

THE SOUTHERN CROSS: A CASE STUDY IN THE BALLAD AS HISTORY¹

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This paper examines "The *Southern Cross*," a Newfoundland ballad dealing with the loss of a ship and 173 crew in the spring of 1914. The focus will be upon the degree to which the ballad reflects the actual events that took place, and upon how the ballad and surrounding lore tried to explain (or at least cope with) the highly tragic events surrounding the ship's loss. This approach provides some insight into the process of ballad-making as well as a degree of understanding of Newfoundland balladry.

The *Southern Cross* was an old wooden-hulled steamer that joined the seal hunt every spring between the years 1901 and 1914. She had not been overly successful in her career but tended to make a reasonable showing. In 1914 she was in the hands of a relatively inexperienced, but ambitious, skipper — George Clark. She left St. John's on March 12, 1914, and after a successful hunt began the trip home on Sunday, March 29. Sometime during a storm on the night of March 31 she foundered and went down with all hands. To this day her exact fate is unknown. A map tracing her route from the Gulf is based on a detailed account of the ship, the setting and the events leading up to her loss, which I provided in an earlier article.²

The Southern Cross in Song

The best known version of the ballad dealing with this tragedy was published in Gerald S. Doyle's *Old-time Songs and Poetry of Newfoundland* (editions 2, 3 and 4). This version was taken from Greenleaf and Mansfield (pp. 281-82):

SOUTHERN CROSS

Written out by Lizzie C. Rose, Fox Harbour, Labrador, 1927

in moderate time

The image shows a musical score for the song 'Southern Cross'. It consists of four staves of music in a treble clef, with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a time signature of 3/8. The melody is simple and folk-like. The lyrics are written below the notes, with some words underlined to indicate phrasing. The lyrics are: 'She got up steam the twelfth of March and short-ly did em- bark. To try her for- tune in — the Gulf — in charge of Cap- tain Clark. — She car- ried a hun- dred and sev- en- ty men. a — strong and vig- or- ous race, — Some



She reached the Gulf in early March, the white-coats for to slew,
 When seventeen thousand prime young harps killed by her hardy crew,
 All panned and safety stowed below, with colours waving gay,
 The *Southern Cross* she leaved the ice, bound up for home that day.

She passed near Channel homeward bound, as news came out next day,
 To say a steamer from the Gulf she now is on her way.

“No doubt it is the *Southern Cross*,” the operator said.

“And looking to have a bumper trip, and well down by the head.”

The last of March the storm came on with blinding snow and sleet;
 The *Portia*, bound for western ports, the *Southern Cross* did meet;
 When Captain Connors from the bridge he saw the ship that day,
 And thinking she would shelter up in St. Mary's Bay.

St. Mary's Bay she never reached, as news came out next morn.

She must have been all night at sea, out in that dreadful storm.

No word came from the *Southern Cross* now twenty days or more;
 To say she reached a harbour around the western shore.

The *S.S. Kyle* was soon dispatched to search the ocean round,

But no sign of the missing ship could anywhere be found.

She searched Cape Race and every place until she reached Cape Pine,
 But of the ship or wrecking the captain saw no sign.

The *Southern Cross* out twenty days, she now is overdue;

We hope, please God, she'll soon arrive and all her hearty crew,

But put your trust in Providence and trust to Him on high

To send the *Southern Cross* safe home and fill sad hearts with joy.

