

The August Gale and the Arc of Memory on Prince Edward Island

On Prince Edward Island, “hurricane” has always been a faraway word, more suited to doomed Spanish treasure galleons or palm-treed beaches than to red soil. Even when the rag-tail of some tropical storm strikes the Island, it is largely spent, chilled by the North Atlantic and broken by the massive breakwater of Nova Scotia. But not always. On 24 August 1873, a full-fledged Atlantic hurricane crashed ashore in Maritime Canada with devastating consequences. It was known as the August Gale, and it would be the second worst natural disaster in Island history. Yet today it is virtually forgotten in this province.

The Summer of Confederation

Already, by August, 1873 had been an epochal year on Prince Edward Island. During the winter and spring, the last painful scenes in the drama/farce of Confederation had been played out. Faced with a choice between fiscal bankruptcy and political dependency, the Island government had reluctantly done what 99 of every 100 Islanders had once allegedly opposed, negotiated entry into the new Canadian Confederation. That spring, electors had sullenly chosen between “terms” and “better terms,” and on 1 July the self-governing colony of Prince Edward Island had become the seventh, and smallest, province in the Dominion of Canada.

Ottawa had been rather good natured about stitching such a small patch into the great Canadian quilt, agreeably improving on its original terms once pressed. When Lord Dufferin, the Governor General, visited the newest province that July, he was greeted with a welcome arch reading, “Courtied long, won at last.” Condescendingly mindful of Islanders’ ego, Dufferin flattered the conceit. The Island, he wrote Sir John A. Macdonald, is “quite under the impression that it is the Dominion that has been annexed to Prince Edward Island, and in alluding to the subject, I have adopted the same tone.”¹ All

¹Quoted in F. W. P. Bolger, “Long Courtied, Won At Last,” in Bolger, ed. *Canada’s Smallest Province* (Charlottetown: Prince Edward Island 1873 Centennial Commission, 1973), p. 231.

that August, newspapers exulted in the rough and tumble of a spirited contest for the six federal seats created by Confederation. The mud-slinging would continue well into the fall as a series of by-elections filled the vacancies in the provincial legislature created by the resignations of new senators and would-be MPs.

Of course, the proximate cause of Confederation had been the construction costs of the Prince Edward Island Railway, which within a single year had pushed the Island government to the brink of financial ruin. There had been evidently scandal, certainly miscalculation, and arguably mismanagement in the whole railway business, but whether or not a sinister plot had “railroaded” Prince Edward Island into Confederation remained only dark rumour. In late August, the railway that had so dramatically altered the Island’s destiny was far from finished. The Nova Scotian visitor whose “Trip to P. E. Island” began serially in the *Semi-Weekly Patriot* on 23 August, had traveled strictly by horse and buggy.² But the iron horse was coming. As the rails crept westward from Summerside, supplies and building materials were stockpiling at western ports such as Alberton.

Summer waxed golden as the *Halifax Reporter’s* correspondent drank in the pleasures of primitive Island tourism, promenading on the beach and admiring the rich fields of grain and potatoes: “The tourist from the Maritime Provinces may travel many lands ere he beholds a sight more magnificent than the agricultural beauties of this tight little isle.” Island farmers were more prosaic in their assessment; 1872 had seen a dismal harvest, but 1873 “never looked more promising.”³

A Perfect Storm

While politicians blustered and summer dreamed, a hurricane brewed in the equatorial waters off West Africa. By mid-August it was working its way westward across the 15th parallel. As it neared

²“A Trip to P. E. Island,” re-printed from the *Halifax Reporter* in the *Semi-Weekly Patriot*, 23 August 1873.

³“The Late Storm,” *Island Argus*, 2 September 1873.

the West Indies, it began slowly to re-curve northward as it bumped along the outer edge of the sub-tropical high pressure zone that sits athwart the Sargasso Sea each fall. By the 20th, it had crossed the Tropic of Cancer, well off-shore, about 900 nautical miles east of Florida's southern tip. Then something -- perhaps two things -- happened; the inexactness of 1870s meteorology (and the notorious waywardness of hurricanes) allows only speculation. The hurricane bent back northeastward, as it passed over, or maybe along, the axis of the warm Gulf Stream. It may also have absorbed another low pressure system moving off the continent. In any case, instead of weakening as it passed over the cool waters of the North Atlantic, the storm intensified, and accelerated. By the early morning of 23 August, it was well east of New York City spiralling northwards.

In trying to reconstruct the path of the August Gale, meteorologists at the United States National Hurricane Centre have long given the hurricane a northeasterly track after 23 August. As early as the late 1873, the American track shows it passing 150-300 nautical miles south and east of Nova Scotia, with an eventual landfall on Newfoundland's Avalon Peninsula. But a close examination of contemporary newspaper coverage in Maritime Canada tells a different story. By the early morning of 24 August 1873, the August Gale was on a collision course for Cape Breton and Prince Edward Island.⁴ It was a killer, and it would strike Maritime Canada at the very height of the shipping season.

Landfall

There was a new moon on Friday night. The next morning, 23 August, dawned fair and warm on Prince Edward Island, with temperatures hovering around 70° Fahrenheit and a gentle breeze from the south-southwest. But the barometer was already falling, and as the day wore on, the sky grew

⁴As summarized in Alan Ruffman, "Hurricanes of Renown," public lecture at the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic, Halifax, 21 September 2004 (courtesy of author); and Ruffman, "The Forgotten and Mislotted Hurricane of August 24-26, 1873," Maritime Moments of the Millennium, Annual Conference and General Meeting, Canadian Nautical Research Society, Ottawa, 8-10 June, 2000.

overcast. Around 4:30, Rev. R. W. Dyer, the Anglican minister in Alberton, set out for Kildare Capes. In his diary that night he noted an ominous turn in the weather. “It came on to rain, still we went on. . . . The wind is increasing: there certainly will be a storm.”⁵ Saturday night’s rain was driven by a northwest wind. By dawn on Sunday the 24th, the rain had stopped, but the wind was moving round easterly, and it freshened into a “half-gale” as the day wore on.⁶ The rain came back, in torrents. Nearly two inches fell in Charlottetown on Sunday, and nearly four inches would fall before the storm blew itself out.⁷

The heavy rain kept all but a few people from attending Reverend Dyer’s service that Sunday in Miss Travers’ parlour at Kildare Capes. He preached from Romans 8:32: “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not give us all things with him?” “I enjoyed the sermon,” he confided to his journal, “had a very nice service.” By afternoon, there was too much wind and rain to think of going on to his Tignish charge. He remained at Miss Travers’, and for the next 24 hours, his diary became a running commentary on the gale’s onslaught.

