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**THE YANKEE GALE, THE AUGUST GALE AND
POPULAR CULTURE ON PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND:
A MEDITATION ON MEMORY**



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS become temporal and cultural bookmarks. We measure by them, organize other memories around them. Yet, how and why weather events are remembered—and how that memory might change over time—is perhaps a more complicated process than it first seems.

On a winter's night in the early 1990s I gave a public lecture in O'Leary, Prince Edward Island, about the "Yankee Gale" of 3–5 October 1851, the most deadly natural disaster in Island history, which enjoyed a lively half-life in the province's oral culture.¹ After the lecture, an old man came up and told me a story about how his father, as a young seaman, had been given up for lost in the Yankee Gale. When he showed up back at home, his family took him at first for a ghost. It was a wonderful story, but on the long drive home I realized that it was chronologically implausible.

¹ Subsequently, the basis for Edward MacDonald, "The Yankee Gale," *The Island Magazine* 38 (Fall/Winter 1995): 17–25.

Even if he were only a boy at the time, my informant's father could hardly have been at sea in 1851. On the other hand, he could well have lived through the terrible August Gale of 1873, the second most devastating weather event in the province's recorded history. And yet, the old man had been certain. Long ago his father had survived a great storm. The Yankee Gale was such a storm. Therefore, folk memory dictated that his father's storm must have been the Yankee Gale.

Only recently, it seems, has the Yankee Gale lost its potency as an oral touchstone, especially for Islanders living along the province's North Shore. For over a century the story was recounted and re-printed, losing some details, blurring others, but retaining its essential contours. On the other hand, the August Gale disappeared almost entirely from local memory on Prince Edward Island within thirty years of the event. The inevitable question is "why?"

In terms of popular memory on Prince Edward Island, it was the fate of the August Gale to be gradually appropriated by the Yankee Gale through a fascinating process of cultural selection. Seeking to explain the number of casualties by the magnitude of the storm, local lore ending up "borrowing" elements from the August Gale, an extreme weather event of hurricane force, to fit the heavy loss of life associated with the arguably less severe Yankee Gale. At another level, the question of memory seems subtly linked to cultural utility. The story/stories of the Yankee Gale had a long echo in part because they highlighted attitudes and qualities that popular culture valued at a pragmatic or moral level. In other words, the memory of the Yankee Gale proved more useful than the memory of the August Gale, which ultimately succumbed to a sort of cultural amnesia. And even as the Yankee Gale persisted in popular culture, its memory mutated as the *fact* of remembrance got tangled up with the *mode* of remembering through the symbiotic relationship between oral and written re-tellings of the event. Thus, the workings of popular memory were perhaps more complex—and convoluted—than the weather events that triggered them. But it is with those events where the study of their memory properly begins.

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To distinguish between an event and the memory of it is not to ignore that contemporary reportage can be inaccurate or incomplete. Moreover, it often misses the shared gossip, direct observation, and lived experience that are the raw materials of popular memory. Nevertheless, contemporary accounts

do establish a documentary baseline for our understanding of events in 1851 and 1873.

The story of the Yankee Gale began with the New England mackerel fleet. By 1851 that fleet had been fishing the Gulf or “Bay” of St. Lawrence for just over twenty years. It averaged about six hundred vessels annually, greatly outnumbering its British American competitors.² The mackerel vessels—schooners and pinkies, mostly—congregated where the mackerel congregated, and the mackerel were most often found on three fishing grounds: New Brunswick’s Chaleur Bay, the Magdalen Islands, and, from August onwards, along the North Shore of Prince Edward Island.

Friday, 3 October 1851, found the bulk of the fall fleet jigging for mackerel close inshore along the “waist” of the Island between Cascumpec and Tracadie Bay. When a sudden nor’easter blew in that evening it caught the mackerel fleet between the hammer of the gale and the anvil of the coast, and over the next forty hours it beat that fleet to pieces. Some vessels foundered at their anchors as they tried to ride out the storm off-shore; others wrecked in the desperate attempt to find a way through or over the barrier dunes that barred every harbour along the northern coast; some smashed ashore on rocky headlands. No complete record of wrecks or deaths was ever possible for the disaster. There were too many home ports involved, too many vessels, too few records, and too many conflicting reports. Official estimates put the losses at 74 vessels and 160 men, but the actual total was undoubtedly much higher, perhaps as many as 110 and 250, respectively.³ What is clear is that by Monday morning the shore from North Cape to Cable Head, was strewn with wreckage, debris, and bodies. Still, the survivors far outnumbered the dead, and hundreds of shipwrecked Yankee fishermen were given temporary refuge by local families, who watched as they came to terms with the sudden loss of life and property. The macabre scenes of death and emotional devastation made a deep impression on eye-witnesses, and it is no coincidence that the greatest concentration of Yankee Gale lore would be found where the wrecks were most numerous, the stretch of coast between Cascumpec (present-day Alberton) and Tracadie Bay.

