

## After the Escuminac Disaster: Poverty and Paternalism in Miramichi Bay, New Brunswick

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

In June 1959, the fishing fleet leaving from the wharf at Escuminac in northeastern New Brunswick was struck by a hurricane resulting in the deaths of 35 men. The Escuminac Disaster was one of the worst work-related disasters in the province's history, creating a significant challenge for dependents left behind with limited resources. In response, provincial leaders – both secular and religious – created the New Brunswick Fishermen's Disaster Fund. The administrators of the fund, mostly well-to-do and English-speaking, exhibited great difficulty in understanding the survival strategies employed by families, all of whom were poor and many of whom were Acadian.

# After the Escuminac Disaster: Poverty and Paternalism in Miramichi Bay, New Brunswick

RONALD RUDIN

En juin 1959, la flottille de pêche partie du quai d'Escuminac, dans le nord-est du Nouveau-Brunswick, fut frappée par un ouragan qui causa la mort de 35 hommes. Le désastre d'Escuminac, l'une des pires catastrophes de l'histoire de la province à s'être produites dans le cadre du travail, engendra de grandes difficultés pour les personnes à charge que ces pêcheurs laissèrent derrière eux et dont les ressources étaient limitées. En réponse, des dirigeants de la province, tant laïques que religieux, constituèrent Le fonds de secours du désastre maritime du Nouveau-Brunswick. Les administrateurs du fonds, pour la plupart des anglophones bien nantis, eurent du mal à comprendre les stratégies de survie employées par les familles, qui étaient pauvres et dont bon nombre étaient acadiennes.

In June 1959, the fishing fleet leaving from the wharf at Escuminac in northeastern New Brunswick was struck by a hurricane resulting in the deaths of 35 men. The Escuminac Disaster was one of the worst work-related disasters in the province's history, creating a significant challenge for dependents left behind with limited resources. In response, provincial leaders – both secular and religious – created the New Brunswick Fishermen's Disaster Fund. The administrators of the fund, mostly well-to-do and English-speaking, exhibited great difficulty in understanding the survival strategies employed by families, all of whom were poor and many of whom were Acadian.

IN JUNE 1969, BEFORE A CROWD NUMBERING 2,000 (in a town of fewer than 300 residents) and with dignitaries – both secular and religious – on hand to mark the occasion, a monument was inaugurated on the wharf at Escuminac, along Miramichi Bay in northeastern New Brunswick. Designed by the Acadian sculptor Claude Roussel, the Fishermen's Memorial features three large figures of fishers dressed to go out to sea, holding their drift-nets.<sup>1</sup> They

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1 The memorial is discussed in Nicole Lang, "Mémoire et patrimoine maritime: le désastre d'Escuminac de 1959 et le Monument aux pêcheurs," in *Développement comparé des littoraux du golfe du Saint-Laurent et du Centre-Ouest français, d'hier à aujourd'hui*, ed. Nicolas Landry, Jacques Péret, et Thierry Sauzeau (Moncton, NB: Centre d'études acadiennes, 2012), 181-98; see also David Frank and Nicole Lang, *Labour Landmarks in New Brunswick* (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2010), 51-63. The current article, which forms part of a larger project exploring the Escuminac Disaster from various vantage points, benefitted greatly from the thoughtful feedback provided by reviewers.



**Figure 1 – Fishermen's Memorial, Escuminac, NB – Sculpture by Claude Roussel.**

Source: Fonds Claude-Roussel, 245-169-0006, Centre d'études acadiennes Anselme-Chiasson, l'Université de Moncton, Moncton, NB.



