easy about it. They had frozen feet, and fingers too numb and cramped with the cold to wipe the tears from their eyes. Tears from tough, fearless, grown men. And a good many of them young, too! Most of them just lay down on the ice, frozen solid, almost, weak from hunger and too tired to get back up. They gave up the ghost. Died of despair, most of ’em did. And with tears frozen to their cheeks, too. ’Twas cruel to look upon, you know. We figured no one was lookin’ fer us. Oh, my boy, that was the saddest part of all! We figured we were left to die. Turns out we were right, too.”

Sitting next to me in the cab of our five-ton Ford truck was my wife, Rose, and beside her, staring out the passenger-side window, was Cecil Mouland, the last living survivor of the *Newfoundland* sealing disaster. The old gentleman’s white head was bent in sorrow, his memories overwhelming him. No one spoke for a while as the truck’s engine whined. The transmission clicked as I geared down halfway up a steep grade somewhere west of Clarendville on the Trans-Canada Highway. Behind the cab, the stake-bodied deck of my truck was loaded with the last

of Cecil's worldly possessions. It was the fall of 1971. The day was warm and the country we were driving through was resplendent with autumn colours. But the story we were listening to was a dark and cold one.

Up until that very day, Cecil Mouland had been a resident of my hometown, Hare Bay, and his wife was the former Jessie Collins from the same community. The two had lived in other places, including an extended stay in the US, but in their senior years they had returned to Newfoundland, where they lived in a modest bungalow in the east end of our community. The couple lived a frugal, independent, modest, and unassuming life.

They were devout Christians and were loved and respected by everyone. Jessie had died two years before, on July 15, 1969, at seventy-four years of age. They had no children, so, rather than allow himself to become a burden to anyone in his advanced age, Cecil decided he would move to a seniors' home in St. John's.

We had loaded all of Uncle Cecil's furniture, bed and baggage, and secured it to the truck the evening before. We were lucky it hadn't rained because the load was not covered. Uncle Cecil wasn't really my blood relative, but in the Newfoundland way he was called uncle by everyone. The man had a jovial manner. Laughter came easy and he was seldom seen without a smile. He was content with his lot and had that true zest for life which comes from someone who had nearly lost it. Everyone knew Uncle Cecil was a survivor of the great *Newfoundland* sealing disaster, and as the years went by he became the last. Like many others in our community, I had heard snippets of his courageous ordeal on the ice floes in the spring of 1914, but I had never heard the full story.

As the old truck laboured along the TCH, we would not only hear the amazing tale of the tragedy; we would hear it from a man who had lived through it. I had never seen a person become so animated when telling a story. He spoke with great emotion and moved his hands and arms for emphasis. He laughed aloud and cried real tears as his storytelling warranted.

At one point he said, "I have to show you how it was!" Dropping to his knees on the dirty floor of the truck, he clasped his hands together forcefully as if in prayer, his knuckles white with the exertion. He did this so fervently it was as if he were supplicating to Almighty God, even now after all those years, to spare his fellow hunters. The old man wept so hard he had to remove his glasses to wipe away the tears.

He got back up on the seat, replaced his glasses, and said, "It must be told again and again, you know. So people will know how it was, you see. What we went through, and so, pray God, it will never happen again."

We stopped for gas and a snack, and after settling onto the road again, I asked Uncle Cecil about his life after the disaster. He tried his very best to make a living in Newfoundland, he told me. He fished for a while and worked at whatever was available. There wasn't much work in the Doting Cove area during the early years of his marriage.

"We didn't need much, though, my Jessie and me. Never ones for material things, we weren't. There was only the two of us, you know. No children came our way. Would have liked children of my own. My Jessie, too, loved children, she did."

The 1930s were the hardest. Fish prices dropped and everything else slid downhill with it. The economy was really bad and there was no work to be had anywhere, he said. Many Newfoundlanders left to find work in Canada and others went to the United States. Cecil and Jessie joined the latter.

I listened without interrupting, though I wanted to hear more about the seal hunt. It was as though he wanted a break after talking about so much death and sadness. With a ready smile on his face again, he burst out laughing, as hard as he had cried moments before, while he recounted this little story.

Cecil scraped together enough money for passage from St. John's to Brooklyn, New York. In 1940, he and Jessie lived on 642 10th Street, Kings, New York. The first job he managed to get—jobs were not easy to come by in the states, either—was

in a carpenter shop, though he said he couldn't drive a nail straight or follow a line with a handsaw. The first day on the job, the foreman asked him if he could build a door. Cecil, with his confident Newfoundland outport attitude, assured him he could. After all, how hard could it be to construct something as simple as a door? It was all easy work, nothing to it.

