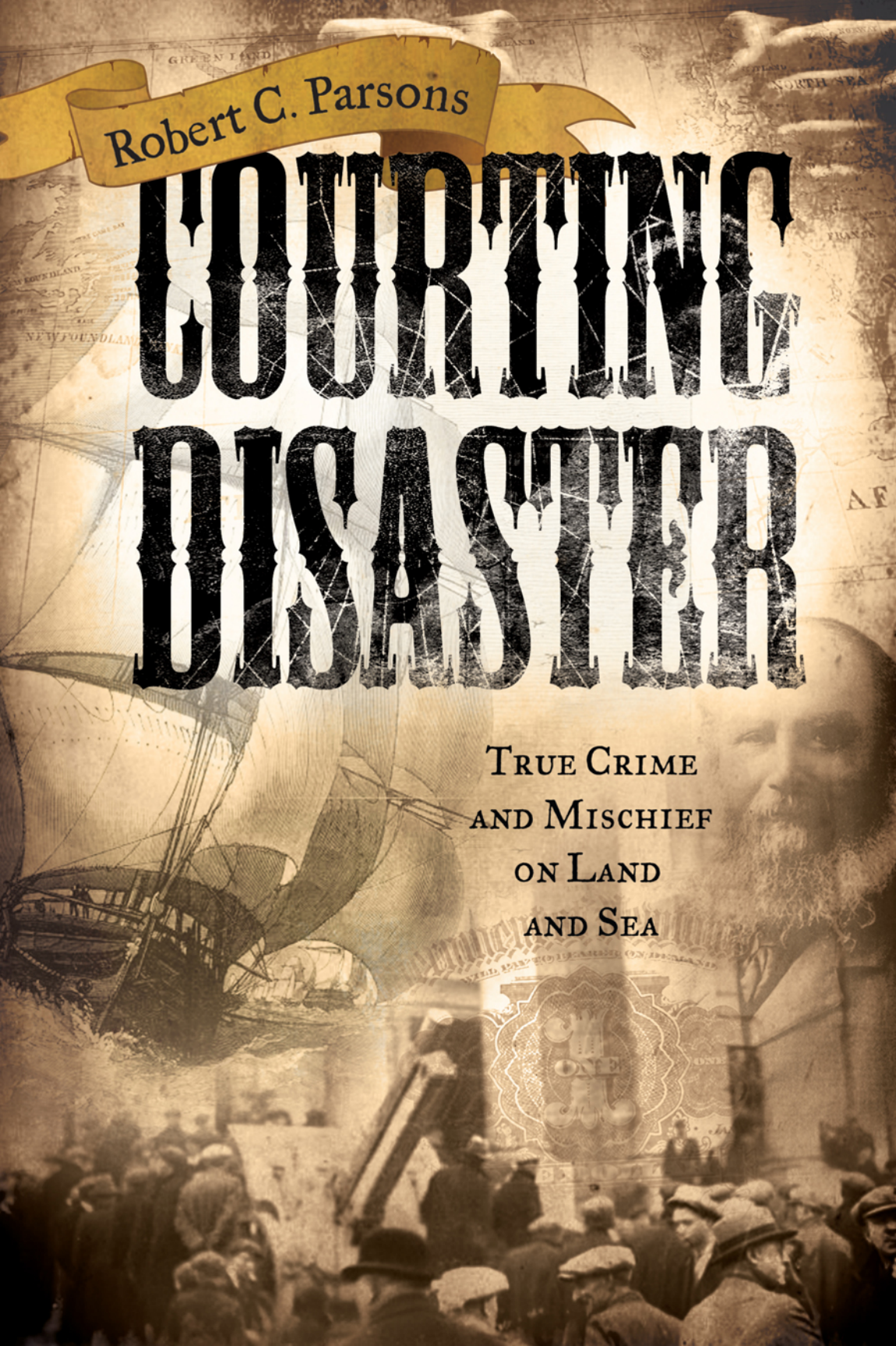


Robert C. Parsons

# COURTING DISASTER

TRUE CRIME  
AND MISCHIEF  
ON LAND  
AND SEA



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TRUE CRIME AND MISCHIEF ON LAND AND SEA

Robert C. Parsons

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*Preserving Newfoundland and Labrador's  
Maritime History, One Tale at a Time . . .*

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## PREFACE

Crime is all around us. Always has been, always will be. Despite deterrents and public education that “crime doesn’t pay,” it exists. *Courting Disaster: True Crime and Mischief on Land and Sea* takes wrongdoings from Newfoundland and Labrador’s long and colourful history and presents them in short items. This book has a variety of stories; the sixty-three chapters come from all coasts of Newfoundland (the country’s official title in this era). They range from mischief to dangerous pranks, from misdemeanours to murder, from theft of a raincoat to shipwrecking.

In some cases a crime was committed or there was gross negligence, yet no person was arrested or held responsible, and there were no court proceedings. In others the perpetrator was caught and punished. In others still, an accusing finger was pointed, but there was no proof or not enough evidence to warrant an arrest or trial. The stories, all true, vary from short anecdotes to accounts of longer trials.