**Map 1 – Miramichi Bay, New Brunswick.**

Source: Map by Sepideh Shahamati.

represented the 35 men who died a decade earlier, when a hurricane struck the fishing fleet that had headed out just outside the bay to fish for Atlantic salmon in the Gulf of St Lawrence. The Escuminac Disaster has been called “the deadliest hurricane in Canadian history” as well as one of the “worst work-related disasters” and one of the worst fishing disasters in New Brunswick history, all of which helps to explain why it attracted so much attention on its tenth anniversary.<sup>2</sup>

The 100 men who set out that day in June 1959 were engaged in a practice that had scarcely changed since it was introduced in Miramichi Bay in the early 20th century.<sup>3</sup> Drift-netters harvested salmon by extending nets, often more than a kilometre long, that would float below the surface of the water. Since this technique was “most effective on dark nights when there is a moderate breeze blowing,” fishers leaving from the Escuminac wharf would typically head out in the late afternoon to set their nets.<sup>4</sup> They would then retire to the boat’s cabin for a meal and some sleep overnight before pulling in their nets and returning to shore the next morning – that is, unless something unforeseen intervened.

Drift-netting, and salmon fishing in the Miramichi watershed more generally, had been in decline for much of the two decades preceding the

2 *Times & Transcript* (Moncton), 18 June 2009; Frank and Lang, *Labour Landmarks in New Brunswick*, 51–58.

3 Canada, *Report of the Royal Commission Investigating the Fisheries of the Maritime Provinces and the Magdalen Islands* (Ottawa: F.A. Acland, 1928), 24.

4 F.H. Wooding, *Canada’s Atlantic Salmon* (Ottawa: Department of Fisheries, 1954), 12.

Escuminac Disaster, the result of the degradation of the river due to a variety of pollutants, including DDT, sprayed upstream intermittently for two decades starting in 1952 as part of a campaign to destroy the spruce budworm.<sup>5</sup> In addition, salmon moving up and down the Miramichi were exposed to a variety of toxins dumped into the river by local industries.<sup>6</sup> In this context, the total weight of the commercial salmon catch across New Brunswick declined by 90 per cent between 1930 and 1955. Then, between 1955 and 1959, there was an anomalous increase of nearly 150 per cent in the area where drift-netting was staged from the Escuminac wharf.<sup>7</sup> A Department of Fisheries report explained that in 1959 “salmon were available to the drifters farther offshore and for a longer time than usual. . . . The 1959 Miramichi drift net catch totalled just over 30,000 salmon as compared to about 10,000 in both 1957 and 1958.”<sup>8</sup>

Having gone through a long period of decline, the drift-net fishers viewed the summer of 1959 as a small window of opportunity for them to provide for their families by adding a good salmon catch to their harvest of other species such as lobster, cod, and mackerel. In that context they were willing to head out on the early evening of June 19, even though some were concerned by signs of stormy weather. In an interview on the 40th anniversary of the disaster, James Maxime Manuel explained how he “went fishing because we were poor and needed the money. . . . Going out fishing that night, I took a chance. The weather office did give us bad weather reports all right, but the fishing was good and so we went anyway. . . . We hoped to get more fish in one night than we would ordinarily get in a week’s fishing.”<sup>9</sup> In the end, Manuel was among the 65 men who survived the storm out of sheer luck in addition to their skill. Forecasts shifted late in the evening, but this made little difference as most of “the tiny fishing boats, having no radios, carried on into the night.”<sup>10</sup>

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- 5 Mark J. McLaughlin, “Green Shoots: Aerial Insecticide Spraying and the Growth of Environmental Consciousness in New Brunswick, 1952-1973,” *Acadiensis* 40, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2011): 3-23.
  - 6 Paul Elson, “Impact of Recent Economic Growth and Industrial Development on Ecology of Northwest Miramichi Atlantic Salmon,” *Journal of the Fisheries Research Board* 31, no. 5 (May 1974): 527, 530.
  - 7 A.W. May and W.H. Lear, *Digest of Canadian Atlantic Salmon Catch Statistics*, Technical Report No. 270 (St. John’s: Fisheries Research Board of Canada, 1971), 16.
  - 8 *Trade News* (Department of Fisheries) 12, no. 2 (June 1960): 4, 17.
  - 9 Harold Adams, ed, *Trouble at Sea: Survivors and the Widows and Orphans of the Escuminac Disaster Tell Their Stories on the 40th Anniversary* (Miramichi, NB: Cardogan Publishing, 1999), 52. To the extent that the degradation of the Miramichi River sent the men out to fish, what happened at Escuminac was not exactly a “natural disaster.”
  - 10 *Daily Gleaner*, 27 June 1959.

