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THE NEWFOUNDLAND TIDAL WAVE DISASTER



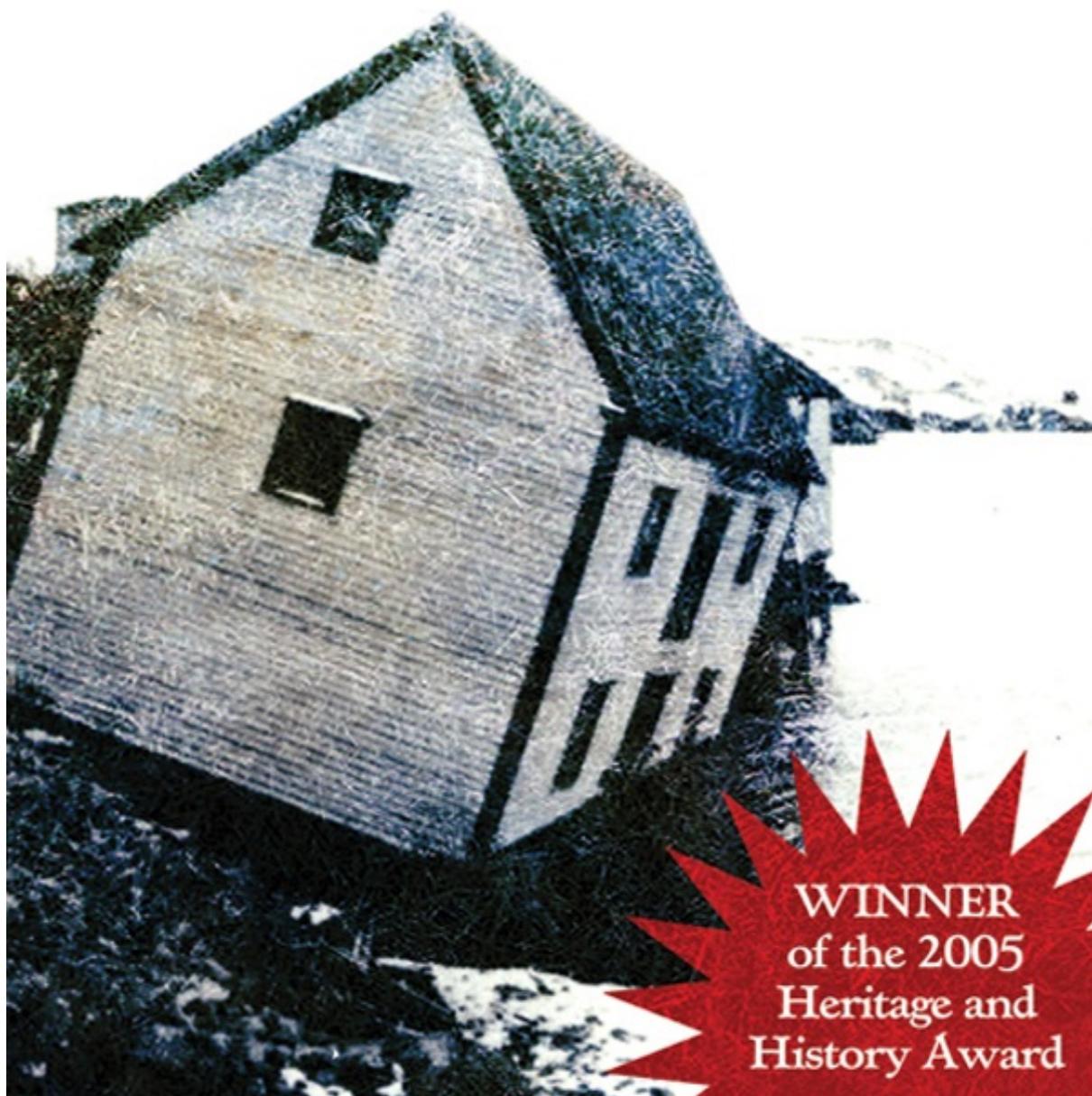
WINNER
of the 2005
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