The Escuminac Disaster

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the worst work-related disaster ever to occur in the history of New Brunswick. This catastrophe, known as the Escuminac Disaster, took place during the night of 19 to 20 June 1959, when 35 fishermen, young boys as well as adults, perished in a violent storm on the coast. Escuminac Wharf, located at the entrance to Miramichi Bay, was at that time the centre of fishing activity for several nearby communities.

On that day in June 1959 when fishermen went out to sea in pursuit of the lucrative salmon fishery, the weather forecast from Halifax predicted nothing out of the ordinary, nothing more than light winds. It was only later on that evening that warnings of a violent storm were issued. Unfortunately, none of the fishing boats was equipped with a radio. The fishermen, who had already cast their nets, tried in vain to brave the storm. The winds reached 75 mile-per-hour (120 kilometres-per-hour) gales, and 50-foot (15 metres) waves reduced 22 of the 32 boats to kindling and did the same to many of their trawls and lobster traps. Although 16 fishermen were spared, 35 could not escape the ravages of the brutal storm. The youngest victim was only 13 years old.

The tragedy brought severe social and economic hardships to those affected in the region. It also served to shed a sudden light on the impoverished condition of the fishing communities. The most visible response to the Escuminac Disaster was the launching of the New Brunswick Fishermen's Disaster Fund, established by Fredericton's Daily Gleaner publisher Brigadier Michael Wardell. During the months following the tragedy, donations were received from all parts of Canada, and even Pope John XXIII and Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, who was on a Royal Tour in Canada, donated money to the fund. More than $400,000 was collected, enough to provide limited but valuable relief to the 24 adults and 83 children who were the widows and orphans left in distress by the tragedy.

Acadian artist Claude Roussel was living in Edmundston when the tragedy hit Escuminac and nearby communities. He was moved and decided to create a work of art in honour of the fishermen. He prepared a wood carving 24 inches (60 centimetres) tall, a model for a sculpture to be entitled Les Pêcheurs - The Fishermen. The quality of his model was recognized when Roussel won the first prize at an exhibition at the New Brunswick Museum in 1962. In 1969, thanks to financial support from the Beaverbrook Foundation, Roussel sculpted his work Les Pêcheurs - The Fishermen in stone. Residents of the Escuminac area organized a fundraising campaign to cover the cost of a base for the monument, as well as the bronze plaques on which the names of the victims and survivors would be inscribed.

Roussel and his assistants laboured for six months to complete this remarkable work of art, which shows three stylized human figures seven feet (2.3 metres) in height. The imposing stone monument weighs 10,000 pounds – nearly 5 tonnes
– and stands on the wharf in Escuminac. The figures can be seen from the sea as well as from land, and their appearance changes depending on the light and the fog in the bay. Rather than representing particular individuals, the monument shows a group of fishermen, in their work clothes and bearing their fishing nets, about to venture on the sea to take up their duties. A modernist in his style, Roussel aimed to produce a monument that would honour the dignity and courage he witnessed in the daily life and work of the fishermen. In other words, the artist wanted to evoke feelings of compassion for these working men.

The monument was unveiled on 19 June 1969. It was a major event, drawing 2,000 people, including Premier Louis J. Robichaud and the former premier Hugh John Flemming. Since that time, anniversaries of the disaster have been marked by public activities at the site. In addition, the Government of New Brunswick declared the Escuminac Disaster Memorial a Provincial Historic Site in 2001. To mark the occasion, a commemorative plaque was unveiled at the Escuminac wharf during a public ceremony on 8 July of that year.

For many fishermen, the monument erected in 1969 is a reminder of the perils of the work at sea, a warning to use care and show respect for the ocean because the elements of nature are more powerful than anything else. As long as there are fishermen, it is said, the Escuminac Monument will not be without a purpose. This comment clearly shows how important this kind of commemoration is in the eyes of the working people of the province.

CONTACT: For more information on the history of unions and workers in New Brunswick, visit the New Brunswick Labour History Project website at www.lhtnb.ca.

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