The names of the men who died are inscribed on the base of the Fishermen's Memorial, as are those of 16 others who were recognized for their acts of bravery during the storm. There was the case, for instance, of Bernard Jenkins, who was out with his nephew Cyril when they came across the capsized boat of Jack Doucet. At this point one member of Doucet's crew had already been killed in the storm, and Doucet and two of his sons were hanging on for dear life after one brother rescued the other from certain death by drowning. Jenkins passed near the capsized vessel several times to pull in each of the Doucets. For their efforts, the two Jenkins men were awarded British Empire medals while Alphonse Doucet (who saved his brother) received the Queen's Commendation for Bravery.

Still other acts of heroism went unrecorded within the families of fishers who had died, which forced 150 dependents to figure out how they would get by after having lost a major source of support. In some cases, the frequently large families lost not only a father but also single, young men who were contributing to their families as well. William and Alozia Chiasson, for instance, had seven children, two of whom died along with their father in the disaster. As Zoël Chiasson, one of the surviving children, explained: "When dad died, my entire family suffered with poverty. Three deaths in our family all at the same time was hard to live through. . . . We planted food in the garden to help feed ourselves. We got secondhand clothes from the nuns. Each child in my family tried to help out by getting work to at least be able to buy our own clothes."<sup>11</sup>

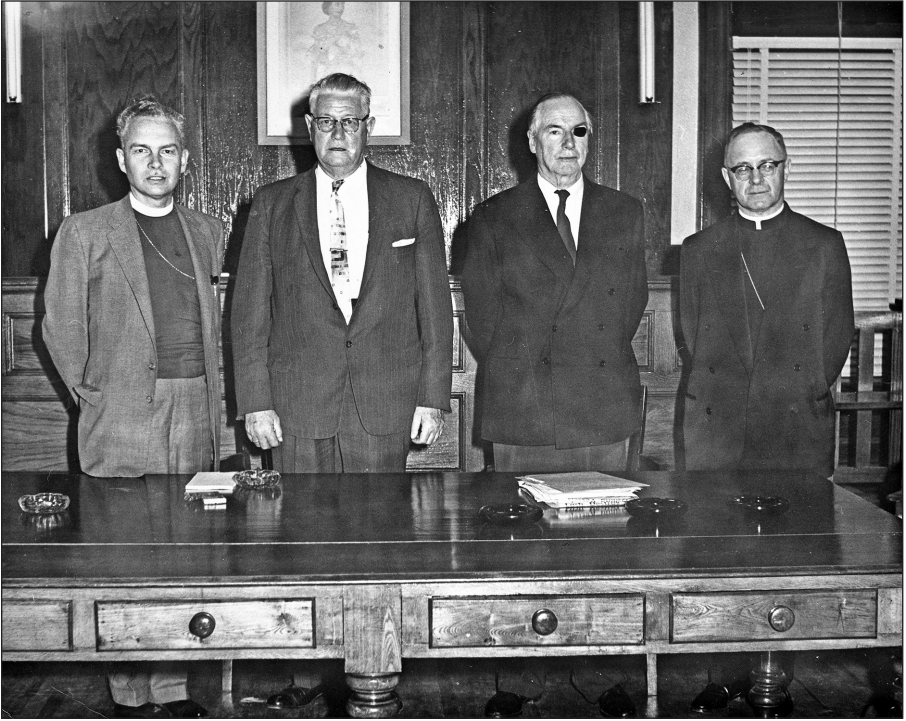
In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, and in order to help out families like the Chiassons, the province's elite, including a number of the people on the podium for the inauguration of Roussel's sculpture, created the New Brunswick Fishermen's Disaster Fund, which is at the heart of this article. During the seven months following the hurricane the fund collected \$440,000, starting with a \$5,000 contribution from Lord Beaverbrook (the London-based newspaper magnate who grew up in the Miramichi). This contribution was acknowledged in a further plaque on the memorial, which includes his message at the time: "In this disaster without parallel in the Miramichi Bay that holds for me life-long memories, I send my deepest sympathies to the bereaved, my sorrow for the loss of so many splendid lives, and my admiration for those who faced the dangers of the storm and survived."<sup>12</sup> It is hardly surprising that the men who died or exhibited bravery were commemorated on the base

