

## Past Imperfect: Sealing disasters have taken heavy toll



Published on July 31, 2012  
Ed Roberts 

Topics : [Lost Party](#) , [Brown's](#) , [Newfoundland](#) , [Conception Bay](#) , [Carbonear](#)

Sealing – call it the seal hunt or the seal fishery as you wish – has been part of life on the island of Newfoundland since Europeans first came here to live here year-around.

The island's aboriginal inhabitants, the Beothucks, who lived on the coast during the summer and retreated into the interior during the colder months, sent hunting parties after them in the spring. (Seals were an essential part of the life of Labrador's aboriginal inhabitants, the Inuit, who hunted them for food and for their hides, which they made into clothing.)

Shannon Ryan, a preeminent Newfoundland historian whose "The Ice Hunters: The History of Newfoundland Sealing in 1914" is the definitive study of sealing, put the start of the "local [European] commercial seal fishery" at about 1700, a hundred years after the first English men and women settled here.

By 1719, the first year for which reasonably reliable statistics are available, 2,329 people lived on the island year-round. But it was not until early in the following century that sealing became a major industry.

Before then, seals were killed by men (and perhaps a few women) who lived in the northern settlements, in Trinity and Bonavista Bays. The hunt was shore-based, and carried out during the winter months.

### Harbour Grace a 'leading centre'

The early 1800s saw the hunt transformed into one carried out in the spring, by sailing ships from Conception Bay – Harbour Grace, Carbonear, Brigus and Bay Roberts – or St. John's.

"In 1811, St. John's sent 48 ships to the seal fishery, while Conception Bay sent 81," Ryan records. The number of animals killed increased more than three-fold between 1803 and 1818.

He continued: "By 1820, the Conception Bay ports' share amounted to 81 percent of the total spring kill, 75 percent of the fleet originated from there, and 77 percent of all men involved were engaged by shipowners in these ports ...", with Harbour Grace being the leading centre.

Sealing became an important part of Newfoundland's year-round economic cycle. The ships that carried men to the ice flows in March and April went to the Labrador in the summer and early fall. Taken together, the seal hunt and the cod fishery provided work for the greater part of the year. Atop that, a very substantial part of the vessels used in

the hunt were built in Newfoundland.

The late 19th century saw the hunt reach its peak. Sailing ships, many of them locally built, were replaced by steamers – the famed wooden walls – and eventually by iron-hulled steamers. Demand for seal oil and seal hides dwindled over the years, and by 1960 the ship-based seal hunt had receded into the mists of history, and an ever smaller number of seals were being taken by land-based crews, most of them fishing from longliners.

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The seal hunt's place in our mythic history grew steadily even as its economic importance faded away. The hunt's story is studded with tragedy. Ryan tells us that no fewer than 11 of the "wooden walls" were lost between 1907 and 1914 alone. "Chafe's Sealing Book," the authoritative record of the seal hunt, lists countless other vessels lost over the years.

David Blackwood, an artist who grew up in Wesleyville, one of the centres of the seal fishery and home to some of the best-known seal killers, created a series of extraordinarily powerful, graphic and gripping images of the vessel-based hunt in his Lost Party series during the 1960s and 1970s. The vision enshrined in these compelling images portrays both the glory and the horror of the hunt.

Cassie Brown's "Death On The Ice" (1972) is an unforgettable account of the best-known of the sealing disasters – the loss of the Newfoundland in 1914. Many judge it to be one of the two or three best books ever written about Newfoundland. Anybody who wishes to know who we are and how we became what we are must read it. A series of misunderstandings and plain stupidity by two sealing captains left the Newfoundland's crew stranded on the ice during a terrible winter storm which raged for two nights at the end of March; 78 of the 132 men died, and the rest were scarred for life by their experience.

### **Terrible losses**

That same spring, 1914, the Southern Cross, a heavily laden sealing ship returning from the Gulf, was overwhelmed by a storm. She sank, taking 174 men with her. Many of those men came from Brigus and the nearby communities between Harbour Main and Carbonear.

Countless homes along the North Shore of Conception Bay felt the tragedy personally. Newfoundland lost 252 men in those two disasters, nearly as many of her sons as died in the gallant but doomed attack by the Newfoundland Regiment at Beaumont Hamel on July 1st, 1916.

Blackwood's images and Brown's words together show the price Newfoundlanders paid as they hunted seals. The unarguable historic truth is that the hunt claimed the lives of thousands of Newfoundlanders over the years, even as many millions of animals were killed. As Kipling said, in his "The Song of the Dead," "if blood be the price of admiralty, Lord God, we ha' paid in full!"