

REVIEW ESSAY

Filling a Void with Online Avocational Scholarship

Kevin C. Griffin. *St. Lawrence Saga: The History of the Clarke Steamship Company*. clarkesteamship.wordpress.com, 2014. 1479 pp., illustrations, bibliography, appendices. Available online without charge.

In 1995 Lewis R. Fischer lamented that fact that the business history of shipping has been much neglected or even ignored by Canadian writers.¹ The few volumes or articles that did exist at the time were generally rated “unsatisfactory” or “questionable”, with special scorn on corporate histories, several of which were written as commissioned works. A year later, in an overview of the early years Canadian Merchant Marine, Kenneth Mackenzie was a forced to go back to late-nineteenth century sources to reference published sources on the five North Atlantic lines which he discussed.² Both writers, Mackenzie specifically, and Fischer by implication, mainly restricted their analysis to international shipping, especially the North Atlantic connections. These were companies with large fleets offering luxury, speed, complex financial and management structures, and often headed by dynamic, larger-than-life figures.

As a maritime nation, Canada’s merchant marine had a far larger and longer role serving the ports within the Dominion itself as well as connections with traditional near-by trading partners such as Newfoundland, the United States and the West Indies. Here too, there seems to be little scholarship dealing with the successes or failures of regional shipping lines, whether domestic or international.³ Walter Lewis, in a recent paper in this journal, challenges us to look more closely

¹ Lewis R. Fischer, “The Enterprising Canadians: An Assessment of Canadian Maritime History since 1975,” in Frank Broeze, & Lewis R. Fischer, eds., *Maritime History on the Crossroads: A Critical View of Recent Historiography* (St. John’s: International Maritime Economic History Association, 1995), 35. He specifically mentions Edgar A. Collard, *Passage to the Sea: The Story of Canada Steamship Lines* (Toronto: Doubleday, 1991) and George Musk, *Canadian Pacific. The Story of the Famous Shipping Line*, (London: Davis & Charles, 1981).

² Kenneth S. Mackenzie, ““They Lost the Smell”: The Canadian Steam Merchant Marine, 1853-1903,” *The Northern Mariner/Le Marin du nord* 6: 2 (April 1996), 1-29.

³ There are a number of exceptions, including some fine work on British Columbia shipping noted in the Fischer article above.

at the shipping companies serving inland waters, lakes and rivers and coastal lines.⁴ There were scores, if not hundreds, of such companies with names unfamiliar to all but regional or local historians but which played a significant role in the nautical history of Canada.

Individually, they may be insignificant on a national overview but collectively, they represent a major area of Canada's marine history and can serve to examine larger themes such as the advancement of policy objectives, stimulating and assisting resource development, and providing individuals and communities with opportunities for contact, communication and growth.

If we were to wait for interest in these lesser shipping entities to be sparked on the part of traditional academic historians, it might be some time before they came under the microscope. There has been a tendency to belittle non-academic approaches, with analysis and commentary often being given higher value than descriptive content. The records of these small shipping enterprises seldom survive as a distinct "fonds" in archival repositories and their study is rarely embraced by graduate students or promoted by tenured academics. With the field vacated or (more likely) seldom occupied by historians, research in this area has continued but with a different perspective. While they are often the subject of pejorative comment by some academics, "avocational historians" have pursued their interest in these local or regional companies and with new vehicles for presenting information using online publication there has been an increase in websites, blogs, and e-journals dedicated to, or featuring, nautical history.⁵ In contrast to being placed in obscure publications with short-press runs, these online resources are often hiding in plain sight. These can be of mixed value and many contain all of the deficiencies of self-publication, but they also can be of high quality and be extremely useful for researchers.

In this context, *St. Lawrence Saga: The History of the Clarke Steamship Company* represents a significant research achievement. Far from being a narrow corporate history bereft of context, or a list of notable ships and remarkable men, this work represents a major contribution to the history of the region over the last century. The Gulf of St. Lawrence represents a sizable area of Canada's coastline and many of the natural resources of the region gave flavour to its nautical history.⁶ There have been boom and bust cycles in many of its industries, including fishing, resource extraction, and manufacturing and transportation of raw materials, finished

⁴ Walter Lewis, "Line Development and Passenger Steamboat Trade on Lake Ontario and the Upper St Lawrence River, 1829-1875," *The Northern Mariner/Le marin du nord* 29:2 (Summer 2019), 135-48.