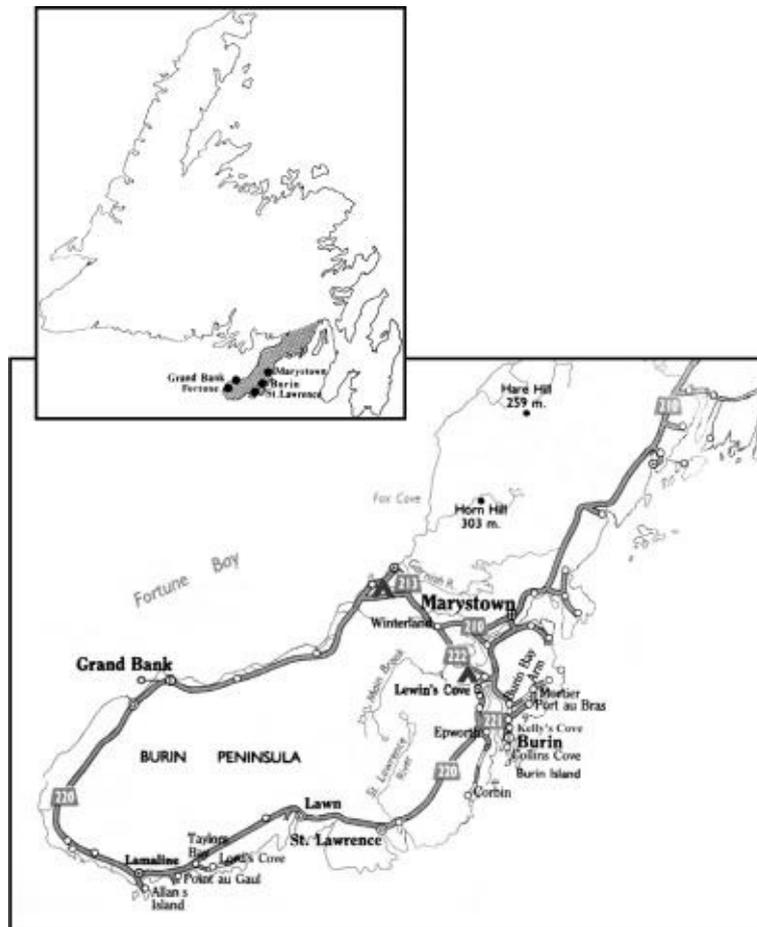
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Map of Newfoundland with detail of the Burin Peninsula most affected by the 1929 tsunami, or tidal wave.