All things do happen for the best, but if they're called away,

The brave lads on the *Southern Cross* out in the storm that day,

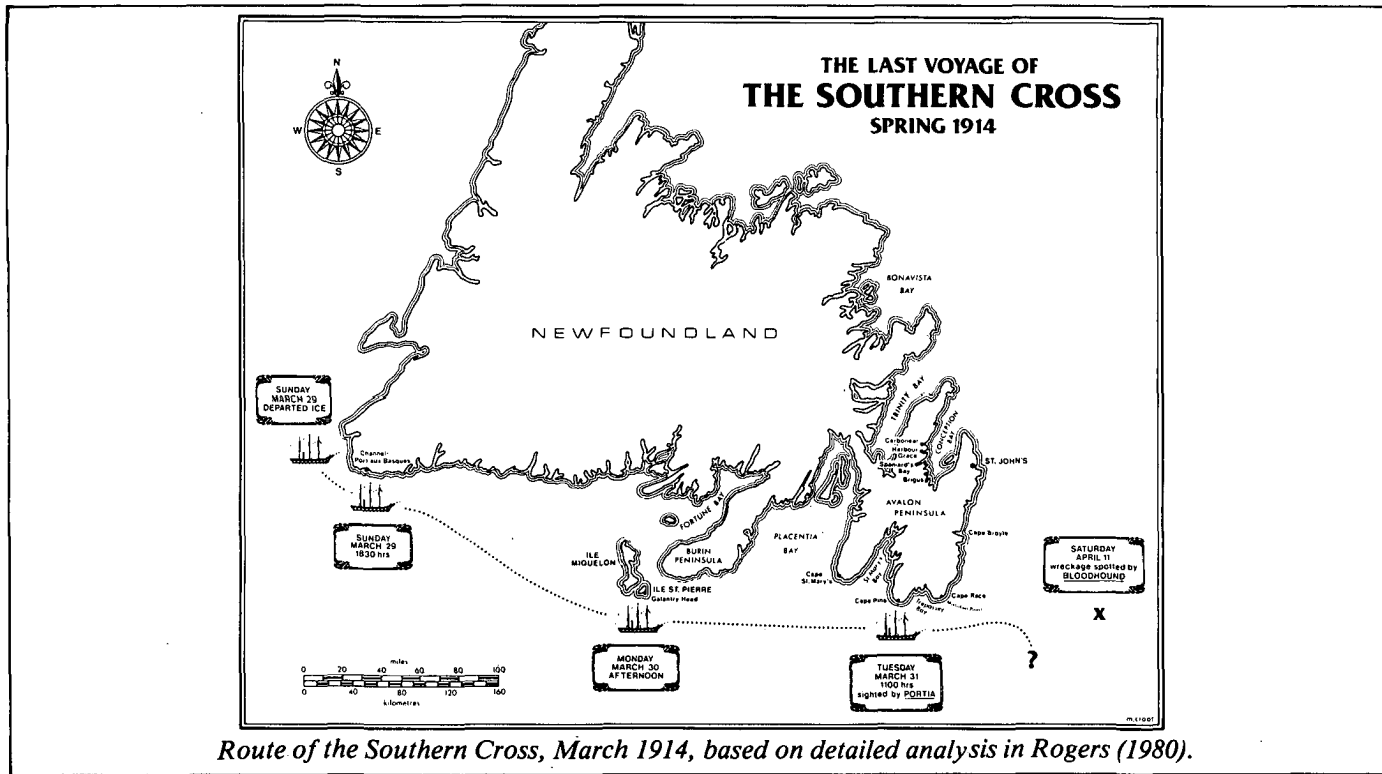
We trust that they reach that heavenly land and rest with Him on high,

Where cares and sorrows are no more, but all is peace and joy.

In addition to this ballad, the *Southern Cross* is mentioned in four sealing songs quoted by Ryan and Small: “Captains and Ships” (pp. 76–77) in which Captain Clark was mentioned; “The Sealer's Song” (p. 79) with reference to Captain Carter, her master in 1907; “Success to Hardy Sealers” (p. 81); and “Success to Every Man” (p. 109). The second and third songs were written by Johnny Burke. These references indicate that the *Cross* had some popularity among balladeers prior to her loss.

The ballad relating to the loss of the *Southern Cross* has emerged a number of times, and three distinct versions have been published. At least eight recorded performances have been located, and in a 1979 interview G. Pennel indicated that the song was popular.

Version A. Greenleaf and Mansfield first published the song in 1933 (pp. 281–82). They did not give the author but provided the following information:



Route of the Southern Cross, March 1914, based on detailed analysis in Rogers (1980).

