

THE WRECK OF THE ASTRAEA

D. C. HARVEY

THE wreck of the *Astraea* at Little Loran Head, Cape Breton, in 1834, was one of the most tragic of the many shipwrecks that took place in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, when migration from the British Isles to the British North American colonies was in full swing, and unscrupulous shipmasters overcrowded their far-from-seaworthy craft to profiteer in human misery. For the first decade of this period there was not a lighthouse on the entire coast of Cape Breton Island, and, during that decade, on an average five ships a year were stranded between Louisbourg and Cape North, to be pillaged of their cargo or scattered far and wide as a menace to navigation. St. Paul's Island, near Cape North, and Scatari, near Cape Breton, were the two greatest danger spots for all who ventured through Cabot Strait, in nature's blackout, *en route* to the St. Lawrence, while the former was equally dangerous to those who were outward bound. It was through the bitter experience of those years that Lower Canada and the Maritime Provinces finally cooperated to maintain lighthouses and life-saving establishments on St. Paul's and Scatari Islands, and the government of Nova Scotia appointed committees of local residents to watch out for shipwrecks on the east coast of Cape Breton, to supervise the work of rescue and salvage, and to protect the lives and property of the unfortunate passengers and crews.

It is not suggested that all of the vessels which were wrecked in this period carried immigrants, or that all were plundered by the local inhabitants. In fact, most of these ships were trading vessels with miscellaneous cargo, and some of them were pillaged by people who came to the notorious danger-spots in the months of April, May and June for the purpose of speculating in misfortune, although some of the local inhabitants who eked out a precarious existence from the barren hills or troubled sea looked upon such shipwrecks as a "godsend." Moreover, in all the direct immigration of that sad decade, not one of the vessels bearing Scots to the Island of Cape Breton seems to have been wrecked on its coasts. The Scots had been victims of injustice in the new social order of their day and generation in Scotland; they suffered from ships' fever and smallpox during the "middle passage," but they were landed safely and, after many tribulations, were given temporary relief, free land and a second chance.

If those who came direct to Cape Breton in this period were spared the perils of shipwreck, the same cannot be said of those who came too close to her shores in search of the southern entrance to the Gulf of St. Lawrence. In November, 1828, Charles E. Leonard, Collector of Provincial Excise at Sydney, reported that the ship *Adamant* of London with a cargo of lumber from Quebec had been stranded and plundered near Lingan. He added that during the past four years upwards of twenty vessels had been cast on the shores of Cape Breton, that the crews of five had perished, that many of these vessels had been plundered by local and transient inhabitants and, though some of the vessels had been sold, the proceeds had fallen into private hands, because no claimant had appeared and there had been no official at hand to see that they were paid to the provincial treasurer on the expiration of a stated period.

The names of these unfortunate vessels have not all survived, but those which have will illustrate the character and fate of all. In January, 1823, the barque *Assistance* from Miramichi with lumber for Great Britain became a total wreck off the coast of Cape Breton. Captain Winn^d was saved, but lost everything he possessed, spent the winter in Baddeck and was finally sent to England at the public expense. Early in June, 1826, a British merchant ship, the *General Brock*, on a voyage from Jersey to Lower Canada, was sunk in a collision with another vessel. Judge Marshall gives the following details of this tragedy: "Some of the persons belonging to the *General Brock* took to a boat and after enduring extreme hardships, and some of them dying in the boat, ten of them were found alive and taken on board a vessel bound to a port in this county. Six of them died while on board of this vessel and three were landed here (Sydney) in an extremely emaciated and distressed state, their feet severely frozen, and being almost destitute of clothing, as the vessel was run down in the night and they had only time before quitting her to put on a part of their clothes." Two years later the barque *St. Charles* with a cargo of dry goods, brandy, wine and gin was stranded near Ingonish, and afforded rich plunder for a transient speculator and a visiting master of a trading vessel, but the latter was robbed of his prey in attempting to smuggle it into Halifax. In July, 1831, a British vessel, the *Lady Sherbrooke*, carrying 300 emigrants from Ireland to Quebec, was wrecked off the coast of Newfoundland with the loss of 268 lives. In trying to avoid St. Paul's her captain had kept too close to Newfoundland, with equally disastrous results. The

thirty-two, who were saved, were rescued by a schooner from Halifax, James Munro, master, and taken first to Sydney and finally to Halifax. In May, 1832, the brig *Anna Maria* from London, Alexander Crombie, captain, was struck by the ice off Smoky Cape and sunk. The captain and crew escaped in their boats and finally made their way to Sydney. In June, 1833, the magistrates of Sydney reported to the government of Nova Scotia that several vessels bound for Quebec had been wrecked that spring, and that already there were 400 destitute and starving survivors on their hands.