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TIDAL WAVE DISASTER

MAURA HANRAHAN

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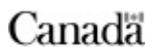
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For Paul

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GLOSSARY

(The) boot: the lower part of the Burin Peninsula

Capstan: a revolving cylinder used to wind an anchor cable

Dory: small, flat-bottomed open fishing boat with pointed bow and stern

Fish and brewis: a traditional Newfoundland meal of boiled fish and hard tack

Flake: a platform built on poles and spread with boughs for drying fish

Hogshead: a large cask

Lassie bread: bread with molasses on it; a traditional Newfoundland treat

Livyer: permanent settler; people who live in a particular area

Member of the House of Assembly (MHA): elected representative of the Newfoundland legislature

Old hag: a particularly harrowing form of nightmare; nocturnal terrors associated with a range of cultural beliefs in Newfoundland

Quintal: a hundredweight (112 lbs.), used as a measure for dried salt cod

(Fishing) room: the waterfront property of a fisherman or merchant, including the stages, stores, flakes, etc.

Shore fishery: later called the inshore or small boat fishery

Stage: an onshore platform holding working tables and sheds where women and men processed fish

Store: place where supplies, gear, and dried or salted fish are kept

Token: a vision of an absent friend or relative indicating they will die within a year

Western boat: a fishing vessel of between fifteen and thirty tons

FOREWORD

In 1929, Newfoundland was a self-governing Dominion, as were Canada, Australia, and other “white” countries within the British Empire. Newfoundland’s territory consisted of the seventh largest island in the world, positioned where the Labrador Sea meets the Gulf Stream in the Northwest Atlantic Ocean, and the vast continental land mass of Aboriginal Labrador. The island had been settled by Europeans from the British Isles, the Channel Islands, France, the Iberian Peninsula, and elsewhere for hundreds of years—despite an early British ban on settlement. Some of the settlers married indigenous Mi’kmaq, a few, the Beothuck, members of a small nation that disappeared due to exposure to unfamiliar diseases, loss of access to the seals and fish on the coast, and conflict with those who now encroached on their land.

The settlers and the nations of Europe who sent their fishing fleets were initially attracted by the richest cod fishery in the world. Those who snuck onto the island and dared to over-winter established hundreds of coastal villages where they fished every summer. During the harsh months of November through March they repaired to inland quarters which gave them access to wood and fur-bearing animals.

The island never industrialized in the manner of urbanized countries in Europe and North America; instead, raw materials have always been exported, as they are to this day. This has left Newfoundland relatively cash-poor and sparsely populated but also with fresh air and an enviable slower-paced way of life that persists even into the early twenty-first century.

In 1929, almost thirteen thousand people lived in the seventy-eight communities of the Burin Peninsula, a boot-shaped piece of land that hangs off Newfoundland’s South Coast. The peninsula juts out into the North Atlantic as if it is trying to reach the once cod-rich Grand Banks, which have been its life force. Fortune Bay is on one side of the peninsula; Placentia Bay, Newfoundland’s largest bay, on the other. For generations the people of the peninsula were engaged in the shore fishery, made up of small boats out of which they fished seasonally, or the Banks fishery, which consisted of schooners that went to the Grand Banks and other offshore locales. They traded their fish to merchants who supplied them with food staples and other goods and a frequently perennial debt burden; this was called the truck system. In turn, their fish went to markets in the West Indies, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Greece, and South America, delivered in Newfoundland schooners. Thus, some Burin Peninsula fishermen were among the most well travelled people in the world. They brought back oranges and bananas for their children, silk and satin for their wives, Jamaican rum for themselves, as well as rich stories to fire everyone’s imaginations.

At first, the 1929 October Bank Crash, which signalled the beginning of the Great Depression, seemed not to mean much to the rural people of the Burin Peninsula. Later, when fish prices dropped dramatically, its effects would become startlingly clear to them and to Newfoundlanders in general, as they would to people all over the

western world.

Even now, though, the people of the Burin Peninsula remember 1929 for the tidal wave, the great *tsunami* caused by an underwater earthquake that struck their shores. The ruptures from the deep that night measured 7.2 on the Richter scale and caused the sea floor to move several yards. The subterranean quake forced waves across the ocean at speeds of more than eight hundred kilometres an hour. Most *tsunamis* develop in the Ring of Fire, the region that encircles the Pacific Ocean. Although tidal waves (as they are commonly but mistakenly called in this part of the world) are not unknown in Newfoundland, the island is obviously far away from the Ring of Fire. Thus, the *tsunami* that hit the Burin Peninsula came as a complete shock to the people who lived there. This book tells their story.

PART ONE: WAVES



It would be carved into the children's store of memories forever. In Lawn, on the boot of the Burin Peninsula, as the evening of Monday, November 18 drew in, six-year-old Anna Tarrant lay on a day bed in her family's kitchen, suffering from a sore throat. It was the time of year for colds, the child's mother had said that morning. Anna, wearing a white flannel nightgown, amused herself by playing cat's cradle. She snuggled into the thick cotton quilt her mother had covered her with to keep off the chill.

Suddenly the odd sound of dishes rattling caught Anna's attention. Her eyes scanned the kitchen counters and cupboards, but she could see nothing. The eerie sound continued. Then, still beneath the quilt, Anna looked for the Tarrants' old tabby. Had he bumped into some dishes?

