

ABOT ISLAND

THE ALEX GILL STORY

Inspired by True Events



GARY COLLINS

CABOT ISLAND



NEWFOUNDLAND

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*To my son, Nicholas C., whom we lost long
before we should have, and whose name I
intend to keep alive with my writings.*

Am I my brother's keeper?

Genesis 4:9

INTRODUCTION

Long before Morgan was a pirate or the dreaded Blackbeard had whiskers, men sailed and explored and plundered around this northern isle, daring great reefs and countless unknown offshore islands. This dragon-shaped “new-found-land” outcropping, of a different landscape and which guards the entrance to some of North America’s greatest continental treasures, held untold secrets of its own, for off its snarling coastline and below the seething shallows swam the greatest source of protein the world had ever known. Dark-clad sailors from England and France and Spain soon realized the riches beneath the grey sea and sought refuge and safe haven close to this bounty. Then, as is now, the greatest enemy to seamen wasn’t necessarily the sea itself, but more often than not, where the sea meets the land; for here the

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great wet plain exerts its watery dominance with dogged determination, carving its way inland, its heavy salt weight gouging and shaping and leaving behind perils of unseen rock close to shore.

Nowhere in this triangled maze of islands and bays is more dangerous to shipping than its northeast coast. Here the broad expanse of the northern sea rolls unchecked, its icy current carrying great icebergs and spawning terrible gales all headed for the craggy shallow coast around Cape Freels. The shallow waters in this area have been pounded by boulders hurled from the bottom of the heaving seas, the rocks pulverizing themselves against the shores and forming white beaches of fine-granulated sand.

Just south of Cape Freels, and inside the shipping lane that heads straight for Cape Bonavista, are nestled the worst of the reefs and shoals between the two capes. Almost all of the larger offshore islands and most of the sheltered coves on the mainland were at one time inhabited by fishermen who built their saltbox-style houses as close to the sea as was possible. They were master architects at designing houses whose foundations on narrow ledges were usually supported by simple wooden shores cleverly constructed to hold even the largest of buildings. This proximity to the sea was imperative to the fishermen, who depended on the bountiful ocean for their very

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existence. These settled islands and coves hid among uncharted dangers, though, which presented a navigational nightmare to the many ships required to support and carry the great volumes of cod to markets all over the world.

In the nineteenth century, the Newfoundland government, under constant pressure from the fish merchants, began installing lights and lighthouses in some of the more treacherous places around the island of Newfoundland. There was a need to keep ships moving around the rich bays until at least early winter. The loss of a few lives was an accepted expense, but the loss of a ship and its valuable cargo was not. The shallow waters south of Cape Freels provided rich fishing grounds—and contained the deadliest nest of rock, reef, and shoal ground on this tangled coast of lowland. Standing to sea, and with most of its perils hidden, presenting a false sense of security of entrance to this part of the bay, was the most dangerous island of them all—Cabot Island—its name borrowed from the supposed discoverer of the huge island province that stretched away to the west.

In truth, hundreds of years before the heavy-clothed explorer from Italy hove into view outside this sweet-smelling June bay—and standing on the rolling deck of his caravel declaring it a happy site—our own red-skinned natives had already laid claim to Newfoundland's riches. Their race

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would be decimated by the greedy and disease-carrying Europeans, and more than 500 years would pass before the lives of these gentle people would be recognized posthumously. It would take just as many years for the invading White Man to find artifacts of the Maritime Archaic Indians, their way of life unearthed on a grassy peninsula at the entrance to this Bonavista Bay that Cabot had already proclaimed to have “discovered.”

The years rolled on and the island progressed and modernized with their advance. In the 1950s, the island named for John Cabot boasted a large lighthouse, with a steady, brilliant night light and a bellowing foghorn to warn seafarers away from its inviting shoreline. By 1954, the large white structure dominating the small island and guarding the north entrance to Bonavista Bay was complemented by two employees of the department of transportation, one the lightkeeper and the other his assistant. Fifty-two-year-old Alexander Gill, the keeper, and Bertram Gill, forty-nine, his assistant and brother, were both from Newtown, just seven miles northwest of the island. Both men were married with families.

The large house on the Cabot was constructed to accommodate two families, and with its nine rooms was equipped with two of everything required for the workers and their

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families, if they desired to live on the island during the navigation season, usually from early March to late November. Two complete and separate kitchens and dining rooms, also bedrooms, pantries, and outside entrances, provided a measure of privacy for the keepers. The wood, brick, and cast-iron building was a solid fortress against the wiles of the North Atlantic and offered the keepers most of the amenities of modern 1950s outport Newfoundland. This is where our story begins.