Written out by Lizzie C. Rose
Contributed by M.S. Evans, Vassar College
Sung by Philip Major, Sally's Cove, 1929
Recorded by E.B.G. (Greenleaf)

Since then Doyle reprinted this version in 1940, 1955, and 1966 and indicated that Lizzie Rose hails from Fox Harbour, Labrador. It was not reprinted in Doyle's 5th edition in 1978 but the text was reprinted in Mowat (p. 135), and Ryan and Small reproduced both tune and the text (p. 100).

Ryan and Small list three performances of the ballad in the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive (MUNFLA) under the following transcription numbers: C129, C256, and C695. Alan Mills recorded this variant on the Folkways album *Folk Songs of Newfoundland* (FW 8771, 1958). Taft notes that Omar Blondahl recorded it on three different records: Rodeo RLP-5, *The Saga of Newfoundland in Song*; Rodeo RLP-80, *Songs of Sealers*; and Banff RBS-1173, *The Great Sea Hunt of Newfoundland*.

Version B. Peacock recorded a somewhat different version from Jack Dalton in the Codroy Valley in July of 1960 (pp. 973-74) which has minor variations. For example, the lead-in to verse four is "That very night" in the Peacock version, and "The last of March" in the Greenleaf text. The tune is rather different too, prompting Peacock to state: "This present variant (referring to B) has a completely different tune from the one noted by Greenleaf and Mansfield" (p. 974). In his notes Peacock describes this as a "famous native sea ballad" (p. 974) and suggests that it received wide circulation through being reprinted in the Doyle books.

Version C. The third version is a fragment published by Leach (p. 9) which has but seven verses compared to eight in versions A and B. The lost verse involves the omission of the middle portion of verse 3 and combining the remnant with verse 4, thus making the third verse six lines long. Apart from this, the text is very close to Version A.

Leach, who recorded this song from Peter Letto in 1960, presented only the last two lines of the tune. Even this portion is so radically different from A and B that there can be no doubt that this constitutes a third version of the ballad.

The Facts

One aspect of the "Southern Cross" is the degree to which the ballad is an accurate account of the events as they occurred. While some details are still unknown, comparison of the text with historical data show a surprising degree of accuracy.

For example, the first verse is saturated with relatively accurate historical information. The *Cross* being a steamer, the date of departure, that she was headed for the Gulf, the captain's name, and

that the crew was relatively young (“a strong and vigorous race”) are all historically accurate (I discussed this in detail in my earlier article). There are minor inaccuracies in the crew size, with the Greenleaf version being three short (the actual crew was 173). Mention of the crew being from “St. John’s and Brigus and more from Harbour Grace” is also close to fact. The most frequently listed hometowns of the crew were St. John’s and Harbour Grace (25 and 20 crew respectively). Brigus, while actually the seventh most frequently-listed hometown with eight crew, was probably mentioned as the captain was from there. It appears, then, that comparison of the historical information with the first verse of the ballad indicates a considerable degree of accuracy.

This general level of accuracy is reflected throughout the ballad. Compared to newspaper accounts, the order of events has been nicely represented in the song. The estimated kill of 17,000 (verse 2) is close to the probable cargo as she had brought home 1000 less the year before, and 1914 was a bumper year for her. The departure of the *Southern Cross* (verse 2), its sighting from Channel (verse 3), the encounter with the *Portia* (verse 4), and the dispatch of the *Kyle* as a search vessel (verse 6) all reflect historical fact.

At a general level, then, the ballad “*Southern Cross*” appears to be good history. Aspects of the actual event discussed are accurate, and the ballad writer has tried very hard to preserve the order of events as they occurred.

Connotative Meaning

But there is more than “good history” in this ballad. The facts — or denotative meaning — are indeed good. In addition, though, there are a number of references that *connote* hidden and critical information. These connotations convey special meaning to people familiar with the seal hunt in that era, and represent one of the reasons why a good ballad — like the “*Southern Cross*” — is more than good history. It is in this connotative meaning — known to members of an in-group — that the true craft of ballad-writing can be understood. An example of this is the word “Gulf” (verse 1) which means simply the Gulf of St. Lawrence to the uneducated. But sealers and their families in 1914 knew that hunting in the Gulf was risky and second-best, compared to moving further north where success was apt to be greater and less chances would have to be taken by the hunters. Thus the reference to the Gulf in the first verse sets a tone of risk and danger. This tone can be appreciated only if we are aware of the subtle shades of meaning that are part of the in-group language.