⁵ This is in addition to a number of peer-reviewed journals which have either originated as online publications as e-journals or have migrated to the format. One which may be of interest to *Northern Mariner* readers is *Coriolis: the interdisciplinary journal of maritime studies* <https://ijms.nmdl.org/> published by Mystic Seaport.

⁶ Several examples of the regional approach to nautical history can be found in Claire E. Campbell, Edward MacDonald and Brian Payne, eds., *The Greater Gulf: Essays on the Environmental History of the Gulf of St Lawrence*, (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019).

goods and workers. These activities both contribute to, and are the result of, the success of coastal shipping firms such as Clarke Steamship. In some respects, *The St. Lawrence Saga* is a linked series of case studies of the changing fortunes of the Gulf area.

The Clarke Steamship business originated out of the family involvement in publishing in the 1890s, which led to participation in the pulp and paper industry in 1902, the establishment of mills at Clarke City, near what is now Sept-Îles, Quebec, and from there to regional shipping in the Gulf. The steamship company was founded in 1921 and soon expanded into related sectors, all of which are documented in the study. Griffin is successful at explaining the relationships between companies created as subsidiaries for legal and tax purposes. For example, during some periods it was advantageous that each ship was owned by a different company, and while this can become complex, and at times confusing, for the reader it does contribute to an understanding of the multitude of companies operating in the region. The study contains an appendix providing details on building, ownership and disposition of the 60 vessels owned or chartered by Clarke and its related companies.

The author, Kevin C. Griffin, has personal experience with the Clarke enterprise, having been associated with them in the 1970s and 1980s, but the work is not a commissioned corporate history. Griffin had access to some of the company records which might otherwise have been destroyed, and these led him to undertake further research. He currently holds a number of corporate directorships in the marine industries, especially in companies related to the cruise and travel sector. That current interest is evident in the coverage of the cruising activities which occupy a good part of the Clarke story. In addition to cruising in the Gulf area, which was an activity that built on the passenger capacity and role of its ships as part of the communications system in the area, Clarke was, for a time, a major player in the Bermuda and West Indies cruise business. In contrast to the domestic nature of Clarke's primary shipping business, the cruising activity gives the firm an international presence in this specialized area. Engaged initially owing to the availability of its ships during the winter "off-season" in the Gulf, the company emerged as a player in what became a lucrative market in the 1920s and 30s. Given the detail of this activity and the passion evident in Griffin's interest, this aspect might have been better served with a separate volume on the cruise business.

The phrase "encyclopedic" is often bandied about but it can be realistically applied to Griffin's work. It is not simply a narrowly construed history of a single shipping line, but an extensive examination of the shipping world of the Gulf of St. Lawrence using the Clarke Steamship as a lens. At more than 1400 pages, the study does not lack for detail. The first 175 pages deal with shipping in the Gulf before Clarke Steamships and introduces routes, ships, and lines that show how steam technology fundamentally changed communications within the region. Firms such as the Quebec and Gulf Ports, Dobell Line, Chaffey Brothers, the Montreal and Maritime Provinces Line, Black Diamond, Montreal & Acadian, Holliday Brother,

the North Shore Steamship Line and many others, as well as their vessels active in the region before the Great War, create a context and a history of shipping for the period. Very few of these companies have ever come under scrutiny from Canadian marine historians.⁷

This comprehensive approach continues throughout the text and Griffin includes a great deal of information about Clarke's competitors and collaborators although sometimes following these many rabbit holes can be frustrating for the reader. With dozens of companies and perhaps hundreds of vessels named, the lack of an index becomes somewhat of a deficiency. While the online text is searchable, often the reference from search engines is to the chapter of the work and as the chapters are not paginated, a reference to a name in a 120 or 130 page chapter in pdf format is not all that accessible, as some pdf format readers do not include a mechanism for searching within the document.⁸

One of the themes noted in this early period is the impact of changes in land-based communications on shipping lines and routes. In the nineteenth century, the gradual development of railways in the lower provinces and the completion of the Intercolonial line between Quebec and the Maritimes forced significant changes in how freight and passengers within the region were handled.⁹ This theme is carried forward into the twentieth century as the rail, and later the road networks in Newfoundland and along the developing resource towns of Quebec's North Shore forced shipping firms to withdraw from some markets and re-structure their services to others. In the late twentieth century technological shifts in bulk cargo handling and containerization had a similar impact, resulting in consolidation and the loss of many smaller enterprises. Owing to Clarke Steamships' long service on the Lower St. Lawrence and Quebec North Shore extending to the west coast of Newfoundland and Labrador, the history of the company is to a very great extent the history of the isolated communities in this area.

