

Hanrahan, Maura. *Tsunami: The Newfoundland Tidal Wave Disaster*. St. John's, 2004. ISBN 1-894463-63-3

HALIBURTON'S FAMOUS FICTIONAL character Sam Slick, the Yankee clock-maker, was once made to remark, wisely, that "there are stranger things in reality than can be found in romances." It is this tension between reality and romance which is, perhaps unwittingly, the leitmotif of this unusual book.

Maura Hanrahan has taken as her subject the tsunami which followed the most powerful offshore earthquake recorded in Atlantic Canada. Though the quake was frightening to many of Newfoundland's inhabitants, especially on the South Coast, little significant damage was experienced when it struck moments after 5:00 p.m. on the fine, still evening of 18 November 1929. The devastation came some two hours later when large waves, resulting from offshore submarine earth movements, swept onto the South Coast, especially the Burin Peninsula.

Coastal dwellings and fishery infrastructure were swept away; at least 27 lives were lost; damage to property was in the order of \$1 million.

The scale of the disaster is only partially comprehended by these bald figures.

The death toll, large as it was, becomes the more poignant when it is seen disproportionately to include the more vulnerable elements of society — mothers, children, and the elderly. The property damage of roughly \$1 million does not readily register in the inflated fiscal measures of the early 21st century — until we realize that, in 1929, the total GNP of Newfoundland was, at a rough guesstimate, about \$30 million, and colonial public revenues were in the region of \$10 million.

Try to imagine a contemporary disaster that scored roughly half a billion dollars, and we get a better estimate of the magnitude of this 1929 catastrophe.

In the style of the time, the devastating waves were referred to as "tidal waves," and the horrendous event was long known to contemporaries as "The South Coast Tidal Wave Disaster." Today, the Japanese term "tsunami" is almost universally applied to such phenomena and Hanrahan adopts this style as the lead title of her work. It is proper that she should do this: there is no requirement for the historian to adopt an archaic style. In fact, it is perhaps desirable that new writers should restyle and reinterpret past events for a contemporary audience in current terminology. But how far does the author succeed in this?

It should be stated from the outset that Hanrahan is not attempting a scientific account of the disaster. *Tsunami* is principally about the people involved in the disaster — "This book tells their story," the "Foreword" tells us. It is, in fact, an imaginative reconstruction in the style of what has become known as creative non-fiction, a medium not always respected amongst scholars, but with a wide audience appeal. The test of such a work, of course, is the degree to which balance is maintained between the factual content, the *non-fiction*, and the nuances of creative interpretation applied to it.

The story is cast in three parts — neatly and attractively labelled “Waves,” “Journey,” and “Aftermath.” The first part describes the human and physical impact of the destructive waves that struck the coastline between roughly 7:00 and 8:00 p.m. on that awful night. It limns the people and the settings of the communities most heavily affected, and their privations, in an effective manner. The second section gives a cameo role to the sole District Nurse in the area and her heroic journey on foot and horseback to succour the survivors in the three days following the catastrophe. This is a clever use of the facts of the story, as it functions to give geographic unity to the scattered and isolated community disasters — each locale of harrowing disaster is tied, with Nurse Cherry’s progression, into a region of collective tragedy. The third section shifts both scale and locale to describe the relief efforts established when news of the disaster tardily reached the outside world — as telegraphic communications were destroyed by the tsunami, it took nearly three days for the news to reach the capital of St. John’s, but only a creditable nine hours for a relief ship to be dispatched when the news came in.

These three main sections are followed by an “Afterword” in which the author describes her methodology: “except for reconstructed conversations, this book relies entirely on the historical record,” plus witness accounts. She also adds a number of appendices drawn from contemporary records.

How effective is this presentation? The structure, chronology, and clear story line are generally well done. Clever ‘reconstruction’ endows the soon-to-be ravaged communities with warmth and humanity, for example, the charming tale of two small boys in Burin Bay Arm who are intent on catching a neighbour’s strayed sheep. It does not much matter whether this incident is accurately represented, or perhaps even if it happened at all — because it is peripheral to the main story. But sometimes, the reconstruction is more substantial, and less credible — for example, in Lord’s Cove, Prosper Walsh predicts the tidal wave: “That was no laughing matter ... Hear what I’m saying. That was an earthquake. And there’s going to be a tidal wave next” (18).

Farther down the coast, in Point aux Gaul, Joe Miller, “an old man from France,” placed his ear to the ground and said, “Prepare yourself for a tidal wave” (26). And in Taylor’s Bay, Thomas Hillier was reported to have had presentiments of disaster. “I feel the need to visit with my close friends, with my buddies,” he is reported to have said in the few days preceding. His wife Lydia, we are told, “frowned a little at her husband’s circumspect tone” (27).