“Wind increasing,” Dyer wrote that evening. “It is blowing a gale; the trees are blowing to pieces — plums falling to the ground. Oh, how awful! There is no doubt but that there will be an awful loss of life and vessels wrecked. . . . It is now 10 o’clock p.m., and no abatement: the house is shaking greatly. Went to bed about 10 or 11 and it was still blowing a gale.” But he did not sleep. “Oh, what will become of the poor fishermen! The Lord have mercy on us.” The storm reached its peak shortly after midnight: “About 12 o’clock the wind rose higher and higher. Oh how the house shook! Could not sleep. I never felt a house shake as Miss Travers’ new house did. From 12 until one o’clock it blew almost a hurricane. The trees — apple trees, plum trees, cherry trees, are blown and whipped

⁵Diary of Rev. R. W. Dyer, (Public Archives and Records Office of Prince Edward Island (henceforth, PARO) 3251/1. Unless otherwise noted, place names refer to Prince Edward Island.

⁶“The Storm,” *Prince Edward Island Islander*, 29 August 1873, p. 5.

⁷“The Recent Storm,” *Semi-Weekly Patriot*, 28 August 1873, p. 2.

to death. Plums are lying thick on the ground, and apples too.”⁸

By dawn on Monday morning, the worst of the gale was over, but it was still blowing hard and raining. After breakfast, anxious about his family, the intrepid Reverend Dyer set out for home: “Got as far as the turning from the shore when I met a great tree right across the road. With some difficulty, got the waggon [sic] and the horse through the stumps onto the road again.” In a few hours he was safely back in Alberton, but stormy weather, with showers and a raw northwesterly wind, persisted through Tuesday.⁹ By then, the August Gale had moved on.

Reverend Dyer had only hyperbole with which to gauge the force of the gale. The person on the Island in the best position to measure it more precisely was Henry Cundall, Charlottetown businessman and local observer for the fledgling Dominion Meteorological Service. But for some reason, Cundall had taken in his anemometer overnight. The most he could say was that at 11 a.m. on Monday morning the wind was blowing at 37 miles per hour. Nevertheless, Cundall calculated that the storm, “at its highest, could not be estimated at less than from 50 to 60 miles an hour.” Across the harbour at North River, naturalist Francis Bain had no anemometer, but he did make a precise note of wind direction at the storm’s height. It was, he recorded in his diary, a point east of north.¹⁰

Barometric pressure was another measure of the storm’s severity. It took three days, from Thursday evening to 10 o’clock on Sunday night, for Cundall’s barometer to fall 0.8 inches, levelling off at 29.34.¹¹ But Prince Edward Island was clearly not in the direct path of the hurricane. At North

⁸Diary of Rev. R. W. Dyer, PARO 3251/1.

⁹Diary of Francis Bain, entry for 26 August 1873, PARO 2353/95; “The Storm at Prince Edward Island,” *Saint John Daily News*, 30 August 1873, p. 1.

¹⁰Diary of Francis Bain, entry for 24-25 August 1873, PARO 2353/95. In eastern Cape Breton, the wind hauled around from southeast to straight easterly, and then northeast, providing some clue as to the track of the hurricane.

¹¹“The Recent Storm,” *Semi-Weekly Patriot*, 28 August 1873, p. 2. Given that Prince Edward Island was undoubtedly on the lefthand side of the hurricane, and so, the speed of the

Sydney, the barometer plunged the same distance, from 29.8 to 29 inches, in only 12 hours on Sunday.¹² On the Magdalen Islands, where the wind blew “with a violence never equalled in the experience of the oldest frequenters of that coast,” the barometer reportedly bottomed out at 28.9 inches.”¹³ If accurate, these are remarkable readings. According to modern, metric meteorologists, a fall in barometric pressure of one millibar per hour for 24 hours is considered a meteorological “bomb.”¹⁴ The reported drop in North Sydney between noon and midnight on Sunday was 2.25 millibars per hour!

Cundall’s sober measurement and Dyer’s anguished observation were mirrored in the published accounts of the gale. All across the region news reports shared a common quality of astonishment. “The extraordinary feature about this storm,” marvelled the *Islander*, “was the blasting character of the wind when at its height, and the swell of the tide, the former scorching foliage like frost, and the latter carrying everything before it in on the land from fifty to one hundred yards – as the boldness of the ground might check or its level admit – beyond anything ever known before.”¹⁵ Over and over again, phrases like “never before seen,” “unprecedented,” or “worst in memory” recur in newspaper reports.

By Tuesday, 26 August, the first reports of damage had already begun to trickle in, eye-witness accounts and hearsay, spreading on the wings of rumour and along hastily repaired telegraph lines.

weather system itself blunted the speed of the winds within it, this remains an impressive windspeed. To the right of the hurricane’s eye, in places such as North Sydney, the speed of the storm was added to the speed of its winds, and the gale unquestionably reached hurricane status.

¹²North Sydney *Herald*, quoted in the St. John’s *Courier*, 3 September 1873.

¹³The barometer reading for the Magdalen Islands was published in “The Great Gale,” *New York Times*, 6 September 1873, p. 1; the quote is from “Magdalen Islands,” *Prince Edward Island Islander*, 19 September 1873, p. 1. It is impossible to say how reliable some of these readings are.

¹⁴E-mail communication, John Rousmaniere to Edward MacDonald, 6 July 2001.

¹⁵*Prince Edward Islander*, 5 September 1873, p. 5.

