Research paper to explore the cultural tradition of rescue at sea and the heroism associated with these events

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Introduction

This paper investigates the cultural tradition of rescuing individuals from vessels shipwrecked along the coast of Newfoundland and Labrador, with emphasis on the heroism associated with these events. The paper attempts an historical perspective, with the view that such an approach would be useful in the decision-making process regarding how these events might be commemorated.

Newfoundlanders and Labradorians are people of the sea. In the centuries following sustained European contact the highly indented coastline became home to a scattering of settlements, often separated by treacherous geographic features, a coastline made all the more perilous by unpredictable weather and prolonged cold temperatures. “There are few areas in the world which possess as severe environmental conditions as the continental shelf off eastern Canada.”[1] Add to this the proximity to Newfoundland and Labrador of trade routes between Europe and North America, the historic lack of lighthouses, inadequate charting, and the relatively late introduction of dedicated search and rescue facilities, and it is not surprising that the coastlines of this province have been the sites of an inordinate number of shipwrecks. The total number has been estimated at 10 -15,000.[2]

Many of these have gone unrecorded. Of those we do know something about, the details surrounding them are often scarce or unreliable. For some, however, authenticated stories have emerged. And in a few dramatic incidences these stories involve exceptional displays of courage on the part of individuals onshore who put their own lives at risk in their attempts to save the lives of those aboard the wrecked vessels.

The Early Years

Up to the early part of the 19th century there is but a vague record of most shipwrecks, and thus
any attempts at rescue. Of the devastating hurricane of 1775, for example, we know few details other than a general description and an estimate of the dead at “not under Three Hundred.”[3]

There are scattered references to assistance by aboriginals to shipwrecked Europeans, but again details are scanty. When, in 1774, the sloop Amity with four Moravian Missionaries aboard was wrecked along the coast of Labrador, it was “a friendly Eskimo in his kayak” who piloted to Nain the two missionaries who survived the ordeal.[4]

In the century that followed there were more such occurrences. 1851 survivors from the barque Graham (shipwrecked in the area of Mansel Island in Hudson Bay) were lead to Okak by Inuit.[5] “The circumstances attending the rescue of the poor sufferers were such as to do great credit to the humane and generous feelings of the Christian Eskimo, who were the instruments of effecting it...”[6] In 1859 shipwreck survivors — this time from the Hudson Bay Company vessel Kitty — “after enduring terrible sufferings, fell into the hands of Christian Eskimos, by whom their immediate wants were supplied, and were conducted in safety to Okak.”[7] Once again little detail is recorded, including an indication of the risk to which the Inuit put their own lives.

The Nineteenth Century

In the first three decades of the 19th century the population of Newfoundland quadrupled.[8] Previously unsettled parts of the island and Labrador became home to permanent residents. As the decades passed and more settlements arose, the likelihood of there being witnesses to shipwrecks increased significantly. Fortunately, there are a number of rescue attempts for which we do have substantial written record.

Several of them deserve particular attention:

— 1828 - Isle aux Morts - The Despatch

George Harvey, his seventeen-year-old daughter, Ann, and his twelve-year-old son, Tom, with
a hurricane still raging, rescued in excess of 150 people, passengers of an Irish immigrant ship left stranded on the offshore reefs on which it ran aground and broke apart.[9] Harvey was awarded a medal by the Royal Humane Society of Great Britain, and promptly turned it over to his daughter, the heroine of the rescue. In 1838 the Harveys again displayed their courage, this time in the rescue of 25 crewmen, following the wreck of the *Rankin.*[10]

— 1851 - Cape Spear - *Salmah*

Lighthouse keeper James Cantwell and his sons went among the pounding breakers striking the rocks of Cape Spear where a cargo vessel had been blown onshore and had broken apart during a fierce November storm. Despite the danger of being swept off the rocks, the Cantwells managed to throw a rope to the ship, and to help get the crew ashore one by one. All but three of the crew survived the ordeal.[11]

