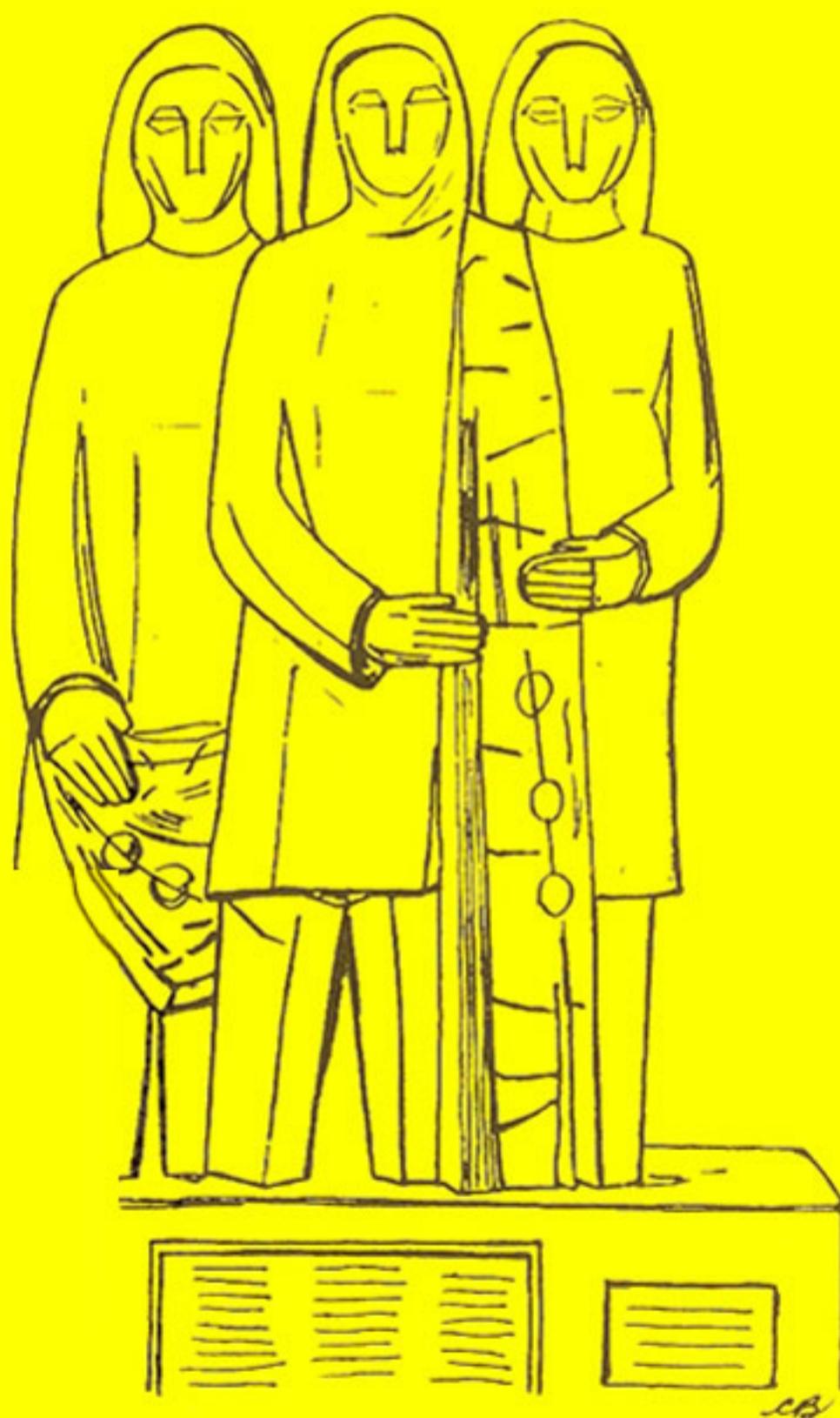


# The Escuminac Disaster



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Miramichi Literacy Council – Miramichi Literacy Writers series

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Judy Arnold  
President  
Miramichi Literacy Council Inc.  
P.O. Box 534  
Miramichi, NB  
E1N 3A8  
(506) 773-6734  
[judy960@hotmail.com](mailto:judy960@hotmail.com)

Written and illustrated by Dawn Maclean  
and Cindy Barry.