Two days later, the first newspaper accounts appeared in Charlottetown. *Haszard’s Gazette* reported, “On the night of Friday last, and throughout the

² Raymond McFarland, *A History of the New England Fisheries* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania Press, 1911), 171.

³ As discussed in MacDonald, “Yankee Gale,” 23–24.

whole of Saturday and the following night, we were visited with a gale of unusual violence, from the E.N.E., and violent storm of rain, almost unparalleled in the history of this Island; from the loss of ships accompanying it, and altogether so far as loss of life which has taken place.”⁴ “The loss of life and property among the shipping is almost incredible,”⁵ echoed *The Islander* on 10 October. Early reports concentrated on listing the wrecks, but, already, an element of drama was creeping into the narrative of the storm’s onset: “The afternoon was warm and still, the sky was heavily clouded, but yet no indication of the approaching tempest was apparent, excepting a lurid brassy appearance to the north and nor’west about sunset: in the West Indies, the sure harbinger of a hurricane.”⁶ Later re-tellings would considerably embellish this after-the-fact recollection of eerie foreboding. They would pointedly ignore *The Islander’s* subsequent change of heart about the severity of the gale. Only two weeks after calling it “a most violent gale of wind and rain,” *The Islander* recanted:

Now that men’s minds have recovered from the shock communicated by the unparalleled destruction of life and property on our North Shore, they begin to investigate the cause of the catastrophe. It has been mainly owing to bad vessels badly managed. The storm continued an unusual length of time, but it was not severe, and the mischief was consummated within a few hours from its commencement. On our Northern Capes, not a rickety out-house has been injured that we have heard of, not hardly a breach made in the still more rickety snake-fences, although exposed to the closest sweep of the blast. In short, we have heavier gales and higher tides almost every year without loss.⁷

Just how bad was the Yankee Gale? There is little objective evidence. In Charlottetown, Dr. John Mackieson’s diary entry for 4 October was terse: ““This morning a heavy gale with rain from the north-east.”⁸ Up in Malpeque, on the disaster’s doorstep, the view was different. “A great Gale

⁴ *Haszard’s Gazette*, October 7, 1851. Unless otherwise noted, all newspapers referenced were published in Charlottetown.

⁵ “Violent Gale,” *The Islander*, October 10, 1851.

⁶ “The Storm,” *The Islander*, October 17, 1851.

⁷ “The Late Gale,” *The Islander*, October 31, 1851.

⁸ Diary of Dr. John Mackieson, Public Archives and Records Office of Prince Edward Island (PARO), 2353/340359.

these 3 days the worst in memory,” wrote James F. Macnutt in his diary on 7 October, “the wind blowing from the North and by North East, Very Heavy rain. The waves Crashing over the cliffs at the Back shore. The consequences of which the past days have shown Many wrecks on the Shores from Hog Island to Darnley—numbering 30 to 40 in all and many Schooners stranded on the Reefs at North Channel & Malpeque outer Bars.” On 9 October, after cataloging the grisly flotsam and jetsam along the shore, he added, “A great devastation [sic] from the Storm. Some of the Stacks [of] grain—lost—and water logged, no good for feeding loose to Live stock or Threshing.”⁹ The most scientific weather observations were actually made in Cape Breton, by Captain Henry W. Bayfield, aboard the hydrographic survey ship *Gulnare*, which rode out the gale at a sheltered anchorage near St. Peter’s, on the Bras d’Or Lakes. Between 10 a.m. on Friday and 1 p.m. on Saturday, his barometer plummeted 1.2 inches, from 29.95 to 28.93. The wind direction and the barometer reading confirm that an exceptionally deep low pressure system was tracking south and east of Cape Breton.¹⁰ Nonetheless, the narrow path of destruction—there were few reports of damage elsewhere in the Maritime colonies—suggests that the high loss of life on Prince Edward Island had as much to do with the storm’s duration and the vulnerable position of the Yankee mackerel fleet as the malevolence of the weather.¹¹

