

Feb 9

This is Seamus Hanley.

This piece is called **The Wreck of the Joseph Howe: what happened to the Captain afterwards**. Helping **me** stay on course in telling it are two New Zealanders Pip and Vonda. Their lectures have been retelling the story of another dramatic rescue. It was carried out by Ernest Shackleton, his New Zealand Captain, two other Irishmen, and 2 others. They rowed 800 miles in the open ocean to rescue 22 of Shackleton's men waiting it out on Elephant Island. Their ship had been wrecked by the Antarctic ice more than a year earlier.

Today the spotlight will be **on new information** on what happened to the captain of the Joseph Howe after he and the three other seamen were rescued 150 years ago this month. It changes some of what you can find on social media and it provides some closure for the USA relatives of the captain.

Pip Miller began by asking me.

The Joseph Howe was wrecked at Fail na dTadhg on Bere Island. The rescue by two Greenane men was celebrated in a poem and the rescuers got awards from the RNLi and the Board of Trade. The story of the rescue was retold in the Schools Folklore Collection; and in Ted O'Sullivan's book. **But the story took another turn when the internet came along**. The Bere Island Facebook version added that the captain was **sentenced to 18 months jail with hard labour for manslaughter**. This prompted his great-great granddaughter, Robin, to reply by posting a clip from a Belfast newspaper of the time. (The captain was from Belfast) That clip makes it clear this information about the sentence was not correct. The clip showed the captain in a more positive light.

Then a great-great-granddaughter (Jo Anne) emailed Bere Island with two clips about a **separate part of the story** – it's a part that has not been passed down at all. The clip from the Glasgow newspaper mentioned a Board of Trade Enquiry into the loss of the ship and the clip from a Liverpool newspaper reported the ruling. Some of her cousins were not happy that her digging into the past unearthed this negative ruling.

Then, in 2024, the maritime journalist Tom MacSweeney repeated the incorrect information about the sentence for manslaughter. His article in the online version of the Evening Echo had this headline "The wreck

of the Joseph Howe at Bere Island uncovered dark cruelty aboard.” It explained that one of the rescued men, the ship’s steward, complained to the authorities in Castletown, and (and I quote)

the captain was arrested for ill-treating the galley boy during the voyage. The galley boy died from his injuries and was buried at sea. The RIC arrested the captain, who was tried in court, found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to 18 months jail with hard labour.

That 2024 article didn’t mention the captain’s name, but it included a page from the Schools Collection, and that page named the captain as **William Templeton**.

Clip But it wasn’t just the captain who was charged?

The captain’s great-granddaughter was keen to have more information than the one paragraph items in the Belfast and English newspapers. With my access to the Cork newspapers of the time, I was able to find much more.

I have posted on my website all the information I found, and so I will just summarize here. There are **two entirely separate issues**, one to do with the manslaughter charge, and another to do with the Board of Trade Enquiry into the loss of the ship.

First, as for the manslaughter trial, which was held in mid March. The much longer Cork newspaper reports tell us *the charge wasn’t for the manslaughter of the young galley boy, but of an older man, already very sick*. They **confirm** that both the captain and the boatswain were indeed arrested and tried for manslaughter and that the **jury did** find both men guilty. And they were put back for sentencing.

However, the reports show the sentence of eighteen months jail with hard labour to be a ‘Bere **Island myth**.’ In fact, the judge was not all that comfortable with the verdict the jury returned. A week later, at the sentencing, he told the captain and the boatswain

“I have considered the case very anxiously since it was tried, and I am bound to say the conviction has not been altogether satisfactory to my own mind. I don't think any evidence in the case can be relied on except that of the foreign seaman. His evidence would establish a charge of assault against both of you, but it would not, in my judgment, at all establish the charge of manslaughter.

Therefore, on the whole, having regard to the very excellent character you have received, and to your previous good conduct, I have come to the conclusion that I won't pass sentence upon either of you, but discharge you both."

Now to the Board of Trade Enquiry into the loss of the ship. It too was held in Cork City -- at the end of March. It heard from all four survivors (the captain, William Templeton; the boatswain also named William Templeton; the steward; and the seaman) and from the two rescuers (Dennis Harrington and Michael Shanahan). The 3 days covered 8 aspects (1) the voyage from Mexico, with a cargo of mahogany, bound for Cork (2) the deaths, early on, of two crew: they, as well as the captain and other crew had been suffering from the effect of the fever they caught in Mexico (3) the mid-voyage gale that carried away some of their sailpower (4) sighting the Calf Rock Lighthouse and realizing they were off course, having literally "lost their bearings" (5) the loss of two men when trying to launch the boat (6) getting into Fail na dTadhg and striking the rocks (7) the rescue (8) the Coastguard on Bere Island.

I will **paraphrase the first paragraph** of the judgment

"The master showed great want of energy in **not getting the foreyard repaired** after the gale of the 27th January; had he repaired it, he could have used more sail.

The **second reads**

"the vessel was lost through a **mistake in the master's reckoning**; he found himself **off the Calf Rock light-house, instead of Cape Clear**, which he intended to make;

when he had ascertained his position with certainty that morning, he knew (a) he was short handed and his crew debilitated from sickness; (b) that he could not carry sufficient sail to work her off the land, and (c) he saw she was making leeway dead on the land;

So, he was **guilty of a grave error in judgment in not running into Berehaven where he could have procured assistance while he had daylight and a fair wind.**

Now **to its ruling**

The Court, therefore, adjudge that the **certificate of the master, Wm. Templeton, be suspended for six months**

from this date; and recommend that the Board grant him a mate's certificate for that period.

So, the Bere Island version of events seems to be a mutation: **six months' suspension for losing of the ship mutated to eighteen months' hard labour for manslaughter.**

The full report has a photo of the captain and his wife, and a recent one of a great-granddaughter (Jo Anne) and two great- great-granddaughters (Robin and Judith Ann). Also in it, Jo Anne continues William Templeton's story unto **he died in 1909 at the age of 66.**

By the way, I eventually found out where the version on Facebook and on the Bere Island Community Archive came from. It's from Riobard O'Dwyer's book on Bere Island families.

The entire story is a good example of how, once information gets 'out there,' a narrative takes on a life of its own, and isn't easily 'un-told.'

Clip: History is hard

I hope the new information helps the family members; until now they had very little to go on. I also encourage readers to examine the fuller account, and then decide for themselves.

To find our online report, search for - **Seamus Hanley wreck Joseph Howe** (H-O-W-E) - and follow it to my McGill University website.

1377 words

<https://jhanley.biostat.mcgill.ca>

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