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1

ONE

Alex's family had long since moved back to Newtown after spending the summer on Cabot Island. Bert's family had stayed in Newtown, having no desire for the greater isolation of the tiny island. Saturday, November 27, 1954, found the two brothers alone on the island. The day had begun slow and quiet, the great expanse of sea calm and unusually flat for November. Before noon, though, the sky had become sullen and greyed with dense clouds that lowered the sky ever closer to the now disturbed sea. The two brothers sat at the kitchen table in Bert's section of the lighthouse. Alex, who was a ravenous eater, had finished his meal and now savoured the dregs of tea in his nearly empty cup. He slid the sturdy chair back from the table, making a slight scraping sound on the floor in the process. Lighting his already loaded pipe, he sucked pur-

posefully until his effort produced a cloud of blue smoke. He glanced at his brother eating and silently wondered as he always did how Bert could take so much time putting away a bit of grub. Stretching his legs toward the warmth of the coal stove, Alex watched his heavy-scented smoke drift toward the heated stovetop, only to be rapidly pulled upward along the black funnel and disappear between ceiling-flange and stovepipe. Alex drained the last of his sweet-tasting live tea and placed the cup back onto the saucer, his one indulgence at fanciness. The sugar-sticky tea leaves clung to the side of the cup. Staring at the tiny, sodden leaves for a moment, he said, "Now dere's a queer pattern if I ever seen one, Bert, b'y. I 'low someone could read the mystery in them tea leaves fer sure."

"You don't believe in that stuff, do ya, Alex?"

"I don't know if I believes in it or not," drawled Alex in his joking way, "but the ol' fellers said they could tell a man's lifespan by lookin' at the leaves left in his cup."

Bert slurped the last of his own tea and placed the empty cup back onto the oilcloth tabletop. "Well then, 'tis long life for you fer sure. Look 'ow your tea leaves run from the edge of the cup, right to the bottom, and mine are all lumped at the bottom of me cup."

"Ah, 'tis all silliness, I knows that." And with that, Alex placed his left hand on the table and pushed himself to his

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feet. Walking briskly to the small window, he looked out and pulled thoughtfully on his pipe again, the smoke now a lesser blue curling around his head. Taking the hot pipe from his mouth he turned back to his brother. "The swells are risin' steady and backin' from the nodeast. Accardin' to the sky, der'll be a starm in a day or so," he said.

"Dere wadn't a wag of sea dis marning, but I noticed a big change just before we come in fer dinner," agreed Bert, as he too pushed back from the table and joined his brother, now at the door. Pulling on their warm hats and coats, both men stepped outside. The sea, which had been relatively quiet for the last few days, had changed noticeably; the gentle swells from the south had now backed from the east. The great stretch of ocean was still fairly smooth, but the grey swells had a hidden strength to their reach. The two men left the lighthouse together and walked the narrow beaten path to the Sailors' Home on the southeast side of the island. This separate building had been built some years before by the government. Its primary purpose was to provide immediate shelter and accommodation to the lightkeepers and their families in the event of a fire in the main house, or in case of shipwrecked sailors a shelter would be readily available, hence the name. It was equipped with everything needed for survival, complete with a small kitchen and bedrooms. It also had a

sort of repair room. The name Sailors' Home was given to the structure by the lightkeepers and the name stuck. It also housed a small tool shop where repairs could be carried out and the necessary tools required for general maintenance stored. In this small carpenter shop was the punt Alex was repairing for his son, Eli. He and Bert would work a few hours here during the day, the small boat a pleasant distraction from the tedium of lighthouse duty.

Alex tapped the dottle from his pipe against the narrow keel of the upturned boat. "I 'lows we'll have to put a new garbit into 'er like you said, Bert, b'y. Eli says she leaks most along by 'er keel."

"Yes, 'er garbit plank is rotted in places," agreed Bert. "I drove me knife right t'rough in a coupla places, and 'tis no good to cark that."