The foreman showed him the tools and the lumber he would need, gave him the door measurements, and left the shop. Cecil worked on the door all morning. The wood was pine, it smelled good, and it was easy to work with. He had the door finished by midday, but after sizing up the job, he wasn't very pleased with his creation. It wasn't square—or even rectangular—as a door should be. He could see every nailhead and the joints gaped open. It looked more like a splitting table than a door. Fearing the foreman's return, he decided to hide it. He pushed the door under the workbench, buried it in the sawdust and shavings that were all over the floor—most of them of his own making—and started to build a second one.

He worked frantically now, not knowing when the foreman would return. Just before quitting time at six that evening, Cecil had made another door and decided it wasn't much better than the first one, when the foreman entered the shop. The man stood beside Cecil at the bench, looked at the door, and for the longest time said nothing.

Then: "Well, Mouland, there is one thing I know. You can only get better, because there is no way in hell you will ever find a door as bad as that one."

And though it might mean his job, Cecil could not resist saying, "Oh yes there is, sir!"

And with that he pulled the first door out of its hiding place. The foreman stared in disbelief from one door to the other before he burst out laughing. The two men became good friends and, under his guidance, Cecil Mouland learned the art of carpentry—even how to build a good door.

Uncle Cecil removed his glasses, and this time the tears he

wiped away were from genuine laughter. He greatly enjoyed spinning yarns, and like the true storyteller he was, he had included the carpentry story as a bridge between bad episodes of his life. When I gently inquired about the shipboard conditions aboard the old SS *Newfoundland*, his demeanour changed and the man returned to the year 1914. So vivid and passionate was his description, he took me back with him.

"Oh, Lord save us," he said. "What a filthy ship she was. And the smell of her bilge! It remains in my head still. Funny thing about that, eh? How a man can hold such a thing as a bad smell in his head for so long?"

"Did you ever go back to the seal hunt, Uncle Cec?" Rose asked.

"No, my darling maid, I did not," he replied. "Been asked that same question many times since. Everyone figured I couldn't go back to the hunt because of what I had witnessed out there on the ice, you see. So much pain and death I had seen up close like a man should never see. 'Twasn't that a'tall. I was young then and would get over that part of it, like many others did. Went back to the seal hunt, they did, them as had endured the same thing as me.

"But to be honest 'twas two things which kept me from returning. The first was the grime and filth of the ship that I could not abide. I saw the first rat in my life aboard that ship. Imagine that! A great bilge rat. Big as a cat, it was. And we jammed in solid out on that white sea of ice! I found lice in me blankets, too, and that, too, was a first fer me. Mind ye, I wasn't raised with a silver spoon nor satin sheets for my bed, either, but my mother's table, sparse though it was at times, was always a spotless one and my bed was ever a clean one."

Uncle Cecil stopped and I was afraid he wouldn't continue. He drew his hand through his thinning hair.

"I've never had one louse since. Course, if I did they would be easy to spot now, eh?" Then he laughed his hearty laugh again, which I knew was his way of easing himself back into the

sad part of his tale. "The second reason was the all-consuming fear that if I ever got stranded on the ice no one would come lookin' fer me. The utter despair I saw in the eyes of men. The despair of it all. That was the thing of it. I will take that cruel memory of being abandoned and left to die to my grave."

Uncle Cecil was silent for a while after that.

"I should have died out there, you know," he said quietly, his voice soft and very serious. "I would have, too, but for two people, and both of them with the same name . . . and both Collinses, too," he said with a grin, looking directly at me. "The first was the man Jesse Collins from Newport, the hardest, toughest man I've ever known. He kept me and a good many others alive. The other was my sweetheart, Jessie Collins, from your town, Hare Bay.

"My, my, what a beautiful girl she was then, and oh how I loved her. I loves her still, of course. A man never stops lovin' his first—and for me, my only—true love. I promised her I would return and marry her, you see. And she said she would wait for me. It was a love pledge between the two of us. Still, if it weren't for the other Jesse Collins"—here he raised his two arms as if to ask, *Who knows?*—"I might not have kept my pledge."

Cecil grew silent again, remembering. His eyes filled with tears once more, thinking, I was sure, of the woman who was no longer a part of his aging years. I sensed his story was done and didn't ask him any more questions.