I have not arranged the assorted accounts under subject headings or types of crime, or placed them chronologically or geographically. The stories come from various sources – court records, newspaper accounts, personal memoirs, family anecdotes, folklore, and interviews.

There is one type of criminal activity that does not appear in this volume: “luring.” In my twenty-plus years of searching for stories of shipwrecks and the causes of marine disasters, I have yet to find any story or newspaper account of “luring” – a common term for falsely

putting up lights to intentionally cause a ship to wreck. I found no instance where anyone in Newfoundland was accused of luring, much less arrested of such a crime.

In relation to sailors and ships, readers will note an inclination to lean seaward and to feature misdeeds and mischief on the North Atlantic, that element of Nature forever pounding at our door. But then, that's where the majority of work and activity – hence conflict, misdeeds, crime – took place up to a generation or two ago.

I would like to acknowledge the help, encouragement, and guidance of the following people: Carl Gillard, Springdale; Kate Edwards, Lawn; the late Vibert Shave, Burin; Alf and Eleanor Manuel, Twillingate; Cyril Pinsent, Clarenville; Andy Careen, Lance Cove; Randy Hann, Carter's Cove; Arthur Elliott, Lewisporte; and several others who, because of the sensitivity of the event, wish to remain anonymous. For Captain Fudge's story I consulted his sixty-page biography: *John Marshall Fudge: His Life as a Fisherman and Businessman*, as well as PEI newspapers. The staff at various libraries usually found what I wanted. Specifically they are the Newfoundland Reference Section at the A. C. Hunter Library, the Maritime History Archives, and Memorial University's Centre for Newfoundland Studies (CNS).

If any errors occur in the information given – the spelling of names, identities, misrepresentation or misinterpretation of the event or in the citing of sources – please notify the author and efforts to correct them will be made in any subsequent editions or reprints.

## THREE MONTHS FOR SHIPWRECKING

When the Court of Quarter Sessions convened at Ferryland on October 25, 1883, it was to proceed in a case against two Lawlor men and their accomplices. It was one of the first cases tried under Newfoundland's "Wreck and Salvage Act," passed by legislature and made law in 1880. The four defendants had articles and property from a wrecked ship in their possession, and they knew and understood the goods were from a wrecked ship.

In fact, after their apprehension, Timothy and Laurence Lawlor, Ambrose Quinn and Peter McCarthy of the Southern Shore had no hesitation in pleading guilty. The Lawlors owned the boat that visited the wreck site; Quinn and McCarthy went with them as crew.

The Crown's evidence consisted of certain articles marked *HERDER* and others marked **E. W.** The stolen articles were from the passenger and freight steamer *Herder*. It was wrecked at Long Beach near Trepassey on October 5, 1882. The **E. W.** articles were subsequently identified as the property of Mrs. Worthill, a passenger on the *Herder* when it was wrecked.

The SS *Herder*, bound from New York to Hamburg with mail, passengers and general cargo, struck a rock off Long Beach while passing Cape Race. It went aground across a small cove near the eastern head of Long Beach, a community with only two occupied homes. After they were transported to shore in the eight boats belonging to the *Herder*, the 144 passengers were stranded.

Temporary tents made of sail from the wrecked steamer were set up to house the crew and passengers.

Salvage operations began immediately. All seventy-six bags of mail were brought ashore first, then the valuables, including silverware, plates, and three cases of coin from the ship.

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><b>EVENING DESPATCHES.</b></p> <p><b>What They Say at the Cape.</b></p> <p><b>Latest Regarding the Wrecked Steamer "Herder."</b></p> <p><b>THE "NEPTUNE" ARRIVES AT LONG BEACH.</b></p> <p><b>Passengers and Crew Leave for St. John's.</b></p> <p><b>TWO THOUSAND PACKAGES OF CARGO LANDED.</b></p> <p><i>(Special to the Evening Telegram.)</i></p> <p>CAPE RACE, Last Evening.</p> <p>I have just returned from the scene of the wrecked steamer "Herder." The S.S. "Neptune" arrived there at 8 o'clock this morning.</p> | <p><b>Evening Telegram.</b></p> <p>WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 11, 1882.</p> <p><b>THE NEW RINK.</b></p> <p>THE dimensions of the new Rink, now in course of erection at the south eastern end of the Parade Ground, are two hundred feet long, seventy feet wide and two stories high, and will have a gallery all round for the accommodation of spectators. In the centre of the Rink, the curlers will have a space of thirty-four feet, set apart for their game, whilst sixteen feet on each side will be allowed for skating. In the turning of the corners the skaters will have more room than they had in the old Rink, as the new one will be considerably longer. Mr. J. Score has the contract.</p> <p><b>Meeting of the Excelsior Amusement Club.</b></p> |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

The Evening Telegram of October 11, 1882, reports on the wreck of the SS Herder at Long Beach near Cape Race.