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<sup>11</sup> Adams, *Trouble at Sea*, 61.

<sup>12</sup> *Daily Gleaner*, 20 June 1969.





**Figure 2 – New Brunswick Fishermen’s Disaster Fund meeting, 1959 – from left, Anglican Bishop Henry O’Neil, Lieutenant-Governor J. Leonard O’Brien, Brigadier Michael Wardell, Père J.A. Boucher (curé, Baie-Ste-Anne).**

Source: Source: P349-122, Provincial Archives of New Brunswick (PANB), Fredericton.

of the Fishermen’s Memorial, but the inclusion of Beaverbrook – giving his voice so much space – is another matter altogether. To be sure, it is common for monuments to serve as tributes to their benefactors, either implicitly or explicitly, but what is striking here is that we hear Beaverbrook in a way that we do not hear the fishers.<sup>13</sup>

As we will see, however, Beaverbrook’s prominent inclusion was an accurate reflection of the central role played by the elite, which directed the disaster fund in its efforts to help the families rebuild their lives after the loss of breadwinners. In that regard Beaverbrook serves as a proxy on the monument for that elite and in particular for his protégé Michael Wardell, who worked

<sup>13</sup> While some monuments note the identity of the benefactors, others implicitly honour them; this is the case of the numerous memorials to the heroes of the Confederacy erected in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which were really tributes to the men who were building Jim Crow in the American South. See Karen Cox, *No Common Ground: Confederate Monuments and the Ongoing Fight for Racial Justice* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

for him in London before coming to Canada in the early 1950s as editor and publisher of Fredericton's *Daily Gleaner* and later at the monthly magazine the *Atlantic Advocate*. In the decade following the disaster, ending with the inauguration of the Fishermen's Monument, Wardell was involved with every aspect of the fund's operations, beginning with the decision as to how to frame the work that he and his colleagues were about to carry out. He provided his perspective on the matter shortly after the disaster, when he wrote to Beaverbrook: "I saw all the families. All are poor. Most are destitute."<sup>14</sup>

The families who lived along Miramichi Bay were indeed poor by any metric, yet this did not mean that they were indistinguishable, one from another, as Wardell suggested. Within that population, families adopted a variety of strategies to get by on a narrow resource base and came mostly from two communities that were divided by language and religion: Bay du Vin was largely English-speaking and Protestant while Baie-Ste-Anne was overwhelmingly Acadian and Roman Catholic. While Wardell and his colleagues spared no effort in collecting funds, they seemed incapable of understanding the texture of the lives of the people they were supposed to be helping.

This disconnect between those in a position to provide support following a disaster and those in need of relief has been the focus of authors writing from the perspective of Critical Disaster Studies. These authors start from the premise that the idea of a disaster was a construct, often used by members of elites to reinforce their position in society.<sup>15</sup> As Andy Horowitz has observed in his study of the causes of and responses to Hurricane Katrina, disasters were defined as such precisely so that they might be cordoned off from more ordinary moments. As he put it, "To name something a disaster is to decry its outcomes as illegitimate, and to call for a restoration of the status quo, instead of suggesting that the status quo may have been illegitimate in the first place. The disaster idea makes enduring suffering appear to be a personal failure."<sup>16</sup>

Leaders could focus on the immediate fallout from a disaster without dealing with long-term issues of poverty in the larger population as Jacob

14 Wardell to Beaverbrook, 12 July 1959, Beaverbrook Fonds, MGH case 130, file 1b, Harriet Irving Library Special Collections, University of New Brunswick (UNB Special Collections), Fredericton.