Cecil and I off-loaded his belongings at his modest apartment in St. John's. He gave Rose a hug as well as a wall ornament he had made. Turning to me, he shook my hand, and when I told him I wanted only gas money for the trip, he grasped my hand warmly in both of his and said simply, "Thank you, my boy, and may God bless you."

"Thanks for the tale," I said.

"Oh, I will forever tell it, my boy. I would to God there was no tale to tell!"

We left him then, and he stood waving with one hand and drying his eyes with the other until I turned out onto the busy street and lost him in the truck mirrors.

It would be more than forty years before I would come to realize the true value of what I had heard. Luckily, when I sat down to try and retell, in my own way, the story of that horrific sealing disaster, the voice of the old gentleman huddled with emotion in the cab of my truck came back to me with astounding clarity.

When I was a boy, there was another man who lived in our town who had also survived that same disaster. His name was Jesse Collins, the man considered by many—especially Cecil Mouland—as one of the heroes of the *Newfoundland* sealing disaster. He moved to Hare Bay from Newport, one of the de-settled fishing communities eighteen miles or so north by the coast. I use *de-settled* because I know of few that were forced to leave their birthplaces who were ever truly resettled.

Jesse died on February 7, 1959, at seventy-four, when I was ten years old. He lived just two houses up the gravel road from mine. I remember him as an old man who often walked down the road pulling on a curved pipe with a stream of tobacco smoke trailing over his left shoulder. He was always well-groomed and wore a tie, even on weekdays. I don't remember speaking to him, but I remember the day he was carried along the gravel road of our town to his grave. It was cold and snowing and the road was snow-packed and slippery. His coffin was sticking out of the back of a truck. There were chains strapped to the back tires, clicking and rattling as the truck slowly drove by. Dark-clad mourners walked behind in silence. The blinds and curtains at every window were drawn as the funeral procession passed. Horses drawing sleds laden with logs were *whoaed*, their reins sawed tight until the cortège passed.

When I asked my mother, who was peering out the window, she whispered, "Hush! They are burying the ol' ice hunter Uncle Jesse Collins today." Jesse and his wife, Alice, had five children.

Today many of his descendants still live in Hare Bay, and his name lives on in the same garden where he spent his last days.

The night I received the call from Garry Cranford, the president of Flanker Press, asking me to consider telling the story of the *Newfoundland* sealing disaster of the spring of 1914, is a memorable one. I was stunned. That night has been recorded in my private journals along with my first reaction to his request. My editor, Jerry Cranford, part of the executive of Flanker Press, felt that after 100 years, the story should be told again. The only real, authoritative story on that event, *Death on the Ice*, had been written by Cassie Brown. Margo Cranford, also on the executive board of Flanker Press, is the niece of the late Cassie. Margo agreed that it was time for those events to be retold. I was humbled to be asked to take on such a story. I was also flattered, but mostly I was frightened. How could I dare disturb the unique work of the late Cassie Brown?

But the truth of it was that I had for some time secretly wanted to retell the story in my own way. After considerable thought I agreed to write it. During the initial course of my research for this book, I refused to read *Death on the Ice*. I didn't want to be influenced by Cassie's work. I am fiercely independent—well, as independent as a writer can be when he bears in mind that with a historical, fact-based work he has to rely on information from others.

But no matter the avenue I pursued, all roads seemed to lead back to *Death on the Ice*. It was the only thorough account written about the event. There was no alternative. I read it again and I gleaned from the pages of Cassie Brown's stellar book many facts and accounts of real events that were to be found nowhere else, but as far as it was in my power to do so, I have left her work undisturbed. With the first draft of my manuscript written, its framework describing many scenes of ice and seals and men, I started to feel my way toward the climactic conclusion of the book. I was actually afraid of it! Again, I felt as if I were intruding in some way upon Cassie's great masterpiece. After all, *Death*

on the Ice is iconic in Newfoundland and Labrador and can be found in nearly as many homes as the Bible.

I was bolstered and reassured by my family in this endeavour. With every page my wife read, and after searching my own memory of that long-ago day in the cab of my truck with Uncle Cecil Mouland, I finally came to realize that the story I would tell was to be mine alone and no one else's. I continued with a free mind, then, and completed the story in great earnest.

Though the story you are about to read is a dramatic retelling of the events surrounding the Great Newfoundland Sealing Disaster of 1914, with new information and new sources interviewed, I respectfully acknowledge the writings of Cassie Brown, Newfoundland and Labrador's First Lady of Literature, and her book *Death on the Ice*.

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