



Photo by Peter J. Thompson, National Post

Sealers unload harp seal pelts from the *Ross Pride*, a longliner boat, in Twillingate Harbour, Newfoundland, April 14, 2010.

# A Dying Living

## Newfoundland seal hunters fight to save a tradition they say everyone, especially Ottawa, is against

BY PETER KUITENBROUWER

**A**t 8 a.m. on Wednesday, April 7, the *Ross Pride*, a 44-foot longliner fishing boat registered in Shelburne, N.S., set sail from the Twillingate Harbour Authority wharf under cloudy skies. It was 2C and the wind blew northeast at 15 knots.

The *Ross Pride* sailed northeast, travelling at 8.2 knots. At her wheel stood Captain Bruce Jenkins, 53, a jovial man who, with his grey beard and round face, looks a little like Captain High Liner. He lost a pinkie at age 21, when a seine net—to catch herring—he was shooting out from a speedboat caught on his wedding band. He can see from only one eye; he blinded his left one 10 years ago fixing his ATV, when a metal shard flew off a nut he was banging with a chisel.

Also aboard the *Ross Pride* were the captain's two sons, Dana, 34, and Dion, 33, wearing insulated overalls and Cofra Superlight Thermic green workboots, calf high, which

their father bought them for Christmas in St. John's, for \$200 a pair. The fourth crew member was Gary Gillard, 51, a long-time seal hunter.

The *Ross Pride* carried prodigious supplies, including a freezer packed with frozen turr (a local sea bird), duck, two whole chickens, a box of chicken wings, five roasts of beef and four roasts of pork. Along with 10 dozen eggs, and sacks of onions, potatoes, turnips and carrots, the boat carried a dozen "batches" (a local word for loaves) of bread and 10 partridgeberry jam pies, plus dozens of raisin and chocolate chip buns.

Capt. Jenkins' cousin, Margaret Jenkins, who is in her seventies, baked the bread and buns and pies. The captain's wife, Beverley, picked the partridgeberries on the rocky hills around Twillingate.



*Harp seals are plentiful: their population in the North Atlantic, off Newfoundland, has more than doubled to over 7-million.*

The long liner held 12,000 litres of diesel fuel, and was brimming with weapons. There were four Winchester .222 rifles and a .243 Remington (which the skipper bought for \$200 when he turned 16), plus 5,000 rounds of .222 bullets and 1,000 rounds of .243s, 13 pelting knives, hakapiks and gaffs. The skipper had a promise from NuTan Furs of Catalina, N.L., to buy 1,000 harp seal pelts.

The Ross Pride steamed northeast all day. At 6 p.m. Capt. Jenkins cut the 350-horsepower motor and let the boat drift

*“I have no problem with the seal hunt, but can they be killed humanely?”*

among the ice pans near the Grey Islands, off the east coast of Newfoundland’s Northern Peninsula.

As darkness fell, the captain switched on two searchlights and pointed them into the icy North Atlantic, to look for harp seals. By and by, seal pups swam up, first a few and then a couple of dozen.

“The young fellers were trying to catch pictures of the seals in the lights,” says Capt. Jenkins. “The seals were there for hours, just swimming around and playing like a puppy would do. Anybody who looks at it would say it looks cute, because they were chasing each other and one thing and another. I figured that there would be seals on the go the next day.”

The next morning at 6 a.m., Canada’s Department of Fisheries and Oceans declared the seal hunt open on Newfoundland’s “Front.” As Capt. Jenkins steered the Ross Pride north, the men began to hunt. A gunner at the bow would shoot a seal; then a man with a gaff (a wooden pole tipped with a steel hook) hooked the seal and hauled it onto the boat, where a third crew member bled and pelted the animal. By midnight, the crew, having killed, pelted and

iced 325 beater harp seals, settled below in the forecandle to a meal of roast beef with mashed potatoes and peas and carrots and gravy. They were exhausted, and happy.