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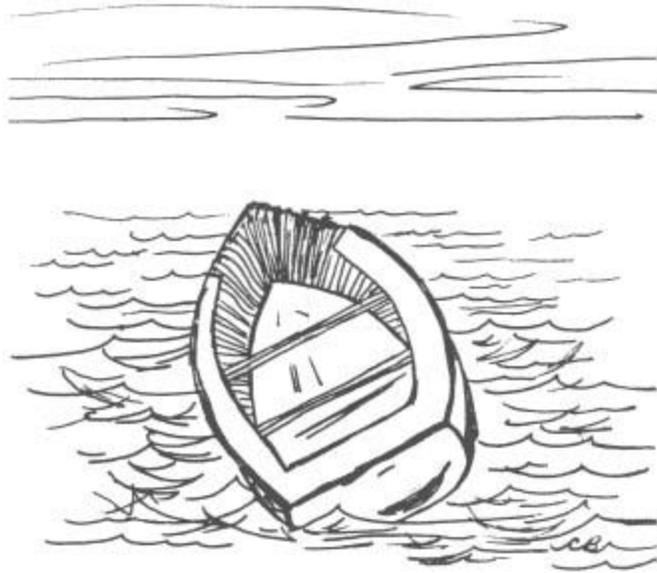
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Miramichi Literacy Council  
Box 206  
Chatham, N.B.  
E1N 3A6

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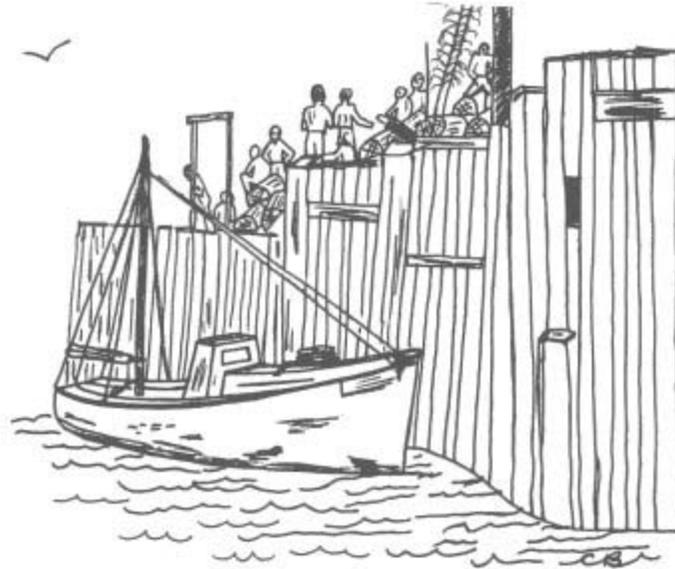


# THE ESCUMINAC DISASTER

## CHAPTER I

It was Friday, June 19, 1959. The day was foggy and cold. For the fishermen of Escuminac Wharf, it was just another working day. The fish were running. The men could not afford to stay at home because of the poor weather. Fifty-four boats set out well before daylight. The weather report called for fog and winds of twenty-five miles per hour.

Few of the boats had radio equipment. A later weather report said that winds would top thirty-five miles per hour. No one knew of the real strength of the upcoming storm. The men finished setting their nets. The winds began to climb to seventy miles per hour. The angry waves rose thirty feet. Many men stayed with their nets, using the weight of the nets to protect against the weather. Although the nets may have saved some lives, thirty-five were lost.



## CHAPTER II

The Cook's boat had overturned. Fraser and his son, Edward, were thrown into the water. The boat righted itself. The two men managed to climb back in. Edward tied himself to the mast. He yelled to his father to do the same. Fraser, however, knew their only hope was to start the boat's engine. When he reached the engine, a huge wave hit and lifted him into the bay.