While not footnoted, it is clear that *The St. Lawrence Saga* is the result of both diligent and exhaustive research. A bibliography includes more than 125 books and other works as well as articles and reports from both academic and popular journals, shipping and general periodicals and government sources. The source of any direct quotations used in given in the text. Griffin is interested not only in

⁷ Kenneth Mackenzie references a manuscript in preparation on the history of the Quebec and Gulf Ports Steamship Company in his 1996 history of the Canadian merchant marine in the last half of the nineteenth century, but it does not seem to have reached publication. Mackenzie endnote 33, "They Lost the Smell" 26.

⁸ Although the content of the site appears in general search engines, it is not captured by Google Scholar for obvious reasons. Citations and references to *The St. Lawrence Saga* site are almost non-existent, although to be fair, there has been little writing on the subject area since the site became available online in 2013.

⁹ The role of subsidies and government involvement in the shipping connections with Newfoundland are covered in Malcolm MacLeod "Subsidized Steamers to a Foreign Country: Canada and Newfoundland, 1892-1949" *Acadiensis* 14:2 (Spring 1989), 66-92.

the companies and the ships, but also in the people and the impact the shipping service had on the ports visited, especially those in remote communities along the St. Lawrence north shore. He includes accounts and reminiscences of passengers and residents of the area as well as officers and crew members as part of the story, offering a social history of the steamship service.

Like philosopher John Locke's socks which had been darned so many times that it was impossible to determine if the socks, as such, still existed, the changes in direction, management, and ownership of Clarke Steamships into the most recent period become so convoluted and distant from the original Clarke Steamship story that what is a strength at the beginning of the narrative becomes a bit of a burden for the reader as after 1980 spin-offs, successor companies, and holding companies (few bearing the Clarke name) follow in quick succession. Barring a dramatic termination point, it can be difficult in some cases to bring such a broad story to a close. Like a late-night traveller looking for a motel, Griffin drives by several possible stops, none of which are just right for him, until the narrative finally grinds to a halt, as if out of gas, in the early twenty-first century. His unwillingness to let go of the story leaves him following the fate of ships, corporations, and even of key personnel long after they have lost relevance. Because 2021 would be the centenary of the founding of the Clarke firm, Griffin may be struggling to get to a nice round number before publication, but the reader also struggles to come this far.

Ironically for the online publisher, finally getting the information into the hands of readers is not necessarily the end of the matter, for the file remains open. There is comfort for the author in knowing that, unlike in volumes graven in paper and ink, errors can be corrected and information added as it becomes available. The publication has dynamic potential to respond to feedback. That can be both a strength and a weakness, as the hazards of premature presentation or of insufficient attention to editorial details of punctuation and infelicitous phrasing are often found in such publications. That, refreshingly, is not the case in *The St. Lawrence Saga* which has very few instances of such deficiencies. The volume, however, could still benefit from a strong editorial hand. Encyclopedic coverage is good if one is writing an encyclopedia, less so in a saga. An outside reader or two might harness the enthusiasm of the author for his subject and direct the results to better interest a reader less already in love with the subject. Griffin concedes that many readers might be put off by a volume with the bulk of a Dickens novel or the Bible and that perhaps there might be more than one story to be told.¹⁰ In fact, there could be several books struggling to get out of the draft manuscript.

The material is presented online as a draft and one wonders what its fate may be. Online resources have vanished overnight through loss of domain names or the restructuring of an internet host. Even a limited print on demand format can give more permanence. Interested readers should download this work without delay and

¹⁰ K.C. Griffin to H.T. Holman, personal communication, 28 June 2020.

store it safely away. Griffin appears to have finished work in 2013 and is careful to identify what he has presented as a draft rather than a manuscript. Editing such a detailed and comprehensive document for print publication is a significant task, as is incorporating an additional (and potentially valuable) resource that Griffin has amassed—a collection of over 300 photographs and illustrations related to the company, its ships, and their activities. Too long and detailed to be attractive to a publisher of popular books, and insufficiently critical to appeal to a university press, *The St. Lawrence Saga* may already have found its best vehicle for reaching its readers. Nevertheless, it would be unwise for anyone interested in the region or the development of coastal shipping lines to ignore the importance of Griffin's work or to consign it to the fate of many self-published volumes. This well-told story is still the best account of coastal shipping involving five of Canada's coastal provinces. Although unorthodox in its method of presentation, *The St. Lawrence Saga* is well-deserving of greater attention by both academics and those with a general interest in the subject.

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