The seal hunt in Newfoundland and Labrador, like maple syrup season in Quebec and eastern Canada, is a traditional rite of food-gathering that heralds the arrival of spring. Farmers tap maples before their fields thaw; fishermen hunt seals before sailing out to gather crab, turbot, lobster, smelt and shrimp. The supply is plentiful: Ottawa estimates the North Atlantic holds at minimum 6.9 million harp seals, up from three million seals 15 years ago.

But a 40-year campaign attacking the seal hunt on moral grounds has turned many against it. And now, some fishermen and other Newfoundlanders accuse the federal Department of Fisheries of conspiring with the protesters to end the hunt. They point to new regulations enacted last year that require sealers to club seals with a hakapik -- a medieval club-type weapon the hunters had traded for a rifle a generation ago. The clubbing is back, by federal mandate, and it looks bad on video.

Lack of demand for pelts has reduced this year’s seal hunt to a shadow of its former self.

Just four years ago, with buyers paying a record \$105 for a seal pelt, the hunt attracted 340 vessels from all over Newfoundland, pouring money into the local economy for food, fuel, clothing and ammunition. This year only one processor is buying, paying \$21.50 for a Grade A pelt, plus \$2.50 per pelt for the blubber.

The weather, too, is strange: For the first time anyone can remember, no ice formed in Notre Dame Bay off Twillingate; vessels must travel to the northern tip of Newfoundland to find seals. There the boats found seals so plentiful that one boat, the Lady Victoria, caught its quota of 2,800 seals in less than a week, a record.

Also bolstering the seal industry: Greek cardiologist Andreas Agathos, who gathered harp seals in Quebec’s Magdalen Islands last year and again this year to study using their heart valves in humans. A pig heart valve lasts just 12 years; he believes seal valves will last longer.

In St. John’s crowds formed on the wharf this week to buy seal flippers. Across Newfoundland, the sense that they are under attack by lily-livered mainlanders fuels republican sentiment--which is never far below the surface here.

Newfoundland is nobody's pet rock. Today, increasingly self-confident with new oil money, Canada's youngest province fights to hang on to its traditions.

The first Newfoundlander I met on this trip opposes the seal hunt. Edna Edwards-Lush, a retired schoolteacher, was returning home to St. John's from a cruise with her daughter off Puerto Rico. "I have no problem with the seal hunt, but can they be killed humanely?" says Ms. Edwards-Lush, drinking Porter Airlines' red wine as our Bombardier Q400 plane droned eastward.

"I was a guidance counsellor in Labrador. All the tapes came in. They die in horror for hours. A lot of city people feel we can find other things. I'm one of those rich man's wives, with satin sheets and cufflinks. The seal hunt is a stain on Newfoundland, it's a stain on Canada, and it's going, going, gone."

The next morning, I visited Government House in St. John's, a sprawling Georgian castle built of local stone in 1829 to house the governor during colonial times. Set on a vast lawn amid oaks, elms and beeches in the heart of town, the house boasts 10 fireplaces and five chandeliers.

These days it is home to John Crosbie, the bombastic Cabinet minister of the Mulroney era, now Lieutenant-Governor of Newfoundland and Labrador, who lives here with his wife, Jane, and their Shih Tzu, Rudy.

Mr. Crosbie, 79, greeted us wearing a hat and coat made of seal fur by a local furrier -- "the same one I wore when Prince Charles was here with his new wife," he announces.

This past November, as the Prince planted some trees on the grounds here, "Camilla was looking with startled eyes at this coat."

The coat hangs loosely on Mr. Crosbie now. He has lost about 50 pounds since suffering an attack of viral pneumonia in Banff in February 2009. "I was lucky to get out of the bloody place," he says. "I lost my sense of taste. But I can still drink, and I think that's what saved me. I used to drink Scotch. I now drink dark rum. I feel better."

The flame of the Newfoundland iconoclast still burns bright in the old warrior. Hearing of our mission to see what was left of the seal hunt, Mr. Crosbie insisted on seeing us, promising: "I'll be wearing my goddamned sealskin underwear."

Mr. Crosbie's family made its fortune financing fishing and sealing expeditions that boasted high peril and low pay. On his wall hangs a picture of the SS Ungava, chartered in 1933 by Crosbie & Co., which brought in 49,600 seals, a record haul.