In cities and towns all over the eastern seaboard there were similar scenes to the one played out in Charlottetown in the week after the storm. “During the past few days,” an Island correspondent reported to the *Saint John Daily News*, “the News Room has been visited by anxious and excited crowds, and the telegraphs there are of the most disastrous character.”¹⁶

Elemental

It is difficult for us today to appreciate what a sea-going society Prince Edward Island was in 1873. Besides building vessels for export (60 to 130 per year), Island shipowners operated a fleet of almost 400 vessels by the late 1860s, and in 1873, Island-owned shipping neared 70,000-tons.¹⁷ Every coastal community had its share of captains, and both surplus sons and part-time farmers regularly went to sea. Although business was slipping by the early ‘70s, Island vessels still controlled a healthy share of the regional carrying trade, from sooty little schooners carrying coal from Cape Breton, to grain-laden brigs and brigantines, to barques and barquentines and full-rigged ships plying the timber trade. Since mid-century, a local fishing industry had emerged as well. Encouraged by free trade with the United States, Island vessels had finally joined the great mackerel fleets that scoured the Gulf of St. Lawrence each summer and fall. And so, the August Gale caught many Islanders on the water, and any narrative of the storm’s impact on the province must take into account the predicament of Island ships and crews around the region.

One of those places was the Northumberland Strait. According to the *Saint John Daily News*, “A great number of small schooners belonging to Charlottetown are a total wreck on the North Shore of Nova Scotia.”¹⁸ The statement was vague, but more or less accurate. As the powerful storm winds

¹⁶“The Storm at Prince Edward Island,” *Saint John Daily News*, 30 August 1873, p. 1.

¹⁷Lewis R. Fischer, “The Shipping Industry of Nineteenth Century Prince Edward Island,” *The Island Magazine* 4(Spring/Summer 1978): 17.

¹⁸“The Storm at Prince Edward Island,” *Saint John Daily News*, 30 August 1873, p. 1.

funnelled through the Northumberland Strait, they literally piled up a wall of water. Down at Wood Islands, Angus MacMillan went down to the shore on Sunday night to gauge conditions. “He was on the breakwater,” the *Island Argus* explained, “and the tide suddenly rising three feet in [a] single wave, he had to betake himself to the roof of a small cookhouse near by, where he had to remain for hours, exposed to the pitiless storm, expecting every minute to be his last.”¹⁹

Where the Strait narrowed, the phenomenon intensified, and the combination of hurricane, high tide, and Friday’s new moon produced an unprecedented -- and dangerous -- storm surge late on Sunday night. Near Merigomish, Peake Brothers of Charlottetown lost their new brig *Zeroni*. Three more Island vessels were lost in Pictou Harbour, where wind and surf destroyed the breakwater, breached the walls of the lighthouse, pushed the lighthouse keeper’s cottage off its foundations. As their outbuildings floated away, the keeper and his wife to escape by boat.²⁰ At Brulé Point, in Tatamagouche Bay, Charlottetonian John Hughes’ schooner *J. J. Marshall* was driven ashore 100 feet beyond the usual highwater mark. Even there, according to the *Patriot*, seaweed was carried 10 feet up her masts and rigging. Captain Lord’s little schooner *Mary Kate* was aground, though less spectacularly, nearby at Tatamagouche Head.²¹ On the other side of the Malagash peninsula, the storm surge invaded the seaside town of Wallace. By midnight on Sunday, the wind had hauled around from north-northeast to north and then northwest. “The waves were immense and white with foam.”²² Along the waterfront, the water was three to four feet deep in some stores, as the storm surge washed quantities of merchandise – flour, sugar, salt, packages -- out onto the street. Caught up in the flood-tide, drifting timbers smashed into wharves and walls.

¹⁹*Island Argus*, 2 September 1873.

²⁰“The Late Storm,” *Island Argus*, 2 September 1873. A more prosaic account of damage can be found in the annual report of the federal Department of Marine and Fisheries, Sessional Paper No. 4, Sessional Papers, Canadian Parliamentary Proceedings, 1874.

²¹“More About the Storm,” *Semi-Weekly Patriot*, 4 September 1873.

²²The description of conditions in Wallace is cribbed mainly from “The Late Severe Gale,” *Saint John Daily News*, 1 September 1873, p. 2; and

A few miles up the coast, Pugwash Harbour provided doubtful haven for another Island vessel. Late on Saturday evening, the 700-ton ship *James Duncan* had cleared Charlottetown Harbour bound for Liverpool. Named for her owner and the queen of his shipping fleet, she was heavily laden with deals and a miscellaneous cargo of fish, including 313 cases of an emerging export, canned lobster. The big ship beat out into the Northumberland Strait, but the mounting gale soon forced Captain Hickham to run for shelter on Sunday. “Miraculously,” the *James Duncan* made it into Pugwash Harbour, but even there she wasn’t safe. The flood tide pushed her and several other vessels aground on the harbour mud.²³ The same tide washed 30 head of cattle off a small island at the mouth of the harbour, and dawn on Monday revealed a surreal shoreline, littered with timber, dead cattle, and soggy merchandise.²⁴

The *James Duncan* would fare better than many vessels stranded by the August Gale. The soft mud of the Pugwash flats protected her hull from injury, and once her deckload was removed, she was light enough to float clear. She would resume her voyage to Liverpool only a week behind schedule.

On the Island side of the Strait, the gale whipped up a tempest in the little teapot of Charlottetown Harbour. At the eastern end of town, where an earthen embankment carried the new railway east and then north in a great arc out over a stretch of marshy ground, the tracks simply disappeared. Heavy seas smashed through the embankment, “carrying away rails and ties, while the water in the depot yard was in places more than a foot deep.²⁵ At the city gas works, the flood waters reached the doorstep of Manager Murphy’s house, and lapped against Lea and Gale’s sash and door factory on

²³The details are culled from James Duncan & Co. to Sir James Malcolm, 23 and 26 August 1873; and Duncan & Co. to Captain McInnis, Barque *Katie McDonald*, 28 August 1873, James Duncan & Co., Letterbook, 1873, Hunt Papers, PARO 2654/358, pp. 510, 511, 515.