Finally, in 1834, the spring toll mounted still higher. In April, the *James*, of Newcastle, with 265 persons on board, struck a cake of ice, sprang a leak and sank. The captain and ten others escaped. On May 7th, the same night as the *Astraea* sank, the brig *Edward* struck a piece of ice near Cape Nova and sank immediately; but the captain and crew were saved. On the tenth the brig *Fidelity*, R. Clarke, master, with 183 emigrants from Dublin for Quebec, was driven ashore at Scatari. All the passengers were landed on the island but, when taken off three days later, three were left behind. One of these, a woman, was discovered by a fisherman, nine days later, and taken to Mainadiou, but died at landing. The other two, a woman and a girl, were rescued three weeks later, having found a deserted hut and lived on dead fish in the interval. It was these incidents, together with the tragic details of the wreck of the *Astraea*, which led the provincial government to appoint superintendents of shipwrecks for the northeastern and southeastern shores of Cape Breton, to keep a constant lookout for such wrecks from Louisbourg to Scatari and from Sydney to St. Paul's and to take prompt steps for their assistance.

Though the actual loss of life in the wreck of the *Astraea* was not quite as heavy as the loss of life in the *James*, above-mentioned, the tragedy was brought home to the inhabitants of Cape Breton more vividly, by the fact that it occurred close to land rather than in the open sea, and that many of the bodies were washed on shore as mute reminders of an unhappy fate. Moreover, the recovery and burial of these unfortunates evoked a lengthy official correspondence, from which the details of the tragedy can be reconstructed almost as fully as if it had happened before our eyes to-day.

The following extract from the report of Mr. H. W. Crawley to the Provincial Secretary of Nova Scotia, on May 24, 1834,

sets in bold relief not only the necessary details of the wreck itself but also the whole problem of dealing with shipwrecks at that date:

"I am just returned from the scene of a terrible shipwreck, that of the barque *Astraea*, W. Ridley master, with passengers from Limerick for Quebec. She struck on the rocks under Little Loran head (between Menadou and Louisbourg) close to the shore, in a very dark night, and went to pieces immediately, only three persons escaping out of 251. These three were the surgeon, by name O'Sullivan, the carpenter, and one seaman. They leaped into the sea as the ship was parting, and were washed by the tremendous surge on to the top of the precipice. All the rest went to the bottom, in about eighteen feet water, tho', as before said, quite close to the shore. The cabin passengers, besides the surgeon, were a Mr. O'Doherty, who it is reported was one of Lord Aylmer's suite, on his way to Quebec; an old maiden lady, whose name I have not learned, going to her brother, in Canada; and a young woman named Moss, from Limerick. The rest were steerage passengers, and, as I understand, consisted of farmers and their families, from the vicinity of Limerick.

"This is by far the most disastrous wreck that has occurred on our coast this season, and there have been six or seven already. My reason for addressing you is to enquire what hopes there may be of obtaining remuneration for the people who are employed in the very necessary business of securing and interring the dead bodies. There are but few persons living in the immediate neighborhood, and they are poor fishermen who are now particularly hurried to get their potato seed into the ground, and to attend to their fishery, this being the principal season. The process at the wreck is so tedious that it seems probable the delay will be so great as to cause the loss of their usual harvest, both on land and sea. I found these poor fellows, to the number of about fifteen, part in boats dragging for the bodies, and part on shore excavating the ground, for which they had very poor instruments; a few Irish spades and no pickax. They had been at this work, I believe, about fifteen days, and had got up and interred about seventy or eighty bodies. They were growing very tired and disheartened, seeing the alternative was the loss of their crops and fishing without any certainty of being paid for the work they were performing, or of leaving the corpses to be strewed along the coast, a prey to the pigs, dogs, fish, &c. &c. They found, too, that with their limited numbers and means it was hardly possible to finish before the bodies would be in so advanced a state of decomposition that to manage them would be exceedingly difficult, for they were already changing fast. I should have been very glad that I could have assured them of remuneration, and set them to work heartily, with proper tools, and more laborers. As it was, I stretched my conscience a little by telling them I thought it impossible they could be refused payment. You will think, perhaps, as I have heard some persons intimate, that the men

