

## Chapter 1

### Cheating Death

As the morning sun creeps in through my bedroom window, I turn my eyes, still clouded with sleep, towards the Straits of Juan de Fuca. Through the haziness of my eighty three years I search my memory for the ship that held us captive for the better part of six months.

My wife Ann and I, along with our four sons, our widowed daughter Marion with her two boys, and our nephews Archibald Muir and John McGregor with his wife Mary and their three children, stepped into a new stage in our lives when we disembarked at Fort Victoria on June 1, 1849. The brig *Harpooner* brought our group to this new world in the company of seventeen other weary travellers. It was a trip I would not wish to repeat.

We bade farewell to our family and friends in Kilmarnock, Scotland, on the 10th of November 1848 and travelled by rail and steamer until we reached London Station eighteen days later. On the way, we took full advantage of a day's stopover in Manchester to change our notes for gold, for we understood British currency would be of little value in the new Colony of Vancouver's Island.

Our party arrived at the West India Docks on the River Thames, only to find the facilities shut up for the night. Mr. Montague's Jamaica Tavern stood alongside, and although seedy in its appearance, it provided acceptable lodging for a much-needed rest.

On the morrow we rose early and trooped off to the docks with full expectation that we would soon be underway. Our ship, the *Harpooner*, had been commissioned

eighteen years prior. It was a fine vessel with a displacement of 405 tons, three square-rigged sails, and passenger accommodation upon two decks allowing for the separation of social classes. Captain Lewis Morice, with a crew of eight, stood ready to receive us, as did the Captain's wife.

Right off we were permitted on board. Being a consignee of the Hudson's Bay Company, I was allotted quarters on the upper level, which Ann and I shared along with the others in our party.

Following breakfast on board, my eldest son Andrew and I caught a short rail to Number 4 Fin Church Street, the offices of the Hudson's Bay Company. There Mr. Barclay, the secretary of the Company, received us warmly. It was he who provided us with our commission for employment once we arrived at the Colony of Vancouver's Island. Barclay presented me with a letter of introduction, followed by a hearty pat on the back and the sincerest of best wishes.

We had signed on for three-years with the HBC in their new Colony located on the west coast of British North America. It was heralded as a place "where fertile land was abundant and opportunities to harvest nature in its rawest form awaited all who possessed the courage to come." Our homeland of Scotland had been in a state of depression for some time, and there was no bright future for the common man, which is why Vancouver's Island held such a great promise. My sons and I considered ourselves stalwart men and we were eager to carve out our own niche in a new land. The HBC's aggressive campaign enticed brave souls with promises of rich farming land, including the rights to any coal found within it, upon the payment of a royalty of two shillings and a sixpence per ton, plus all the fish one could desire from the local waters.

Land was offered at one pound per acre, with a minimum parcel being 100 acres. With each 100-acre allotment, a man had to pay for the passage not only of himself and his family, but also of five single men or three married couples. This was rather an expensive proposition for one such as I, being of minimal wealth and yet it appeared so blatantly directed to benefit the wealthy.

As an alternative, my sons and I had chosen to take employment with the Hudson's Bay Company. Therefore our passage was paid and our needs provided for, so long as we completed the terms of our three-year contract. After our obligations were fulfilled, we would each receive a grant of twenty five acres in a location of our choice and we would be free to do as we saw fit. At that time I feared a three-year delay in settling land might render it difficult to locate a choice parcel, but, trusting in the Lord, we remained confident and awaited our departure with great anticipation.

It was the 1st of December when the *Harpooner* finally slid from its moorings, and at that moment we graduated from among the lower orders to join the middle class, standing somewhere between the gentry and our old status. We were overcome with scattered thoughts of joy, sorrow, and expectancy, intermingled with a nagging sense of anxiety and hesitation.

As we settled in for the first night, our ship lay at anchor in the shallow waters of the Thames estuary, approximately two miles offshore. Much to our disappointment we remained there until the 4th. No fires were permitted on board to ward off the bone-chilling December air or for the preparation of our meals. For those three days, safety became a primary concern to the Captain as the crew loaded and adjusted a volatile cargo of black powder that was brought on from a lone jetty at Gravesend.