"There has been a seal fishery in Newfoundland for 3,000 years, long before the English got here," Mr. Crosbie says. "You became a man in those days when you went out on the seal hunt, and that's why we are not going to be bullied into giving it up. Today, people don't want to recognize their background. If Canadians haven't got backbone enough to withstand criticism, tough titty."

The Rock was a "have" jurisdiction long before Canada was born. Newfoundland began exporting seal oil to England



Newfoundland villages such as Twillingate were built from the wealth that came from the sea, including harp seals.

in 1720. In 1857, the peak year, 370 vessels with 13,600 sealers killed 600,000 seals for their oil and pelts. That hunt evolved into the whitecoat hunt, which lasted until

## *I slept on a pile of dirty sealers' overalls on the wheelhouse floor.*

Greenpeace protests led to a government ban on killing whitecoats, the newborn seals, in 1983.

Today's seal hunt, Mr. Crosbie says, is no more brutal than any other killing of mammals, such as cows or pigs. "It's not a pretty sight," he says. "If people want to look in on their friendly neighbourhood abattoir, they would find it rather bloody." And he reacts with contempt to the European Union ban on Canadian seal products that goes into effect in August. "There's all kinds of things we could complain to the Europeans about," he says. "Christ, the sons of bitches caused so many goddamn wars where hundreds of thousands of us lost our lives."

Twillingate is an anglicized spelling of Toulinget, an outport on New World Island about 400 kilometres north of St. John's settled by the French. Plentiful seals (along with cod) drew settlers to build wooden houses on the rocks, lashed by wet wind and the tumultuous North Atlantic.

I first visited Twillingate in April 1995, invited by Garry Troake, a well-read, charming young seal hunter dedicated to building bridges with animal welfare activists and media. That month, the ice lay 10 metres thick in Notre Dame Bay. Locals, eager to go out for seals, brought out chainsaws with metre-long blades, to cut their boats out of the harbour.

On April 20, the wind blew the ice out to sea; I set sail on the Lone Fisher with Captain Jack Troake, Garry's father, at the helm, plus Garry, his brother Hardy and three other crew. I slept on a pile of dirty sealers' overalls on the wheelhouse floor. After a week battling wind, rain, fog, ice and snow, the crew shot and landed 200 seals. A gale warning forced us to take refuge at Catalina harbour on the Bonavista Peninsula, with the scant 200 pelts -- worth \$16 each at the time--in the hold.

The next morning I left the Lone Fisher and walked into town to catch a bus. I wore a dirty old floater jacket and knee-high green fishing boots. I hadn't shaved or showered in a week. Where I had felt an ignorant outsider on my arrival in Newfoundland, now I sensed an unspoken respect. Like one of the boys. I belonged.

Returning to Twillingate this month, I did not visit Garry Troake, but rather his gravestone, in the United

Church cemetery on a windy hill near his home. The circumstances of his death, aged 40, reinforce the sealers' sense that everyone, especially Ottawa, is against them. On

Thanksgiving, 2000, Garry Troake and Roger Blake, who had just married Garry's niece, set out in a motorboat to pull in two cod nets. A week before, Fisheries officers had charged six fishermen for leaving their nets in on Sunday, violating new rules.

"The weather turned bad," recalls Jack Troake. "The wind was northeast blowing on the land and a big sea out." When the men failed to return, Jack drove his pickup out to Long Point, where the lighthouse stands, and saw his son's overturned boat. Garry died of hypothermia. Federal regulators soon scrapped the "no nets on Sunday" rule.

Twillingate in 2010, compared with 1995, feels defeated. Abandoned houses with weathered clapboard siding cling to the shores. Fog and mist bring a haunted beauty to this remote spot. Oil money flooding St. John's has not made it here.



*Captain Jack Troake killed his first seal at age nine. "I took one because that's all I could manage," he says.*

The decline of the fishery has taken its toll. From 6,000 people 50 years ago, Twillingate today counts just 3,000 souls.

