

BRUCE STAGG

LANDSLIDE

The Jack Hickey Story



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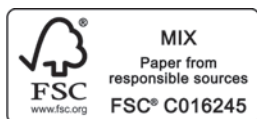
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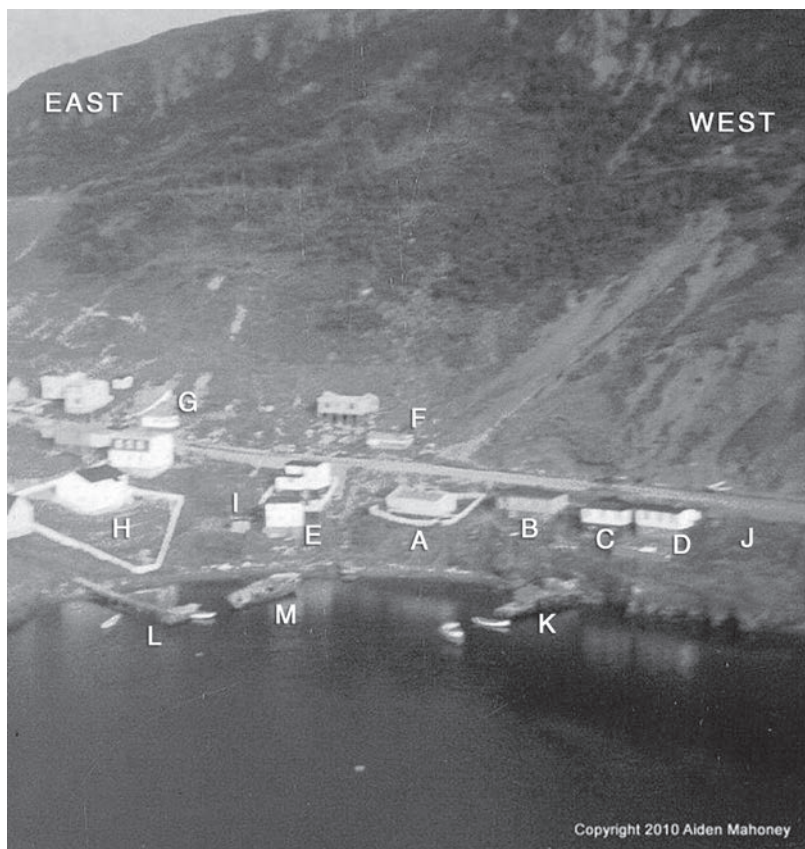
*To the memory of
Pauline, Eddie, Timmy, Julie, and Jo-Anne Hickey*

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THE AREA PRIOR TO THE LANDSLIDE



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FOREWORD

MANY BOOKS HAVE BEEN WRITTEN ABOUT ROMANCE, lost love, tragedy, grief, and happiness. In this book Bruce Stagg has covered them all in the telling of my life story. Bruce has succeeded in bringing out all of my innermost thoughts and emotions. He has expressed what most people only feel in their hearts.

I have attempted to relate to Bruce all of the facts as I know them, and it is my belief that he has recorded them accurately. In the meantime I have, through the process of writing this book, learned many things—things that others told Bruce but could not tell me. I have also, through Bruce's probing, become aware of things that I had forgotten or had buried in my subconscious. Little facts were recalled, scenes flashed before me, and sounds and smells were remembered.

I am very pleased that this story has been recorded in its entirety, and my fear of it being forgotten has been eliminated. It can now be passed on to my children and grandchildren, who up until now were unaware of all the details.

Over the past three years that Bruce has been researching and writing this book, he and I have become friends. We have shared many conversations, both happy and sad. Overall, I would say that the process has been cleansing for me—painful on times but cleansing

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and enjoyable. It is my sincere wish that the reader will enjoy the story.

John (Jack) Hickey

INTRODUCTION

“ . . . on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened. And rain fell upon the earth forty days and forty nights.” Genesis 7:11

THE RESIDENTS OF HARBOUR BRETON, a small fishing village on the Connaigre Peninsula in Fortune Bay, Newfoundland and Labrador, claimed that it rained for forty days and forty nights. For forty days and forty nights, during the summer of 1973, a prevailing southwest wind off the Grand Banks caused persistent rain, drizzle, fog, and sometimes torrential downpours. Root crops rotted in the ground, paint peeled off houses and fences, brooks and rivers overflowed their banks, ponds and lakes swelled, and the land became saturated. In the early morning hours of August 1, the earth could take no more. A mudslide, originating approximately 1,000 feet up the steep southside hills, cascaded down with explosive force, picking up momentum and gathering debris. It crossed the road and smashed into four houses, tearing them from their foundations and sweeping them away. Twenty-two sleeping souls were hurled from their beds in a fury of destruction. By the grace of God, the majority survived; but, four children, ages

eight, seven, five, and four, all siblings, perished. *“Jesus called them to him, saying, ‘Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them’ . . .” Luke 18:16.*