A generation later, it all happened again. On Sunday, 24 August 1873, a full-fledged Atlantic hurricane crashed ashore in Maritime Canada, wreaking havoc on land and sea. Like the Yankee Gale, the August Gale was a devastating nor’easter, although the wind was more nearly north this time.¹² This time there was more warning for seafarers, but though far fewer ships were caught on a lee shore than in the Yankee Gale, the magnitude of the storm defeated most precautions. Many vessels were driven from supposedly safe anchorages or ran out of searoom and were wrecked on Maritime coasts. According to one report, 1,032 vessels, including 435 small fishing schooners, were “known to have been destroyed in the neighbourhood of the

⁹ Transcription from diary attributed to James F. Macnutt, Malpeque, Earle Lockerby, Fredericton, to Edward MacDonald, August 14, 2001.

¹⁰ Henry Wolsey Bayfield, *The St. Lawrence Survey Journals of Captain Henry Wolsey Bayfield, 1829–1853*, vol. 2 (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1984), 401.

¹¹ *Haszard’s Gazette* (October 21, 1851) reported one wreck and damage to vessels at Richibucto, the only published record of serious damage elsewhere.

¹² Diary of Francis Bain, entry for 24–25 August 1873, PARO 2353/95. Bain, a naturalist and close observer of nature living near Charlottetown, recorded the wind at the storm’s height as one degree east of north.

Gulf of St. Lawrence and the Atlantic shores of Nova Scotia, Cape Breton and Newfoundland.”¹³ The reported number of deaths was 223, although the study conceded that 500 would be a more accurate figure. On Prince Edward Island, far fewer vessels were lost (25–35) than in the *Yankee Gale*, but the crews were proportionately larger, and the death toll, 115–150 lives, came well within echo of the earlier disaster.¹⁴

Reflecting both the pattern of shipping and, probably, the August Gale’s size and track, the pattern of shipwrecks was more dispersed on Prince Edward Island than in the *Yankee Gale*. While a number of wrecks came ashore along the waist of the Island between Alberton and Tracadie Bay, there was a cluster of wrecks at both extremities of the province, as vessels tried vainly to weather either East Point or North Cape. The losses there were mostly fishing schooners, but along the North Shore the wrecks included a number of large cargo vessels. In contrast to the *Yankee Gale*, storm damage in 1873 also extended to the south side of the Island. There was local flooding in the east end of Charlottetown, where the storm surge washed away the newly constructed railway embankment, and all along the South Shore wharves were battered, and vessels driven from their moorings.

As the *Islander* was quick to observe, it had been the worst such summer storm since the *Yankee Gale*.¹⁵ Indeed, in a purely weather sense, contemporary reports suggest the August Gale was actually more powerful, even though Prince Edward Island was clearly not in the direct path of the hurricane. The Charlottetown observer for the Dominion Meteorological Service in Charlottetown, Henry Cundall, inexplicably took in his anemometer on Sunday evening, but afterwards estimated the wind velocity overnight at 50–60 miles per hour.¹⁶ The recorded impressions of Rev. R.W. Dyer, Anglican minister at Alberton, were more visceral. Sunday night found him storm-stayed at a parishioner’s house in Kildare Capes. “Wind increasing,” Dyer wrote that evening:

¹³ “The Great August Storm,” *Semi-Weekly Patriot*, October 25, 1873, 1–2. When it factored in over 90 vessels reported lost in the same storm before it reached Maritime Canada, the Washington-based report came up with a grand total of 1122 vessels destroyed.

¹⁴ This estimate is based on research compiled for Edward MacDonald, “The August Gale and the Arc of Memory on Prince Edward Island,” *The Island Magazine* 56 (Fall/Winter 2004): 9–20.

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

¹⁶ “Meteorological,” *Charlottetown Patriot*, August 28, 1873, 2.

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 [sic] still blowing a gale. Oh, what will become of the poor fishermen! The Lord have mercy on us. 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 to death. Plums are lying thick on the ground, and apples too.¹⁷

The damage on land paralleled the destruction at sea. All across Prince Edward Island wharves were ruined, bridges damaged, trees toppled, buildings blown down.¹⁸ “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.”¹⁹

Clearly, Islanders had witnessed something extraordinary. Indeed, since many more Islanders were at sea in 1873 than 1851, more of them experienced the August Gale first-hand, both off Island shores and in other parts of the Gulf region.²⁰ Several had miraculous escapes. And yet, within thirty years, the August Gale would all but vanish from popular memory.²¹ By then, the Yankee Gale was entering a whole new phase of remembrance.