We made our way along the River Thames at a cautious pace, under the watchful tow of a pilot steamer, until our release into the open waters of the English Channel on the fifth day. There our ship was cast upon the mercy of the prevailing winds and the ever-changing currents that were pushed up the Channel from the Atlantic.

Moving topside, I found that we were completely enveloped in one of those dank, misty mornings for which the English coast is so well known. We soon began to make headway upon smooth waters, under a light sail, all the time rejoicing that we were finally on our way.

Given just cause to celebrate, the Captain's wife baked a delicious dumpling as dinner for the crew and passengers. Had there been the slightest indication that our rations would soon be reduced to a most unpleasant fare, I would surely have savoured that morsel a wee bit longer.

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It was not long before our cramped quarters proved to be encumbered with far too many bodies. Though this be the case, I continued to remind my family that we were far more fortunate than those travellers who did not enjoy the benefit of a cabin. Those poor unfortunate souls were herded together into the area referred to as the steerage. This being a meager space within the belly of the ship, forward of the main cargo hold. There the lesser passengers spread their bedding over the rough-hewn planking amidst piles of debris and personal belongings. No bunks were to be had, just the damp filthy boards that spanned the ship's interior.

There was nary enough height in the steerage for a mature man to stand upright. Natural light had no way of penetrating such quarters, which lay well below the level of

the sea. The officers placed a pair of smoky oil lamps at their disposal, which was the only gesture made to acknowledge their plight. While the amber glow offered a degree of relief from the foreboding gloom, the lamps gave off a pungent odour that mixed poorly with the musty air rising from the bilge below.

Our first week was one of resignation as we adjusted to the realities of our confinement. Our sea legs grew at different rates. Andrew, our eldest of twenty one years, quickly proved himself, while the other boys and I remained squeamish. The womenfolk fell desperately ill as their systems fought stubbornly to counteract the ship's motion.

On the 14th of December a heavy gale lit upon us with such a squall that we wished we had never set foot on board. The entire hull of our ship reverberated under the constant pounding of the breaking waves. As we made our way through the English Channel, each wave appeared at odds with the other as they rebounded off the opposing French and English shores. A dreadful tug-of-war pulled our ship westward along the Channel despite the changing of the tides. As we crested the summit of each wave, we were momentarily suspended before plummeting again into the trough that followed.

Our women showed indomitable courage. Although Ann was consumed by sickness, she, Marion, and Mary continued to care for the needs of the children. There were occasions when Ann managed to take a little wine, offering a token of nourishment, while attempts to eat remained a wasted effort for it would rest within her but a matter of minutes.

The 15th offered no improvement, and to sleep during the howling of the night wind was all but impossible. Anchoring our bodies firmly to the berth proved to be a matter of survival. If one neglected to do so, they were soon cast about as any other

unsecured item of cargo. The storm showed no mercy to the weak nor the strong. As each passenger ventured free of their cabins, they mustered the strength necessary to attend to their shattered limbs and bloodied bodies.

The weather showed moderate signs of improvement on the 16th, releasing our ship to settle comfortably onto its keel. This reprieve allowed us to make significant headway at roughly eight knots. Ann and the other women were able to find their feet beneath them and stole a breath of fresh air topside. Such pleasures were short-lived, for again they were bedridden on the 18th as a second storm did its best to drive our tiny ship over onto its side.

Again it came on with a vengeance, trying desperately to outdo its predecessor. Everyone save the Captain and crew fled to their cabins till a few days prior to Christmas. If the weather on the 14th left us wishing we had never stepped aboard, the second storm was a profound confirmation.

More than once, mountains of water crashed against the galley, doing their best to sweep what stood in their way clean off the deck. On one occasion our wee ship was hit with such a volume of water that the force drove the ship's stove crashing across the deck. Along with the stove went the cook and steward, rendering the same totally useless for many days to come. As a result, every passenger was reduced to a ration of salted beef, cold fish, and biscuits with jam.

At the best of times our food was less than favourable. On any given day we would be served processed meat if available, scones, shortbread, soup, and potatoes, with a wee toddy as a nightcap. On occasion we would be offered a tart or a small jigger of rum as a treat.