15 For an introduction to this perspective, see Jacob A.C. Remes and Andy Horowitz, eds., *Critical Disaster Studies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).

16 Andy Horowitz, *Katrina: A History, 1915–2015* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), 15.



Remes has observed in his important study of disaster relief in the early 20th century, which focuses on the aftermath of a massive fire in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1914 and the Halifax Explosion three years later. Much as the New Brunswick leaders seemed unconcerned with the texture of the lives of the people affected by the Escuminac Disaster, Remes, leaning on the work of James C. Scott, explains how members of the elite found the survival strategies of the affected population to have been illegible, with the result that these leaders were “unable to understand and adapt to the complex and nuanced systems and structures that working-class families and individuals constructed and in which they lived.”<sup>17</sup>

Wardell and his colleagues were unable to understand the survival strategies of fishing families, as they espoused a view common at the time that focused on how poor people’s lives were shaped more by how they thought than by the objective circumstances in which they found themselves. In this regard, the anthropologist Oscar Lewis referred to a “culture of poverty” from which poor people could not escape as they suffered from “a great deal of pathos, suffering and emptiness.”<sup>18</sup> This concept was applied to Atlantic Canada in the late 1950s and 1960s by Alexander Leighton and his colleagues, who linked poverty in Digby County, Nova Scotia, to the population’s “sentiment about work” that made them content to be “unskilled workers who cut timber in the woods, dig clams, do odd jobs around the countryside, peddle produce and the like.”<sup>19</sup>

The geographer Larry McCann, starting from a different perspective, looked positively at this use of different forms of labour, which he referred to as “occupational pluralism.” He found that such “pluralism in a resource-based economy like that of Digby County can be viewed as a long-term strategy. . . . As a means of earning a permanent livelihood, these strategies are practiced to

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17 Jacob A.C. Remes, *Disaster Citizenship: Survivors, Solidarity, and Power in the Progressive Era* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 9. Scott’s best-known expression of the importance of “legibility” is *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

18 Oscar Lewis, *A Study of Slum Cultures* (New York: Random House, 1968), 18.

19 Charles C. Hughes, Marc-Adelard Tremblay, Robert N. Rappaport, and Alexander Leighton, *People of Cove and Woodlot: Communities from the Viewpoint of Social Psychiatry, Volume 2: The Stirling County Study of Psychiatric Disorder and Sociocultural Environment* (New York: Basic Books, 1960), 265, 260. The use of Stirling County was a poorly veiled effort to obscure the fact that the focus of study was Digby County, Nova Scotia.

both create and sustain family well-being.”<sup>20</sup> But such strategies were illegible to people such as Wardell.

Writing about the Fishermen’s Memorial, David Frank and Nicole Lang recognized that as “a member of Lord Beaverbrook’s inner circle in London, Wardell was an unlikely advocate of social change, but he considered it his responsibility as a member of the elite to assist the poor.”<sup>21</sup> The men behind the fund, as we will see, were uninterested in any profound social change, as they led a philanthropic effort grounded in a certain paternalism – a certain noblesse oblige – and based upon little more than a passing understanding of the lives of the fishing families. Indeed, as Remes and Horowitz have observed, disaster relief tended to “reproduce existing inequalities, usually by design, and many such plans exacerbate[d] them.”<sup>22</sup>

The leaders of the disaster fund may have been genuinely interested in helping the families, at least in terms of the immediate aftermath of the disaster. At the same time, however, they were also interested in maintaining their place in society, particularly as the New Brunswick government began to challenge their power during the 1960s by creating a state-run welfare state. In this context, the Escuminac Disaster, and more specifically the disaster fund, provides an opportunity to examine how an elite used its influence during a time of crisis as a tool for retaining its own influence. Along the way, as these leaders sidestepped the underlying causes for the region’s poverty, they defended the status quo that had served them well, in the process frustrating hopes that the fishing families may have had that anything would change following the disaster.