²⁴See “The Storm ‘Down East,’” *New York Times*, 27 August 1873, p. 1; *S. A. Journal*, quoted in *Semi-Weekly Patriot*, 27 August 1873, p.1.

²⁵“The Storm,” *Prince Edward Island Islander*, 29 August 1873, p. 5. Off-Island reports that “two miles” of track had been washed away at Charlottetown were a forgivable exaggeration. (See “The Gale in Nova Scotia,” *New York Times*, 29 August 1873.)

Grafton Street, halfway between Edward and Cumberland Streets. All along the waterfront, the gale pounded wharves and drove vessels from their moorings. The little harbour ferry *Elfin* was disabled, and three schooners ended up ashore at Rocky Point. On the east side of the harbour, the breakers broke right over the ferry wharf in Southport, washing away its clay in-fill and damaging the wharf timbers.²⁶ By storm's end it, like almost every other wharf along the Island's southern coast, was in ruins.

Similar scenes were repeated along the New Brunswick coastline. At Shediac, from which the Charlottetown Steam Navigation Company's side-wheeler *Princess of Wales* maintained a daily connection to Charlottetown, there was chaos and panic. As the *Island Argus* laconically put it, "the *Princess of Wales* had the misfortune to have the railway shed . . . blown over and thrown upon her." The steamer missed her crossing on Monday.²⁷ She might have fared worse. The railway wharf itself, along with thirteen railcars, and the freight houses, were destroyed. Just to the north, at Caissie's Cape, two men drowned when their lobster factory was caught between fire and flood, and at Pointe-du-Chêne, the Northern Hotel was so undermined by waves that it toppled off its cliff-top site. Meanwhile, a 900-ton American ship, loaded with deals, was reportedly blown ashore into the woods 150 yards above the average high tide mark. At Baie Verte, the storm surge breached the ancient Acadian dykes and flooded the low-lying marshlands. Even at the western end of the Strait, in Buctouche, the high tide was four to five feet higher than anyone could ever remember. Here, on the outer fringe of the hurricane, it was still "one of the most severe storms ever experienced in this vicinity."²⁸

There were several vessels ashore at Buctouche, and over a dozen at Richibucto, most of them large

²⁶"The Late Storm," *Island Argus*, 2 September 1873, p. 2.

²⁷"The Late Storm," *Island Argus*, 2 September 1873.

²⁸The destruction of the lobster factory and the flooding at Baie Verte were reported in the *Saint John Daily News*, 28 August 1873, p. 3 (which located the factory at "Casey's Cape"); the other details are taken from "The Storm," *Prince Edward Islander*, 29 August 1873, p. 5.

vessels engaged in the timber trade.²⁹ Among those square-riggers was the Island-built barque *Undine*. Her owner was politician/entrepreneur J. C. Pope. A wily survivor in the rat-pit of Island politics, he had just led Prince Edward Island into Confederation as premier, and that August, he was campaigning to become one of the Island's first six federal MPs. The *Undine* was almost as famous. Launched in 1864, she had made a name for herself in her youth with a series of very quick passages across the North Atlantic.³⁰ The August Gale found her salvaging a cargo of deals from a stranded vessel at North Cape. Early reports had her wrecked there, but, in fact, running under bare poles, she was driven clear across the Strait, where she ran hard aground on the south beach at Richibucto. Three of her crew were lost, but the rest were able to leap to safety.³¹

Maritimers along the Northumberland Strait might be excused for thinking they had borne the brunt of the August Gale, but all the evidence suggests that the full force of the hurricane was felt in eastern Nova Scotia and Cape Breton. In Guysborough County and Canso and Baddeck, dozens of buildings -- barns, houses, even churches -- were blown down as if made of straw. Others were moved, witnesses swore, 20 to 30 feet off their foundations. In the same region, there were reports of acres of forest levelled, as if from the shock wave of some nuclear explosion.³² The story at sea was, if anything, worse.

²⁹Various figures were quoted. In "The Recent Storm," *New York Times*, 27 August 1873, the losses were described as eight barques and "several" brigs, plus two or three schooners.

³⁰Marven Moore and Nicolas de Jong, *Shipbuilding on Prince Edward Island: Enterprise in A Maritime Setting* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1994), p. 125.

³¹The North Cape location for her wreck is reported in "The Late Storm," *Island Argus*, 2 September 1873, and "The Storm," *Prince Edward Islander*, 29 August 1873, which added the detail about the three missing crewmen. But the *Saint John Daily News* for 3 September has her beached at Richibucto.

³²As reported, for example, in the *Harbor Grace Standard*, 30 August 1873, p. 3.

At North Sydney, “a darker, gloomier and wilder night no one could imagine.”³³ Dozens of schooners had taken shelter in its long, narrow harbour. When the wind suddenly veered around easterly on Sunday evening, it blew straight down the harbour and sent “a tidal wave ten feet high, sweeping toward the docks and wharves.”³⁴ Vessel after vessel broke loose of its moorings and drifted pell-mell onto shore. A local reporter struggled heroically to capture the pandemonium of that night: “Houses were being stript of their doors, shutters, chimneys; barns unroofed and hay flying through the air; fences falling by the miles; lumber rushing over one’s head as if alive and possessed with wings; and fruit trees, potatoes, grain being destroyed by the acres. The howl of the storm drowned the loud cries of the ship-wrecked sailors scrambling up the cliffs or in terror clinging to the rigging. The elements were wild, crazy, frenzied, *drunk*.”³⁵

Among the stranded vessels at North Sydney was the Charlottetown schooner *Margaret Jane*, which drifted “a considerable distance up the harbour” before fetching up at the foot of a steep clay bank. At that point, the Captain’s wife took matters into her own hands. “Being anxious,” the *Islander* reported in an admirable understatement, Mrs. McDonald “ventured on a leap for her life, and cleared the vessel some twenty feet up the bank at a bound. She alighted with safety and uninjured”³⁶ The reporter failed to record whether or not Mrs. McDonald accomplished her Olympian bound in or out of her skirts.