With cold storage representing a luxury left behind, fresh meat and vegetables spoiled quickly. Yet to our amazement, unpalatable offerings continued to find their way onto our tables until the smell of tainted pork brought every man with a sound mind to cast his meal aside. Many of the passengers and crew grew weary of these conditions and took the liberty to register their discontent with Captain Morice. We stood fast and refused to eat that which our Captain persisted in serving. After a lengthy standoff, the boatswain put a small piece of the spoiled meat to good use and hooked a large shark with a hand line. We welcomed a portion of the beast for our evening meal and again at breakfast.

Gedion, the stores keeper, made a slip of his tongue which left us all a tad suspicious. He suggested the ship's officers had eaten the good beef and left the tainted for the deck hands and passengers. His comment quickly spread and brought about a mutiny, with the crew refusing to turn out for duty until a fresh cask of beef had been opened. Andrew tried to reason with Mr. Wright, the first mate, but the latter stated our provisions would remain as they were. In his opinion we would be satisfied or go without. Andrew summed him up as a man without principle.

Threats volleyed back and forth over the days that followed. During a time of heavy seas, Andrew and Archibald took the helm in the absence of the crew. For the well-being of all on board, the topsail needed some reefs to be taken in, but the crew refused, stating they could no longer work day and night without meat. Mr. Wright ordered them out of their quarters, but again they refused. Wright was about to strike one of the men when the Captain came forward and ordered that another cask be opened. To the delight of us all, it held beef that satisfied until it too was gone.

In a lighter vein, mutiny also took over the better judgment of one of the Captain's turkeys. In an attempt to flee its master's clever, one of his best Toms leapt overboard without first mastering the fine art of swimming. Regrettably, its demise profited nary a soul.

I have found that with hindsight, wisdom is generally quick to follow, and in this case it was to be no exception. When we signed on for the voyage, nary a man had given thought to the possibility that our Captain would turn a blind eye to our well-being. As our pleas for decent food repeatedly fell upon deaf ears, it became all too apparent, that as the Captain was part owner of the ship, a sizable profit from the voyage would be his primary concern. Second to that would be the safety of his ship, followed by the well being of his crew, and lastly the passengers.

On the 25th of December, fear appeared as a stowaway on board for we truly believed we were going to lose our son Andrew. While he was making his way about the upper deck, a heavy sea rushed across the ship's beam catching him quite off guard. At the same moment the wind fled the lee side, causing the boom to pivot upon the centre mast. It caught Andrew with a dreadful blow on the back of the head, sending him head long with a mountain of water through the opened hatch to our quarters below. He held no sign of consciousness, but after a number of hours under the watchful eye of Doctor Benson, Andrew began to resume his way.

Andrew was truly a lad after my own heart. He would offer his services to anyone needing assistance and he did so without hesitation. After a day shearing the sheep and completing various other tasks that were assigned to him, he would assist Reverend Staines with the on-board schooling. My sons never lazed about. Nor did they take the

position that life was to be delivered to them on a silver platter. My lads took their turn to rise early and prepare the stove for breakfast. They would put on the tea and then help the crew dress the sails. On a whim they would scrub our cabin from stem to stern, or the upper deck, which oft-times required a labourious rubbing with sandstone.

Though we were passengers, in many respects we were required to behave in a manner not unlike that of the crew. The terms of our passage specified that we would be called upon to serve as cooks, stewards, deck hands, or whatever else Captain Morice deemed necessary. To refuse duty or show disdain towards the Captain and his officers was considered by the same to be nothing short of treason and punishable in the strictest of fashions.

One passenger, a ship's carpenter answering to the name of James Yates, considered common labour beneath his dignity and refused to take his role as cook. His disposition soon led to disharmony aboard our wee ship. Andrew labeled him a "Coollyshang," that being an old Scottish term for a common good-for-nothing. Yates's self-righteous ways and disregard for authority tested our Captain's mettle until he found himself with no option but to place the antagonist in irons. His incarceration lasted two days, but served its purpose and humbled him into submission. Although I found myself with mixed feelings over the severity of his lot, the importance of communal work on board ship was an easy fact to acknowledge.