¹⁷ Diary of Rev. R.W. Dyer, PARO 3251/1. My thanks to Carter Jeffreys for first bringing it to my attention.

¹⁸ For a partial list, see *Island Argus*, September 2, 1873. Dyer's return to Alberton was obstructed by fallen trees.

¹⁹ *Prince Edward Islander*, September 5, 1873, 5.

²⁰ By 1873 Islanders were active in both the mackerel fishery and the carrying trade. My research has uncovered twenty-seven Island-owned vessels wrecked or severely damaged in other parts of the Maritimes.

²¹ One exception: it is among the catalogue of notable events chronicled in James B. Pollard, *Historical Sketch of the Eastern Regions of New France ... also Prince Edward Island: Military and Civil* (Charlottetown: John Coombs, 1898), 96. Almost the only modern reference is an undated manuscript recovered from a burning house in the 1960s, which became the subject of a newspaper article three decades later. (See Nancy Willis, “Historic Gale Claims Many Ships,” *Guardian*, May 13, 1992, A-7.)

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The first known re-telling of the Yankee Gale was actually visual. Two years after the storm, in June 1853, *Haszard's Gazette* reported that marine artist and sometime Deputy Colonial Secretary George Godsell Thresher of Charlottetown had completed "a very well executed painting of the disastrous gale which occurred in 1851, by which so many fishing vessels were wrecked, and so many lives lost."²² Faithful to the murky half-light of the storm's daylight hours, Thresher's oil canvas depicts a fleet of fishing vessels tossing helplessly amid heavy seas against a background of angry, dark sky. Even though the majority of wrecks actually occurred along the coast, there is no land in sight (perhaps because the Island's low coastline lacked painterly wildness).

Although he had once been shipwrecked himself, it is unlikely that George Thresher was an eye-witness to the event he had painted.²³ The next recorder of the Yankee Gale almost undoubtedly was Elizabeth Lockerby had just turned twenty-one when the American mackerel fleet came to grief on the shores below her father's farm in Cavendish.²⁴ In 1866, she published a book of verse, *The Wild Brier*. The most evocative passages in its most ambitious poem, "George and Amanda, A Sketch from Real Life," provide an extended, blank-verse account of the Yankee Gale. Narrative details familiar from newspaper accounts are present. There is the eerie calm before the storm. There is the gale's caprice: survivors of one wreck haul themselves ashore, hand-over-hand along a lifeline, then a giant wave washes the wreck onto dry land, allowing the rest of the crew to walk to safety. And there is (although no names are supplied) Captain James Wixon of Dennis, Massachusetts, coming to Cavendish to retrieve the bodies of his four sons from the wreck of the *Franklin Dexter*; only to lose them at sea a second time when the vessel that he used to ship the corpses home, the *Seth Hall*, sailed out of Rustico Harbour and was lost at sea.²⁵

²² "Painting of the October Gale," *Royal Gazette*, June 13, 1853. The canvas was intended for exhibit in New York City. It is now in the collection of the Confederation Centre Art Gallery and Museum in Charlottetown.

²³ Irene L. Rogers, "Thresher, George Godsell," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography On-line*, http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id_nbr=4220&interval=20&PHPSESSID=iktvsn144pbee5bksevg59mfu7 (accessed October 10, 2009).

²⁴ Thomas B. Vincent, "Lockerby, Elizabeth Newell (Bacon)," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography On-line*, http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id_nbr=5659&interval=20&PHPSESSID=iktvsn144pbee5bksevg59mfu7 (accessed October 10, 2009).

²⁵ E.N. Lockerby-Bacon, *The Wild Brier* (Charlottetown, 1866), 13–31. Fact and folklore in the case of the *Franklin Dexter* are considered in MacDonald, "The Yankee Gale," 22. The report of the *Seth Hall's* disappearance was published in "Missing Vessel," *The Islander*, March 30,

Besides adding dramatic flair, Lockerby's verse version of the Yankee Gale also introduced two moralizing details that would become central tropes in almost every subsequent re-telling. First, she explained the disaster in terms of Divine retribution:

... vengeance was appeased, and
 Sabbath profanation fearfully
 Chastised. For that proud fleet no Sabbath knew,
 But, on the sacred day of rest, pursued
 Their daily round of toil, and hasted to
 Be rich: and thus temptation and a snare
 Beset; and swift destruction smote them down.

Then, in the storm's aftermath, another act of impiety, this time from the lips of the *Seth Hall's* doomed captain:

The Captain of the craft was one who feared
 Not God, nor yet regarded man, but cursed
 The storm—the wreck it made—and, in profane
 And awful language, to His face defied
 Almighty power, and said no storm could ever
 Injure *him*. And with loud blasphemies upon
 His lips, set sail ...