Did Lydia really frown? Maybe, maybe not. And perhaps it doesn’t matter. But what matters more is whether Prosper, *and* Joe, *and* Thomas really, in this way, apprehended disaster. Did they actually know what was coming? Or is this an instance of back-formation — the subsequent creation of folk-memory, something that didn’t really happen, but might or could or should have happened in such circumstances? Even, a more frightening possibility, have the instances been *created* in 2004 — is the fiction beginning to overpower the facts?

These questions are worth asking because they bear on the overall credibility and integrity of the narrative. Look, for example, at two other cases — misrepresentations of simple fact — which illustrate this point. The heroic Nurse Cherry is faced in *Lamaline* with another emergency — a woman with badly burned arms: “She set to work rooting salve out of her black bag and preparing a dressing. She knew she had Demerol, too, and she would give the victim a shot of that to ease her terrible pain when her charred skin had been soaked enough” (98). Graphic, but unfortunately unconvincing when we know that Demerol was first synthesized in Germany ten years later, in 1939. And earlier, we are told of the tragic loss of two women in Point aux Gaul, one “eighty-five year old Mary Ann Walsh” (56) — but we know from careful contemporary research that this person was only 80 years old.

Are these points picayune? Some may think so. But the essential point is that the writer of creative non-fiction is not permitted to fictionalize when fact can be reasonably established — paltering with the truth for effect erodes the credibility of the narrative. If the author is wrong here, and here, can the reader believe in this, and this? And it should be said that points such as the ones made above are numerous in this work. In such a situation, the reader may be forgiven for wondering whether the author is justified in not letting the facts get in the way of a good story.

Contrast this with the freedom afforded the writer of true fiction. And here we have an instructive parallel in the work of the much undersung Newfoundland novelist, Margaret Duley. By happy chance, Duley’s last true novel was a minor masterpiece also built on the fact of the Burin tsunami. *Highway to Valour* (1941) tells the story of fictional Sheila Mageila Michelet, sole survivor of a family wiped out in the tidal wave tragedy. With lyrical insight, Duley deftly expresses the agony of the human and physical context: “Bitterly she wept for the rage of waters and the hard stripping of the land” (53). But Duley does not pretend to represent the catastrophe as fact: as a novelist she can play with time and space to fit her characters’ needs — simply because she is writing principally about characters and plot and not about the contextual phenomenon. In point of fact, Duley tacitly shifts the whole frame of her tsunami into the late 1930s because it suits her plot to have her characters’ development worked out in the impending shadow of war. And her locus is indeterminate — the Burin Peninsula is never mentioned, and the fictional outport of Sheila Mageila could be anywhere in Newfoundland — save that Sheila’s father is a Frenchman from St. Pierre. But the novelist can do this as a right — the writer of creative non-fiction is more strictly limited.

If, as seems likely, this genre is to expand, how are we to judge whether a book is successful or not? Good examples are not too hard to find. In Newfoundland, some of the works of Cassie Brown are excellent starting points, especially *Death on the Ice* and *A Winter’s Tale*. In a wider field, the works of Simon Winchester come to mind — his work closest to *Tsunami* in subject is *Krakatoa: The Day the World Exploded, 27 August 1883*. Here is an example of a major catastrophic event,

deeply researched and eloquently written. For this reviewer, this work has useful parallels for the work under review. Winchester carefully balances his human descriptions with an analysis of the physiographic phenomena from which the catastrophe flowed. Perhaps *Tsunami* would have benefitted from a similar treatment. For example, Hanrahan early in her work notes briefly that the tidal waves were caused by submarine disturbances which “caused the sea floor to move several yards” (3). But this is a pale understatement. Wouldn’t it have been more telling for the reader to know that that “movement” was the submarine avalanching of approximately 200 cubic kilometres of muds and sediments coursing out to the ocean deeps for hundreds of kilometres at high speeds? Data such as these could perhaps have balanced the more speculative and uncertain of the human “reconstructions.” And all are readily available from contemporary research.

So, in summary, how are we to assess this book? Well, it’s a successful book — my copy tells me that it is a national bestseller, and “Winner of the 2005 Heritage and History Award.” To this we might respond that this only tells us that Heritage is not necessarily the same as History. For, in truth, *Tsunami*, if it is history, is History Lite. But it is a great story, and it is a good read and perhaps in that lies its success. Hanrahan clearly knows the area well, and often depicts it with quiet lucidity and feeling, a facility that nearly approaches in its lyricism the power of a Margaret Duley. For the little boys in Burin Bay Arm “the afternoon was so windless that the meadow grass was motionless. Running through the late fall air was a thread of coolness that hinted at the winter that was just around the corner. Above the boys, though, the skies were an azure blue and cloudless. The Atlantic far below was quiet as if asleep.” And I particularly liked expressive touches of calm amongst the havoc: describing the only minimally damaged community of High Beach, Hanrahan writes, simply, “if the wave had a kind face, it showed itself here.” The effect is powerful. Touches like this give feeling to the story and personality to the place. People will read and enjoy these, as they should. But much of the speculative “history” will mislead as much as it will inform — too often, the romance gets in the way of reality.

Michael Staveley
Memorial University