By October 10, the *Herder* was given over to legitimate salvors who attempted to get as much of the ship's furniture and cargo – lard, cotton and tinned meats – ashore as they could before the weather and seas turned nasty. To secure the ship and to deter looters, Judge Prowse had sent a police squad from St. John's. Before the *Herder* broke to pieces, shipping authorities sent a final report on the wreck:

There are several holes in the bottom of the *Herder* and all compartments are full of water. Had the ship kept a little more than the length of itself from Mistaken Point,

it would have gone clear of everything; while, on the other hand if it had been a little nearer land, it is questionable whether any of those on board would have been saved.

The stately and magnificent floating palace of yesterday is now only a mass of wreck and ruin today.

Despite the best intentions of the law and armed guards, Long Beach was overrun with men from Renews to St. Shotts looking for bounty from the sea. They would take whatever could be lifted and stashed away from under the very eyes of those paid to protect the wreck of the *SS Herder*. Four men with stolen goods were apprehended.

The four shipwreckers went before Judge Daniel W. Prowse in the Ferryland court. Mr. Kelligrew, legal counsel for the wreckers, advised them to plead guilty, and perhaps Judge Prowse, who was known to throw the book at wreckers, would go easy. After proceedings got under way all four men made a voluntary statement of guilt and regret for the crime.

Prowse, in his sentencing of the four prisoners, found the time to lecture to all present on the crime of wrecking:

These men before us who took these items from the wrecked steamer and a passenger on that steamer would never under other circumstances steal or rob one cent from a neighbour or any other person. Such acts that they have committed can only be attributed to the fact that a prevalent and hereditary idea exists that "wrecking" is a proper thing to do.

I call on all present to put a stop to this nefarious practice – one which was and still is bringing disgrace upon the name of Newfoundland.

Judge O'Mara also gave the prisoners a dressing-down, saying that he hoped circumstances would never again call upon him to perform the painful duty now resting upon him. He then pro-





*The great ship Herder laid low at Cape Race. To add insult to injury, wreckers from the area took what they could from the wreck until four of them were apprehended.*

nounced sentence: Timothy and Laurence Lawlor, owners of the boat used in wrecking, three months' imprisonment each. Ambrose Quinn and Peter McCarthy, part of the crew, two months each.

Both O'Mara and Prowse wished it to be understood that these were light sentences, owing to the frank and apologetic voluntary statements from the accused, and because of their previous good conduct.

Before court adjourned, lawyer Kelligrew rose to draw attention to the disgraceful conditions of the Ferryland jail, where the prisoners were to be incarcerated. He hoped something could be done about them. Afterward, Judge Prowse visited the cells and agreed to bring the matter to the Executive Council.

## THE SLEEP OF DEATH

In 1882, a local paper in Newfoundland ran a story with the heading **MYSTERIOUS DROWNING AT CROQUE**. The subhead called the strange death “A Tradition of the French Shore,” as if to imply a mysterious drowning or wrongful death was a common feature of that part of the coast.

The French Shore, or Treaty Shore, came about as a result of centuries of war, peace agreements, and more war between England and France. The treaties, blocking the settlement of hundreds of miles of coastline by non-French fishermen during most of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, gave the French full access to the coast and its cod.

By 1783, the French Shore stretched from Cape Bonavista and Point Riche on the northwest side of the Great Northern Peninsula. Later, an international compromise changed the boundaries to Cape St. John and Cape Ray.

For generations, resident Newfoundland fisher families and the migrant French managed to get along fairly well. However, from time to time there was smouldering animosity which often broke out into sharp disagreements. In 1904, the French agreed to give up their rights to the French Shore, and the English were free to settle there.

The story surfacing in St. John’s from the French Shore described the death of a young man named Johnson of Green Cove. Apparently a doctor, who hailed from France but lived in St.

Julien's, came to Green Cove – about three miles away – to seek help. The doctor needed someone to row his boat to a nearby community to administer to a patient. He went into a house and asked a Mrs. Johnson's permission to have her son, aged twenty-two years, to row him across to Croque.

Mrs. Johnson consented, and in due time the doctor and young Johnson arrived at Croque, where the doctor went into one of the three fishing establishments there. He left Johnson at the wharf. There were several French fishermen at the Croque landing place and about 150 Frenchmen in the surrounding area.

When the French doctor concluded his business, which took perhaps a hour or so, he came back to the wharf. Johnson was nowhere to be seen. The doctor had no choice but to find another fisherman to ferry him back to Green Cove.

When he arrived, he went into the Johnson home and the mother asked him, "Where's my son?"

"Oh," the doctor said with a shrug, "he must be asleep somewhere in Croque." The doctor returned to St. Julien's, but young Johnson was missing. He was asleep, all right – the final sleep of death. His body was found the next day in a cove at Croque.

Along the coast in English towns, an outcry arose at the untimely death of the young man. Suspicious of foul play were cast upon the French fishermen. The curious circumstances were first relayed to a British warship, HMS *Firebrand*, stationed in the general vicinity. Its duty was to protect the English interests along the French Shore. However, no one aboard the warship was able to determine when and by what means Johnson had died.

Inspector Paul Carty of the Newfoundland Constabulary went to Croque, and he too conducted an investigation, without success. Carty had no choice but to exonerate the local French fishermen. In the end the curious demise of Johnson was entered into the records as "misadventure."

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