Once clear of the English Channel, our ship turned to the southwest, setting its course through the calmer waters of the North Atlantic in hope of catching the elusive trade winds. New Year's Day was anything but festive, while the 3rd of January brought us alongside the *Lady Flora*. The feeling of loneliness that had taken over was eased to

some degree as the passengers of the *Lady Flora* lined the rail, waving, as a mirror reflection of our own ship. Destined for the Cape of Good Hope, they had pulled clear of London the day following our departure. Come the morning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> it became apparent that the *Flora* had regained the lead during the night. Not wishing to admit defeat, we drew sufficient sail and again passed her on our leeward side. Yet by mid-noon she had crept up and stolen the wind from our sails leaving them to flounder in disgrace. It was most exciting as we competed for the opportune position in the wind. On one occasion it appeared we were on a collision course, when at the last moment the *Flora* came about and again pulled ahead. In the true spirit of competition, we hoisted a second jib in hopes of catching the full force of a fresh wind. By the end of the day we were the victors as the *Flora* proved no match for our speed and ingenuity.

If that were not enough to make us a fine day, we were entertained by a shoal of porpoises which played about our bow.

On our 35th day we were within sight of Madeira, and the next day we were told that the city of Las Palmas, in the Canary Islands, was off our starboard side.

As the weather grew warmer, the squalls became more frequent. Far too often we were imprisoned below deck while bolts of lightning darted about our ship. Again and again we were reminded as to how insignificant we were in the ocean world. On the 21st of January we were forced to change course abruptly as a spout of water rose skyward before us. Had the Captain not brought our ship about at the moment he did, I dare say I may not be here today to relay this account.

During a lull in the weather and the mutiny a matter of history, the crew took relaxation from their more labourious disciplines to repair the rigging and mend our sails,

for much damage had been done during the storms. With nerves of steel and a threaded needle in hand, they would spend their day trapezed upon the masthead, some 40 feet above the upper deck.

In due course we were drawn into the path of the trade winds and I could readily see why the captains of the day sought their backing. The ship's speed became constant, and no longer did we scramble about to alter our tack with the departure of each wind. That small wonder of nature carried us across the Atlantic to our first stopping point in the islands of the West Indies.

Every image I held of those tropical shores faded in comparison to their reality. The white man's culture had minimal effect on the islands as they were so thick with foliage I dare say one would have to cut his way through to achieve any degree of headway. The natives were a mix of Irish and Black, and although wearing little more than what the good Lord gave them, they greeted our ship with gifts of fruit and flowers. After topping up the ship's lockers with fresh produce, we set our course south with enough leeway to safely clear Cape Horn.

The equator came and went on the 24th beneath a scorching sun and in the company of two other vessels. The traditional dunking of passengers who crossed the line of demarcation for the first time fell unceremoniously into the shadows of other concerns. If the fires of Hell hath such furious intensity, it seems to me the confines of a straight and narrow path are a minor discomfort compared to the agony such sweltering heat would offer as an eternal destiny.

Small flying fish kept pace with the bow and proved a pleasant distraction as their long fins caught the ship's draught, lifting them high above the water. Oft-times the poor

things unwittingly settled upon the upper deck, giving the children hours of pleasure as they scrambled about, hoping to be the first to release the scaly critters back into their watery domain.

Varied distractions broke up our days. From time to time a shark would rise to the surface in search of refuse or an unfortunate sailor. If one were to slip from his lofty perch while mending the sails, or if some poor soul met an untimely death while out at sea, he would be committed to the appetite of those creatures lying below. Thankfully, none was to be their fare during our voyage.

On the 14th of February the sea again mounted the upper deck with a vengeance, this time drenching Ann from head to toe. On the 23rd we began to round Cape Horn while in the firm grip of a fearful hurricane. The high-pitched wind and driving snow forced an unforgiving chill through the outside walls of our ship. Andrew stood alone at the helm, while the crew scrambled to nail down the hatches and reef in the sails. In all the excitement there came the sound of satin tearing, but before the crew could make their way to the front of the ship, the fury of the storm shred the forward sail. With the main sails reefed in tight, we were all but left to the mercy of whatever might crop up in our path. During the night we could hear the Captain throwing orders to a frantic crew over the drone of the wind. For days our ship drifted without sails, with our only defense being a large canvas sock that the crew had tethered off the rear of the ship in an effort to slow our uncontrolled drift. With no end to the storm in sight, I fought back the fear that our destiny could well be a watery grave. To this day the nausea brought on by the constant pitching and rolling remains fresh in my mind and the explosions of fifty foot

waves breaking over our 115-foot vessel ring loud in my ears. Heaven only knew how far we were driven off course as we drifted without the ability to correct our course.