## Fundraising

In the aftermath of the Escuminac Disaster, media attention quickly turned to the families who now had to cope with little or no income; newspapers and magazines, for instance, were constantly providing photos of young women (several of whom were pregnant at the time of the storm) with large numbers of children. In total, there were now 20 widows (none of whom subsequently remarried) with 83 children under the age of 18.<sup>23</sup> However, this focus under-

20 Larry McCann, “Seasons of Labour: Family, Work, and Land in a Nineteenth-Century Nova Scotia Shipbuilding Community,” *History of the Family* 4, no. 4 (1999): 487.

21 Frank and Lang, *Labour Landmarks in New Brunswick*, 99.

22 Remes and Horowitz, *Critical Disaster Studies*, 3.

23 The number of children under 18 includes the 4 being carried by their mothers at the time of the disaster.

estimated the size of the dependent population left behind. Take, for instance, the case of John Chapman, who died while serving as the second hand on the boat of Captain George MacLeod (who also died). A 16-year-old, Chapman was identified as “the main support of his family, which included his mother, father, and eleven brothers and sisters.”<sup>24</sup> As for MacLeod, who was single, he “helped to support both his parents.” Indeed, his brother described how “Dad was lost without my brother. . . . George helped out at the 100-acre farm. He helped plant our large garden, milked our cows and helped with the pigs.”<sup>25</sup> When the list of dependents is extended by considering such cases, the number reaches nearly 150.

In that context, within days of the disaster, while most of the bodies of the dead fishers had yet to be found, the drive began to rally support for the New Brunswick Fishermen’s Disaster Fund. Some of the funds needed to reach the goal of \$440,000 came from the various levels of government, although this was not always straightforward since there was effectively no Canadian policy in the summer of 1959 to provide support for disaster victims.

While Fredericton offered \$25,000, the federal government dragged its feet. It refused at first to take action when Michael Wardell requested \$100,000, the same amount that had been provided to the Springhill Disaster Fund; the latter had been established only 8 months earlier following the death of 75 miners when a bump, an underground earthquake, resulted in the collapse of a coal pit in a Nova Scotia town, about 200 kilometres from Escuminac. Support for the Springhill miners became a benchmark for aid to the families of the Escuminac fishers, providing a convenient template.<sup>26</sup> Ultimately, Ottawa provided \$50,000 to the fishermen’s fund, or twice the provincial contribution, paralleling the situation in regard to Springhill where the federal grant to the miners’ fund was twice what Halifax provided.<sup>27</sup> And a further \$75,000 came from the Canadian Disaster Relief Fund, which had itself been created out of funds raised from the public following the Red River Flood in 1950.<sup>28</sup>

In Manitoba as in Springhill, fundraising was directly linked to the possibilities of presenting a compelling story that could sustain media attention over several weeks. In regard to the miners, there was the drama connected

24 Roy Saunders, *The Escuminac Disaster* (London: Oldbourne, 1960), 119–20.

25 Adams, *Trouble at Sea*, 4–5.

26 Ian McKay, “Springhill 1958,” *New Maritimes*, 2 (December 1983–January 1984): 4–16.

27 Privy Council Office, 10 July 1959 and 16 July 1959, RG2, Series A–5–a, vol. 2745, Library and Archives Canada (LAC), Ottawa.

