



The **W**reck of the **E**thie

HILARY
MANTEL

AN EXTRAORDINARY, FASCINATING ACCOUNT
OF A SHIPWRECK THAT COST

The **W**reck
of the
Ethie

The **W**reck
of the
Ethie

HILARY HYLAND


PEACHTREE
ATLANTA



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*For John and Haley,
whose love and support
made everything possible*

*In memory of
H. D. “Hoot” Raymond and
Mary Lou Powell Raymond*

*And for my muse, Cubby,
a special Newfoundland dog*

—H. H.





Labrador
(Mainland area of
NEWFOUNDLAND
Province)

QUÉBEC



Gulf of St. Lawrence

Strait of Belle Isle

L'Anse aux Meadows
(Where Vikings landed)

Flower's Cove
Port Saunders

Daniel's Harbour

Parson's Pond

Cow Head

White Bay

Great Sealing
Disaster of 1914

SS ETHIE
shipwreck

Martin's Point
Sally's Cove

Lobster Head Cove

Notre Dame Bay

Bonne Bay

Rocky Harbour

ATLANTIC OCEAN

Bay of Islands

Corner Brook

Seal Cove

St. George's Bay

NEWFOUNDLAND

Bonavista Bay

Trinity Bay

Channel-Port-
aux-Basques

Conception Bay

Isle-aux-Morts
(Death Island)

St. John's

Fortune Bay

Placentia Bay

Cape Race

St. Mary's Bay

NEWFOUNDLAND

Grand Banks



TITANIC
sank, 1912



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PREFACE

MY DAUGHTER SUGGESTED that I write this book after she read, in a book on Newfoundland dog training, a paragraph describing the shipwreck of the SS *Ethie*. Fascinated with the role of the heroic Newfoundland dog, she couldn't put the story out of her mind, and soon I was captivated too. What began as an entertaining quest to satisfy our curiosity developed into an absorbing project requiring two years of extensive research, numerous interviews, and a trip to that spectacularly wild, enchanting island, Newfoundland.

I based this book on true accounts of the shipwreck of the SS *Ethie* during the Christmas holiday season in 1919. The ship's ninety-two passengers and crew members had the great misfortune to be caught in the blizzard of the century, which pounded the western coast of Newfoundland for several days. I fictionalized some elements of the story, but I tried to remain true to the basic facts of the verified events.

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CHAPTER ONE

MARTIN'S POINT, NEWFOUNDLAND

DECEMBER 10, 1919

The huge black dog stood on a cliff overlooking the ocean at Martin's Point. Weighing more than one hundred and fifty pounds, Skipper resembled a bear with a plumed tail. The great Newfoundland was jet black except for a small, white patch on his chest. Wind whistled through his fur, blowing his ears back and flattening them against his head.

The clouds moved quickly across the afternoon sky. Cold air blustered down from the arctic, whirled over Labrador and Quebec, then spilled across the Gulf of St. Lawrence to these rocky bluffs on the northwest coast of Newfoundland. Very few trees or houses stood along the coast to block the wind.

The dog watched the fisherman as he loaded nets into a dory and shoved it into the surf. The tide was still creeping in. Whitecaps dotted the choppy sea just off the Point, and the waves rolling down the Labrador current crashed against the boulders offshore. Known as the Whale's Back, this line of rocks continued for miles along the coast. Visible only during low tide, the treacherous rocks had ruined many ships. Ice was beginning to form along the shoreline, and large chunks floated in the eddies among the boulders.

THE WRECK OF THE ETHIE

Skipper knew every cliff, path, and burrow within miles. Opening his mouth slightly and letting his tongue hang out, the dog stretched his head up to the ashen sky. He let the sea spray tingle his throat, and he savored the salty taste. The feathersoft snow melted on his tongue; other flakes landed on his ebony coat, only to be blown away. The polar wind rippled through his fur. The dog faced the ocean and planted his webbed paws firmly on the ground. Watching a flock of seagulls circling above him, he woofed loudly, reminding them that this was his territory.

“Skipperrrrr, me boy. Come on, laddie!” the fisherman called from his boat outside the cove far below. Putting his finger and thumb between his chapped lips, Gerald Reilly whistled loudly. His eyes automatically darted to his fingertips, checking to see if they were turning dark. Several of his fishing friends had lost parts of their fingers in weather like this, so Gerald Reilly was constantly on the lookout for signs of frost-bite. He tugged his nippers on over his wool mittens, and silently thanked his wife again for giving him this new pair of thick rubber gloves.

He looked up and saw Skipper cock his head. The dog dashed to the path and picked his way back down the slope to the pebbled beach. The man and his dog had been out several times since daybreak fishing for cod. Mr. Reilly stood in the small fishing dory, his legs wide apart as the boat rocked in the swells. Sea spray dripped off the wide brim of his oilskin hat. When

MARTIN'S POINT, NEWFOUNDLAND

Skipper reached the water, the fisherman jerked his head sideways, giving the signal.

Skipper knew his job well. He watched as Mr. Reilly lifted the heavy fishing lines and heaved them over the starboard side. The dog stood still while the dark waters sucked the lines under.