I visited Harbour Breton for the first time in the fall of 2008. As I made my way down the Connaigre Peninsula, I was taken by the rugged beauty of the land—vast, naked barrens with hazy, majestic mountains in the background. Harbour Breton lay nestled among these mountains, and I was looking forward to seeing it. But, by the time I arrived at the sign welcoming me to the town, a pea-soup fog had settled and completely engulfed the little town. The foggy conditions continued for the two days I was there, and I left the town without ever witnessing its beauty or seeing the lay of the land.

My next visit was during the summer of 2009. Although it was a fine sunny day when I left my home on the east coast, by the time I reached the Bay d’Espoir intersection the sunshine had disappeared and a misty rain had begun to settle on my windshield. Much to my disappointment, I found Harbour Breton the same as I had left it the previous fall—totally socked in with fog.

The next morning I was questioning my bad luck when suddenly the sky began to brighten, and magically the fog began to dissipate. Like a print in a photographer’s darkroom, a picture was developing in front of me. The harbour was a pool of quicksilver reflecting multicoloured houses, fishing stages, and longliners. The surrounding hills emerged wearing a veil of silver fog that framed my picture.

Within an hour the fog had totally burned off, the sky was a clear blue, and I set out on foot to explore the community. My first stop was at the town hall where I read storyboards that gave me a brief history of the town.

I learned that Harbour Breton was a very important community to this part of the coast and that it holds a very rich history. I discovered the town had acquired its name from the family of Bretons of Brittany,

France, who fished from there in the seventeenth century. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Harbour Breton served as a base for English colonial fishermen who settled in Fortune Bay. After the Treaty of Paris in 1763, merchants from Jersey, and Poole in England were compelled to move their operations from St. Pierre to suitable harbours in Fortune Bay.

In 1776, Captain James Cook described Harbour Breton as the principal harbour in Fortune Bay, and he mentioned that the company of Clarke & Young of Poole had constructed buildings there, making it quite suitable for carrying on fishing and trading. Soon after, William Waldren of Poole also established premises there, forming the firm of Waldren, Clarke & Young. Harbour Breton was now considered the mercantile centre of Fortune Bay. Waldren, Clarke & Young was succeeded by the English firm of Spurrier, later acquired by Robert Newman & Company, a London-based firm famous for its port wine.

During the 1820s, Newman & Company made Harbour Breton its Newfoundland headquarters and went on to control commercial life in the community for over 100 years. It constructed impressive brick and wooden stores, warehouses, a large kitchen, a cellar, wholesale and retail stores, as well as workshops for carpenters, coopers, blacksmiths, and other tradesmen. The premises also contained a doctor's residence and a church. Cannons on the beach facing the entrance to the harbour acted as protection for the plantation. The famous Newman's Port wine was stored on the premises for aging and maturing before shipment to the markets of Europe.

Newman & Company had many years of prosperity in Harbour Breton, but by the early 1900s its fortunes had declined and operations were closed in 1907. This marked the end of an era in the Newfoundland salt fish trade, for Newman & Company was the last English-based fishing firm to operate in Newfoundland. After Newman and Company pulled out of Harbour Breton, its premises were bought by Job Brothers, who soon sold it to Arthur Bouthilier

of Halifax, forming the National Fish Company in 1914. By 1924 the Bouthilier interests were acquired by Gorton Pew & Company of Gloucester, Massachusetts, who then sold the premises to Hugh Coady of Harbour Breton in the late 1920s. From the 1930s and beyond, Harbour Breton's commercial life was centred around the Grand Bank fishery, from processing salt cod to a new fresh cod processing plant in the early 1960s. (*Harbour Breton History Board*)

From the town hall I proceeded along Southside Drive until my attention was drawn to what appeared to be a little picnic area. As I approached, however, I realized that this was in fact a memorial site, erected as a reminder of the tragic landslide that occurred on August 1, 1973, and dedicated to the four young children who had lost their lives. The site consisted of a granite monument, granite benches, and a large boulder with an attached plaque. It was inscribed as follows:

This memorial is dedicated to the Hickey Children: Pauline 8 years, Eddie 7 years, Timothy 6 years, Julie 4 years. Innocent victims of the Landslide of Aug. 1, 1973 and to all others who lost precious belongings.