28 *Daily Gleaner*, 9 August 1959.

with the rescue of men believed dead – a situation that allowed the collection of more than \$2 million. Jack MacAndrew, a CBC reporter, explained years later how he “waited anxiously at the pithead in 1958 to learn if any of the miners trapped deep below the surface were still alive. . . . ‘The world hung on whether or not these men would be found,’ Mr. MacAndrew told Halifax’s *The Coast* newspaper.”<sup>29</sup>

J.M. Bumsted has explained, in terms of the Red River flood, how fundraising was aided by the disaster’s “great theatre,” which was “highly visual, full of human interest, and consisting of a series of cliff-hanging escalations in which the drama built and built over a period of months. . . . The Red River rose inexorably . . . and was battled courageously . . . in very photogenic ways, particularly through the ubiquitous sandbagging of the dikes and the river banks.” Under these circumstances, roughly \$10 million was raised for the Manitoba Flood Relief Fund, but a surplus of nearly \$2 million remained by the end of 1951, when there was “virtually no one left to reimburse.”<sup>30</sup> This surplus provided the capital for the Canadian Disaster Relief Fund, which was put to use in regard to other disaster situations including the one at Escuminac.

Drawing on his own media credentials, Wardell was preoccupied with the difficulties in selling the Escuminac disaster; it provided little in the way of visuals, and it was over so quickly that some of the survivors were out fishing again within days on the now-tranquil waters. In that context, he made clear the challenge to fundraising several weeks after the disaster: “There will not be anything like the public response to this appeal that there was in the case of Springhill owing to the suspense in that case that was extended over several weeks. The [New Brunswick Fishermen’s Disaster] Fund has [received] very little publicity across Canada, although I shall try to stimulate it.”<sup>31</sup>

A week later Wardell laid out his plans in correspondence with Lord Beaverbrook, who by then had made the initial contribution to the fund. Wardell explained to his mentor how he was just back from Miramichi Bay,

29 *Globe and Mail*, 24 June 2014.

30 J.M. Bumsted, “Developing a Canadian Disaster Relief Policy: The 1950 Manitoba Flood,” *Canadian Historical Review* 68, no. 3 (September 1987): 347–73.

31 Wardell to A.J. Brooks, 4 July 1959, RS 415, Provincial Archives of New Brunswick (PANB), Fredericton. Research for this article was entirely carried out during the pandemic, so I was only able to consult material held by the PANB thanks to Ryan Stairs from the archives, who helped identify pertinent documents, and Cass Philips, who photographed them for me.

where he had been scouting for a poster family that could be sent to Toronto and other points in Ontario for a media blitz:

I am sending one woman and her eight children to Toronto. The children are bright and attractive, the mother, though 28 looks twice that age, and her teeth were in an appalling state. I took her to a dentist in Newcastle, and he took a cast of her mouth and will yank most of her teeth and fix her up for TV. John Creaghan [owner of a chain of clothing stores] is dishing out clothes to the woman and all the children, and I have asked the Air Force to fly them to Toronto next weekend. I have asked [Toronto mayor] Nathan Phillips to be host and foster-father to them in Toronto. If all goes well we might get quite a bit of support.<sup>32</sup>

The widow in question, Violet Kingston, from English-speaking Bay du Vin, was pregnant and her husband's body had yet to be found at the time she was dispatched to Toronto, which only added to the poignancy of her situation.<sup>33</sup> In the days leading up to the trip, the *Daily Gleaner* ran a steady series of pictures showing off the Kingstons as they readied themselves. And this media attention continued in regard to their time in Ontario, where Wardell carefully choreographed the family's activities with a particular focus on the eldest daughter Jane. As Wardell put it, "And always Jane, aged eight, stole the show. One day she would be seen on the front page of the *Telegram* putting out shoes for her seven brothers and sisters. Next day she would be disporting herself quite unselfconsciously in a splendid private swimming pool."<sup>34</sup> Media exposure also extended to the main events of their journey, as they were featured on *Tabloid*, the CBC's flagship public affairs program, in addition to making an appearance on a television station in Barrie (roughly 100 kilometres north of Toronto).<sup>35</sup>

Reflecting on the experience 40 years later, Violet Kingston indicated how "Mr. Michael Wardell convinced me to go. . . . I did not think much of [the

32 Wardell to Beaverbrook, 12 July 1959. Beaverbrook Fonds, MGH case 130, file 1b, UNB Special Collections.

33 Windsor Kingston's body was recovered in mid-August, found by a lobster fisher off the coast of Prince Edward Island. Windsor's father also died in the hurricane, so that Violet had seen the death of both her husband and father-in-law.