— 1856 - Ferryland - *Heather*

Ten men of Ferryland left in a skiff to rescue four crewmen who were sighted on drifting ice, stranded there when their brigantine, en route from Baltimore to St. John’s, was lost off Cape Spear. The crewmen were rescued at considerable risk to the Ferryland men. Then, as the boat turned for shore, a strong wind sprang up. For two days it was prevented from reaching land, leaving the men to the cold, open ocean of March, with little food and water, before finally coming ashore in Witless Bay, “much fatigued” but alive. The brave actions of the rescuers were recognized by the House of Assembly, and payment of £50 was approved for distribution among them.[12]

— 1860 - Conche - a French *batteau*

During the time the area was part of the French Shore, local English fisherman John Dower, alone in his boat, left Fox Head to render assistance to a French *batteau* (a flat-bottomed, shallow-draft boat, normally carrying 3-5 men) which had gone out from Conche despite an impending storm. “His heroism was rewarded by the salvation of several from apparently unavoidable death.”[13] For his brave deed Dower was awarded a *Medaille d’Honneur* by the *Ministère de la Marine* of the Government of France. [appendix, p. 18]
— 1867 - Spotted Islands, Labrador - *Sea Clipper*

Captain William Jackman of Renews swam from the shore for a distance of approximately 500 ft / 152 m (by some accounts, 400 yd / 365 m) and back again to rescue one by one the 27 people aboard a fishing schooner which had struck a reef during an October storm. The first 11 were rescued without additional aid; for the remainder Jackman had use of a rope and was assisted by other men onshore. In recognition of his near superhuman effort he was awarded a silver medal by the Royal Humane Society of Great Britain.[14] [appendix, p. 19]

— 1873 - near Cape Ray - *Rivoli*

With seas raging, Ralph Blackburn and two companions set off from their home near Cape Ray in an attempt to reach the barque (bound to Quebec from Barbados) which had run upon the reefs of nearby Duck Island. Having made it to the island, they hauled their boat a half mile across it, and then launched it again to reach a rock closer to the doomed vessel. With the seas washing over the rock, Blackburn succeeded, after countless tries, to get a boat hook (secured to a rope) hooked into its counterpart cast out from the *Rivoli*. With a lifeline secured, Blackburn and his companions saved the Captain and his crew from certain death. Their efforts were never formally recognized.[15]

— 1875 - Horrid Gulch, near Pouch Cove - *Waterwitch*

Alfred Moores, and four other men of Pouch Cove, put their lives at great risk to rescue people stranded on a ledge following the wreck of the vessel en route from St. John’s to Cupids. With Moores in the lead, the men lowered themselves by rope in the cold and darkness of a November night down the face of a 600-foot cliff to positions where they could gain footholds. Then Moores (three-quarters of the way down) lowered more rope, allowing those on the ledge to climb one by one up the cliff, with the assistance of all five men. In recognition of these deeds, Moores was awarded a silver medal by the Royal Humane Society, and the four others were awarded bronze medals.[16]

— 1883 - Ferryland Head - *Octavia*

Ferryland lighthouse keepers Patrick Keough and William Costello set up a lifeline to those
aboard the vessel after it ran onto a reef. With all but one crewman safe on shore, the rope broke, at which point Keough tied a rope around his waist and plunged into the pounding surf. Struggling through the wreckage, he reached the man and held on to him until they were both pulled to shore. The Royal Human Society presented Keough with a certificate and silver medal to honour his selfless deed.[17] [appendix: p. 21] (In 1904 the sons of these two men, plus a number of others, performed a similar act of great courage in lowering themselves over a cliff in December to retrieve the bodies of men washed ashore from the wreck of the Danish vessel Sigrid.) [18]

— 1885 - Bonavista - Christabel

With certain destruction awaiting the Norwegian schooner on the rocks of Caplin Cove, more than a dozen men of Bonavista, led by Thomas Sellers, set off aboard two skiffs into the teeth of the great storm of June 7th. Fighting wild wind and huge waves, they managed to reach the schooner and take the captain and crew off the madly pitching vessel just before it struck the rocks and broke apart. A plaque bearing the names of the rescuers can be found on White Rock, the highest point of land in Bonavista.[19]

