

REVIEWS - COMPTES RENDUS

The Novascotiaman. Clement W. Crowell. Halifax, N.S.: Nova Scotia Museum, 1979. xvii, 398p., ill., index, biblio. ISBN 0-919680-11-9. \$20.00. Reviewed by Rosemary E. Ommer.

The Age of Sail has always caught our landlocked imaginations with its aura of romance, of challenge, and of swashbuckling adventure. Somehow the mental image of a great white-sailed clipper running before the wind through the Straits of Sunda must always remain more compelling than that of a tramp steamer churning through the same seas. And yet, although we imbue them with the mystique of the sailing vessel, the "novascotiamen" of the last century were essentially trampers.

The late Clement W. Crowell's The Novascotiaman is a book which does justice both to the reality and the romance of the sailing ship and should be enjoyed alike by television addicts of "The Onedin Line," by Nova Scotians who remember with nostalgia their province's age of sail, by maritime and business historians, and indeed by anyone for whom the sailing ship days of Eastern Canada hold an attraction.

This extremely readable and well-presented volume is a splendid example of what can be done with old business papers which all too often are left to moulder in an attic, barn, or back porch until they are finally consigned to the dump. The ship's papers of Captain Frank Gullison of Beaver River, Yarmouth County, saved by the author from almost certain destruction, have been carefully ordered and edited here, and the result is a gold mine of valuable information on the freight-carrying shipping business of Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, in its declining years. It is also a great story.

The book is well thought out with an introductory chapter designed to provide the essential historical context. This is nicely focussed on shipping and avoids extraneous and distracting detail while offering a useful résumé of Yarmouth's capacity to operate this line of business. Attractive charts give the necessary detail on how Yarmouth shipbuilding fitted the wider arena of international events. Appendices at the end

summarize the history and economics of the business, the vessel, and the main cast of characters.

The rest of the book is devoted to the ship's papers, ordered by voyage. There unfolds before the reader a global freighting business seen mainly through the eyes of N.B. Lewis, the managing owner of the good ship N.B. Lewis, and his vessel's master, Captain Frank Gullison. Crowell has wisely disturbed the original texts as little as possible, confining himself to judicious explanatory footnotes and occasional comments when these are required to maintain or clarify the chronology and the unfolding drama of the N.B. Lewis's search for profitability in a changing technological world.

There are many insights provided into the sailing ship business, from the day-to-day trials of "beating and banging around" in the Straits of Sunda to the way in which a ship's managing owner had to think: balancing profit against safety ("don't take deckload, freight would not pay for the risk"), searching for better freights in a falling market ("this is not much of a business but...in fact the only thing offered"), searching for good ship's officers, worrying about necessary repairs and maintenance, and the thousand-and-one other details that were necessary to the good management of such a far-flung enterprise.

Beyond the interplay between owner and master (not only in economic but also human terms - "I...am sick and tired of the name and sound of Cardiff"), this correspondence also points to the supportive network of entrepreneurship that surrounded the management of these vessels. We learn, for example, of what could be called the "Yarmouth connection" when a Yarmouth sailmaker in business in Liverpool, England, writes to Captain Gullison that he "can make you Yarmouth duck [sails] which would be beneficial to your owners as they are shareholders in the cotton mill"; we meet compradors such as "Cheap Jack" of Hong Kong and Shanghai; and we are shown how the landward support businesses (such as ship insurance brokers and the like) operated with respect to the vessel. When the enormity of the task of steering us through the financial and managerial complexity of these papers is considered, the few minor editorial problems that remain

(such as the mis-ordering of letters on pp. 50-51 and pp. 92-95) must be regarded as insignificant.

This volume carries us well beyond the superficial explanation of "sail versus steam" as the cause of decline of the sailing fleet of Nova Scotia - an argument that is often linked to disparaging remarks about inadequate entrepreneurship. Declining freight rates loom enormously large in the last years of the N.B. Lewis, but we learn that in 1887, for example, six years before she was finally sold, the vessel had problems obtaining business because she was a "softwood" vessel (pp. 94-95), no longer new (p. 95), and with size against her (she was 1327.71 registered tons), "charterers hesitated to give even 18/6 for a vessel the size of the N.B. Lewis" (p. 117). The losing battle of both master and owner to maintain profitability becomes painfully clear as the volume progresses. The end, when it comes, is no more than yet another example of wise entrepreneurial decision-making.

From the point of view of the researcher in Canadian maritime history, this is an invaluable collection of papers. The realities of such esoterica as man/ton ratios, port dues, turn-around time, and freight rate indices come to life in these letters. If we wish to reach a fair conclusion in regard to current efforts to assess the business worth of the Eastern Canadian sailing ship industry in the late nineteenth century, The Novascotiaman will prove to be essential reading. It is a sound piece of editing of material worthy of the effort involved, an absorbing example of what can be done with old business papers, and a challenge to historical analysts of the period. The work of the Nova Scotia Museum and the author is to be commended.

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