

GARY COLLINS

Mattie Mitchell

A BIOGRAPHY



NEWFOUNDLAND'S GREATEST FRONTIERSMAN

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

MORE PRAISE FOR GARY COLLINS

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 CONFESSION*

“*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

MORE PRAISE FOR GARY COLLINS

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

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

Other books by Gary Collins

CABOT ISLAND

THE LAST FAREWELL

SOULIS JOE'S LOST MINE

WHAT COLOUR IS THE OCEAN?

WHERE EAGLES LIE FALLEN

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I respectfully dedicate this book to Marie Marion Sparkes née Mitchell, whom, sadly, I never met. She passed from this earth before I started to write about her grandfather, Mattie Mitchell.

And grasps me now a long-unwonted yearning
For that serene and solemn Spirit-Land:
My song, to faint Aeolian murmurs turning,
Sways like a harp-string by the breezes fanned.
I thrill and tremble; tear on tear is burning,
And the stern heart is tenderly unmanned.
What I possess, I see far distant lying,
And what I lost, grows real and undying.

Goethe's *Faust*

PREFACE

THE TIME I SPENT WRITING ABOUT the incredible life of Mattie Mitchell the frontiersman has been a joyous one. The wilds of Newfoundland have always been a sacred, mysterious place for me. As Mattie's pages lengthened, so did my respect for the man. When the manuscript was nearing completion, I was hired along with my partner, Allan Keats, to spend the summer prospecting in the wilderness of Newfoundland. One of the areas we worked was the Great Northern Peninsula. I could not believe my good fortune! I would be paid to traverse the same country where Mattie Mitchell had spent the most exciting part of his life.

For thirty days Al and I drove, canoed, and walked most of the area between Gunners Cove in the north to Daniel's Harbour in the south. And as we walked the land, with maps, compass, and GPS in hand, my respect for Mattie Mitchell grew daily. This area of our province truly is great! There is no other place like it. Away from the stunted, twisted tuckamore trees that line the coastal gulf highway there lies a hidden world.

Among the distant mountains of grandeur there are hanging green valleys of incredible beauty. Untouched forests of fragrant balsam firs, gun-barrel-straight drokes of black spruce, and stately, castor-scented white spruce grow in profusion. Twisting

along the mountain valleys, the clearest of river waters course along limestone beds and sometimes mysteriously disappear without a trace. From the heights one can see endless vistas of the distant ocean sheltering white-clad villages. Verdant green hills and deep valley winds fill your senses.

This is an area of our province about which few south of that peninsula know. It is more than worth it to take a day's journey off the beaten path. It is a hunter's paradise, a photographer's delight, and it will test the mettle of the most ardent hiker. And always, the great mountains will witness your journey. The place truly amazed me and will forever stay with me.

Somewhere, in one of the hidden valleys we walked through, I found the true spirit of Mattie Mitchell. It was more than the mere admiration for a man who could travel across this great land without any of the modern navigational aids Al and I carried. That fact in itself astounded me.

No, it was the realization of the man's true being: he had been one with such a vast wilderness. This knowledge finally connected me spiritually to a great man I had never met, but with whom I have gladly walked.

SEPTEMBER, 2011
HARE BAY, NL

CHAPTER 1

EVER SINCE SHE WAS OLD ENOUGH to hear the adults in her family tell their stories, Marie Marion Mitchell was an avid listener and something more. As she grew, Marie learned that she was blessed with a near-photographic memory.

She was born in the Newfoundland west coast city of Corner Brook on May 20, 1936. She was baptized in the Roman Catholic faith in that same city on May 24 of the same year at the Holy Redeemer Cathedral Parish.

Her childhood years were a time without television. Her family owned a dry-cell battery-operated radio. It was the only mechanical source of entertainment in their home. Between the bouts of static emerging from the radio—turned on only at night—came the crackly voice of a newsman. It was not entertaining to a child. Marie's favourite source of amusement and entertainment came from the stories she heard in her mother's kitchen.

She remembered cold winters evenings especially. The kitchen door would open without anyone knocking, and stepping through the doorway with a brief kick of their feet to dislodge the snow caked to their boots, their visitors would enter. Great drafts of cold winter air came with them, meeting the warmth of the kitchen to produce misty wreaths above the hats that covered their heads.

It was almost always men of the Mi'kmaq race who came. They were hunters who knew the ways of the wilds, and they came to tell their stories. They also knew their own oral history. Their favourite stories to tell were of the man who was a legend in their world, Mattie Mitchell. And while they spun their yarns, Marie listened with all of her attention. She never tired of hearing about her famous grandfather.

The rugged men with bristly beards smoked short-stemmed pipes or thin cigarettes they rolled themselves. As they talked, the room warmed and they removed their coats, but never their boots. Smoke leaving their mouths was drawn by the heat of the wood range and, rising blue above the hot stove, escaped through the seam between the black funnel and the silver flange nailed to the white ceiling.

This was where the young Marie first heard about Mattie Mitchell. Without knowing it, she was holding in her head the storied history of a man who was legend among his people. And from her memory she would record in her personal journals the incredible lore she had heard about the grandfather she always wished she had known.

