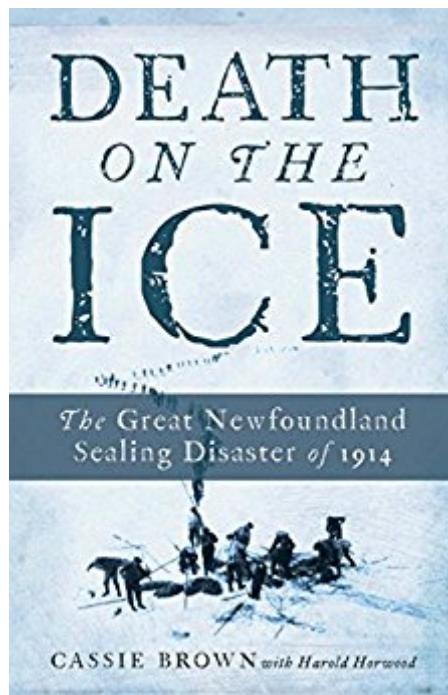




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Death On The Ice: The Great Newfoundland Sealing Disaster Of 1914



Synopsis

Each year, for generations, poor, ill-clad Newfoundland fisherman sailed out 'to the ice' to hunt seals in the hope of a few pennies in wages from the prosperous merchants of St. John's. The year 1914 witnessed the worst in the long line of tragedies that were part of their harsh way of life. For two long, freezing days and nights a party of seal hunters--one hundred thirty-two men--were left stranded on an icefield floating in the North Atlantic in winter. They were thinly dressed, with almost no food, and with no hope of shelter on the ice against the snow or the constant, bitter winds. To survive they had to keep moving, always moving. Those who lay down to rest died. Heroes emerged--one man froze his lips badly, biting off the icicles that were blinding his comrades. Other men froze in their tracks, or went mad with pain and walked off the edge of the icefield. All the while, ships steamed about nearby, unnoticed. And by the time help arrived, two thirds of the men were dead. This is an incredible story of bungling and greed, of suffering and heroism. The disaster is carefully traced, step by step. With the aid of compelling, contemporary photographs the book paints an unforgettable portrait of the bloody trade of seal hunting among the icefields when ships--and men--were expendable. From the Trade Paperback edition.

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Customer Reviews

This was a first rate read. This story proves that real life is far more exciting than anything an author could make up. Thus historic event was a tragedy, and the author told the facts beautifully. I couldn't put this down, even reaching for it in the middle of the night. This was a thriller.

Unbelievable story of conditions that boys and men endured to try to make a few dollars and the greed of many of the ship captains. Made me glad I protested the mass killing of seal pups. Story of courage and greed. A must read for understanding the life of the Newfoundland people.

I read this book in High School and do remember being greatly astonished by this event. After reading it a second time 30 years later I was no less astonished or impacted. This book is a must read for all who are interested in Newfoundland culture. The author does a wonderful job of reporting the story and presenting the key figures in the historical account.

This is an important book to me because Jesse Collins was my great grandfather. I can remember my grandfather telling me this story and other stories of growing up in Newfoundland and living at sea. It was a difficult life. I appreciate someone writing this account of the disaster so that we won't ever forget.

This book was written in 1914 the year my grandmother was born--she is still with us. Her uncle--my great-great-uncle Donovan was part of the history of the writing. I am sorry to say he perished on the ice. I wanted to read this to be a part of my heritage. Thanks Paula

Awesome blend of history and storytelling. Was well worth a re-read after all these years.

Reason for Reading: I read the book a long time ago and knew it was a good read. This book is a chilling tale of how 132 men were stranded for two days and nights during a freezing storm on the ice-fields of the North Atlantic with only one-third of them surviving to be rescued. First, though, it is the story of the harsh life of the early 20th century Newfoundland fisherman who scraped a living from the sea. Fishing when it was warm and sealing at the end of a long winter when the money

was direly in need. The fur seals came up onto the ice for a brief period of time and it was a race against the clock to get out to the seals until the sealers were done and home, safe, again. It wasn't a job anyone liked, there was no sport in clubbing baby seals and the conditions on the frozen ocean were dangerous, but it was one of only a few ways to make a living. The year of 1914 would prove to be one of the worst tragedies the Newfoundlanders had seen in their entire harsh way of life. The men from one ship, the SS Newfoundland were stranded on the ice, and none of the captains of any of the other ships including the Newfoundland knew they were out there. Everyone assumed they were aboard another ship. The Newfoundland had been stripped of its wireless the previous year as the company found it unprofitable, thus communication with this one ship which was stuck in the ice was impossible. A harrowing tale of what men will do to survive under the most extreme conditions. How the will to survive kicks in, the mental state one goes into to come out of such an ordeal alive. A gut-wrenching tale of how men slowly succumb to the elements, how it affects first the body then the mind causing some to end their own lives by walking off the ice into the ocean, others to lay down and die and many more died frozen in mid-step; these are the worst as they had the will but their bodies just couldn't hold out. "Death on the Ice" also shows the complete and utter folly of those in charge to do anything to save these men. The disaster could have been prevented if one of any number of things had been done either prior to or during the expedition. "The men" were concerned for them and spoke to their superiors who then spoke to their superiors but word never got beyond that point because "Old Man" Kean was out there and he was the one who had sent the men out into the upcoming storm. No one questioned Kean or told Kean what to do; he was a seasoned Captain, as well as a respected and feared man. The complete mess that goes on back on the ships while these men are freezing to death is unbearable. A riveting and compelling read of human survival, suffering and death versus company greed and disregard for human comfort at a time when employers counted human lives as expendable.

I discovered Cassie Brown's 1972 "Death on the Ice" in a used book store this summer entirely by accident. It is out of print now. What a gem to have found! This is the tale of the sealing ship "Newfoundland" which ended up losing nearly half its crew on the ice in the late winter of 1914. This was no mere accident or an "Act of God" as presumed by some. This disaster was entirely preventable. Why did it happen? Read the book. Follow Brown's saga written in a moving, even-tempered narrative that provides insight into the history and culture of Newfoundland, the character of "Newfies" and the fishing-focused lifestyle of the Island. Included are historic photos of harp-sealing and a map of the disaster area. This story will make you angry and it may make you cry

It did both to me. You will understand Newfoundland culture in a way that you could not prior to reading it.

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