would take care to pay themselves from the wreck, and the property of the deceased. This, I verily believe, is impracticable. The wreck was bought by one person, who, being always in attendance, keeps all that has escaped destruction for himself. This is not much. The hull, masts, crates, boxes, and everything that would float, were dashed to a thousand atoms among the rocks. All that would sink is at the bottom, in eighteen feet of water. Coins, of course, can never be recovered. Cordage and iron work the purchaser rakes up, and also some clothes, paltry enough. He does not pretend to claim what is found on the bodies; but they are, with few exceptions, brought up from the bottom in a state of nudity, the unfortunate passengers having been probably drowned in their berths, or before they had time to put on any vestment. It is, I believe, the habit of the lower class of Irish to retire to rest without a nightdress. At any rate, these corpses had nothing on them; and what appears singular, nearly all the number as yet obtained are females, on whom it is not likely any amount of money would have been found, even had they been clothed. I know not how to account for this circumstance, unless on the supposition that they have been entangled, and held to the spot by the hair, while the men were drifted to a greater distance by the current, or motion of the sea. The seaweed is entwined with the hair of these bodies in a most surprising manner, so that it is found impossible to extricate it. The people are very particular in dressing the corpses according to their own ideas of propriety, which are, that each must have a shirt, trousers, and jacket, or a chemise, petticoat and gown, as the case may be, with handkerchiefs over the face and feet, and in this array they are interred, without coffins, to make which there are neither materials, time nor workmen. These clothes they have some difficulty in procuring in sufficient number, by raking them from among the wreck at the bottom; and in some instances they assured me they were obliged to furnish them from their own houses. Their particularity as to the number and nature of the garments which they considered indispensable for the dress of the defunct was laughable enough: but, of course, I carefully abstained from any such remark that could reach their ears, and encouraged them to the utmost. They were also exceedingly careful that everyone should be duly interred before sunset, being persuaded that the inhabitants would be nightly visited by the spirits of such as remained above ground.

“I have entered into all this detail to explain the foundation of my belief, that the fishermen do not, and cannot, pay themselves, in the way some imagine. Can you give me any assurance that they will be indemnified by the province, or in any other way? Might not the unclaimed proceeds of former wrecks be thus appropriated? The service is surely one of public importance, and one that, but for the good will and exertions of these poor fellows, would not be performed at all. Indeed, there should be more done yet, even supposing they succeed in finishing what they have begun. Their time and means do not allow them to excavate

the ground to a sufficient depth. Workmen should be despatched to form barrows over these hasty sepulchres, or the foxes, and other ravenous creatures, will get at them, and probably tear out the corpses piecemeal.

“You will not fail to perceive how advisable it is that some trustworthy person or persons, living near the site of these continual wrecks, should be empowered to take on himself the direction of the necessary proceedings for saving property, interring bodies, &c., and to defray the unavoidable expenses. Even when life is not lost, the plunder of property is often scandalous. You will ask—Would those honest fishermen I found laboring so worthily in the cause of common humanity be so cruel as to pillage the property of the unfortunate sufferers thrown upon their coast? I answer—not impossible, by any means. Those, truly, that were most active in the good work might be least so in the pillage; and some, I doubt not, would be too honest to join at all in such rascality. But you know of what changeable materials men’s minds are made. Add to which the habit long established, I believe, on all sea coasts, of looking upon wrecks in the light of a god-send. Nevertheless, I have little doubt that the worst prowlers of this description kept aloof from the troublesome business in which I found the Loran people so laudably engaged.

