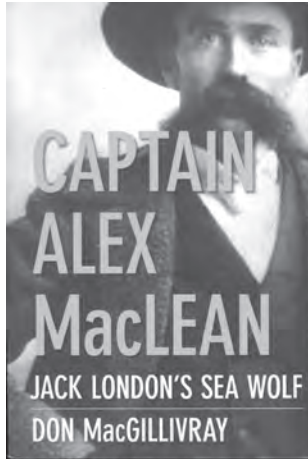


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In Search of Cape Breton's Sea Wolf

A review of *Captain Alex MacLean: Jack London's Sea Wolf*
by Don MacGillivray,
University of British Columbia Press, 2008



In May of 2008 while attending the Atlantic Book Awards in Darmouth, I was surprised to find the Halifax waterfront, or much of the old docks at least, converted into the piers, if not the streets, of San Francisco. I approached one of city's policemen responsible for keeping traffic away from the shoot and he informed me that it was a joint German-Canadian production; later I learned from a friend of mine at the Maritime Museum that the British Actor Tim Roth was playing a central role as Wolf Larsen's brother, Death Larsen. Yes, that's the character's name. *The Sea Wolf*, like most of Jack London's fiction, is not big on subtlety; we are a long way, for example, from his compatriot Henry James who died in the same year as London. And yet London's work keeps on getting filmed, much more so than James', perhaps it's the drama or rather the melodrama that draws the camera and the viewer in. In the early 1990's, the Victorian English critic and scholar, John Sutherland made a case for London's *Sea Wolf* in a new edition of the Oxford World Classic's series. While recognizing the nautical Nietzsche and social Darwinian traits behind the

portrayal of Larsen, Sutherland also took pains to highlight the book's strength as a record of its time and place: "The ruthless harvesting of gravid seals at the end of the nineteenth century was the ecological equivalent of a gold rush. It virtually exterminated a species. Between 1886 and 1911 the northern Pacific fur seals went the same way as the American passenger pigeon and the bison." The vast majority of these seals were destined for the fashion industry in London. It is an old story. Because of Jack London's triumph as a writer of late nineteenth century naturalist fiction, especially with *The Call of the Wild*, his political, and in particular his socialist positions, have been ghettoized or turned into folklore. And yet London remains, with Theodore Drieser and others, a genuine American socialist and the true heir of writers like John Steinbeck.

In his monumental biography of *Captain Alex MacLean, Jack London's Sea Wolf*, Don MacGillivray takes us back to the world that London knew and partially recorded in his novel. MacGillivray's book, like London's, is a tale of the sea but it is much more than this; it is a tale of two cities, San Francisco and Victoria; of two countries, Canada and the United States, and of two empires, Britain and the emerging United States. This later theme is one of the most fascinating parts of the text as MacGillivray takes us behind the scenes and records the international power struggles that emerge over the pelagic sealing industry of the North Pacific and the countries that border it, especially Japan, Russia, the United States and Canada/Britain. Into the midst of this late nineteenth cauldron of predatory (literally) capitalism, of merchant and military navies, of shanghai'd sailors, poachers and pirates comes Captain Angus MacLean, a Gaelic speaking Scot from East Bay, not far from Sydney on Cape Breton Island.

Whatever else may be said of MacLean, he was one of the greatest schooner sailors and captains of the late nineteenth century and if he had not found a place in the fiction of London (distorted as it is) he would still surely have deserved to have his story told. Though MacGillivray gives a thorough treatment of the making of the MacLean/Larsen myth and its place in legend, folklore and literature that part of the story seems minor

and anticlimactic when it arrives at the end of this life. MacGillivray of course may have intended this all along, as MaLean's story is so much more compelling than that of Larsen's. Indeed, MacLean's abilities, strength's and complex character make him at times more fitting material for a Joseph Conrad than a Jack London. There is often more heroic *Nostramo* about him than nautical Nietzsche: while in the south Pacific, for example, his crew comes down with malaria and begins to die off in front of their captain; apparently undaunted, MacLean sets about to single handedly sail the large three-masted schooner for two weeks over a distance of 2,000 miles, all the while battling the disease himself. The story is reminiscent of Captain Bligh and his famous open-boat journey after the mutiny. There are other tales that attract the interest of journalists from San Francisco and Victoria, some concern poaching and piracy, others focus on his ability to fight: once, when leaving a bar, MacLean was set upon by three men, one a prize fighter hired to give him a beating. MacLean draws a pistol and warns the two men not to intervene. Putting away his weapon he then beats the prizefighter to a pulp in short order.

But the independent and resourceful MacLean is also an instrument of the runaway train that is nineteenth century industrial capitalism and imperial expansion. Like Buffalo Bill he too helps preside over the slaughter and extinction of an entire species. It is his great skill as sailor and hunter of course which gains him both respect and notoriety, few captains could claim his success with the exception perhaps of his brother, Dan. Both men seemed to have had as much political savvy, or at least to have understood some of the workings of imperial power politics, as they did an understanding of the sea. Becoming U.S. citizens in 1882, before making San Francisco their homeport, is one example of this political knowledge, and MacLean's confrontations with the Russians and the Japanese, not to mention his numerous testimonies in court, are others. MacLean's appearances before commissions and in courts in particular always showed him to be in command of his facts and the situation generally whether political, legal or nautical. In this respect and in many others MacLean seems an

unlikely model for London's nautical Nietzsche, that extreme, over the top character probably best captured on celluloid by Edward G. Robinson in that early and still best rendering of the tale. And yet there is little doubt that London used the Cape Breton captain's experiences for at least part of his inspiration:

“The MacLeans, their exploits, escapades, and approach to sailing, sealing, drinking, regulations and authority in general, were natural grist for this mill. London later publicly acknowledged that he had heard of MacLean's ‘wild exploits from the men with whom I went seal hunting in 1893. MacLean had an exciting record of adventure and upon his deeds I based my Sea Wolf character.’”

MacLean himself was unimpressed and certainly not flattered by his association with London's famous character. In a chapter dealing with his final years he makes this clear when giving a deposition as a witness in Montreal:

“Counsellor Egan cross-examined MacLean extensively as to whether or not a number of incidents from London's novel were taken directly from MacLean's experiences:

Q. Can you remember any one thing in that book which resembles your life?

A. No. Of course, the sealing part in it resembles some of the work of catching seals.

Q. But you know that he pictures Wolf Larsen as a most brutal violent man? Doesn't he?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. Does that agree with what you know of yourself?

A. No, I don't think it does. Nor anyone else that knows me.”

Don MacGillivray's research confirms the retired captain's conception of himself. MacLean drowned in 1914 when he slipped going aboard a tug boat in a small creek not far from Vancouver,

he was 56 years old. In an earlier chapter, MacGillivray, a Cape Bretoner himself, writes lyrically but without nostalgia about what news of the seafaring MacLeans would have meant to the vast majority of Cape Breton men now facing life as coal miners and steelworkers: ‘Many Cape Breton Gaels in particular, adjusting to work in the steel plant, or in “the black pit of misery” in “the country of coal, ” doubtless cast envious eyes westward to the Pacific and reflected on the spirited adventurer who was one of their own.’