Anna called to her mother who had just come into the room with some blue potatoes and thick round carrots from the root cellar. Mrs. Tarrant was harried. She blew a strand of dark brown hair off her face as she rushed into the kitchen.

"Mommy, where's the cat?" Anna said.

"Here, Anna," came the reply. "Right behind me."

Out from Mrs. Tarrant's skirts came the family pet—straight from the root cellar.

On the day bed Anna filled with fright.

Twelve-year-old Mary Kehoe of Red Head Cove in Conception Bay North was aboard the SS *Nerissa* with her father, Martin, bound for New York. Once the ship left St. John's, she was in rough seas. The decks were cleared and below, passengers bit their nails in fear. Others clutched their hands to their hearts and emptied the contents of their bellies. Mary's father lay next to her in her bunk, holding his daughter tight so she wouldn't be thrown onto the cabin deck. To make matters worse, Mary's stomach churned with seasickness.

Back home in Red Head Cove, Mary's brother and sisters marvelled at the sight of pots and pans dancing around on the stove. It was as if the household items had decided to put on a performance for them. Then the children's eyes looked up in unison at the ceiling while the house shook.

"It's a real windy night!" the littlest sister said.

"No, it's more than that," her brother answered solemnly.

Meanwhile, as the *Nerissa* slowly made her way along the Southern Shore past Ferryland light and Chance Cove, Mary and her father, Martin Kehoe, raised quiet prayers to the heavens for their safe passage. Five-year-old Aubrey King stood with his horse in the garden of his home in Point au Gaul, a village on the bottom of the Burin Peninsula. In the last moments of the afternoon, young Aubrey fed the horse hay and tried to push some into its mouth, like a mother feeds a baby. The boy patted the animal's dark snout. "Atta boy," he murmured. Then, as he had done so many times

before, he stepped back to admire the animal's large body; his appreciative eyes took in its sleekness, strength, and bulk. The horse was a work animal, part of the machinery that kept the family economy going through the year; it was used to haul wood in the winter and do farmwork in the summer. But little Aubrey loved it like a pet and the animal responded in kind.

Then, late in the afternoon when dusk was nothing more than a hint, Aubrey's horse suddenly bit him. The boy drew back, ashen-faced and breathless. Then the ground beneath the two of them quivered and shook. The horse grew skittish and Aubrey, still reeling from the shock of the bite, was too afraid to comfort him.

He ran into the house, even as the earth continued to shake under his feet. There he was greeted by the sight of his mother frozen in front of a picture of her father that had fallen from the wall for no reason at all.

In Great Burin, well to the north of Point au Gaul, eleven-year-old Sam Adams was outside in his family's garden when, late in the afternoon, he felt a tremor under his feet. It was a strange sensation but it didn't last any time at all and it was mild.

"Did you feel that?" Sam called out to a neighbour.

"Yes, like the earth moved a little," his friend answered.

Sam nodded. "What do you suppose it was?" he asked. The other boy shook his head and shrugged. Sam dismissed the tremor as one of the mysteries of life, like stars falling to the earth or whales beaching themselves. He left the garden and went inside, where his mother told him that some dishes stored in the cupboard had shook so much she feared they might break. Sam told his mother about the tremor but the two of them did not know what to make of it.

Bessie Hennebury of Lord's Cove, not far from Point au Gaul, was almost fifteen in November, 1929. She was in her father's fishing room, helping to weigh his dried fish so it could be collected and shipped away to market. She was standing by the big weights that Mike Harnett, the merchant's agent, had brought with him to weigh the fish. As she passed the fish to Harnett, everything started shaking: the fish, the tables, the walls, the weights. Indeed, it seemed as if the very ground under them was moving. The clanging sound of the metal weights seemed like it would not stop. It scared Bessie so much that she bolted out of the fishing room, running straight home. She raced up the hill, away from the beach and the water, her heart pummelling her chest walls so that she thought it would break them open. She did not look behind her to see what was happening. As she ran, she didn't notice if the earth beneath her was shaking here, too; she was desperate to think the tremor was restricted to the fishing rooms.