There are a number of examples of this kind of meaning in the “*Southern Cross*.” Some examples are:

Southern Cross: The ship was named after a constellation of stars very prominent in the southern hemisphere (the Southern Cross is

the equivalent of our Big Dipper). This name signals the *Cross's* history of having been an Antarctic explorations vessel.

Steam: The *Cross* was originally a Norwegian whaler (the *Pollux*) and was a sailing ship. When outfitted to explore the Antarctic by Carsens Borchgrevink and renamed the *Southern Cross*, she was refitted to take a steam engine. This makes her a "wooden wall" which tells Newfoundlanders she was a "high-risk" ship compared to the newer steel-hulled ships.

Gulf: The older wooden walls had to be content with fishing the Gulf of St. Lawrence where luck played a greater role in success. They had to wait for the seals to come to them in the Gulf rather than challenge the floes and go to them which was the strategy of the steel ships at that time.

A hundred and seventy men: This tells of very crowded conditions for the crew on this 146 foot boat.

Seventeen thousand prime young harps: Harps refer to seals. Seventeen thousand was probably her greatest hunt ever. She had gained 16,000 in the previous year.

Panned: Process of preparing the hides, with the fat still on the pelt, for shipping to St. John's. This signals a heavy, hard-to-handle cargo.

Safely stowed below: This is inaccurate, as eye-witnesses to her leaving the ice recalled she had numbers of pelts stowed on deck. In fact, her demise could be attributed to this as the swinging spaces that allow the decks to drain may have been plugged by these pelts.

Colours waving gay: The traditional mode of communication between ships was flags and this phrase in the song tells us that the *Cross* was still of this old, prewireless tradition. The failure of a steamer, the *Newfoundland*, to carry a wireless that same year caused another major tragedy on the floes. The reference to flags, then, connotes her adherence to the old ways and reminds onlookers of other sea tragedies.

She leaved the ice: Accounts suggest the *Cross* was the first to leave the ice, meaning she was in the race for the coveted Captain's flag awarded to the first ship home to St. John's. This tells us she was apt to be pressing for speed and distance in order to win the flag.

Channel: Port-aux-Basques (see map).

Bumper trip: highly successful hunt, again signalling a heavy cargo and danger.

Well down by the head: very heavily loaded, probably with excess coal as well as seals. If "down by the head" the ship would be very difficult to control, particularly in storm conditions.

Portia: a coastal steamer on its regular rounds of the outports.

Shelter up in St. Mary's Bay: the obvious thing to do in the face of the evolving storm, as St. Mary's Bay (see map) would provide a lee shore from the wind and swell. When she hadn't reached St. Mary's Bay (line 1, verse 5), onlookers *knew* she was in real trouble.

Western shore: When it was clear she had not sheltered in St. Mary's Bay, hope turned to her showing up on the west coast (e.g., Cape Broyle). This connotes a degree of desperate hope for her future.

S.S. Kyle: the a new ship. The *Kyle* has been celebrated in Newfoundland lore on several occasions (e.g., Ted Russell's "Smoke Room on the Kyle," Doyle, 1955), and she now rests rustily in Harbour Grace.

This outline of the connotative aspects of the text indicate that, to a member of the in-group, a mood of intense danger and tragedy is created — even before the events unfold in the story. This kind of "connotative foreshadowing" is an integral part of effective ballad-writing craft. The tone is set, and the listener is prepared for the tragedy that is to follow.

An Hypothesis

The text of the "*Southern Cross*" has a definite literal quality to it. As indicated above, the song is very accurate in its portrayal of the sequence of events. This suggests the possibility that *the ballad was composed by leafing through a scrapbook of newspaper clippings related to the event*. This hypothesis is supported by finding some verbatim phrases from the newspaper accounts in the text. The *Daily Mail* concluded a story describing the sighting of the *Cross* from St. Pierre with the words: "No doubt it is the *Southern Cross*" (March 31, 1914, p. 6). These very words occur in verse three of Variants A and B. There is only a slight inaccuracy here as the newspaper article referred to the St. Pierre sighting, while the ballad attributes it to a message from Port-aux-Basques.