It was now high tide and only swirling water marked the rocks that lay not far from shore.

The giant dog breasted a wave washing on the beach and paddled out toward his master. Lifted by a swell, Skipper floated over the Whale's Back rocks and past the white-foamed breakers. Skipper's powerful shoulders and haunches pumped as he cut through the water like a schooner and headed for the fishing boat.

"It's over there, me boy!" Mr. Reilly pointed toward the fishnet. Just beneath the surface of the dark ocean flashed dozens of gleaming lights—the water was teeming with silvery cod.

Skipper swam steadily to the far end of the net, ducked his head under the water, and took the rope in his teeth. Clenching it in his jaws, he circled back to the dory. As he swam, the net closed in on the cod. When Skipper reached the starboard side of the boat, Mr. Reilly grasped the net, secured the rope around a windlass, and cranked the net closer and tighter. Then he hooked each cod and heaved it on board, where it flopped in the growing pile. The fisherman thought about the price he could get for this catch. Once the cod were dried and salted, he could take some of them into

THE WRECK OF THE ETHIE

town to sell or barter. The rest he and his wife and daughter would store to eat in the long winter months ahead.

Skipper was swimming in circles in the swells. He gazed up at Mr. Reilly and waited for the next command.

Mr. Reilly pulled from under a seat a wooden plank that had strips nailed across it, like steps. He shoved one end into the water and hooked the end he was still holding onto the stern. He gave a short whistle.

Skipper paddled over to the floating plank, scrambled up, and leaped into the dory, scattering fish and flinging water all over Mr. Reilly.

“Whoa there, boy. You got me good!” said the fisherman as he hauled in the plank and stowed it.

Then Mr. Reilly got out the oars and guided the dory around the Whale’s Back and into the cove at Martin’s Point. As they approached the beach in the cove, the roar of the tons of water crashing against the point gradually dulled.

Skipper stood at the bow, letting the cold wind hit his muzzle. Small icy balls clung to his whiskers and to the tips of his fur. When the boat was ten yards from shore, Skipper sprang into the white froth.

“Here, Skipper,” Mr. Reilly yelled as he tossed the bowline toward the beach.

The dog grabbed the rope in his teeth. With strong strokes, the Newfoundland towed the dory, Mr. Reilly, and the load of cod toward the shore.



*When Skipper reached the starboard side of the boat,
Mr. Reilly pulled in the net.*

THE WRECK OF THE ETHIE

Just before the dory beached, Mr. Reilly hopped out, his waders splashing through the water washing back toward the surf. He waited for the next wave to roll up the beach, then commanded, "Pull, Skipper. Pull!"

Holding the rope tight in his jaws, Skipper planted his paws firmly and began to move forward. He timed his pulls with each incoming wave. After a few waves, the dog had managed to haul most of the dory above the waterline.

"Good boy. I'll take it from here," said the fisherman. He looked at the long shadows now stretching most of the way across the cove. "Go on. Off with you till Colleen gets home from school."

CHAPTER TWO

SKIPPER

kipper's eyes brightened. With his tongue lolling out the side of his mouth, he sped up the rocky path. As he reached the top of the cliff, he knew that he wouldn't see Colleen for a few minutes, so he decided to see what he could find to entertain himself. He put his nose to the ground and picked up a familiar scent. He followed it until he spotted an arctic hare sitting motionless at the edge of the path. Skipper chased the hare into the thicket of scraggly tuckamore trees that grew along the cliff.

With his front half on the ground, his wiggling rump in the air, and his tail twitching, the dog tried to poke his nose through the gnarled branches of the stunted evergreens. He could smell the hare, but he couldn't quite get to it. Flattening his bulky frame against the ground, Skipper felt the cold rocks through the thinner fur on his underbelly.

The needles on the tangled tuckamore limbs pricked his nose. The big dog blinked. Unable to make any progress, Skipper puffed breath out his jowls, snorted, and tried to butt his head through. But that approach didn't work.

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The hare refused to be routed. After a couple of minutes of barking and scratching at the ground beneath the branches, Skipper lost interest in the pursuit.

Backing out of the tuckamore, he trotted over to the edge of the cliff. The winds shifted. He sniffed the air, looking south along the shoreline. Every afternoon Skipper waited here for Colleen to come into view as she made her way home from school. He spotted a girl walking along the stony beach. The dog scrambled down the cliff path and dashed across the beach.



Colleen Reilly always walked the three miles home from school in Sally's Cove. When the weather wasn't too rough, she liked to take the route along the beach. The beach had little sand, mostly rocks—smooth and rounded to the shape of eggs, worn down from eons of constant scouring by the waves. Some were as large as apples, some small as peas. Many were speckled, pinkish in color, a striking contrast to the gloomy slate-gray cliffs nearby descending into the sea. Accustomed to walking on the rough surface, Colleen kept up a brisk pace, leaning into the icy wind.

A few rays of the late afternoon sun shone through a small break in the heavy, gray clouds. Colleen stopped for a moment, pulled off her stocking cap, and stuffed it in her pocket. Her mittened fingers loosened her tight braids. Her light-brown hair glinted gold in the sunlight. The twelve-year-old girl let the sea air

SKIPPER

whip her hair behind her before she pulled her hat back on.