Warned by weather and their falling barometers, many vessels had beaten the August Gale into port, but didn’t seem to matter how secure the anchorage was. The gale overwhelmed whole fleets of vessels at their anchors. Around 30 vessels ended up ashore at North Sydney, 23 at Pictou,

³³“Great Gale and Tidal Wave,” North Sydney *Herald*, 27 August 1873; quoted in the St. John’s *Courier*, 3 September 1873.

³⁴“The Storm ‘Down East,’” *New York Times*, 28 August 1873, p. 1.

³⁵“Great Gale and Tidal Wave,” North Sydney *Herald*, 27 August 1873; quoted in the St. John’s *Courier*, 3 September 1873.

³⁶*Prince Edward Islander*, 5 September 1873, p. 5.

somewhere between 43 and 60 at the coal port of Cow Bay (now Port Morien).³⁷ At the Magdalen Islands, where the bulk of the mackerel fleet had taken refuge, the storm surge reportedly reached eight feet higher than ever before and 43 to 60 mackerel schooners were blown ashore.³⁸

Suddenly unsafe harbours witnessed scores of groundings around the region, but remarkably few deaths. Many of the stranded vessels were even re-floated, although even the most dogged salvagers were defeated by how far inland the storm surge had deposited some of the wrecks. Vessels caught at sea were in much graver peril, none more so than vessels trapped by the gale out in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Irresistibly, it swept them south towards the August Gale's deadliest coast, the North Shore of Prince Edward Island.

The North Shore of Home

In 1851, a sudden storm had smashed the American mackerel fleet against the northern coast of Prince Edward Island, wrecking between 75 and 110 vessels. On the day before the August Gale, the captain of the *Undine* reported, there were 100 vessels off the Island's northern tip.³⁹ But 1873 was no Yankee Gale. Most of these vessels had either run for shelter in the Magdalen Islands or weathered North Cape, putting the low bulk of western Prince County between themselves and the rising storm. Among the latter was the *Laura A. Dodd*, which rode out the August Gale at anchor off West Point. It was not the sort of sailing vacation that Congressman R. C. Parsons of Cleveland had envisaged when he and his son had shipped aboard the mackerel schooner. Within the week, Congressman Parsons was on his way home (apparently by rail) with a rattling good anecdote to

³⁷The low estimate appears in the *Montreal Gazette*, 29 August 1873, p. 3.

³⁸The improbable storm surge is reported in "List of Wrecks Still Continued," *Globe and Mail*, 3 September 1873, p. 1. The Saint John *Daily News* ("The Storm at the Magdalen Islands"), 9 September 1873, p. 2, puts the number of strandings at 43.

³⁹"The Nova Scotia Gale," *New York Times*, 30 August 1873, p. 1.

regale dinner guests with back in Cleveland.⁴⁰

But not everyone made it around North Cape or into the relative safety of the Magdalen Islands. And if the number of vessels wrecked along the North Shore was far fewer than in 1851, the loss of life was proportionately much higher. Ever since the *Yankee Gale*, the American mackerel fleet had trended towards large “clipper” schooners, fast and sleek, and with more carrying capacity than their predecessors. Instead of jigging for the mackerel, as in the old days, they sent out small boats to encircle whole schools of fish with large nets, gradually tightening the noose of the seine until the mackerel were trapped. Bigger vessels and newer methods entailed larger crews. Where the jiggers had carried eight to ten crewmen, the clipper schooners generally needed 17 or 18, more than many brigs and barques. And that, in turn, increased the potential for tragedy because the price for speed and capacity was sea-worthiness in heavy weather. The larger schooners did not sail well into the wind, and if they lost their canvas, they were especially vulnerable.⁴¹

The *August Gale* grimly illustrated the risk. At least two American schooners wrecked near the rocky hook of North Cape Reef. Among the 17 men lost on the *Carrie P. Rich* of Provincetown, Massachusetts was her master, 42-year-old John McLeod of Park Corner (sometimes referred to as “Johnnie Garland”), whose body was recovered at Miminegash.⁴² The body of crew mate John Gillespie of New London washed ashore near Tignish, 26 miles away.⁴³ Another 18 men were lost nearby on the Gloucester schooner *C. C. Dame*. And two Kings County men, John McPhee of Glencorrodale, Lot 46, and John McKinnon of Goose River, were among the 18-man crew of a second Gloucester vessel, the *James G. Tarr*. A few pieces of that schooner, and two bodies, came

⁴⁰Saint John *Telegraph*, 30 August 1873; quoted in “In the Storm,” *Semi-Annual Patriot*, 4 September 1873.

⁴¹As explained by K. Jack Bauer, *A Maritime History of the United States* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press), p. 212.

⁴²Eric Allaby, *The August Gale*, lists the master as “L. Thompson.”

⁴³*Semi-Weekly Patriot*, 6 September 1873.

ashore at Campbellton, Lot 4.⁴⁴ Three vessels, 53 deaths.

There was another cluster of wrecks around East Point at the opposite end of the Island, although reports leave it unclear exactly how many vessels were lost there. One of them was the mackerel schooner *Angie S. Friend* of Gloucester, which foundered at her anchors with the loss of her entire 14-man crew.⁴⁵ According to another eye-witness account, “A brigantine [more likely a schooner] with 17 men on board was struck by a sea off the east point of Prince Edward Island and was overturned. When she righted the spars were gone clear out of her, the hull was driven on the rocks and every soul on board perished.” The name of the vessel “could not be ascertained.”⁴⁶

The Americans weren't the only ones fishing mackerel in the Gulf that summer of 1873. The vessels ashore around Cavendish included the schooner *Bonnie Jean*, three weeks out from Port Medway, Nova Scotia. She was a total wreck, her 10-man crew all drowned: “These were all young men and the only supports of widowed mothers or aged parents.”⁴⁷ The schooner *Thetis* was picked up off New London, waterlogged and dismasted, her hold filled with cod. In the cabin searchers found three bodies, evidently brothers: two men and a boy. The boy was still in his bunk, partly undressed. The rest of the 12-man crew, all Shankels and Corkums from around LaHave, Nova Scotia, had been swept overboard.⁴⁸

There were Island vessels, too, in the fishery. Like Congressman Parsons, Charlottetown bookkeeper Montague Aldous had made an unfortunate vacation choice. Having just sold his fishing schooner

⁴⁴“Fifty Bodies Washed Ashore,” *Globe and Mail*, 4 September 1873, p. 1.