And was never heard from again.

It is impossible now to tell whether these invocations of a prickly, Old Testament Providence was mostly literary device, reflective of mid-Victorian moralism, or based on local lore, but their appeal for later, second-person story-tellers would be irresistible. Even after the conviction of a vengeful Deity went out of fashion, such stories about tempting Fate retained their fascination. As with other recurring motifs in the after-life of the Yankee Gale, it is difficult to know whether turn-of-the-century re-tellings borrowed directly from Lockerby or simply drew on the same oral tradition that had inspired her.²⁶

1852. The vessel, laden with a cargo of potatoes and carrying two Islanders, was last seen clearing the Strait of Canso.

²⁶ Neither of these traditions figure in Elisha J. Baker's 1904 reminiscence of his own perilous encounter with "the great gale of 1851" aboard the pinky *Abigail Gold*, but it is a personal account, and, in any case, he was from North Lake, far to the east of Lockerby's home community.

The first of these second-person renditions was penned by Cavendish farmer and local historian Walter Simpson. His “Cavendish in the Olden Times,” published serially in the Charlottetown-based *Prince Edward Island Magazine* in 1899–1900, devoted two pages to the Yankee Gale, highlighting the entwined stories of the *Franklin Dexter* and the *Seth Hall*. Simpson even puts exact words in the impious Captain Hall’s mouth as he sets out from Rustico: “The Captain swore a wicked oath that ‘If he got past East Point, God almighty would not catch him.’”²⁷ Two years later, in 1902, Stanhope native James D. Lawson published the first full-scale article on the event.²⁸ “The Great American Gale” was one of several historical pieces that Lawson wrote for the *Prince Edward Island Magazine*—although he was a Charlottetown grocer by day, he was something of an antiquarian—and it seems to have drawn on both newspaper research and oral sources. His dramatic description of the storm at its height presumably mixed a little of both, and it set the tone for subsequent re-tellings: “The following morning—Saturday—how memorable because so awful. What wind! What rain! What devastation! The water was convulsive; the beach a seething mass of foam; the roar of the Gulf deafening and its appearance terrifying but truly majestic, and the sailors in a life and death struggle with the raging wind and waves.”²⁹ Lawson’s chronicle of the Yankee Gale was the most complete, but the most read was likely the fictionalized one served up by the Island’s most famous author, L.M. Montgomery of Cavendish, in her early novel *The Golden Road*, published in 1913. Although the personal and place names are altered, the main outline of the tale, irresistible to a writer of Montgomery’s temperament, is familiar: the sudden storm, the profane Yankees, and, of course, the wrenching tragedy of the *Franklin Dexter/Seth Hall*.³⁰

See Elisha J. Baker, “The *Abigail Gold*,” *Prince Edward Island Magazine* 4.2 (January 1904): 386–88.

²⁷ Walter Simpson, “Cavendish in the Olden Times,” Part 5, *The Prince Edward Island Magazine* 2.5 (July 1900): 146–48. According to the 1901 census, Simpson was farming in Cavendish.

²⁸ James D. Lawson, “The Great American Gale,” *Prince Edward Island Magazine* 4.7 (September 1902): 223–29.

²⁹ “The Great American Gale,” 224.

³⁰ L.M. Montgomery, *The Golden Road* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1962), 253–59. To emphasize the Sabbath profanation theme, she moves the advent of the storm from Friday to Sunday. Even as she was writing *The Golden Road*, Montgomery recounted the story of the *Franklin Dexter* in her journal entry for June 3, 1909; see *The Selected Journals of L.M. Montgomery*, vol. 1: 1889–1910, ed. Mary Rubio and Elizabeth Waterston (Toronto: Oxford U Press, 1985), 352–53.