* * * * *

MATTIE, IT SEEMED, HAD AN affinity toward rivers. Maybe it was because the man was intelligent enough to realize that river valleys almost always provided easy access into the wilderness. All river valleys are conduits for game, whose ceaseless wanderings established trails for the knowing traveller. Or maybe it was simply Mattie's love for the romance of a swift river and burbling stream that spawned some of the stories Marie cherished.

He found ruby red and emerald green garnets and jaspers on Flat Bay Brook and the Humber River. He knew where to find

a coal seam on the Humber. He found a salt deposit on Crabb's Brook.

And on one of the rivers that flow into the Bay St. George, he found gold. For many years the tale of Mattie Mitchell's gold was figured to be just a tall tale.

Mattie was finding his way along the shoreline of a river one day in late autumn. The day was late. The sun was settling down among the trees, its lowering light blazing through the trees and glinting on the rushing water as it sank. He carried upon his broad shoulders a pack heavily laden with animal skins. In one hand he carried his heavy Martin Henry rifle. In his other hand was a long-handled, broad-faced axe.

He was returning to the coast after a month-long trapping venture. He was taking his furs to the only furrier on the coast he trusted to give him a fair price.

Mattie rarely saw any money from his work. His furs—always in prime condition and well cured—he exchanged for provisions for his family. His own needs were simple: tea and salt and, if he was lucky, sugar, a small bag of gunpowder, and a handful of bullets would do him just fine. Mattie traded the bulk of his furs for his family's needs before he set off once again into the wilderness.

His way had been long. The autumn had been warm and unusually dry. River bottoms showed. Some of the brooks and streams had slowed to a trickle. Yellowing birches and golden aspens shed shrivelled leaves that rustled noisily down, crisp and weathered. The broad lower branches of the white spruce trees discarded their sun-burnt reddish brown tips as he brushed past them. The pungent, musky smell that comes with late autumn rains, which every true hunter loves, was missing. It was a time without rain. Mattie had journeyed along this waterway many times, but he had never seen the water level so low.

He was picking his way over a rocky riverbank when the sunlight filtering through the trees reflected off a shiny white surface just ahead of him. When he reached the rock formation he saw a narrow vein running down through the reddish outcrop. Mattie knew the white, crystalline rock in the vein was quartz. He had learned about quartz veins, in particular that they appeared in rust-coloured rocks, from his time guiding geologists. They always paid attention to such places and hammered away at the rocks with the backs of their axes, sometimes studying the pieces for hours. And as they talked, Mattie listened and never forgot.

The low water level had revealed the vein. Mattie lowered his load to the ground and approached the white vein, axe in hand. Settling onto his haunches, he studied the rock. The quartz vein was no more than five inches wide, but it ran from the bank and disappeared under the river water. Mattie scanned the other side of the river but could see no sign that the rock formation had reached across. Looking again at the cliff and noticing the steep angle at which it entered the water, he calculated that it went deep underground at the river's centre.

A brownish cliff several feet wide bordered the quartz on either side. With the back of his axe, Mattie broke a large piece of the white rock loose. The rock was very heavy. He turned it over in his hand and immediately saw the yellow sheen of gold flakes!

Brown stains ran throughout the fractures in the rock. In places the quartz appeared grey. It also smelled bad. Stinky quartz, the geologists had called it. Pyrite cubes glittered everywhere, but the "fool's gold" did not trick Mattie. The pyrite appeared to have been placed into the rock, and its colour changed when he turned it against the dying sun. But the gold seemed to be spattered into the rock, and no matter how he shifted it around, it never lost its deep lustre. He broke several more pieces away and was rewarded again with the buttery colour.

Mattie was neither excited or surprised at his discovery. It was just something his quick eye had found. His remarkable power of recall had done the rest to conjure up the memories of his time with Alexander Murray and James Howley.

Walking back to where he had laid down his pack, with several pieces of the rock cradled in his hands, he thought for a minute where he would put the samples. The day was late and he was hungry. He would not make the coast before dark. He decided to spend the night here on the wooded, mossy bank of the river.

Mattie soon had a small campfire going below the high riverbank. He filled his quart-sized kettle, which was long blackened and dented, with water from the river. Hooking the kettle from a green alder by its wire handle and placing it over the crackling fire, he climbed up over the bank and prepared to build a shelter for the night.

Steam rising from the fire caught his eye. At first he thought the water had boiled over. As he neared the fire, he heard the hiss of water falling on hot coals. His kettle was leaking! He pulled it away from the fire and dumped the few drops left onto the ground. Holding the kettle against the sky, he saw two small holes in its bottom. Resigning himself to a dry meal, he was about to throw the kettle away when he remembered his gold. The kettle was still strong and would make an excellent container in which to carry the rocks.

The next morning broke cold and misty, but the rising sun soon burned through the “pride of the morning,” and when Mattie loaded the heavy pack on his shoulders, the day was warm. Mattie picked up the heavy kettle and considered how he would carry it. It would surely make a noise if he carried it in either hand along with his gun and axe. He fully intended to have a goose or a couple of ducks before he reached the end of this day’s travel, so the kettle would have to remain behind.