— 1887 - near Trepassey - Maglona

Thomas Neill and John Kennedy, having sighted the schooner after it had veered off course and struck a reef, descended a 200-foot cliff to the beach below to attempt rescue of those stranded on the reef. With a line tied around him, Neill swam the turbulent waters of the 150-foot wide gulch that separated the reef from the mainland, then retrieved a rope from Kennedy by means of the line. Together the two men saved all those who had been aboard the doomed vessel. (Ten years earlier, Neill had been lowered by rope over a cliff to retrieve bodies following the wreck of the steamship George Washington with the loss of all aboard.)[20]
The Twentieth Century

By the turn of the new century, aids to navigation had much improved. There were more efficient lighthouses and fog horns, and more of them. Changes to ship construction also made sea-faring somewhat less dangerous. As the decades advanced, and following confederation with Canada, dedicated search and rescue services were put in place. However, the century did see several incidents that demonstrated the continued willingness of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians to put their own lives at risk in an attempt to save the lives of those aboard shipwrecked vessels. These are some such incidents:

— 1907 - Bonavista - Snorre

J. Lewis Little led several other men from the community in rescuing the captain and crew of a Norwegian vessel which had been swept by fierce winds across the harbour and thrown upon the rocks of the Canaille shore. Little was lowered down the cliff face by rope and, although battered by waves smashing against the cliff, managed to throw a coil of rope onto the deck of the stricken vessel. Then, despite being constantly thrown about by the waves, he assisted the men off the vessel. With the further help of others positioned at points along the cliff, they were able to make it to safety. Four men were saved; two others failed to hold onto the ropes as they left the ship and were drowned. For their efforts these men of Bonavista received Carnegie Hero Medals and were honoured by the King of Norway.[21] [appendix: p. 22]

— 1908 - Trepassey Bay - Tolsby

Joseph Perry, one of several men from Seal Cove and Drook who sighted the wreckage of the ship (en route from Texas to France), was lowered by rope to reach the survivors who had managed to escape the ship but were left stranded on the narrow beach at the foot of the cliff. One by one the men were pulled to safety. Said the chief engineer of the Tolsby after the ordeal, “He worked to get us safely landed as I never witnessed a man working before. ...he is worth a medal for his bravery.”[22] Apparently, none was given him.

— 1942 – Chambers Cove, near St. Lawrence - Truxtun and Pollux
Men of St. Lawrence and Lawn lowered themselves over the icy cliffs following a February storm that sent two U.S. Navy vessels to their doom on the rocks of the cove. Of the 400 sailors aboard the ships, 183 were saved. A monument commemorating the event, titled "Echoes of Valour," stands in St. Lawrence today.[23]

--- 1946 - Lumsden – Thackeray

Dozens of men from Lumsden assisted in the rescue of those stranded aboard the S.S. Thackeray which had run aground on Queen’s Head, near Lumsden in a blinding December storm. Owned by the A.N.D. Company of Grand Falls, the ship had been en route from St. John’s to Botwood following delivery of a cargo of paper to Africa. At great risk to their own lives, three of the men took to the pounding surf in a small boat to retrieve a line cast out from the ship. Brought safely ashore, the line was then used to set in place a make-shift bosun’s chair. The ship’s captain and all 36 of his crew were rescued.[24]

— 1980 - Black Tickle, Labrador - Maria Teixeria Vilarhino

Leonard Barney and John Normore (both of Lance au Loup), despite 140 km/h winds, responded immediately to the SOS of a Portuguese trawler that had struck a reef near Black Tickle. Although others followed them (including a helicopter from the Rescue unit at Gander) Barney and Normore were first on the scene. The Award for Valour (Nation Transportation Week) they eventually received stated, “...their high qualities of seamanship, and the risk to which they subjected themselves, played a major role in preventing a marine disaster.”[25]

Enduring Theme

As the list illustrates, the attempt at rescue of individuals from shipwrecked vessels has been an ongoing practice throughout the history of Newfoundland and Labrador. One suspects there were many more such incidents which were never recorded, especially in the early centuries of settlement. Only if an event caught the attention of writers who happened to have been travelling
in the area (Joseph Beete Jukes in 1839/1840, for example), or was recorded in a broader context (the Moravian movement or the Church of England, for example, with their missionary reports) was there published reference made to it. With the rise of literacy and improvement in communications generally (mail service, newspapers, etc) more substantial, permanent accounts of such events were recorded.