Lawson, Simpson, and Montgomery could hardly base their versions of the Yankee Gale on personal memory. Simpson was only four years old in 1851, Lawson was born in 1852, and Montgomery in 1874. But all three were raised in the shadow of the Yankee Gale in communities where there was a communal memory of the storm. Montgomery learned the story of the *Franklin Dexter* from her grandfather Macneill—"I never tired hearing it,"³¹ and both the Simpsons and Montgomerys boasted family heirlooms from the wrecks. The shipwrecked captain of the *Oscar Coles* gave Simpson's father the ship's timepiece, while Montgomery had a mackerel reamer salvaged from the *Franklin Dexter*.³² John MacKinnon's personal connection to the Yankee Gale is more doubtful, but his re-telling of it, published in his 1915 collection, *A Sketch Book*, would eventually become the most imitated.³³

Similarities in wording suggest that McKinnon had read Lawson's article, but the poetic license of his own description asserts a sort of rhetorical one-upmanship that exaggerates and distorts earlier accounts. New omens presage the storm's onset: the sun is surrounded by "a halo of peculiar brightness"; the Gulf waters have acquired "a strange, glassy look as if covered with oil"; in the unnatural calm before the storm, "distant objects looked nigh, and distant sounds were heard with amazing distinctness"; seabirds now announce the approaching tempest, "uttering screams as if scudding about in a gale."³⁴ As for Saturday's tempest:

what uproar, what disaster! The outlook was truly appalling—vessels by the hundred being dashed on shore, their crews in a desperate struggle with the foe of mankind. The dim morning light revealed a war of the elements and the wrecking of whatever came in their way; mountain waves rioting in a maddened career, the beach a maelstrom of foam, the rain almost a deluge, the noise like a continuous peal of the most awful thunder, while the land shook with the tremendous impact, both wind and waves clapping their hands in riotous mirth at the work of destruction. Divested of mournful details the commotion was truly sublime, great

³¹ Rubio and Waterston, *Selected Journals*, vol. I, 352.

³² Simpson, "Cavendish in the Olden Times," 148; and Rubio and Waterston, *The Selected Journals*, vol. I: 1889-1910, 352, and vol. III: 1921-1929 (Toronto: Oxford U Press, 1992), 428-29.

³³ John MacKinnon, *A Sketch Book, Comprising Historical Incidents, Traditional Tales and Translations* (Saint John, NB: Barnes & Co., 1915), 27-34.

³⁴ *A Sketch Book*, 27-28.

rolling billows being wrecked on the strand with a crash easily
heard ten miles away in the country.³⁵

Besides racheting up the intensity of Lawson's description, MacKinnon again has added previously unmentioned—or unremembered—features: “On land, the damage was serious. The tide flooded areas never before seen under water; on fields where harvests had been recently gathered, waves flung their caps aloft, forgetting they were not on the ocean. Bridges and mill-dams were carried away by the score; buildings, fences and great forest trees were blown down, and for days travelling was stopped owing to wind-falls.”³⁶ In fact, no extant primary source accounts of the Yankee Gale mention any such effects; the storm was described at the time as “unprecedented” mostly because of the losses at sea. In contrast, contemporary accounts of the *August Gale* (quoted above) pointedly emphasize those effects. Writing a half century after one storm and thirty-two years after the other, MacKinnon seems to have collapsed the two weather events into one. In story-telling terms, the Yankee Gale has, in effect, appropriated the August Gale.

From this point, tracing the contours of popular memory becomes more difficult. In a literate society, such as the Prince Edward Island of 1900, once published versions of a remembered event exist, they develop a symbiotic relationship with oral traditions. The written accounts draw upon (and often embellish) the oral ones, only to have details from the written sources seep back into popular memory. When later writers encounter those details, they presume they are encountering oral traditions. Within a few generations, it is hard to tell whether written versions of a weather event are capturing oral traditions or merely plundering earlier published ones. What is clear, in the case of the Yankee Gale, is that generations of journalists, columnists, and local historians relied heavily on the descriptive template that John MacKinnon had fashioned for the Yankee Gale in his 1915 account, accepting his version and adding their own subtle variations. With each subsequent re-telling the storm's onset seems to get more ominous, its full fury more extreme, and its damage on land more extensive. At the same time, the anecdotes repeated about tragic death or miraculous salvation slowly blur, often shedding concrete details.³⁷

³⁵ *A Sketch Book*, 29.

³⁶ *A Sketch Book*, 30.