In Burin Bay Arm, George and Ernest Pike, brothers of ten and eight, were in a hillside meadow above their home. The afternoon was so windless that the meadow grass was motionless. Running through the late fall air was a thread of coolness that hinted at the winter that was just around the corner. Above the boys, though, the skies were an azure blue and cloudless. The Atlantic far below was quiet as if asleep.

The weather was of no concern to the Pike brothers, though. The boys had one thing

in mind: their neighbour Mrs. Moulton's sheep. Mrs. Moulton kept sheep to make wool to sell for a bit of cash, and to have some mutton once in awhile. Some of the old lady's sheep had somehow escaped from the meadow and Mrs. Moulton was distraught. She was offering twenty-five cents to anyone who could return the strays. The Pike boys were delighted at the opportunity to make a little cash. They had spent their dinner break and the walk home from school planning how they would retrieve the lost sheep. Now, George and Ernest bent over a hole in the fence that surrounded the meadow, intent on their task as they attached a rope snare in the hopes of catching a sheep. In their minds' eyes were the hard candies they would buy and savour if their venture was successful.

It wasn't long before they were rewarded. But as soon as a sheep was caught in the snare, the boys were startled by the arrival of a motor car, one of the few in the area. The car turned around just below the meadow. George and Ernest fell to the hard ground on their bellies, trying to hide from the car's occupants; they thought the people in the car might think they were doing something wrong by catching the sheep.

Then without warning, the ground shook with great force.

"What's that?" George asked.

"The car must have her winter chains on," Ernest answered.

"You're crazy," his brother replied. "Chains on a car wouldn't shake the ground like that."

Ernest frowned. He didn't know what was going on. When the car left the area, the shaking and the bold noise that accompanied stopped. George and Ernest rose and smoothed out their jackets and pants.

"I don't know what that was," George said, staring out at the ocean as if it held the answer. Ernest looked at him, expecting him to say more, but he didn't.

Then the two boys turned their attention back to the task at hand. They took the sheep out of the rope snare and led it out of the meadow and down to Mrs. Moulton's. The old lady was standing outside her house, wearing a white cotton apron and a winter coat that she had evidently thrown over her shoulders. She was surrounded by her family, some of whom were pacing back and forth on the road.

"Look at that commotion!" George said.

"I'm not going back in for the money!" one of Mrs. Moulton's sons cried. From their talk, the Pike boys realized the Moultons were convinced the house was haunted. They thought there was a ghost under the house, a ghost who had caused the stove covers to jump, the dishes to rattle and break, and the pictures to fall off the wall. As they fretted over the ghost shifting the house as it had, Ernest realized they thought the tremor was specific to their house. He knew then it had been more general, taking in at least part of the village all the way to the meadow and possibly beyond. He thought of telling the Moultons this but they were too panicked to listen to him, he figured. And in spite of everything that was happening, the succulent candy remained uppermost in Ernest's mind. It was getting late, his mother would expect the boys to return home soon, so he decided to take care of business.

He stepped forward to announce their success in catching Mrs. Moulton's sheep. When her son reached for it, he shook his head.

“No money, no sheep,” he said.

The Moultons stopped talking and the men looked at each other. Mrs. Moulton poked one of them. “I want my sheep back,” she said.

Her son sighed and went into the house, walking slowly as he did. He came out with twenty-five cents and handed it to Ernest. The boys pocketed their reward and went home.

At Lawn, where Anna Tarrant struggled with her sore throat, a bevy of school boys avoided their homework by playing soccer before supper. They were soccer mad in Lawn and in the villages adjacent to it. They started playing the game not long after they could walk.

One of the smaller boys who played that afternoon, Austin Murphy, was just seven. In the middle of the game he stopped to take a rest. He sat on a flat grey rock on the side of the meadow that served as their soccer pitch and took in the unusual brightness of the late fall day. He could see the bay from where he was and, beyond that, the wide Atlantic Ocean, which was as smooth as a baby’s bottom for once. It put Austin in mind of mid-summer, though the nip in the air reminded him it was nearly winter.