"No, the oakum won't stay in a rotten seam. You start gettin' the old plank out 'n I'll look for a nice clear black spruce plank to put back." Holding his tooth-scarred pipe between his clenched teeth, Alex pulled a full plug of Beaver tobacco from his pants pocket and, using his short pocket knife, the blade sickle-curved from long use, he shaved several short strips of dried leaf into his cupped left hand. He rubbed the curled leaves between his huge, calloused hands, the motion producing a rustling, rasping sound. Holding his pipe by the

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curved stem, he poured the crushed tobacco inside, and tamped it tight with a broad thumb.

“One good thing, ’er timbers are sound enough,” said Bert, tapping the boat’s ribs with his hammer.

Alex put a burning match to his waiting pipe, the yellow flame peeking through his cupped fingers. Soon, tendrils of blue smoke seeped around his fingers, and after several deep, lung-filling pulls, he exhaled smoke out the corners of his mouth in a satisfied stream of pungent mist. “A good t’ing, too, ’cause dere’s nothin’ here suitable for makin’ punt timbers. You want wood with a good sweep in it fer that.”

Looking around at their meagre supply of boat-building materials, Bert nodded his agreement.

For the next couple of hours, the two men contented themselves with their time off work. Alex especially loved working with wood and was an excellent boat builder. He’d told his son, Eli, that he’d have this boat repaired by the close of navigation and in plenty of time for the winter turr- and duck hunting that Eli so passionately pursued. With Bert’s eager hands to help, the job was near completion, the shaping of the new plank to lay alongside the keel the last major task. The chirrup of the long wood-shaving plane, the rasp of saw and ring of hammer mingled with the murmur of the two brothers as they worked, the sounds blending, belonging.

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Inside this simple workplace the very atmosphere was charged with contentment; their feet moved back and forth from boat to bench, shuffling among the wood shavings that fell from the well-worn plane. The steady quiet heat from the coal stove warmed the room enough to release the myrrh-smell from the new shaved wood, which blended with the salt sea smell from the seasoned punt, to produce an aroma of land and sea. Every now and again one of the men would look out the window, from where the grey sea could be seen coming to the land in long, gentle swells that foamed and hissed where they met the smooth rocks.

Above the small workbench several skeins of unspun oakum hung from rusted nail hooks; the deep, rich smell of this boat-caulking material mixed with the other airborne scents while the tobacco-blue smoke sought out the shafts of dusty light between windows and floor. This was a common scene along the shores of Newfoundland, for industrious men were seldom content with idle hands and usually found meaningful tasks to enrich their spare time. Alex and Bert were as content with their simple work here on this speck of island, on the fringe of the world's stormiest ocean, as if they were working in their own stage in Newtown, where a call from their nearby home would hurry them to an already prepared table.

Satisfied with the early evening's work, Alex straightened

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and glanced out the low window. "The evening's closin' in. We'll knock off fer the day. We'll be nigh to finishin' 'er by Monday or Tuesday. Eli'll be proud of his ol' punt when we're finished with 'er, Bert, b'y."

"And that 'e will, though by next spring she'll be just as bad again, the way he serves 'er," cautioned Bert.

"Well, 'tis no changin' 'im, Bert, you knows that. 'E'll drag 'er t'rough every bit of slob ice there is d'winter after the ducks and turrs, that's for sure." Alex grinned, the corners of his blue eyes crinkling.

The two men made their way back to the lighthouse, their dark clothing made even darker on the narrow trail with the grass dead underfoot and the evening falling around them. They had almost covered the short distance and were nearing the lighthouse when Bert's keen hearing alerted him to the nearby ocean, and there, looking small and swinging inside Wester Point, and heading for the landing area, was a boat. Alex had heard the boat's engine as well, and his sharp eye had also identified her. "Why, that's Eli's boat, and it looks like Fred and Baxter aboard wit' 'im," shouted Alex. "I 'lows they got some mail fer us, Bert. You run in the house fer the mailbag and the heaving-line and I'll run on down to the landin' to let the boys know we sees 'em." With that, Bert ran into the lighthouse while Alex hurried toward the shoreline.

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THE BARBOUR RESIDENCE IN PRESENT-DAY NEWTOWN (Courtesy of Winston Perry)

About the Author

Born in a small, two-storey house in Hare Bay, Bonavista Bay, Gary Collins finished school at Brown Memorial High School in the same town. He spent forty years in the tree harvesting/sawmilling business along with his father, Theophilus, and son Clint. His writing career began when he was asked to write eulogies for deceased friends and family. Currently he is a freelance writer who contributes feature articles to the *Newfoundland Herald* under the pseudonym Nicholas C. In his spare time he likes to play the guitar.