

The Perils and Pitfalls of the Steamer Ploughboy: A Story of its Construction to Destruction by John C. Carter

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Book Reviews

Spring 2020



The Perils and Pitfalls of the Steamer Ploughboy

A Story of its Construction to Destruction

By John C. Carter

Essex, Ontario: Essex Region Conservation, 2018. 86 pages, \$15 softcover.

ISBN 9781999456504. (jrcph@erca.org)

This short book details the career of the steamer *Ploughboy*, owned by Thomas, John, and Theodore Park, whose company operated thirty-five vessels on the Upper Lakes, in the mid nineteenth century. Using contemporary newspapers, shipping magazines, and personal letters and diaries John Carter fleshes out the story of one steamer, giving the reader a sense of life and work aboard such a vessel. Steamers played a critical role in the economic development and settling of Canada West. Carter has added to our understanding of

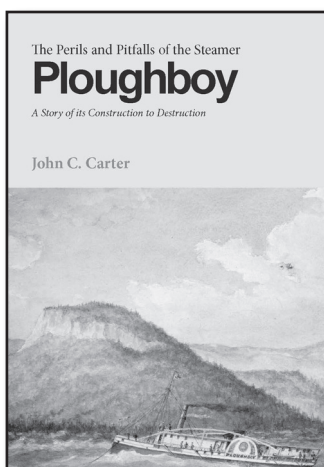
these vessels and their place in Great Lakes maritime history.

The Parks purchased the *Ploughboy* from William and Walter Ebert in 1854. Since its launch in 1851 the *Ploughboy* had been employed in carrying people and goods between Chatham and Amherstburg, Ontario, and Detroit, Michigan. Over the course of the next sixteen years *Ploughboy* plied two major routes in the upper Great Lakes. The first was from Buffalo, New York, to communities along the north shore of Lake Erie and on to Cleve-

land, Ohio. In 1858, as the first route became economically unfeasible, the steamer moved to weekly trips from Collingwood, Ontario to the isolated settlements along the east and north shore of Georgian Bay and on to Sault Ste. Marie and St. Joseph, with monthly journeys into Lake Superior to Fort William.

Ploughboy carried every type of cargo imaginable, from cattle, pigs, and chickens, to various types of cloth, wood, commercial goods from the southern cities to northern lake shore communities, and at times the Royal Mail. It also dealt in passengers along each of its routes and played a role in carrying settlers to the far reaches of Western Canada. It also seems to have had an occasional involvement in the illegal running of rum between the United States and Canada.

Each chapter in the book covers a year, or short sequence of years, in the vessel's life. Most are only two or three pages. Chapter length appears to be governed largely by the availability of source material. The events of 1859 lead to a rather robust chapter, as the disaster the ship narrowly avoided could have cost Canada West most of its provincial government cabinet, including then Premier John A. Macdonald. *Ploughboy* was headed to Little Current when mechanical failure left the vessel drifting off Lonely Island, in Georgian Bay, headed for the rocky shore. With the anchor out to its full length and not grabbing bottom, the passengers and crew felt their inevitable fate close at hand. But the anchor finally took hold and kept the steamer off the rocks, and death at bay. The ship was towed back to Collingwood



for repairs. Carter uses numerous newspapers, letters and diaries to tell the story of this incident from the perspectives of various crew members and passengers.

In 1863 the *Ploughboy* was at the centre of a murder and the drowning of four crew members. The murder was of fishery superintendent William Gibbard. Gibbard had been part of a group of police sent aboard the *Ploughboy*

to Manitoulin Island to settle a fishing dispute with local Indigenous groups. Arresting an Indigenous leader, they returned to the *Ploughboy*. After sending the prisoner ashore, at Killarney, Gibbard could not be found aboard ship. His body was retrieved from Georgian Bay two days later. His murder was never solved, though blame first fell on the Indigenous prisoner. Carter notes that gambling debts may have had more of a hand in Gibbard's demise. Later in the year, a mechanical failure again stranded the *Ploughboy*, this time off Barrie Island. Crew members headed off in boats to get assistance. One of these was bound for Detour (on the American side of Lake Huron). The men in this boat were struck by large waves, washing out four of them. Among these four drowned men was Herbert Park, son of the *Ploughboy's* owner John Park. Herbert's body was never recovered.

The following year *Ploughboy*, getting older and out of date, was turned into a steam tug and renamed *T.F. Park*. The craft made daily trips from Detroit up the St. Clair River to Lake Huron to tow vessels down bound past Detroit. *T.F. Park* also participated in the occasional rescue of stranded boats between Lakes Huron and

Erie. In 1870, the steam tug was sold to James Valentine, of Detroit, who intended to refit it as a passenger steamer. Unfortunately, it caught fire and was a complete wreck.

The steamer had its share of running aground, and mechanical breakdowns. Significant damage was usually repaired in Detroit, or parts were sent from there, or Buffalo, to Collingwood. This speaks to the Americans having the necessary ship repair facilities on the Great Lakes, ahead of Canada. Carter notes that steamers competed with the steam train for providing service to communities around the lakes. In some places, trains replaced ship travel and in others ships helped to advance the rail lines (by carrying cargo for railway construction).

Carter's sources include a wide swath of contemporary newspaper articles and shipping news items, as well as account books, private letters, and diaries, along with secondary sources. The resulting bibliography for this volume is worth the price itself. Images are spread throughout the book, most dealing with the Park fam-

ily, or the *Ploughboy*. The cover is a particular gripping image of the events off Lonely Island. Three appendixes give list of vessels owned by the Parks, a timeline for the *Ploughboy*, and two images related to the Park family. The first two appendixes are useful, the third seems unnecessary.

There is a spacing problem on pages 16 and 17, where the text ends a third of the way down the first, resuming on the next, leaving an empty gap. The second is the verbatim repetition of the information about registration of the *Ploughboy* with the *British Registry of Shipping Inland Waters* and its valuation, see pages 12 and 17. These are small problems that ultimately do not detract from the solid research and the fine story of this steamer's career on the Great Lakes.

This book would be of interest to those studying the merchant trade on the lakes, steamship development and career, and the mid-nineteenth-century history of Canada West.

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The True Face of Sir Isaac Brock

By Guy St. Denis

Calgary, Alberta: University of Calgary Press, 2018. 280 Pages. \$34.99.

ISBN 9781773850207. (www.press.ucalgary.ca)

Was Sir Isaac Brock a good-looking man? Far from a flippant question, Guy St. Denis' *The True Face of Sir Isaac Brock* reveal how accounts of Brock's appearance formed just one thread in the search for an authentic image of the famed hero of Upper Canada. Scouring archival collections across the Great Lakes and the Atlantic, consulting with experts across disciplines, and leaving

no footnote unexamined, St. Denis covers the forgotten controversy over the provenance of Brock's portrait.

St. Denis begins his investigation in 1880, with the search of Lieutenant Governor John Beverley Robinson for a portrait of Brock. In 1896, Agnes FitzGibbon and Sara Mickle, two founding members of the Women's Canadian Historical Society of Toronto, settled upon a rival miniature