The clouds closed up again and shadows crept down the steep slopes that jutted out to the sea. Between the rumbles of the pounding waves against the cliffs around her, she could hear the cry of seagulls. In the distance, far to the south, the muffled baritone of a distant foghorn bellowed its lonely warning.

The girl's eyes watered as the frigid wind blew across her face. Her tongue circled her lips, tasting the briny spray. Shivering, she clutched the scratchy collar of her wool coat and drew it tighter around her neck.

Skipper should be here soon, she thought. Colleen loved scouting among the rocks along the shoreline. All sorts of interesting things washed up. In her room at home she had a box full of shells, bones, feathers, and bottles from her beachcombing expeditions. Sometimes she strapped a canvas sack on Skipper and let him carry the treasures she found. Her greatest pleasure, though, came from finding a small sea animal or bird that needed her attention. A couple of weeks ago she had found an injured puffin and had taken the frightened creature home to nurse back to health.

Colleen heard Skipper's deep, joyful bark. She looked far up the beach and saw him bounding toward her. She waved and cupped her hands around her mouth. "Skipperrrrr! Skipperrrrr!"

He raced to her with his body low to the beach and his tail straight out behind him. The dog skidded to a

THE WRECK OF THE ETHIE

stop directly in front of her, his paws plowing into the seaweed. He plopped his bottom down, whisking his tail back and forth. His long pink tongue fell out of the side of his mouth, and his soft eyes searched Colleen's face. Quivering from head to tail, Skipper nudged his muzzle into her outstretched hands and into the warmth of her gloves.

Colleen's eyes sparkled—sometimes blue, sometimes green—like the sea. She bent over and reached around Skipper's neck, burying her face in his shaggy ruff. His undercoat was soft as a fluffy feather pillow.

“Good dog,” she murmured. “Good boy.”

Skipper cocked his head, listening intently. Colleen cradled his face in her hands, scratching him under his chin. He closed his eyes and lifted his head higher, pressing his chin against her hands. When she gave him a final scratch, he opened his eyes and gave her a slobbery lick right across her freckled nose. Colleen grinned, then wiped her face and stood up.

Skipper nosed among the rocks and pulled out a slimy strand of seaweed. He stood in front of Colleen with the seaweed dangling from his mouth, waiting, his tail wagging eagerly. She grabbed the end and gave it a yank. With a playful growl, the dog pulled on it, jerking his head from side to side.

“I can't hold on, Skipper!” Colleen laughed. “It's too slippery!”

She let go of the seaweed, and Skipper scampered away, shaking his head. The wet seaweed flailed back

SKIPPER

and forth like a whip. He trotted back and stood in front of Colleen, waiting for her to grab the seaweed again and start another game of tug-of-war.

“C’mon,” she said as she headed down the beach. “Let’s go get warm.”

But soon Skipper, ranging ahead of her, had singled out a stone rolling along the water’s edge and proudly carried it back to her. Colleen turned it over in her palm, noticing a black stripe around one end, then threw it just past the breaking waves.

Skipper splashed into the surf and plunged in for the stone. He dove down where the rock had rippled the water and quickly popped back up, a rock softly held in his teeth. He sloshed out of the water, trotted over to Colleen, and dropped it at her feet. A black stripe glistened on one end of the rock. Colleen threw the rock again and again as she walked down the beach, and each time Skipper dove in and brought it back. He never seemed to tire of the game, but after a while Colleen did.

“Come on, Skipper,” she called. “It’s getting too cold.”

The dog ran over to her and shook the water off his long coat, starting with his head and finishing with a last shake at the tip of his tail.

“No, Skipper!” screeched Colleen, trying to get out of the way. “You’re getting me all wet!”

She walked on toward Martin’s Point, and Skipper loped along ahead of her. He disappeared behind a pile of boulders.

THE WRECK OF THE ETHIE

That's when she detected the foul smell. *A dead fish maybe?* Wrinkling her nose, she clambered over the rocks. Skipper was sniffing at a dark object, mostly covered with seaweed, that had washed up on the rocks. Colleen went over and pushed Skipper aside so she could see what he had found. She jabbed at the object with her foot, giving it a shove. It was hard to move. Frowning, she squatted down for a better look. The smell was almost overpowering. Skipper barked and began to paw at the object.

Colleen found a piece of driftwood and pulled the seaweed away. It was a seal hunter's hobnailed boot! The top part of the boot was mangled; it looked as if something had scraped and gouged at it, trying to rip it apart. Colleen shuddered as she thought about the stories her father had told her of sealers lost at sea. Just last year, Alan Raymond, one of her father's friends from Sally's Cove, had gone on a seal-hunting expedition and had never returned. She wondered what had happened to the owner of this boot.

She carefully picked up the boot and looked inside. Holding her breath, she turned the boot upside down. Water spilled out, and something dropped at her feet. She jumped back. It was only a dead crab. She dropped the boot and pulled Skipper away. They hurried across the rocky beach toward home.