Suddenly, the rock shook under him for a full three or four seconds. At first he looked down at it between his skinny little legs, noticing the shaking grass that surrounded it. After the first second or two, he turned his eyes to the boys still playing soccer. They had stopped. They were looking around, too, just as he was. It wasn’t just this rock, then; it was the whole place that was shaking. Perhaps all of Lawn was quaking—or maybe even the whole of Newfoundland.

Austin sat there wondering what was going on. His mates gathered to him. They, too, were flummoxed.

“I never saw anything like that before,” said one of the team captains.

“It was something strange all right,” one of the boys agreed.

None of them were scared; it just hadn’t occurred to them to be afraid, especially since nothing came after the initial tremor.

Then one of the older boys came up with an answer that satisfied them all.

“I know just what it was,” he announced, spinning the soccer ball on his forefinger. “It’s the engines starting up in the powerhouse. That’s what made that shaking.”

The boys nodded. The United Towns Electric Company had all but completed the installation of a hydro-electric plant on Northeast River near Lawn. In November, 1929 the company was about to put the plant into operation, as everyone knew. However, the generators would be turned by water-driven turbines which would make a scarcely audible humming sound. The boys on the soccer pitch, of course, could not know this. They had no way to know that what they had witnessed was the beginning of a *tsunami*.

Sarah Ann Rennie bent over her Singer sewing machine. She wanted to get a start on her sewing before it got too dark. She hated sewing under the lamp and having to squint; she wanted to save her eyes. She had cut up a shirt of Martin's, her oldest, and was making it into two shirts for Bernard, the baby. She smiled at her own ingenuity. She knew her long dead mother would be pleased. Her fingers moved in unison, pushing the blue cotton under the needle, as her right foot worked the pedal.

On the black pot-bellied stove was a huge steel pot full of potatoes, carrots, and turnips from Sarah's root cellar. Sarah had them on slow boil. She'd round out the meal with a bit of salt fish and some of the bread she made every day. She might even let the children have some molasses, though, like all the women in Lord's Cove and the rest of the communities on the coast, she had to spare it along through the winter.

Sarah was a Fitzpatrick before she married Patrick Rennie of nearby Lamaline. She was born in Lord's Cove in 1892 and baptized seven weeks later when they could get handy to the priest at Allan's Island, right by Lamaline. Her father still lived next door to her in Lord's Cove, alongside The Pond on the eastern side of the cove. The children came right away: Martin, Albert, Rita, Patrick, named for his father, Margaret, and Bernard. There would probably be more, Sarah knew, and when she thought of this, she smiled.

She glanced at baby Bernard as she sewed. At eighteen months, his cheeks were round and pink, the picture of health. He was lively and Sarah had tied him into his high chair. Blond curls framed his face and he called out as he banged his rattle on his high chair table. He was already a handful, this child, Sarah thought, laughing at him as she took a scissors to the cloth in her hands.

Nine-year-old Rita and seven-year-old Patrick played with a spinning top in the pantry. Their little sister, Margaret, only four, was in there with them. Sarah could hear the whir of the top and then the thud as it hit the floor. Then she heard the scuff of Rita's and Patrick's shoes on the plank floor. They might be playing school now or house, she thought, alongside the barrels of herring, mackerel, and cod that stood against the pantry wall. Above them hung a brace of rabbits and a row of jars, filled with pickled onions and beets. There were jam jars there, too, containing blueberries and strawberries. Sarah even had some rhubarb jam left, though her children loved it and it was November. Patrick and his sisters were particularly close, little mates, their mother called them. Sarah let them idle with their games before supper and their lessons. They'd have a long dark winter ahead of them and all that trekking to school in the cold, poor mites. And Rita was getting old enough to be a real help to her. She'd let them play when they could.

When the tremor came, Sarah was too face-and-eyes into her sewing machine to notice it. Her foot pushed heavily on the pedal as the needle dove into the pieces of cotton, tying them together. The clack-clack of the machine quickened as she worked