Oft times the only relief from our cramped quarters came during such squalls, for crew and passengers alike were forced to the upper deck, as they heaved over the side what little sustenance they had been able to hold dear. Those who had the strength to improve their situation moved to the centre of the ship, where the motion appeared somewhat less. I for one could not begin to imagine living in the steerage below. The putrid stench of the lamps, mixed with the smell of stagnant water and the vomit of those too weak to make it topside, must have left many begging for mercy.

It was the 1st of March before the seas settled into a state of calm. With the main sails in tatters, our ship slowly pulled itself back on course with what little cloth remained. As the womenfolk found their way up for a breath of fresh air, my boys dug in and held the ship on course while the crew stitched together those sails worthy of salvaged.

On the 29<sup>th</sup> of February, as we made headway towards our destination, my namesake son John turned nineteen. Robert reached his seventeenth birthday on the 6th of March, while our youngest, Michael, turned fourteen the following day, and our eldest, Andrew, celebrated his twenty-second birthday on the 13th of March. With Marion and her boys, John and William, also celebrating their special day between the 29th of February and the 20th of March, we had just cause to hold a grand celebration which we left open to all those passengers feeling comfortable enough to join in.

On the 27th of March, with the ship's supplies all but gone, we inched the *Harpooner* into a small cove located on the island of Juan Fernandez. Anchoring about

one hundred yards offshore, we could see goats and wild asses grazing across the rolling hills. It had taken all of four months to reach this land, which was alleged to be the home of the legendary Robinson Crusoe.

After the Captain made sure of our anchor, a small skiff with four civil-looking Spaniards pulled alongside our port bow. One fellow spoke decent English and said that he was one of seven inhabitants. He stated there was one American, a carpenter by trade, while the remaining were Spanish and duly married.

At what date the seven had taken up residence and from whence did they come, no one seemed concerned enough to inquire. Nonetheless, their lives had taken on a leisurely pace in this tropical paradise. Like their goats and asses up on the hills, they showed nary a care. The islanders' kindness overwhelmed us as one man extended his hand, in which he held a napkin filled with ripe peaches. He continued his mission of hospitality by inviting us to his home for fellowship. To place our feet upon solid ground after staggering about on a shifting deck for 117 days was a long-awaited pleasure. As if that were not enough, this samaritan encouraged us to fill our launch with the wild peaches.

Following some light haggling on the part of us passengers, Captain Morice reluctantly agreed to stay an additional two days, providing half the crew and passengers agreed to go ashore each day to help him and his first mate replenish the stores with fresh fruit and potable water. The remaining folk were at liberty to enjoy the time as they saw fit. I could rightly understand the Captain's fear, for after months of confinement, all but the ship's cat was tempted to make an escape and flee to the pleasures of the island.

On the first day, Ann, Marion, and I, with the thirty-five year old Doctor Alfred Robson Benson, made good our commitment in the company of the Captain and his wife. I, with the good doctor, the Captain, and a few other male passengers filled the ship's casks with fresh water. When full, they were rafted back to the ship where they were loaded and secured by Mr. Wright and the remaining crew. Ann and Marion gathered peaches and quinces until dusk. A pair of the more adventurous men climbed the surrounding hills to hunt for fresh meat, but by day's end they returned with only two pigeons as their reward. The ship's baker proved himself an excellent provider, having caught a number of fish during our absence. With a little help from my boys, they pulled in sufficient more to allow us a great feast at the evening meal.

The island was truly a paradise to behold as the lush hills rose inland from the shoreline for a distance of approximately two miles. These hills were joined by others, which came at right angles and fell immediately in behind the area of settlement. As far as the eye could see, fruit trees dotted the hillsides and filled the gentle offshore breezes with their fragrant aromas. Though I had always considered Robinson Crusoe to be a man of fiction, I found it difficult to deny his existence after seeing the hundreds of fruit trees that over the centuries had propagated and gone wild.