³⁷ The following chronological list is comprehensive though not exhaustive: “The Yankee Gale of 1851,” *Guardian*, March 24, 1923, 9, 11 (which quotes an “old sketchbook”; in reality,

Walter O'Brien, an elderly chronicler of "the olden days," returned to the *Yankee Gale* several times in his weekly *Guardian* column, "Bristol Notes." In his hyperbolic (and unacknowledged) paraphrase of MacKinnon's description the storm at its height, he makes imitation a form of flattery:

What uproar! What disaster! Mountainous waves driven with gale force winds, the beaches a mailstrom [sic] of white foam the rain almost a deluge, the noise like heavy thunder shook the land with tremendous impact. Both rain and wind clapped hands in that riotous destruction. Great white billows of boiling seas being wrecked in [sic] strand with crashing force that could be heard two miles away. The oceans had gone mad with rage, the fierce white tongue licking the beaches far inland only to fall back into the boiling raging seas to gather force to come crashing in again more terrible than before. People saw the end of the world at hand.³⁸

As O'Brien's homage illustrates, MacKinnon's enhanced version of Lawson's description of the Yankee Gale had now clearly become the standard account, so much so, that Phyllis Blakey and Myra Vernon borrowed it without question—August Gale-like details included—when the Yankee Gale made a cameo appearance in the first full-length Island history text, *The Story of Prince Edward Island*, in 1963.³⁹ By the time Julie V. Watson's *Shipwrecks and Seafaring Tales of Prince Edward Island* blithely transferred another folkloric tradition, the "Phantom Ship of the Northumberland Strait," from its regular haunts on the opposite side of the province to the North Shore seascape of the Yankee Gale, the thread of popular memory had frayed to

MacKinnon's article, published only eight years previous); Ruth Teare Woodsworth, "The Old Order Changeth," *Canadian Magazine*, May 1933; "Old Charlottetown," *Guardian*, October 4, 1948; F.H. MacArthur, "The Disaster of 1851," *Maritime Advocate and Busy East* 39.9 (April 1949): 19; Neil A. Matheson, "Yankee Gale Story Is Death and Destruction," *Guardian*, December 30, 1965, 8 (which cites oral traditions of a miraculous "guiding light" showing the way to safety); Walter O'Brien, "Bristol Notes," *Guardian*, October 15, 1974, 2 (which invokes oral tradition: "There is no one today who recalls the Yankee Gale, but older folk learned it from their fathers and grandfathers"); Walter O'Brien, "Bristol Notes," *Guardian*, May 29, 1975, 5; *Guardian*, June 6, 1975, 3; Walter O'Brien, "Bristol Notes," *Guardian*, November 11, 1976, 13; Lorne Johnston, "Tragic Storm for Schooners," *Guardian*, October 13, 1979, 6; Lorne Johnston, "Story Recalls Horror of Killer Gale of 1851," *Guardian*, October 22, 1983, 5; and Julie V. Watson, *Shipwrecks and Seafaring Tales of Prince Edward Island* (Toronto: Hounslow Press, 1994), 60–71.

³⁸ Walter O'Brien, "Bristol Notes," *Guardian*, May 29, 1975, 5.

³⁹ Phyllis Ruth Blakely and Myra C. Vernon, *The Story of Prince Edward Island* (Toronto: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1963), 172–73.

the breaking point.⁴⁰ The Yankee Gale had become something for Islanders to read about rather than hear of.

3

Getting its details wrong but its analogy right, the *Islander* for 5 September 1873 explicitly connected the two deadliest storms in Prince Edward Island history: “No such 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.”⁴¹ It would take another century—and the postwar implosion of Prince Edward Island’s oral culture—for the Yankee Gale to fade from recall, yet the August Gale was essentially forgotten within three decades. What process was at work here? Why was one storm remembered and the other lost? Why were details from the August Gale grafted onto the more dominant memory of the Yankee Gale? And why did re-tellings of the Yankee Gale mutate as they did?

The last question is perhaps easiest to address. Most memories of extreme events arguably tend towards exaggeration over time, but in the escalation of a bad storm to a gale of epic proportions, one senses a sort of weather-lore logic by which the “worst” storm in terms of destruction of life and property *must* also have been the “worst” storm in meteorological terms. That was the easiest way to explain the scale of the disaster to readers and listeners with little experience of the sea. And as the temporal and personal distance between the storyteller and the actual event widened, it became ever easier to slip into hyperbole. There is a story-telling logic at work here as well. The desire for dramatic effect dictated a winnowing of narrative elements. Certain details were deleted as superfluous; others were embellished largely because they made for a good story. After all, popular memory, like all story-telling, generally seeks to entertain as well as to inform.

That the Yankee Gale enjoyed such a long half-life in that popular memory is not in itself surprising. It was, after all, the most deadly storm in Island history with by far the most shipwrecks. It was also, given its narrow path of destruction, a quintessentially local event, while the August Gale was a regional phenomenon, which did its greatest damage elsewhere. One is also tempted to think that the Yankee Gale is remembered as much for

⁴⁰ Watson, *Shipwrecks and Seafaring Tales*, 65. She credits the story to tourism operator and history buff Archie Johnstone of Kensington.