Another aspect of the text supports the hypothesis that the ballad was written by culling a set of newspaper clippings. In all three variants there is reference to the *Southern Cross* being out for twenty days before it was declared lost (verse 7). The only printed admission of the *Southern Cross* being lost that I could find in the local newspapers was a cryptic comment embedded in a two-inch article on the eighth page of the *Daily Mail*: "The return of the *Kyle* means that all hopes of seeing the *Southern Cross* again are given up." This was published on April 20, 1914 — exactly twenty days from the probable date of her loss. The figure twenty days does not occur in any of the press surrounding the *Cross*, nor is it a "standard period" of waiting before declaring a ship lost. It seems to have been based on an intensive reading of the newspapers, probably in-

spired by the writer having kin or acquaintances on the *Cross*.

Variant B mentions a three-day period in reference to the hope that she may have reached a western port. Interestingly, this coincides with the period elapsing between her foundering and the publication of her crew list on April 4 in all of the local papers.

In sum, then, the ballad does contain quite a bit of accurate historical information. Of particular note is the accuracy of the sequence of events portrayed in the song and the emergence of the twenty-day interval which seems to be based on newspaper accounts. This supports the view that newspaper data were an important part of the composing of this ballad. Even today balladeers and song writers rely on the newspaper, indicating that this is a usual aspect of song-writing craft.

An Omission

One historical event was omitted in the ballad. This relates to the sighting of wreckage by a returning sealer:

When the ship (the *Bloodhound*) was about 90 miles SE off Cape Broyle, Capt. Winsor reports passing through a large quantity of wreckage at the edge of the ice floe. The wreckage was first sighted on Saturday morning and consisted of deck sheathing. As the ship continued her course pound boards, flag poles, prizes, pieces of timber, a seaman's chest, a cap, and a bottle tightly corked were seen, and for some distance the ship sighted driftwood. Weather conditions did not permit an examination of the wreckage which was no doubt from a sealing steamer. The bottle was seen by nearly all the crew, and when they learned of the absence of the *Southern Cross* they were of the opinion that the bottle contained the story of what brought the wreckage there (*Evening Telegram*, April 14, 1914, p. 7).

This story prompted the *Kyle* to make a second voyage in the hopes of recovering some of the debris. Her unsuccessful return from this search was the impetus for the short newspaper entry declaring the *Southern Cross* lost on April 20.

It is hard to know why this event was not included in the ballad. The "bottle tightly corked" is a marvellous image wherein all the mystery surrounding the *Southern Cross* is encapsulated in a bottle — and symbolically carried away on the tide, never to be known. However, the formulaic ending that was used probably explains why the wreckage story was not included.

As Caffin and Burns have noted, one characteristic of ballads is the tendency toward the evolution of morals at the ends of stories, when none was in the original. Typically in the last verse of ballads, writers try to complete a seemingly incomplete song or story by putting an expected (or culturally formulaic) ending on it. For the *Southern Cross* this ending related to an appeal to God for the safekeeping of the crew. In a deeply religious community, where trage-

dies of the sea are relatively frequent, this kind of conclusion is the norm. This expectation probably over-rode the aesthetic potential of the “corked bottle” ending, and led to the almost benign, passive ending present in all three variants.

Another Ending

In relation to endings for the ballad — and indeed endings for the story of the *Southern Cross* — some field work has uncovered another possible scenario. Kitch Moore of St. John’s and Hearts Content told a yarn that was the stimulus for this work on the *Southern Cross*.