⁴⁵George Proctor, *The Fishermen's Own Memorial and Record Book* (Gloucester: 1873), p. 167-69.

⁴⁶“List of Wrecks Still Continue,” *Globe and Mail*, 3 September 1873, p. 1.

⁴⁷“Nova Scotia Gale,” *New York Times*, 7 September 1873, p. 1.

⁴⁸Eric Allaby, *The August Gale* (Saint John: New Brunswick Museum, 1973), p. 36.

Dominion to his brother[?] John, he was evidently tagging along on a summer cruise aboard his former vessel.⁴⁹ Around noon on Sunday, as the gale began to rise, Captain MacDonald of the *Dominion* wore the vessel's head north and hove to out in the Gulf. On Monday afternoon, canvas all torn, she was forced to run before the storm and was cast away on Hog Island, the narrow range of sandhills that blocks the entrance to Malpeque Bay. While the *Dominion* wallowed in the pounding surf, her crew tied a line to a barrel and heaved it overboard. It washed ashore, where four men "who had been detained there by the storm" made the rope fast. One by one, hand over hand, captain, crew, and former owner hauled themselves ashore through the sucking undertow, "saving nothing but what they stood in."⁵⁰

Hardly had that ordeal played out when a much larger vessel crashed ashore nearby. She was the barque *Alan*, out of Padstow, England, bound from Montreal with a cargo of grain.⁵¹ Of eleven sailors, only four made it safely to shore. It was Captain MacDonald of the *Dominion*, adrenaline still racing from his own shipwreck, who plunged into the surf to rescue the *Alan*'s boatswain. Never, MacDonald marvelled to the Charlottetown *Patriot* afterwards, had he seen such a sea in the Gulf.⁵²

By month's end, Aldous was back to the safety of his ledgers, his life no longer in the balance. Captain MacDonald's heroism went unrewarded, if not unremarked. Back on Hog Island, the *Dominion* was abandoned, buried in sand right up to her scuppers. The irony of that fate – given her name -- was probably lost on the province's anti-Confederates.

⁴⁹According to the ship registry, she was a medium-sized schooner, 69 tons, built at Grand River in 1867. Although the *Patriot* refers to Montague Aldous as owner, he and merchant Charles P. Hill had sold her to John Aldous, Montague, in July 1873.

⁵⁰"More About the Storm," *Semi-Weekly Patriot*, 30 August 1873. The captain may have been "Mr. Gabriel MacDonald," whose presence aboard the *Dominion* is noted in the article.

⁵¹Island newspapers refer to this vessel as the *Helen*, an understandable mis-rendering, but see, "Wrecks," *The Times*, 1 September 1873, p. 6. The details of the *Alan*'s wreck clearly mark her as the *Helen*.

⁵²*Ibid.*

Besides the *Alan*, there were five other square-riggers wrecked along the North Shore by Tuesday morning. Aside from the 720-ton Liverpool barque *Muscongus*, ashore at Stanhope with her cargo of lumber,⁵³ the rest were locally owned, more proof of how much the Island's great shipowning families had invested in the carrying trade. Perhaps the greatest shipowning family of all, the Yeos of Port Hill, had launched a pair of barques on 9 August. Now, barely two weeks later, both were wrecks. James Yeo's *Edith*, 292 tons, was ashore at Malpeque, while his brother John's *Maggie*, 260 tons, had ended up "high and dry" on Cascumpec Sandhills at the entrance to Alberton Harbour.⁵⁴ A little distance away lay R. T. Holman's well known brig *Kewadin*. The canny Summerside merchant, soon to become a household word on Prince Edward Island as owner of the province's first department store chain, had been using the *Kewadin* to transport rails for the new railroad. R. T. Holman and John Yeo were comparatively lucky. Not only were the crews of their vessels saved, but the wrecks themselves were eventually re-floated -- Yeo actually bought the *Maggie* back from its salvager. By November, both were back at sea.

The *Kewadin* was one of two rail-carriers that Reverend Dyer saw off Alberton when he set out for Kildare Capes on Saturday the 23rd. The other was the *Faith*, a Welsh brig owned by Captain William Richards of Bideford, the Yeos' brother-in-law. It would be another 119 years before curious scuba divers solved the riddle of her fate. In the desperate darkness of that Sunday night, as the *Faith* rode out the storm at her anchors just outside Alberton Harbour, her cargo of steel rails broke free in the hold, smashing through the brig's hull a quarter of the way down the port-side bow. She sank in seconds. There were no survivors.⁵⁵

⁵³"The Storm — Further Particulars," *Island Argus*, 2 September 1873; and "Ravages of the Storm," *Saint John Daily News*, 4 September 1873.

⁵⁴Details are contained in the Prince Edward Island Shipping Registers for 1873, as well as several contemporary newspaper reports, e.g. "The Late Storm," *Island Argus*, 2 September 1873, from which the "high and dry" quote is taken.

⁵⁵As recounted in Allan J. MacRae, "Lost and Found: The *Faith*, the August Gale, and the Coming of the Railway," *The Island Magazine*, 32(Fall/Winter 1992): 31-32.