(Courtesy Aiden Mahoney)

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For a long time, in silence, I stood gazing at the monument. I recalled hearing about this tragedy when I was in my final year of university, but I had had no direct association to either the town or any of the victims, so my memory was faint. Now, though, standing in this spot, reading the grim particulars, I had an unusually surreal feeling. Looking across the roadway and up the steep embankment, the path of the landslide was still visible. In the many years since the disaster, no new vegetation had grown, and a perpetual scar remained on the surface of the earth. I could only imagine the scars that were left on the hearts and souls of the residents of this little town. On the storyboards, pictures of the disaster taken at the time showed debris of houses strewn all over the landwash—the same landwash on which I was now looking. I could only imagine the panic, fear, and hysteria that must have been present that awful morning. How could such a picturesque and peaceful-looking place endure such tragedy? I continued my tour of the town, but the experience at the memorial site stayed with me. It would stay with me for a very long time.

Later that evening, while talking with some local residents, I made further inquiries about the summer it had rained for forty days and forty nights. I was given many more gruesome details, and I was told that the four children lost were the children of Jack and Olive Hickey. I learned that Jack Hickey was still alive and was residing in Gander. The next day, before leaving on my trip home, I made another trip to the memorial site. I just needed to experience it again. The story of the Harbour Breton landslide continued to torment me for weeks after, and I felt a need to delve further into it. I did some preliminary research and found that, other than what I had already learned from my visit to the memorial site and from speaking with people in Harbour Breton, there was little documented information. This, I thought, was a story that should be written. However, I knew it could not be done without the blessings of the person most affected, Jack Hickey. No one had the right to tell this story without

his consent and involvement. I found Jack's number and pinned it on the board next to my computer screen.

Shortly after New Year's Day, 2010, I gathered the courage to call the number. A woman answered the telephone and I asked for Mr. Hickey.

"One moment please," she said politely. "That's for you, Jack," she called.

I knew I had reached the correct number. Then, as an afterthought, she commented, "This better not be a telemarketer." I chuckled and assured her that I was not; nevertheless, I wondered if my call would be received with as little enthusiasm. When Jack answered the telephone I was surprised to hear a rather young and vibrant voice. I had stereotypically pictured Jack Hickey as an older man with a feeble voice. I was to soon learn that my characterization of him was utterly wrong. I introduced myself and explained the purpose of my call. There was a long silence on the other end of the line. "What's your name again?" he asked. I repeated myself.

"I'm looking at your book underneath my Christmas tree right now," he said.

The previous fall I had released a book entitled *The Blackwood Schooner*, and Jack had received it as a Christmas gift. A brief conversation about the book helped to break the ice, and it demonstrated that my request was genuine.

Finally, Jack asked, "How much of this story do you want to tell?"

"If I determine that this is a story I can write, I want to tell it all. I want it to be more than a factual account, I want it to be personal," I told him. "I know it will be difficult and emotional for you, so I totally respect your right to refuse."

"All of the story? Everything?" Jack repeated.

"Yes, everything," I confirmed.

"In that case, you have my full co-operation," Jack responded. Then, he elaborated.

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Jack confessed his fear that the story of the Harbour Breton landslide would become forgotten and all of the details would never be learned. He realized that over the years, especially immediately after the landslide, the tragedy did get reported, but he always felt that the accounts concentrated on the sensational aspects and the story—his and the stories of others involved—had never been fully told. “The town has done a good job by erecting a memorial to my family,” he said, “but the whole story has never been told.” He would consent for me to write the story, if, and only if, I told the entire story.

Jack and I met at his Gander apartment on January 7, 2010, and we talked for three hours. After that meeting I was convinced that Jack Hickey indeed had a story to tell. It is, therefore, my intention in this narrative to tell the entire story about Jack Hickey and the Harbour Breton landslide.

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THE EARLY DAYS

THE HICKEYS OF HARBOUR BRETON originated in Terrenceville, a small community located at the northeastern extremity of Fortune Bay. At the end of the nineteenth century, Jack Hickey's great-grandfather, Jeremiah Hickey, moved his family to Harbour Breton to work with Newman & Company. At the time, Newman & Company was running a very prosperous exporting business, shipping Newfoundland salt cod to Europe, Brazil, and the West Indies, and during the winter months, bait to America. For several years, Jeremiah enjoyed a good life in Harbour Breton while he and his sons found gainful employment with this famous company. By 1907, however, the fortunes of Newman & Company had dwindled and the once-flourishing business closed operations. As a result, Jeremiah decided it was time to move the family back to Terrenceville.

His son, Timothy, however, who was twenty-four at the time and recently married to Dinah Farrell from Great Jervis, decided to remain in Harbour Breton. Timothy Hickey was Jack Hickey's grandfather, and his decision to stay in Harbour Breton kept the family name alive. In the span of six years, Timothy and Dinah were to have four children: Leonard, Augustus, Ellen, and John. But that was to be the extent of Timothy's family. In 1919, at the age of thirty-six, Timothy died of

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