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## THE BURNING SHIP OF NORTHUMBERLAND STRAIT: SOME NOTES ON THAT APPARITION

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During the summer of 1957, I was on Prince Edward Island, and, while collecting data on an entirely different subject,<sup>1</sup> I heard "The Burning Ship" mentioned several times, especially in the area known as the Lot Seven Shore (Cape Wolfe, Glengarry, Burton, and Campbellton). Being occupied with other matters, I did not make anything like a thorough investigation, but I did begin asking questions. Some months after my return to Maine, I wrote letters to the chief Island newspapers asking for information, and I received replies from some fifteen people, most of whom claimed to have seen this ship. This paper is a report of the results of these researches, given in this admittedly incomplete form in order to make the material on this particular apparition more easily available to anyone doing work of a more general nature.

There is very little in print on the subject. The longest account is in Roland H. Sherwood's *Story Parade* (Sackville, N.B., no date, p. 19 ff.). It is mentioned, very romantically, in Helen Champion's book, *Over on the Island* (Toronto, 1939, p. 250 f.). A recent travel book on New Brunswick devotes a paragraph to the "Phantom Ship of Northumberland Strait,"<sup>2</sup> and so does a tourist pamphlet;<sup>3</sup> both associate the ship with the waters off Richibucto, and both draw their material directly from Sherwood's book. The Charlottetown, P.E.I., *Guardian* has printed articles on it at least twice, and there was a writeup in the Halifax (N.S.) *Chronicle-Herald* in 1953. Childs makes no mention of it in his article, unless this is what he means by the "Packet Light, seen in the Gulf of St. Lawrence near Prince Edward Island."<sup>4</sup>

The following reports are typical: A resident of Glengarry, Lot Seven, P.E.I., said that one night as he and his wife were preparing for bed, she pointed out the window and asked him whose light that was on over there. He was puzzled, because there were no houses in the direction she was pointing, just the waters of the Strait, so he went over to look. What he saw was a full-rigged ship in flames sailing northward up the Strait at an impossible speed. The two of them watched it for about half an hour before it disappeared from view. On another occasion, a fisherman in Campbellton, Lot Four, told me that he had seen it while out on the water one night. He

tried to approach it, but it kept well beyond him. Again, a woman in Burton, Lot Seven, said that she had watched it one night from her window for as much as an hour, and she not only saw the rigging in flames but could see people running around on the deck. All the other reports differ mainly in detail, so perhaps it will be better to generalize.

Originally I thought the ship was associated principally with the West End area from Ebbsfleet to West Point, and while almost half of the sightings I have heard of occurred in this area, there are two other areas which are important. I have had almost an equal number of reports of the ship from the central South Shore from Albany to Canoe Cove, and, moving far down to the east, two reports of its presence around Murray Harbor. However, the Burning Ship, or the Phantom Ship as it is often called, has evidently been seen all through Northumberland Strait. To quote Sherwood: "From Richibucto to Cape Tormentine in New Brunswick; along the south shore of Prince Edward Island; and from Wallace to Pictou to Mulgrave in Nova Scotia, you can hear the story of the fire-ship that rides the black waters of the Strait."<sup>5</sup>

Most of the accounts agree that she is a full-rigged sailing vessel, though they differ in regard to how she is rigged. Sherwood and the Travel Bureau have it as a "three-masted square-rigger," while one informant from DeSable, P.E.I., who saw it over forty years ago, described it as "a top-sail schooner, but of much more ancient rig than I had ever seen." However, I have two reports from the Argyle Shore area that speak of it as "a large steamer with upper and lower decks brightly illuminated." Some people report only that she is in flames, while others go into more detail; as my DeSable correspondent described it, "At times the fire would burn low, and again it would billow up in clouds of flame illuminating every detail of masts, hull, and rigging." Many people claimed to have seen people running around on the deck or in the rigging; in fact, "Uncle Joe," in his column, "Legends of P.E.Island," in the Charlottetown *Guardian*, makes it "people and dogs."<sup>6</sup> One person described it as all on fire from end to end, quite long, high at the bow and stern and low in the center. While she watched it, it blew up in the middle, parted, and each end sank.

The majority of the accounts say that the ship is sailing north or northwest (up the Strait), but two have her moving eastward, while several claim that she was not moving at all. A number of the informants spoke of the great speed with which she moved, one fellow reporting that in ten minutes she could not have traveled less than

thirty or thirty-five miles. At least one report mentions her moving even when the Strait is full of ice. She is visible for anywhere from ten minutes to several hours, and then she disappears in one of two ways: either she sails out of sight or she simply settles into the water. Sherwood and the two travel books have it that she disappears bow first.

When does the Burning Ship appear? The sightings are spread over many years. One woman remembers her grandfather telling her that he had seen it, and it has been seen fairly often recently. Although I have been told that it "last appeared" in such-and-such a year, the year is never the same in any two reports. Two people claim it is supposed to reappear every ten years, but both give different dates. She appears in all seasons, spring and fall seeming to be the favorite times, and, as I have said above, she appears even when the Strait is ice-bound in winter. Most of the sightings are in the hours before midnight, which is natural, but "Uncle Joe" of the *Guardian* makes the singular claim that she always appears "in the hour just before daybreak." There has been one daylight sighting, off Murray Harbor. A number of my informants associated it with the approach of a storm, one man claiming that "the appearance of the ship always foretold a bad Easterly Gale." Although a *Guardian* article of undetermined date quotes a very romantic source that claims that it was an evil omen, "as certainly would we hear within three days of a sudden death in this community." I never heard anything to indicate that this belief has persisted.