And so it went, as the chattering telegraph spelled out its terse stories of shipwreck and loss, and newspapers retailed them for readers around the region and across the continent. By October stories about the great gale had finally petered out. There were new headlines, as the Pacific Scandal slowly capsized the Conservative government in Ottawa and the Great Panic on the New York Stock Exchange triggered a world-wide recession. But the sea continued to provide its own postscripts. The body of a man was discovered on the beach at East Point on 18 September: “He was very tall and well dressed, but his body was so mutilated that he could not be recognized. A book was found in his pocket in which was the name ‘Charles Christnel.’ It was supposed he belonged to Cape Ann.”⁵⁶

Storm Wrack

As with most 19th-century storms, there was considerable confusion about the number of vessels and lives lost in the August Gale. “We hear today of great loss of life,” Reverend Dyer recorded in his journal on Tuesday, the 26th. “Some say 18, some say 40, others more; in fact no one knows yet how many were lost.”⁵⁷ Newspapers dealt in a similar currency: rumour and speculation. By 31 August, the *New York Times* was reporting 40 vessels lost on the Island’s North Shore, with only 18 lives saved, although it rightly doubted the latter figure.⁵⁸ The *Saint John Daily News* for 1 September was closer to the mark, claiming that 27 vessels were ashore on the Island.⁵⁹ In fact, extant sources list of 25 named vessels lost on Island coasts, and even allowing for double-counting among the unidentified wrecks, it is likely that there were probably another 9.

The number of deaths is even harder to calculate. In making a plea the following year for more lighthouses on Island coasts, two Island MPs referred to 200 boats and schooners and 200 lives lost

⁵⁶*Semi-Weekly Patriot*, 2 October 1873.

⁵⁷Diary of Rev. R. W. Dyer, PARO 3251/1.

⁵⁸“The North-Eastern Gale,” *New York Times*, 31 August 1873.

⁵⁹“Still Further Details of the Storm,” *Saint John Daily News*, 1 September 1873, p. 2.

at sea during 1873.⁶⁰ They might be forgiven this exaggeration; these were, after all, political speeches. Current research suggests that at least 115 people were killed in Island waters during the August Gale, and given the number of unnamed vessels supposed lost “with all hands,” the total might easily have been closer to 150.

Nor is there any reliable casualty count for the region as a whole. The most frequently cited source, a report out of Washington, D.C., dated October 1873, estimated 1,032 vessels, including 435 small fishing schooners, “known to have been destroyed in the neighbourhood of the Gulf of St. Lawrence and the Atlantic shores of Nova Scotia, Cape Breton and Newfoundland.”⁶¹ The reported number of deaths was 223, although the study conceded that 500 would be a more accurate figure. Whatever the actual figures might have been, the vast scale of the disaster was unmistakable.

By the time the Charlottetown *Patriot* re-printed the damage report from Washington on 25 October, the most visible scars from the August Gale on Prince Edward Island had begun to heal. The bodies had been buried. A surprising number of the stranded vessels had been re-floated. Even the railway was running. In mid-September, a small train carrying 250 excursionists toured the finished section of track between Charlottetown and Summerside.⁶² The crops had recovered, too, and it was a much better harvest than anyone had ever expected in the immediate aftermath of the storm.

Not all the damage could be so easily or quickly mended. For the owners of shipwrecked and damaged vessels, even if insured, the gale was a heavy blow, since it deprived them of their living at a crucial time of the year. The damage inflicted on the Gloucester fishing fleet, the region’s largest,

⁶⁰Boyde Beck and Edward MacDonald, comp. *Everyday and Extraordinary: Almanac History of Prince Edward Island* (Charlottetown: Prince Edward Island Museum and Heritage Foundation, 1999), pp. 51-52.

⁶¹“The Great August Storm,” *Semi-Weekly Patriot*, 25 October 1873, pp. 1-2. When it factored in over 90 vessels reported lost in the same storm before it reached Maritime Canada, the report came up with a grand total of 1,122 vessels destroyed.

⁶²*Islander*, 19 September 1873, p. 5.

topped \$100,000.⁶³ Of 138 vessels at risk, nine were lost with all hands, and another 32 vessels were driven ashore, although only 5 of these were total losses.⁶⁴ As the *New York Times* observed, “The direct money loss does not seem great, but it must be remembered that the disaster came in the middle of the fishing season, and that nearly one half of the Gloucester fleet was lost or disabled. The mackerel fishery being one of the chief industries of the town, it is evident that the calamity will prove to be very serious.”⁶⁵

And nothing, of course, could replace lost lives. Down in Gloucester, the *Fishermen’s Own Memorial and Record Book* was already on the presses when word of the August Gale fell on the town “like a clap of thunder from a cloudless sky.” Victorian pathos coloured publisher George Proctor’s hurried addendum to his book: “Day by day the sad news came, and there is mourning throughout the town as we pen this article. Wives are weeping for their husbands. . . ; sisters are mourning for brothers, and little children ask, in plaintive tones, ‘Why does not father come home?’” Sentimental language was hardly necessary to encompass the scope of the disaster. At the time, it was the single deadliest storm in the history of the Gloucester fishing fleet. In all, 128 men died. As Proctor lamented, “Many of these were among the best skippers and smartest fishermen of the port.”⁶⁶

The Arc of Memory

Getting its details wrong but its analogy right, the *Islander* for 5 September 1873 claimed, “No such

⁶³George Proctor, *The Fishermen’s Own Memorial and Record Book* (Gloucester: 1873), pp. 167-70. For the year as a whole, 172 Gloucester fishermen lost their lives, bringing the total since 1830 to 296 vessels and 1,437 men..

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 167-70. For the year as a whole, 172 Gloucester fishermen lost their lives, bringing the total since 1830 to 296 vessels and 1,437 men..

⁶⁵In the same issue, the Times estimated 36 vessels, valued at \$60,000, lost or disabled, and 35 “hardy fishermen of Gloucester” lost.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 167-70.

summer storm has been known to have occurred since 1852 [sic], when two hundred sail of fishermen were wrecked on the north side of the Island.”⁶⁷ Indeed, the August Gale remains the second deadliest storm in Island history. And yet, like the storm itself, the memory of the August Gale soon died out on Prince Edward Island. Unlike the Yankee Gale, it inspired no poems, no paintings, no articles, and precious few stories. Long before rapid modernization broke the chain of memory that once anchored Island culture to its past, the August Gale began to blur in popular memory.