The source of the tale was Jack Kearsy who would have been between forty-five and fifty years old in 1914. The story was told at the Crowsnest (more than once) about 1946:

Kitch told of talk sessions he’d had with a fellow seaman (Kearsy) at the Crowsnest. Kearsy told him of the time he was working on the “heaving line” on a small boat, on which he was also the cook (a good one too). The heaving line weighed about ten pounds (used for depth soundings) and had a wax core at the bottom. The purpose of this was to capture some of the bottom materials so that information about the sea bottom could be obtained, in addition to the depth.

Kearsy told of crossing Placentia Bay doing soundings, and finding a small piece of white fur on the end of the heaving weight. This piece of fur still had some fat attached to it. The explanation of this is that the only way fur could have ended up on the heaving weight was if he had dropped right into the hold of the *Southern Cross*.

The deck boards which should have emerged as flotsam were thought by Kitch to have been waterlogged, because they were made of oak.

This marvellous story puts a whole new slant on the theories possible to explain the demise of the *Southern Cross*. Presumably, Captain Clark, “hove to” when the storm came on, and made for St. Mary’s Bay. He miscalculated and entered the more westerly Placentia Bay and went down there. He would have had to come about shortly after his late-morning encounter with the *Portia*.

There is absolutely no way to differentiate among the possible scenarios. He could indeed have come about, and due to the snow storm, lost his bearings and cut to the west side of Cape St. Mary’s. Such an account expands significantly the area that could represent the final resting place of the *Southern Cross*. The main importance of this yarn is to demonstrate that there is an active lore surrounding the *Southern Cross*, even today.

The final demise of the *Southern Cross* was the result of a melange of human and technological factors. The greed and desire

for profit on the part of the Water Street merchants, the sealers' real need for "hard cash" and the attempts to maximize captains' shares, all combined to create an intensely competitive atmosphere surrounding the seal hunt. Add to this a captain, George Clark, with personal ambitions that spur him on to the final gamble, and the context of the human drama that occurred on the North Atlantic in late March 1914 begins to unravel. This human drama unfolded in an environment — the North Atlantic — that is known for its unpredictability and savagery. As well, the *Southern Cross* was old — a ship not designed to carry steam; a ship with known design and handling limitations; a ship that was a relic of the pre-steam, pre-steel hull days; a ship with a Quixotian quality, tilting at the North Atlantic squalls in the old ways. This indicates some of the technological aspects of the disaster. Finally, consider the one universal uncertainty — *luck*. Her good fortune on the hunt, resulting in too much coal and seal fat on board, prompted her to depart on the very day that would make her most vulnerable during that final storm. Who could have predicted that? Who could have known that the greed and ambition for greater riches, the quirks of an old boat, and unusual weather would combine with Lady Luck to cause the immense tragedy of the *Southern Cross*?

All of these things are captured in the ballad about the *Southern Cross*. To a member of the in-group, subtle aspects of the text carefully and clearly paint a picture of danger, risk — and indeed greed. Luck and the foibles of an old ship are there too. Because of this, the ballad received extensive circulation in Newfoundland. Today, when understanding of the old ways of the seal hunt is on the decline and ballad singing is not as popular as it was, the song begins to lose some of its richness and impact. However, by examining the song in its historical context, we see a truly exceptional example of the ballad-maker's craft. It is historically accurate, aesthetically viable, and conveys significant amounts of emotional content when viewed in context. As a case study in the ballad as history, we see the *Southern Cross* come alive and emerge as the immense human tragedy that it was. We feel the heartaches of mourning widows, we sense the futility of life on the sea, we begin to feel anger against the Water Street merchants. In the final analysis, we get a glimpse of the people involved in this story in a way that history books can seldom duplicate. Through the song in context, we see human beings — not unlike ourselves — struggling for an understanding of life in a time fraught with unpredictable dangers.

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Résumé: T.B. Rogers nous entretient d'une ballade terre-neuvienne "The Southern Cross", laquelle fut inspirée par la disparition d'un célèbre navire-chasseur de phoque en avril 1914. Il compare donc le texte de la chanson aux comptes-rendes qu'en ont fait les journaux de l'époque pour montrer son exactitude et ses sources probables et ainsi démontrer comment la signification de la chanson est enrichi par sa façon d'incorporer coutumes et dialecte terre-neuvien.