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# Introduction

*“They know what shipwrecks are, for, out of sight of land, however inland, they have drowned full many a midnight ship with all its shrieking crew.”*

HERMAN MELVILLE wrote those words about the Great Lakes in *Moby Dick* in 1851, long before the wrecks of the *Asia*, the *Eastland*, the *Algoma*, the *Charles Price*, the *Lady Elgin*, and the *Edmund Fitzgerald*. The list of ships sunk in the Great Lakes would fill, by my rough calculations, fifty pages of a book. Even if one includes the remnants of the commercial fishing fleets, there are far more merchant vessels on the bottom of the Great Lakes than there are floating on their surface.

The same could be said, I suppose, of the English Channel, the Mediterranean, and the Caribbean, but the Great Lakes were late arrivals to the marine trade. Ship

traffic really began only after the American Revolution. It was given a huge boost by the opening of the Erie Canal, reached a peak before the Great Depression, and is now in a steep decline. Scheduled passenger runs stopped years ago, except on ferry runs. The railway car ferry trade is long-forgotten. Prairie grain heads overland to Pacific ports, not through the lakes. Boats bearing iron ore still feed the steel mills at Gary, Detroit, the Soo (Sault Ste. Marie), Cleveland, and Hamilton, but those mills are being strangled by foreign competition. Harbors are being built up with waterfront skyscrapers, grain elevators are coming down, and evolution goes on.

In the movie *Field of Dreams*, Thomas Mann, the bitter writer played by James Earl Jones, has a revelation: “America has rolled by like an army of steamrollers. It’s been erased like a blackboard, rebuilt, and erased again.” Baseball, he says, “has been the one constant, reminding us of all that once was good, and that could be again.” There have been other constants, of course, and, as a Canadian, I’ve got to argue that hockey’s near the top of that list. But the real constant in North America is the desire to defeat distance, to develop technologies to communicate instantly, to do business without the inconvenience of space, to travel quickly. Military historian John Keegan says Europeans battle against time, North Americans struggle with distance. We adapted our technology to use the Great Lakes as a highway and then, without much evident regret, we’ve left the boats behind and taken to airplanes and cars. Our belongings are shipped by truck or by plane. People today would not even think of traveling by boat between Chicago and Buffalo. They just don’t have time.

So, in most ways, the age of the Great Lakes ship is over. Certainly, the age of the ship disaster has passed. As of this writing, it's been thirty years since the *Edmund Fitzgerald* sank. That was the last and most famous Great Lakes shipwreck. When the Fitz was lost, nine years had passed since the previous big wreck, the *James Morrell*, went down in Lake Huron. But, in the decades before, three or four lake freighters were lost every year, often with their entire crew. Somehow, life has become more valuable. Modern ships are better built and more money is spent on technology that saves lives. With luck the record will hold, and the Fitz will be the last big one lost.

I've learned a few things since I wrote *Ninety Fathoms Down* in 1995, updating and adding to it for *True Canadian Stories of the Great Lakes* in 2004, and writing this book. For instance, when I see a disaster movie like *Titanic* that shows relieved sailors and passengers getting into lifeboats in the open seas, I think of the *Asia*, the *Sand Merchant*, the *Morrell*, the *Carl Bradley*, the *Marquette and Bessemer No. 2*, and many other Great Lakes ships whose survivors, trapped in lifeboats in the open lakes, came to envy those who had stayed on board the lost ships.

It must baffle people who've never lived near the Great Lakes that full-size ships can sink without a trace in lakes that are 500 feet above sea level and more than a thousand miles from the ocean. The idea that you can drive for more than a day from the East Coast through farmland, mountains and cities, then come to bodies of water that are so large that they stretch far, far off over the horizon, must be hard for newcomers to understand. Certainly the marine explorer Jacques Cousteau and his sons had that feeling

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when they almost lost their ship, *Calypso*, on Georgian Bay on the way back from filming the wreck of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*. Cousteau thought the expedition would be a yachting trip. He arrived at Quebec City saying he never wanted to challenge the lakes again.

Now the lakes are left to pleasure boats, a few lake and ocean freighters, cottagers, campers, fishermen, families who worship beaches. Some of us are wistful when we think of the past. Some of us long for the days when it was possible to see the five big lakes by water. Still, we're here because of those who went before us, and we live in conditions of comfort, safety, and luxury that were utterly unknown a century ago. Some of us look back with envy, but those people who opened up the Great Lakes country would have been quick to trade places with us. Our challenge is to ensure that, one hundred years from now, people look back on us with nostalgia, not envy.