In some measure, events conspired against the storm’s recollection. While shipbuilding and seafaring enjoyed a long twilight in Maritime Canada, the age of sail on Prince Edward Island faded quickly. The shipbuilding industry, rebounding strongly in 1873, collapsed entirely over the space of three years in the late ‘70s. And even as Confederation shrank Islanders’ self-importance, the shipping industry dwindled greatly in the closing decades of the century. By 1900, except in the inshore lobster fishery, only a handful of Islanders went down to the sea in ships.

But there is more to it than that. It is almost as if there is only room in folk memory for one great storm. For Islanders, that storm has always been the Yankee Gale of 1851. In fact, by 1900, when the first written recollections of the Gale began to appear, numerous descriptive elements from the August Gale had been appropriated for the telling of the Yankee Gale. Written accounts now incorporated descriptions of coastal flooding and crops blighted by the salt spray. There is none of this in the newspaper coverage of the Yankee Gale in 1851, but the newspapers of 1873 are rife with such details. The arc of memory was not so much broken, then, as bent to serve the story of another storm at another time. Time completed the process begun by economic and social change. And so, when North Shore communities began publishing their histories in the 1970s, the August Gale was almost entirely absent.

The August Gale has been better remembered in Nova Scotia, though it is often confused with another “August Gale,” this one on 24 August 1927. But even there, in the storm surge of media

⁶⁷*Prince Edward Islander*, 5 September 1873, p. 5.

coverage that accompanied Hurricane Juan in the fall of 2003, there was practically no reference to the one storm in Maritime history that most closely paralleled it. The rapid subsidence of the August Gale in popular memory seems astounding. Perhaps it shouldn't. Historical, especially folk historical, amnesia is nothing new, even if it does a disservice to the past. It does raise intriguing questions about the nature of memory: what we remember and why, and how that memory is shaped over time. Severe trauma scars individual psyches, and for a generation or so, the outline of that scar is still visible in a family or community, but it fades away unless reinforced by the larger society. For societies tend only to remember things that serve a purpose. In an age that has largely divorced itself from the perils of the sea, and a place where hurricanes are a news clip from somewhere else, the story of the August Gale has no ready purpose. It's no morality tale, as the Yankee Gale began, about impiety, no storm warning of annual risk, no storehouse for needful nautical lore. It is a distant nightmare, remembered, if at all, for its entertainment value.

Until the next time.

Sources

This article began as a twice-given talk in the 1996 Island Lecture Series. Many other projects have intervened since, and it has taken eight years -- and Hurricane Juan -- to coax me back to the topic. While the August Gale shows up occasionally on internet sites, one of the only printed accounts is New Brunswicker Eric Allaby's centennial compilation, *The August Gale* (Saint John: New Brunswick Museum, 1973), which draws upon various Maritime newspapers, as well as the Lloyd's Lists for its catalogue of wrecks. Back in Number 32 of *The Island Magazine*, Allan J. MacRae recounted the loss — and discovery — of the *Faith*.

Of the newspapers published on Prince Edward Island in 1873, only the *Semi-Weekly Patriot*, the *Island Argus*, and the *Summerside Journal* (after 1 September) are still extant. But the August Gale was widely reported, and more of the Island story can be pieced together by a close reading of storm coverage in off-Island newspapers. It was front-page news, for example, in the *New York Times*,

which followed the story for weeks through telegraphed reports from Nova Scotia. I have also been able to consult *The Times* of London, the *Montreal Gazette*, the *Globe and Mail*, the *Saint John Daily News*, Fredericton's *New Brunswick Reporter*, *Le Moniteur Acadien* (Shediac), the St. John's *Courier* and the Harbour Grace *Standard*. Besides re-printing stories from Island newspapers that are no longer extant, several of these off-Island papers published "special reports" from Prince Edward Island. The Sessional Papers published in the Canadian Parliamentary Proceedings for 1874 and 1875 provide an incomplete but valuable cross-reference, both in the Department of Marine and Fisheries' published list of wrecks and its record of vessels registered at Maritime ports in 1874.

There are glimpses from other primary sources as well. The American Consul in Charlottetown dealt with American wrecks on Prince Edward Island (PARO 3024/3), while George Proctor's *Fishermen's Own Memorial and Record Book*, published just after the storm, provides a contemporary account of the losses in Gloucester, Massachusetts. Island shipping registers (available at the Robertson Library, UPEI, as well as the Public Archives) helped me diagnose the number of Island wrecks. The letterbooks of James Duncan & Company (PARO 2654/358) provided details about the *James Duncan's* narrow escape. Diaries have been useful, too. Henry Cundall (PARO 3473/1), L. C. Owen (PARO, HF3466/HF.71.12.2), and Dr. John Mackieson (PARO 2353/340-359) are regrettably terse, but Carter Jeffrey directed my attention to the far more vivid entries in the journals of Rev. R. W. Dyer (PARO 3251/1), while Dr. Doug Sobey reminded me to consult the eloquent journal of naturalist Francis Bain (PARO 2353/95).

Many other individuals have also contributed to my knowledge. I am particularly indebted to local researcher Joseph Malone, who volunteered his time and expertise during the initial phase of the project. Besides sharing photocopies of material from the St. John's *Courier* and Harbour Grace *Standard*, Alan Ruffman of Geomarine Associates Ltd. in Halifax has been enormously helpful in providing contextual material on Atlantic tropical storms, putting me in touch with "extreme weather event" experts, and using his own irrepressible interest and expertise to help fix a more accurate track for the hurricane. I have drawn in particular on two papers that he has delivered: "Hurricanes of Renown," public lecture at the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic, Halifax, 21 September 2004; and

“The Forgotten and Misplotted Hurricane of August 24-26, 1873,” Maritime Moments of the Millennium, Annual Conference and General Meeting, Canadian Nautical Research Society, Ottawa, 8-10 June, 2000. Among those extreme weather experts, I dealt happily in the mid-1990s with Edward N. Rappaport, now Deputy Director of the National Hurricane Centre in Miami, and Jim Abraham of the Maritimes Weather Centre in Halifax. In recent years, distinguished marine author John Rousmaniere shared his expertise about gauging meteorological “bombs.” That they may well disagree with my conclusions about the track of the Gale merely shows that the storm needs still more attention from weather experts rather than amateurs such as me.