There seems to be no general story or explanation that goes along with this apparition. Most of the stories, I discovered, are found only in print. The most fruitful source of them I came across was Sherwood's book and its derivatives, the travel books. Here we find several suggestions: (1) It is the remains of a pleasure craft which burned when a lamp was upset in the captain's cabin during a drunken brawl; (2) It is the remains of a Quebec-bound immigrant ship which was blown off its course and struck by lightning; it burned to the water and all hands perished; (3) Around Pictou, N.S., it is supposed to be the ghost of a ship that was never heard of after it left Scotland for this port; (4) Along the New Brunswick coast, it is sometimes called "The John Craig Light," that being the name of a ship wrecked off Shippigan Island; (5) Around Pictou Island, it has been related to a "Woman in White" apparition. Some fishermen watched this woman walk into the water and disappear; then they were conscious of a ball of fire that "went bounding over the calm waters" of the Strait; finally they saw the Phantom ship rise

from the waters, move off, and disappear. The fifth story, of course, is not so much an explanation as an extension of the original story.

Very few of my informants from the Island knew of any story or explanation for the Burning Ship. Most of them were quite certain that what they saw was, or looked like, a ship on fire, and yet at the same time they seemed to feel that there was some perfectly rational explanation for it. I heard none of the stories Sherwood mentions, except from one woman from Murray Harbor who said that "the story is that they were drinking below." It is almost too much to expect that Captain Kidd would not somehow be involved, and, sure enough, "Uncle Joe" mentions in his column that "a few advanced the theory that she was one of Captain Kidd's vessels." One of my informants recalls his grandfather saying the same thing, adding "that the captain and all aboard got burnt after sinking and pillaging a vessel from the old country and the crew got drunk and the captain and all hands in some mysterious way set the ship on fire and all hands perished and the old captain told someone during his life he would sail the waters dead or alive and would sail the Atlantic forever." One further informant thinks that the ship appears because "pirates set fire to a religious vessel loaded with priests and nuns." A man from Ebbsfleet connects it with a mutiny that took place in the Bay Chaleur, connecting our fire-ship with the one found up in the Bay. One other informant said that he had heard that the ship occasionally appeared in the Bay Chaleur too.

It is clear that the Burning Ship of Northumberland Strait is closely related to the other known fire-ships of the Northeast coast. Its closest relative is the Fire-Ship of the Bay Chaleur, a hundred miles or so to the northwest. In fact, Ganong reports that that ship is often seen "in the Gulf of St. Lawrence as far south as Northumberland Straits,"<sup>7</sup> and, as we have seen, two of my informants relate the two ships. "The Packet Light" mentioned by Childs is perhaps still another name for the same ship. "The Phantom Ship of St. Martin's, N.B.," on the Bay of Fundy, and "The Palatine Light" off Block Island are two other fire-ships of the Northeast Atlantic coast. All of these ships are described in almost identical terms, all except the St. Martin's ship portend storms at least part of the time, and none except the Palatine Light seem to have any very well-defined story. Finally, it is interesting to me to notice that all these ships (with the possible exception of the Packet Light) are seen in narrow arms of the sea: Block Island Sound, the Bay of Fundy, Northumberland Strait, and the Bay Chaleur.

How many of these fire-ships there are, not only in American waters but all over the world, there is no way of telling at the moment, so it is hard to make any sweeping generalities. As a folklorist, being mostly interested in the lore (or lack of it) pertaining to these apparitions, I am certainly in no position to explain the apparitions themselves. Ganong's statement about the Bay Chaleur ship expresses my own view very well: "Until a short time ago I regarded the fire ship as a pure fiction, with no basis other than the proneness of humanity to see wonders where they are expected or where others say they exist . . . . I now believe there is really some natural phenomenon in that region which manifests itself in such a way as to be imaginable as a ship on fire."<sup>8</sup> But what it is has certainly never been dreamt of in my philosophy.<sup>9</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Coe Research Fund Committee of the University of Maine for their generous grants to me, the second of which made possible my trip to Prince Edward Island to collect material on the life and works of Larry Gorman. This paper is a by-product of that trip and a monument to serendipity.

<sup>2</sup> Jessie I. Lawson and Jean MacCallum, *This is New Brunswick* (Toronto, 1951), p. 157.

<sup>3</sup> New Brunswick Travel Bureau, *New Brunswick, Canada, Motourland* (Fredericton, 1957).

<sup>4</sup> Ralph deS. Childs, "Phantom Ships of the Northeast Coast of North America," *New York Folklore Quarterly*, V (Summer, 1949), 146-65.

<sup>5</sup> Sherwood, p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> The Charlottetown *Guardian*, November 20, 1948, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> W. F. Ganong, "The Factual Basis of the Fire Ship of Bay Chaleur," *Bulletin of the Natural History Society of New Brunswick*, V (1904), 422.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 419.

<sup>9</sup> Since this article was accepted for publication I have read Helen Creighton's *Bluenose Ghosts* (Toronto, 1957), in which there is almost a whole chapter devoted to phantom ships. She refers briefly to the Burning Ship of Northumberland Strait on page 156. Also see Miss Creighton's "Folklore of Lunenburg County, Nova Scotia," National Museum of Canada, Bulletin No. 117, pp. 32-34. Further, a fire ship has been reported off the North Carolina coast. See "The Pirates and the Palatines," *North Carolina Folklore*, VI (July, 1958), 32-34.