By the time Lloyd came across Cook's boat, Edward was near death on the mast. Lloyd and his men circled the boat. They got close enough to throw a rope. After several tries, the rope landed between one of the support lines and the mast. Lloyd yelled to Edward again and again to untie himself from the mast and pick up the rope. Edward could not hear because of the screaming wind. Just in time, he reached for the rope. He would not jump. The men pulled him into the black water. They lifted him to safety and headed home. All in the boat were saved.



### CHAPTER III

Gerard Bonenfant, also known as “Red Goodchild”, managed to fish his twenty-seven nets. This was hard work for one man, but he did catch seventeen fish. In the last net he caught a huge fish weighing three hundred pounds. He was not able to haul this net in. He decided to tie it to the back of the boat to keep it from turning over. He headed for the Wharf. As he neared the breakwater, the waves got higher. The water killed the engine. Goodchild was in grave danger.

At the same time, Tom Lewis and his friends were also in trouble. Their boat began taking in water. Then the mast and sail fell. The waves were violent. The men decided to try for the protected side of Fox Island. Then they caught sight of Goodchild. He was still unable to start his engine. Lewis drove his boat in as close to Goodchild’s as he could. Lewis passed a rope to Goodchild. The rope broke. The boats were fifteen feet apart with each boat lifting and falling thirty feet. Goodchild jumped for his life. He landed in Lewis’ boat. With care, they made their way to Baie du Vin Island. By evening, they made it to Hardwicke.

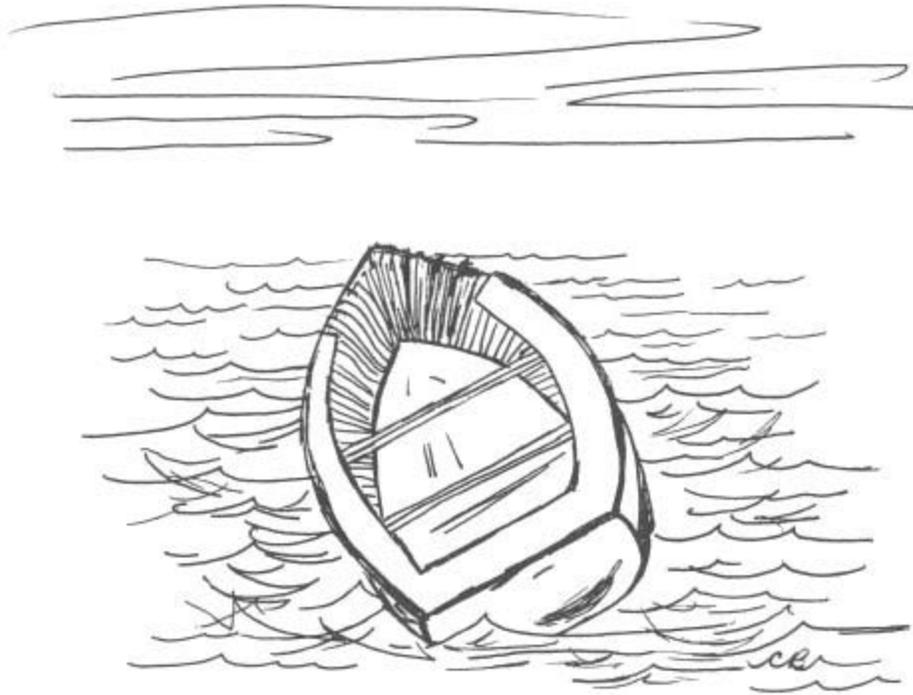


Red Goodchild

## CHAPTER IV

Theodore Williston pulled in his nets before most of the others and set for home. The fog lifted as he neared the Wharf. He was able to save himself from running aground. He was able to warn three other boats from doing the same. Williston then sighted Raymond Thibeau. Thibeau was having engine problems. He was moving towards the troubled waters. Using a rope, Williston was able to keep Thibeau from danger. Thibeau got his engine started. He headed for shore and safety.