Houses here cost \$20,000 to \$30,000. "If our graduating class is 24 students, that's 24 gone by [who leave town]," says Gord Noseworthy, the Mayor and harbourmaster. "There's not a lot of things for people to do."

Only one company is buying seal pelts this year: Nu-Tan Furs of Catalina is taking 50,000 pelts for \$21.50 each. "You got a lot of people out there on the wharf who are dying to go sealing," the Mayor says.

One of those is Jack Troake, 73, who lives with Florence, his wife of 55 years, in a house his ancestors built on a rock by the bay 176 years ago.

"I killed my first seal at age 9," he recalls. "I walked out over the ice with an old man next door. I had a gaff and a knife. I took one because that's as much as I could manage."

## *"People say that Canada is the best country in the world. Bullshit."*

"I put a string in his mouth and two little slits where the flippers were, and dragged it back across the ice. My grandfather always loved me after that, and he gave me his house."

Seals are just a part of the Troakes' diet. They gather food all year. Stuffing their freezer are turr, duck, moose, cod, capelin, herring and rabbits. Beside the house, Jack has built raised beds where he composts a mixture of shrimp husks and seaweed for his vegetable garden. Year upon year, the Troake home fills with journalists, who feast on fresh cod and salt beef and pudding and tea.

This month at one "beef dinner" (dinner is the meal Newfoundlanders eat at noon) we sat to "fresh" and "salt" beef, mashed potatoes and baked pudding, plus carrots, parsnips and beets, all from the Troake garden. On another night we ate fried seal ribs: dark black, briny, fatty and rich.

Jack Troake can hunt, fish, garden, build a lobster trap, repair a fishing net and fix about any motor or boat. Florence can knit, cook, clean and sew. She sits on the church and museum boards and volunteers at the hospital. The only thing the Troakes cannot do themselves -- even with Jack's inimitable potty mouth -- is change perceptions of the seal hunt.

"People say that Canada is the best country in the world. Bullshit," he says. "Jesus Christ. Fuck. IFAW and PETA

[the two main protest groups] are using all the photos of the whitecoat hunt. That's false advertising. If Ottawa was serious about trying to help us preserve this hunt, they would stop that right away, you know old boy."

Then he stops and mutters to his wife, "I won't get any cup of tea today, trying to explain things to the mainlanders."

At 11 a.m. on Friday, April 9, as the Ross Pride hunted seals in the Strait of Belle Isle, off the east coast of Labrador, they attracted some unwanted guests.

"Two helicopters come on the scene around 11 o'clock in the morning," Capt. Jenkins says. "We thought they were Fisheries, until a man called the [Canadian Coast Guard] icebreaker and asked them if they had anyone in the air. And they said no. So that's how we figured out they were the animal rights crowd."

"One helicopter was black and one was white with blue stripes. One had a camera built into its nose."

"The seals were going off the ice. The skipper of Three Ts called in and complained. But they had a permit to observe the hunt."

I asked him about the impact of these observers.

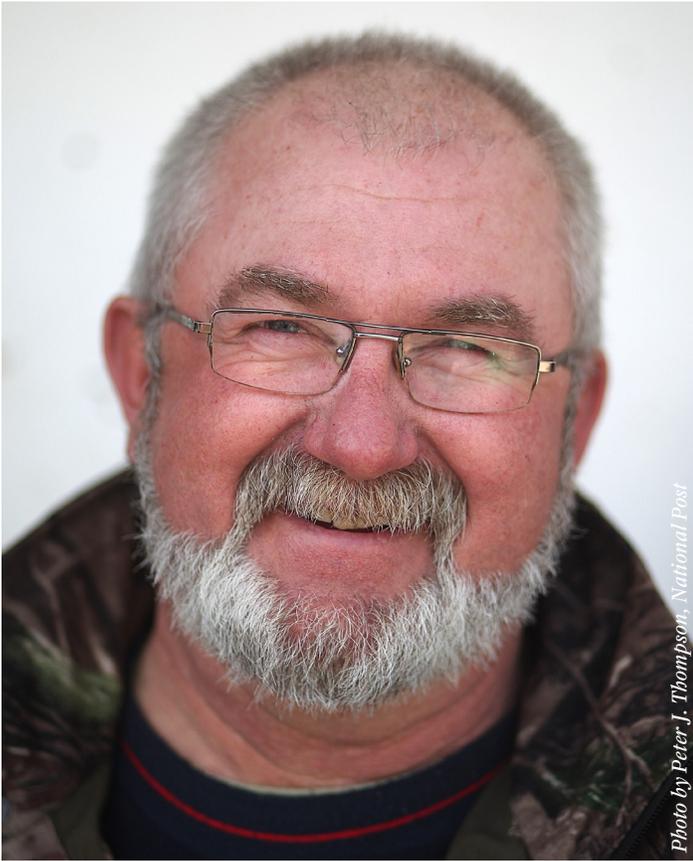
"One thing about it, you made sure that you never made no mistakes. And mistakes can be made in this hunt. You can have a missed shot. It does happen."