**How Widespread?**

How widespread was this practice, how broad its significance? As the map (appendix, p. 17) demonstrates, these listed examples of known acts of heroism were well distributed along the coastlines of Newfoundland and Labrador. Some areas (the south coast of the Avalon Peninsula, for example) saw more of them than others, due to the configuration of the shorelines, the high incidence of fog, and the frequency of the marine traffic. Yet, there is no coast of the province without its history of shipwrecks and attempted rescue.

The population of Newfoundland and Labrador has always been relatively small and has remained, in most areas, homogeneous. The people have traditionally claimed a common identity. Thus, disaster in one region was felt throughout the whole of the population. An act of heroism might have been small in range geographically, but once known, it was embraced across the whole of the country/province. And while specific to a locale (in that it was of most significance to that locale and most strongly remembered there), such acts can be considered broad in their relevance, important to the population as a whole. William Jackman, as an example, is well remembered in Labrador, where his heroic act took place. The hospital in Labrador City bears his name. But he is as equally well remembered along the Southern Shore (there is even a restaurant named for him), and especially in his hometown of Renews. He was further recognized nationally with a Canada Post stamp issued in 1992 to commemorate his act of bravery. [appendix: p. 20] The same might be said of Ann Harvey — that while Isle aux Morts
has the Harvey Trail, the Canadian Coast Guard has a ship named in her honour, and there is both a book and an internationally-performed opera that commemorate her story.

Unique Identity

It could be argued that it is a natural inclination for displays of heroism to take place at times of crisis. Trapped miners, for example, bring out such heroism on the part of neighbours. High steel construction workers may well risk their own lives to prevent accidents to others. It should be borne in mind that in the cases of the shipwrecks cited above the assistance was extended to strangers, with no expectation of compensation or reward. Such heroism is even more significant in that materially it might have been an advantage to let a shipwreck unfold without intervention, that more would have been gained (in foodstuffs, rope, and other ship supplies) were there not attempts to save the individuals aboard these vessels. Certainly there are examples of salvaged goods enhancing the well-being of impoverished outport settlers [26], but there is little record of it being a prime consideration when a shipwreck was sighted.

There are, of course, many examples worldwide of such rescue at sea. The famous story of Grace Darling and her assistance in the rescue off Northumberland in 1838 comes to mind. (Although, equally, in some areas of the world piracy might well be the reaction to the sighting of vessels in distress.) Given its geographic position and climate Newfoundland and Labrador had more opportunity than most to display such courage, but, nevertheless, the selfless acts of rescue would seem to be close to natural, unconsidered reflex actions. Hank Strauss, one of those saved following the wreck of the Truxtun and Pollux, near St. Lawrence, in speaking at a reunion dinner of survivors and rescuers in Lawn in 1988, said, “...heroism is a matter of choice, and you chose to come to our rescue, solely and purely out of love...” A commentator later added, “I doubt that the people of St. Lawrence really perceived that there were two choices — to help, or to do nothing. It simply never occurred to them to do the latter.”[27]
Can we go so far as to say that this practice has shaped a cultural identity, one that would in part define Newfoundlanders and Labradorians who live close to the sea? Insofar as it has grown out of choice and not necessity, and to some extent is in contrast to the reaction to shipwrecks in some other parts of the world, then this could, legitimately be thought of in that way.

Of Exceptional Interest

With the advent of federal Search and Rescue facilities, the practice of rescue at sea has altered. It is generally left to a group of trained professionals with the equipment to undertake the task. Individual or community efforts to come to the aid of vessels in distress are no longer the expectation, nor is it general practice.