As we drew the anchor, an American whaling ship pulled into the harbour. Just as we had done, a number of sailors made their way ashore to fill their larder with peaches and drinking water. It seems they had entered this port of call two months prior, and according to the Captain., they had been absent from home thirty months, with an additional eight months remaining. I find it hard to conceive how a man can choose to abandon his homeland for such a nomadic life. Yet I recall we encountered no less than

eighteen ships on the open seas since leaving London, and saw many others that remained only specks upon the horizon. With this in mind, I confess that such men may not be all that uncommon.

With our ship amply provisioned and the casks of fresh water secured below, we found ourselves once again in search of the elusive breeze. Departing the confines of the bay proved one of the most dangerous acts our Captain undertook. If he misjudged the force or direction of the prevailing wind beyond the protection of the bay, it would immediately dash our vessel against the rocks. To avoid becoming yet another piece of debris within the rip of the tide, every able-bodied man lined the rails, each holding a long staff to push us off the rocks should the need arise.

As we crossed the equator a second time, the heat once again grew intolerable. However in contrast to our eastern passage, a faint breeze did cause our minds to question the term bearable. Lord please forgive us if we complained, for the sub-arctic cold we had endured during our last gale remained permanently lodged in our minds as an unacceptable alternative. With no movement of air in our cabin, we remained topside, huddled beneath a canvas cover the crew had provided. While its shade brought relief, the temperature still rose above acceptable within our makeshift shelter. Oblivious to our discomfort, a school of dolphins provided a splendid distraction as they played about our bow.

On the first day of May, our ship pulled alongside an unnamed island at latitude eighteen degrees, fourteen minutes. The beach was alive with white fowl. The first mate, the ship's doctor, and five members of the crew pulled for shore, returning a short time later with four large turtles, many fish, a basket of unripe prickly pears, and a pail of what

they referred to as American beans. The next day one of the turtles found its way onto our dinner table as the featured ingredient of a hearty bowl of soup.

Our final stop before reaching Vancouver's Island was the city of San Francisco. Settled in the middle of nowhere, it flowed southward from the shore of a protected bay. As we entered the enclosure from the open water, the high cliffs on the left created a natural sentry for the harbour and screened all the unsuspected hustle and bustle carrying on within it. The rush for California gold was evident everywhere, and I could sense a twitching in my boys to flee their quarters and follow the sweet smell of easy riches. Much to my relief, and by the grace of God, their commitment to our original plan held firm.

But a few months earlier, the city of 30,000 had been a quiet commune of 200 immigrants who had chosen the area as their place of refuge. With the influx of so many fortune seekers, the city fathers searched desperately for basic services. Where the provision of drinking water once met their needs, it had become a scarce commodity to so many. Protection against the ravages of fire had never been a concern, yet with the influx of so many seedy characters, it all too soon became a priority.

Only a few months preceding our arrival, fires had started about the city that remain without explanation. First it was the Shades Hotel. With it leveled to its foundation, one of the ships tethered within the harbour came ablaze. It just spread from there with one fire seeming to outdo the other until much of the city smoldered in ruins. The city fathers were convinced they were incendiary, but could find no suspect. Upon our arrival, the stench of sodden ash still clung to the offshore breeze. It left me to ponder

what simple necessities of life we had for so long taken for granted, would be lacking on Vancouver's Island.

Once underway, we again were entertained. Not by dolphins this time, but by a number of whales dancing about as if they were giving praise to King Neptune. Most were of a length at least half that of our ship. They caused a thunderous crack as they slapped the water with their huge tails and broached to the side of our vessel, sending mountains of water skyward and leaving a rainbow of colours across the morning sun. There were so many milling about and showing no concern of our presence that I expected at any time to feel our ship jolt as one of those monsters attempted to scrape the crustaceans off its back with the aid of our ship's keel.

A journey of 171 days at sea was enough to try the patience of any man or woman. Everyone's nerves were on edge, and our Scottish tempers seemed to be merely a word away, although my beloved Ann was determined to be the exception. While not a robust woman, my wife possessed a kindly spirit while remaining brave beyond description. As we were nearing fifty years of age, neither of us fell into the category of youngsters. Many of our friends and relatives, when they had heard of our plans to travel to the new colony, spared not a moment to suggest that we had taken complete leave of our senses. I must confess, during parts of the voyage I too was left to question that very possibility myself. Ann, on the other hand, displayed an unfailing determination to make this new land our home, and as we neared our destination, our focus shifted from the trials that had passed to the challenges that lay ahead.