The excitement was not over for Theodore Williston. Walter's boat was going under. Harold Taylor, Walter's twenty year old friend, was dead. Walter was not far from death himself. He did not want to leave his friend's body behind. Theodore threw a line to Walter. Walter tied it around Harold's lifeless body. After Harold's body was recovered, Walter allowed himself to be rescued.



## CHAPTER V

Jack Doucet met the biggest wave of the storm. The "Francine D" lifted fifty feet then cracked down hard. The boat was quickly shot upwards again. This time the boat went several feet higher than the top of the next wave. The "Francine D" fell back. It landed on its top. Those who watched from other boats were sure no one could have lived. This is what they reported to the people on shore. The families held no hope for the return of the men. In fact, William Manuel, aged seventy-two, was the only man who did not return alive. He had been fishing just for fun.

The three men who lived saw the boat right itself. They held on to its sides. They climbed back in. They waited for Bernard Jenkins to bring his boat in close enough to throw a rope. Seventeen-year-old Alphonse tied the rope to his fourteen-year-old brother Everet. He told him to jump. The second time around, Alphonse caught the rope again. He gave it to his father Jack. Jack couldn't swim. Almost an hour passed before Jenkins could get back to rescue Alphonse. It was during this time that Alphonse saw William Manuel bobbing up and down in the water. His head had been cracked open from ear to ear.

After rescuing the Doucets, a wave hit and Jenkins' boat took in a lot of water. They had to work quickly to save themselves from going under.

Upon their return, Bernard Jenkins stated that without the help from the Doucets, they never would have made it. Much excitement was shown when the men returned that Sunday morning. However, many tearful faces awaited the return of the boats. It was a sad day for twenty-six wives and eighty-three children.



## CHAPTER VI

The Escuminac Disaster, as it came to be known, touched the hearts of people from all of Canada and other parts of the world. On the Monday following, the Daily Gleaner in Fredericton had a call from Lord Beaverbrook in London. He showed a personal interest in the "Disaster." Lord Beaverbrook was the first to give money to the "Fishermen's Disaster Fund." This Fund was set up to help support the families as their incomes had been lost. Over \$440,000 was raised in six months.

Beaverbrook's London newspaper was the Daily Express. The Daily Express had four million readers. The newspaper gave the Escuminac story most of its front page. The Escuminac Disaster had made the world news.

Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip did an unusual thing by giving to the Fund themselves. While on the Royal Tour of 1959, the Queen and Prince Philip met with the mothers, wives and children of the lost fishermen.

Ten years after the Disaster, the Fishermen's Monument was put in place in memory of the thirty-five men who died. Also listed on the Monument are the names of the sixteen men who showed great courage in saving lives.

The Monument itself is made of stone from the Miramichi. It is over seven feet high and shows three fishermen who stand for the lost men.

The fishermen still set out each day from Escuminac Wharf. They have never forgotten the strength of the bay. To these men, fishing is their life, but they also know it could be their death.



The following men lost their lives in the Escuminac Disaster:

John Chapman	William G. Manuel
Adrien Chiasson	Alonzo Martin
Albert Chiasson	Allan Mills
Alphonse Chiasson	Andrew Mills
Robert Chiasson	Geoffrey Richard
William Chiasson	Jean Louis Richard
Fraser Cook	Lionel Richard
Edgar Diagle	Raphael Robichaud
Charles Gauvin	Victor Robichaud
Arthur Kelly	Leo Roy
Hector Kelly	Harold Taylor
Hugh Kelly	Cunard Williston
Clifford Kingston	Eric Williston
Windsor Kingston	Haley Williston
Alfred McLenaghan	Haynes Williston
George McLeod	Oswald Williston
Amon Manuel	

Those noted for bravery are:

	Brian Lloyd
	Roy Lloyd
Pierre Doiron	Aquila Manuel
Alphonse Doucet	Edmond Martin
Alvin Durelle	Hilarion Martin
Bernard Jenkins	Jack Preston
Cyril Jenkins	Robert Searle
Chlorin Jimmo	Theodore Williston
Leslie Lewis	
Thomas Lewis	

# WORD LIST

nets

weather

engine

mast

## Acknowledgements:

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