“I cannot give you a better instance of the necessity for some authorized person to be continually on the look-out than has occurred at Scatari, only about six miles from the scene of the *Astraea’s* fate, and but a day or two after it. The barque *Fidelity*, R. Clarke, master, 183 passengers, besides the crew, from Dublin for Quebec, drifted quietly ashore at her anchors. All landed, and wandered three days and nights in the swamps and thickets of Scatari; not knowing where they might be, until nearly exhausted, and three died. All this time, the people of Menadou, close by, knew nothing of what had happened. Not so those a mile or two further along the coast. They had seen a smoke on Scatari; and away they went in search of plunder. They found the ship, of which they took care to say nothing during two days, in which time they secured and secreted the passengers’ chests and property, which it is known they are selling privately. There is no magistrate at Menadou, and if there were, he would probably find it impossible to convict the offenders, and still more so to recover the property for the poor passengers, who, in a state of destitution, arrived in Sydney.

“Now, were there an intelligent active person, whose business it should be to look out for and protect the ships, persons, and property, so constantly coming ashore on our coast, it is evident that many of these iniquitous depredations would be prevented, and many lives saved; and, as before observed, he might be empowered to direct the proceedings and provide the requisite means, in such cases as that I have described at Loran. I suppose our frugal house of assembly would treat such a proposition as a mere chimera, or as a scheme for providing some one with a place if they were expected to grant the funds, but could not an act be

passed to make the proceeds of the sale of wrecks available for this purpose? By saving much property, too, such a measure would economize the provincial funds, which, in the present state of things, must often be drawn on, to keep the plundered and destitute passengers from starving, and to convey them to their destination. A lighthouse on Scatari would be another saving on a large scale—but that subject is threadbare.”

From later reports of Mr. Crawley we learn that 121 bodies had been recovered and interred by the middle of June, and that a few more had floated in August; but it was generally believed that no more would rise to the surface, as they were thought to be kept down by the rigging of the ill-fated barque. In his final report of October 3rd, Mr. Crawley states that the total number of bodies recovered was 177, and he encloses a rather gruesome list made by one group of the men who had been burying the dead. It comprised 61 persons: 28 women, 1 girl, 2 children, 21 men and 9 boys, of whom 10 women, 1 girl, 2 children, 3 men and 1 boy were quite naked, 3 men were without heads, 2 boys were without legs, and 5 men had lost heads, arms and legs—a sad witness to both the suddenness of the catastrophe, which did not allow the passengers to dress, and the stark ruthlessness of the hungry denizens of the deep.

After 1834, when organized assistance was provided for ship-wrecked mariners, and 1839, when the lights began to shine from St. Paul's Island and Scatari, both the number of wrecks and the loss of life in those that occurred diminished rapidly, while the way of the plunderer was made hard. Thus, in June 1835, when the barque *William Ewing* with 250 emigrants from Londonderry for Quebec was wrecked in a thick fog off Scatari, all were promptly rescued. In the words of Sir Colin Campbell: “By the activity and indefatigable exertions of the Superintendent, Mr. Dodd, and his men, every individual of the crew and passengers was safely landed, together with a portion of their clothing and effects.” Afterwards they were forwarded to Quebec at a cost of £300; and Sir Colin adds: “The expense to this Province in consequence of the many vessels wrecked on this Island, and having so many destitute human beings thrown upon us, has been of late years very great, but I have much pleasure in doing justice to the Philanthropy of the Colonial Assembly in adding that they have cheerfully and unhesitatingly, on every such occasion, voted payment for all such advances as have been necessarily incurred.”

It was obviously unfair that the Province of Nova Scotia should bear the expense of all these shipwrecks, or that she alone

should be expected to provide lighthouses for the security of navigation both to and past her shores. In fact she had already done more than her limited revenue could justify, both in erecting lighthouses on her southern shores and in caring for distressed mariners and Canadian immigrants. Accordingly, in 1836, the British government offered to erect lighthouses on St. Paul's and Scatari Islands, if Lower Canada and the three Maritime Provinces would cooperate in defraying the expense of maintenance and administration. In the following year the four provinces reached an agreement, their respective legislatures appropriated the amounts agreed upon, and construction was undertaken forthwith.

In the century that has elapsed since the erection of these lighthouses and the provision of life-saving equipment, there have been several shipwrecks in these regions; but, with lights to guide them, and ready hands to rescue, none of the victims has known the hopeless dread of exchanging a watery grave for starvation upon an uninhabited island.

Therefore, the brief return of *Astraea* to the New World of 1834, though fatal to the Irish emigrants of that year, ultimately proved a source of blessing to mankind in general, as her sojourn is reputed to have been in the Golden Age.