The next Wednesday, Jack Troake's neighbour, Scotty, called out to him from the driveway: "Did you see the seal hunt video on YouTube?" The edited International Fund for Animal Welfare footage, complete with funereal music, shows men clubbing seals and dragging them onto the boats, leaving blood trails on the ice.

One wounded seal on an ice floe struggles to get away until a second shot leaves it dead.

IFAW had chartered the black helicopter. Sheryl Fink, a researcher with the group, was on board. IFAW, founded in New Brunswick in 1969 to stop the seal hunt, has failed at that goal but grown to 13 offices worldwide, with headquarters in Massachusetts.

On April 8, 9 and 10, the IFAW group shot 12 hours of video of the seal hunt, "to get the evidence to support our campaign to end the commercial hunt," Ms. Fink says.



*Captain Bruce Jenkins of the Ross Pride sailed to the seal hunt with his two sons, Dana and Dion, and one other crew member.*

“The seals are not being killed in a humane manner,” she says.

“The regulations are a little bit lacking. They allow seals to be hooked in the face and dragged onto the boat.

“Then the seal does start moving again.”

Dan Mathews, a vice-president at People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals in Norfolk, Va., visited Toronto and Montreal earlier this month with Pamela Anderson, the Canadian-born actress, to oppose the hunt.

“This is the most barbaric,” Ms. Anderson told reporters. “They crush the skulls. They just bludgeon them to death. They don’t even put them out of their misery by shooting them.”

PETA plans protests at Canadian embassies in France, England and Germany, and at Canadian consulates in the United States.

“The seal hunt is something that appalls the whole world,” Mr. Mathews says. “This clutch of greedy white men use it as an off-season cash grab.”

Before I left for the seal hunt this year, a skeptic asked me:

“Why do they club seals over the head to kill them?”

It is arguably this clubbing motion, the savage swing of the hakapik at the skull of a defenceless creature, that has, over the past half-century, turned much of the world against the seal hunt.

“They don’t club them,” I replied. “I was a week at sea on a sealing boat, and I never saw a man club a seal once. They shoot them with rifles.”

But when I got to Twillingate, I learned that times have changed.

New regulations enforced last year virtually require hunters to club seals. A poster in the Fisheries office in Twillingate outlines the “three-step” process: stun, check and bleed.

“Step 1. Induce IRREVERSIBLE LOSS OF CONSCIOUSNESS or DEATH using regulation weapon: hakapik, club or rifle. Step 2. Purpose: ensure that the skull is COMPLETELY CRUSHED by feeling the top of the head AS SOON AS POSSIBLE AFTER STEP 1.” If a seal, even immobile, retains a lobe of its skull intact, the sealer must smash the skull again. In Step 3, sealers sever the arteries under a seal’s flippers to bleed it, before pelting it.

Pierre-Yves Daoust, a wildlife pathologist at the Atlantic Veterinary College in Charlottetown, helped draft the new rules, “to kill the seal as quickly as possible.” But Fisheries and Oceans has inadvertently handed its opponents their best tool in a generation: the opportunity to once again broadcast, to the world’s horrified eyes, fresh images of Newfoundlanders bashing seals in the head.