He scraped a hole in the coarse gravel under the riverbank and placed the kettle inside. Then he filled in the shallow hole with the gravel and placed several heavy rocks on top of it. He shouldered his pack again and without once looking back he walked away down the bright river valley.

The years went by and Mattie never returned for his “kettle of gold.” He told the story of his gold find many times. Everyone listened to him. Some believed him. But without the “golden” proof, many did not. The river rose and fell with the seasons. Some years its waters peaked and some seasons they did not. Mattie’s golden kettle was forgotten.

Until one late summer day in 1943.

* * * * *

THE LUSH, GREEN FARMLANDS ON THE coastal plain around the largely French-speaking town of Stephenville on Newfoundland’s southwest coast had been converted to one of the world’s biggest runways. War had come lording over the lands of the earth. Since 1939, the free peoples of Europe had been fighting against a tyranny unequalled in history. The isles of Britain, the plains of southern Europe, and the deserts of North Africa were fierce battlegrounds. On December 7, 1941, the richest nation on earth declared war against the far-off nation of Japan. And now the dogs of war scoured the globe, snarling and fighting as they went.

Stephenville had become an American base of more than 8,000 acres. The airstrips created there on the edge of the western sea were 150 feet wide and stretched 6,000 feet toward the distant mountains. During the peak war years from 1943-1945, more than 30,000 American troops per year passed through the base at Harmon Field.

Day and night the planes came in from the western gulf which

separated the island nation of Newfoundland from the land mass of Canada. And just as regularly they flew away again, heading for distant battles that went on and on. And when it was over, all of the dead names could fill pages of books that would never be written. The Greek philosopher Plato said it best: Only the dead have seen the last of war.

Mattie Mitchell's bones had long since blended into the earth he so dearly loved when a young American airman came walking up the river valley. He was accompanied by another man who was little more than a teenager. The American's nickname was "Stringer." He was the leader of his squadron. When he came roaring in from the Atlantic for the airstrip at Stephenville, he always had a group of fighter planes in his "string."

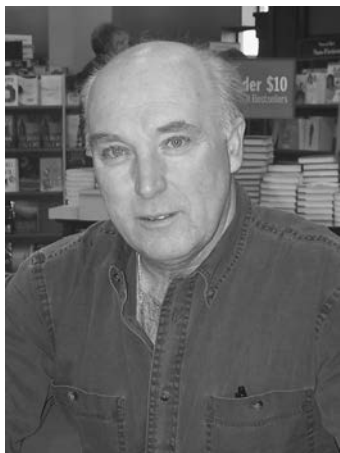
Stringer had met and fallen in love with a local dark-haired girl. The young airman was an avid fly fisherman who until now had never tried his hand at fishing for Atlantic salmon. Stringer learned that his fiancé's younger brother knew all about fishing for salmon. The brother and sister were of Mi'kmaq descent. And so it was that the two men made their way up the river where Mattie Mitchell had found gold so many decades ago. They headed toward a deep pool where the boy assured the airman the salmon always rested.

For two hours the American fished the deep, dark water of the pool without any success, although the salmon frequently jumped all around him. He had changed his fly hooks several times, but it was all in vain. He just couldn't get the hang of catching an Atlantic salmon. Walking a little farther upstream and pulling his hat from his head, he removed another fly hook from the felt band that ran around the quiff. He was tying the fly to the fine leader when he saw it.

He bent his head down and placed the end of the barrel knot between his teeth. Turning his head sideways, he bit down and



Matthew "Mattie" Mitchell (left) and two sportsmen.
(Courtesy of Brian Sparkes)



GARY COLLINS was born in a small, two-storey house by the sea in the town of Hare Bay, Bonavista North. He finished school at Brown Memorial High in the same town. He spent forty years in the logging and sawmilling business with his father, Theophilus, and son Clint. Gary was once Newfoundland's youngest fisheries guardian. He managed log drives down spring rivers for years, spent seven

seasons driving tractor-trailers over ice roads and the Beaufort Sea of Canada's Western Arctic, and has been involved in the crab, lobster, and cod commercial fisheries.

His writing career began when he was asked to write eulogies for deceased friends and family. He spent a full summer employed as a prospector before he wrote *Soulis Joe's Lost Mine*; he liked the work so much, he went back to school to earn his prospecting certificate. A critically acclaimed author, he has written a total of six books, including *Cabot Island*, *The Last Farewell*, *Soulis Joe's Lost Mine*, *Where Eagles Lie Fallen*, and the children's illustrated book *What Colour is the Ocean?*, which he co-wrote with his granddaughter, Maggie Rose Parsons. The latter won an Atlantic Book Award: The Lillian Shepherd Memorial Award for Excellence in Illustration.

Gary Collins is Newfoundland and Labrador's favourite storyteller, and today he is known all over the province as "The Story Man." His favourite pastimes are reading and writing, and playing guitar at his log cabin. He lives in Hare Bay, Newfoundland, with his wife, the former Rose Gill. They have three children and three grandchildren.

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The official Gary Collins website is www.garycollins.ca.