⁴¹ *Islander*, September 5, 1873, 5.

the lingering emotional imprint of so many wrecks and so many stricken survivors as for the loss of life. "Even yet," wrote James D. Lawson in 1902, "some persons in this locality have distinct but melancholy recollections of the survivors weeping over their fallen comrades. And people there, now up in years, well remember the nervousness of women and children, especially after night, on account of the dead bodies on the shore."⁴² The mystery, then, is not that the Yankee Gale was so memorable, but that the August Gale was not.

Selective amnesia and unconscious editing is not a new phenomenon in societal memory. Individual memory is often mediated by the need to make it conform with societal expectations, and memories are realigned as those societal norms change.⁴³ The same is true of iconic figures and events from the past, which are reconfigured to serve different needs at different times.⁴⁴ Even commemoration is a subtly evolving dialogue between monuments or rituals and the successive generations that encounter them.⁴⁵ But there is no obvious motive for popular memory on Prince Edward Island to suppress or mis-label the August Gale.

In an on-line blog about the history of Gusyborough County, Nova Scotia, where the August Gale of 1873 was particularly destructive, a genealogist recently noted that the storm became for many years "a sort of time-marker, events being noted as having taken place so many years before or after the August Gale."⁴⁶ Not so on Prince Edward Island. In the end, it seems, there is only room in folk memory for one great storm. For Islanders, that storm has always been the Yankee Gale of 1851. Thus, when *Guardian* columnist Lorne Johnston drew upon conversations with old salts to re-create a dialogue between onlookers as a string of mackerel schooners wreck on East Point during a fierce northeaster, he simply assumed the storm in question was the Yankee Gale. In fact, no vessels were wrecked so far to the east during the

⁴² Lawson, "The Great American Gale," 226.

⁴³ See, for example, Alastair Thomson, "Anzac Memories: Putting Popular Memory Theory into Practice in Australia," in *The Houses of History*, ed. Anna Green and Kathleen Troup (New York: New York U Press, 1999), 230–52.

⁴⁴ To cite just one example, Cecilia Morgan, "'Of Slender Frame and Delicate Appearance': the Placing of Laura Secord in the Narratives of Canadian Loyalist History," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 5 (1994): 195–212.

⁴⁵ As explored in Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 1995).

⁴⁶ Harvey Kolgan and Peggy Feltmate, "More on Aug Gale 1873," Nova Scotia Genweb, <http://www.oulton.com/cwa/newsns.nsf/a6040306c38ac84d85256588001c248a/ef44541a03bbaff2852565c80001dd561OpenDocument> (accessed October 12, 2009).

Yankee Gale. It is more likely that Johnston's "old salts," arguably all born (like Johnston) in eastern Prince Edward Island during the First World War era, were remembering a cluster of wrecks at East Point during the August Gale.⁴⁷ Lacking a reference point, their memories of the event gravitated to the earlier calamity.

Individual memory may be arbitrary, but societal memory tends to preserve only things that serve a purpose. Here the Yankee Gale had an undeniable advantage over its meteorological sibling. The sea captain punished for his blasphemy, the fishing fleet punished for breaking the Sabbath: these had resonance in the Old Testament mentality of the nineteenth century and a story-telling appeal in the twentieth. Curiously, no one suggested that the August Gale, which struck the Maritimes on a Sunday, had been sent to chastize Sabbath-breakers. But then, if a storm must become a morality tale, there is still only a need for one such, and the Yankee Gale had already staked out that ground by 1873. And if a terrible gale must serve as a reminder of Nature's power—and caprice—the same, again, is true. Undoubtedly, too, the early existence of written accounts of the Yankee Gale both reinforced and informed folk memory, helping ensure its persistence. In a form of folkloric natural selection, then, the mighty August Gale failed to find a purpose, and its memory quickly withered, while the Yankee Gale flourished.

What lessons can we draw from this story of remembrance and forgetting? What does it tell us about the connection between extreme weather events and oral traditions? Surely, it is not to drive us back to primary sources or to brand folk memory as inherently unreliable. But it should remind us that folk memory is inevitably selective, sorting and culling in unpredictable ways, and that it is itself a living organism, capable of mutating over time and of interacting with other forms of memory. As with much history, the process of remembering thus becomes as revealing as the event itself. When it comes to weather lore, then, the memory of past storms should teach us caution, a lesson not lost on the seafarers of more distant times.

⁴⁷ Newspaper sources indicate that as many as nine vessels were lost on or near East Point during the August Gale.