Morgan Oake, a field supervisor and Fisheries officer in Twillingate, enforces the new rules. He is a smiling man with a semi-automatic pistol at his belt. He calls himself “the fish cop.” One sealer notes: “He is not the most loved person in this area.”

Says Mr. Oake: “I play hockey on a team and they are all fishermen. One guy sitting next to me on the bench said, ‘Morgan, I’m the only guy on the line that you haven’t charged yet. I feel like I’ve got a big old target on my back.’”

On the first day of this year’s hunt, patrolling the ocean in his 23-foot Zodiak, Mr. Oake boarded 12 vessels, and says, “There is going to be charges laid on two sealers on one boat.”

Mr. Oakes approves of the new rules, which require sealers to club seals even when they are dead. He taught



Photo by Peter J. Thompson, National Post

*Doug Taylor of St. John's bought 1,752 flippers for 75¢ each, paying Capt. Jenkins \$1,340 in cash. He retails the flippers for \$3.50 each.*

the “three step” process at 22 meetings with sealers across Newfoundland last year.

“If the skull is crushed and the seal is bled, I know that the seal didn’t suffer. I believe our vet puts it this way: ‘They’re dead, then they’re dead-dead.’ “

But Capt. Jenkins disagrees. “You’re shooting them with a rifle,” he says. “You’re only hitting something that’s dead and hitting it again,” he says. “It can only be dead once. You take a seal that’s three feet long and a man six feet high with a four-foot hakapik. It don’t look nice.”

On Wednesday morning, April 14, the mood on the wharf at Twillingate was celebratory.

The Ross Pride had arrived at 6 a.m., back from the hunt. The deck of the sealing boat was splattered with blood. By one gunwale, a bloody hunting axe lay on a table. This is where sealers chop the head and scutters off the seals. Bloody seal rib cages filled plastic tubs.

On the deck lay orange mesh plastic bags, the kind onions come in, filled with seal flippers.

The sealers stood on deck in their rubber overalls, joking about Pamela Anderson. “I wouldn’t turn her away,” Dana Jenkins concedes.

On the quay, a clutch of pickup trucks had gathered. A half-dozen men stood waiting to buy flippers. “I wants a dozen,” says Bill Keats, a retired fish plant manager.

Mr. Jenkins counted out 12 flippers and handed them to his son Dana, who passed them up to Mr. Keats.

Dana, who wore blood-soaked rubber gloves, told him to

stuff the \$12 into his breast pocket. Mr. Keats then tried to zip the sealer’s pocket closed on the money. “It won’t close,” Dana said. “It’s too thick with seal blood.” Each sealer will earn about \$2,500 for six days’ work.

Doug Taylor, a third-generation seal meat and fish merchant, had left St. John’s at 4 a.m. in his F350 Ford pickup truck. He arrived on the Twillingate dock at 9 a.m. and bought 1,752 flippers for 75¢ each, handing Capt. Jenkins \$1,340, cash, explaining, “There’s a lot of people in Newfoundland eating seal meat.”

From Twillingate I returned to St. John’s. In a truck parked on the wharf emblazoned Taylor’s Fresh Flippers, Heidi Taylor struggled to keep up with the customers, buying flippers for \$3.50 each, cleaned, or \$40 a dozen.

Two blocks away, workers had spread out the red carpet at the Mile One Centre to greet music stars from across Canada for the Juno Awards. If the seal hunt is Newfoundland’s past, this is what some see as its future: security guards in neon T-shirts patrolling George Street, the main club strip, lit with movie lights and strung with kilometres of sound and light cables. A wristband to visit George Street on Juno night cost \$20. I ducked into Bridie Molloy’s, a pub, where local musicians sat playing lilting melodies on fiddles, a button accordion and a bouzouki.

The boys were drinking Kilkenny red ale and enjoying the Juno moment. But old habits die hard.

“We’re going to Paddy’s tomorrow,” smiles Graham Wells, resting his fiddle for a moment, “for a flipper supper.”

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