Interest in such past occurrences, however, remains high, and in recent years there has been considerable attention directed toward these stories – in books, particularly (the *Shipwrecks of Newfoundland and Labrador* series by Frank Galgay and Michael McCarthy, the many books of Robert Parsons, *Ann and Seamus* by Kevin Major), magazine and newspaper articles (in *Downhome* magazine, for example) and, to a lesser extent, in radio, film, music and theatre. With interest in the history of the province strong and sustained, these stories appear to add significantly to the cultural identity of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians. Heroic deeds help define a people, and help shape the view of themselves they present to those beyond their borders.

Summary

In summary then, it would appear that incidents of rescue at sea and related acts of heroism are widespread and have occurred many times throughout the history of Newfoundland and
Labrador. While many have likely gone unreported, there is record of a substantial number, particularly in the 19th and 20th centuries. These demonstrations of heroism, while not unique to maritime regions of the world, do seem to show a cultural tradition beyond what might be expected of a people, most of whom were living in remote or semi-remote areas, often with only meagre financial resources.

The author of this report supports the concept of recognizing and commemorating these acts in some way. One route might be the erection of a memorial in a significant location in Newfoundland and Labrador, a single memorial that recognizes all such acts, perhaps with small, coordinating plaques erected near the specific sites of rescue. Another route might be the creation of curriculum-based material to be used in the province’s schools, similar to Of Character, the series of posters (with related activities) profiling women and aboriginals of historical significance, recently released by the province’s Department of Education. (cover poster and sample profile poster: appendix, p. 23-24). Another concept would be the creation of a website devoted to these events. In whatever way(s) the acts of heroism might be commemorated, it is important that it allow for updating as more such stories are uncovered through research in the years ahead.
Notes

Introduction


The Early Years


5. unknown author, Brief Account of the Missionary Ships Employed in the Service of the Mission on the Coast of Labrador from the Year 1770 to 1877, London, 1877, as excerpted in Baehre, Outrageous Seas, p. 120-121. See also Barron, David C., Northern Maritime Shipwreck Database, (ship listing: Graham), Bedford, N.S.: Northern Maritime Research, 1997, CD-ROM (date of shipwreck given as 1849)

6. Baehre, Outrageous Seas, p. 120

7. Baehre, Outrageous Seas, p. 122

The Nineteenth Century

8. Manion, John, J. (ed.), The Peopling of Newfoundland (Essays in Historical Geography), St. John’s: ISER, 1977, p. 6


13. Correspondence with Joan Simmons, French Shore Historical Society, Conche, NL, 9/10 September 2009, including photocopies of documents (and translations) concerning John Dower. Dower’s medals and related documents are on display at the French Shore Interpretation Centre, Conche, NL.


The Twentieth Century


Unique Identity


27. [www.wildbillguarnere.com](http://www.wildbillguarnere.com) Commentary on reunion of survivors and rescuers at St. Lawrence in 1988.
Appendix

page 17: map of Newfoundland and Labrador with location of cited shipwrecks

page 18: document on display at French Shore Interpretation Centre in Conche regarding John Dower (spelled “Doure”)

page 19: medal awarded William Jackman, page printed from the website of The Captain’s Table Restaurant, www.captainstable.ca

page 20: Canada Post postage stamp commemorating William Jackman, page printed from the website of The Captain’s Table Restaurant, www.captainstable.ca


page 23 & 24: reduced reproductions of two-sided poster prints (11” x 17”) for series Of Character
Do your own research. Learning about different cultures can be a great way of developing an understanding of cultural diversity. Do a spot of research online or through books, and study some of the history and traditions of other cultures. Talk to someone from a different cultural background. Try and get to know them a bit better. You don’t necessarily have to ask them directly about their culture, but by getting to know them you’ll automatically find out more about their life and experiences. Travel! One of the biggest difficulties to overcome in understanding cultural differences is making judgements based on one opinion. Do your own research and make an effort to actually learn about people, instead of making broad-brush assessments. Everyone is unique.