34 Michael Wardell, "Heroes of Miramichi Bay," *Atlantic Advocate* (June 1969): 29-30.

35 *Daily Gleaner*, 14-24 July 1959.





**Figure 3 – Mayor Nathan Phillips with the Kingston Family in Toronto.**

Source: Michael Wardell, "Heroes of Miramichi Bay," *Atlantic Advocate*, June 1969, p. 28.

idea] at the time. I was pregnant, and had never gone anywhere before." She nevertheless went along with the plan, noting that it "did raise one quarter of a million dollars for the Fishermen's Fund. We went on TV and the radio and told our story."<sup>36</sup> As for Wardell, he explained how "he had synchronised [the Kingstons' tour with] a mail appeal, and the results were very good. Many thousands of dollars were received in donations, and they were still coming in by every mail [in early August]."<sup>37</sup>

Violet Kingston's experience was not the only media event orchestrated by Wardell to bolster support for the disaster fund, as he was also involved with efforts to have the widows and children meet the Queen and Prince Philip who were in Canada at the time. Royal interest in the Escuminac survivors was first evident when they broke with precedent by making an undisclosed contribution to the fund.<sup>38</sup> Writing in the *Atlantic Advocate*, Wardell crowed about how this contribution "put the appeal on the front pages of newspapers

<sup>36</sup> Adams, *Trouble at Sea*, 69.

<sup>37</sup> Wardell, "Heroes of the Miramichi," 29–30; Finance Committee, New Brunswick Fishermen's Disaster Fund (NBFDF), Minutes, 7 August 1959, RS415, PANB.

<sup>38</sup> Barry MacKenzie, "Breaking Royal Precedent?: The Escuminac Disaster and the Royal Tour of 1959," *Acadiensis Blog*, 3 February 2020: <https://acadiensis.wordpress.com/2020/02/03/breaking-royal-precedent-the-escuminac-disaster-and-the-royal-tour-of-1959/>.



**Figure 4 – Queen Elizabeth II meets families affected by Escuminac Disaster, Pointe-du-Chêne, NB, 29 July 1959. The family of Roy and Delila Lloyd is in the foreground. Both Roy and his son, Brian, were recognized for their bravery.**

Source: P225-7270, PANB.

and on radio and television networks, and the money started to flow in from all parts of Canada.”<sup>39</sup> Subsequently, the Queen altered her tour so that she could meet briefly with the survivors at Pointe-du-Chêne, near Shediac, roughly 130 kilometres south of Escuminac. Conscious of the optics, W.J. Gallant, one of the MLAs from the region, who was involved with arranging the details for the visit with the Queen, made it clear that it was a “necessity for the mothers to take their children with them if they are to go to Pointe-du-Chêne.”<sup>40</sup>

Included in the group that spent several hours travelling each way was Violet Kingston and her children, who had returned from Ontario only days earlier.<sup>41</sup> Also on hand that day was Eva Chiasson, along with 12 of her 13 children; one of whom, Velma, observed 50 years later that the whole event “C’était pas nécessaire.” It was only “une grande misère à voir la reine pour une

39 “A Glorious Future,” *Atlantic Advocate* (August 1959): 14.

40 NBFDF, Minutes, 6 July 1959, RS 415, PANB.

41 Violet Kingston’s presence is curious given that the plan for the visit with the Queen was to inexplicably exclude the families of men whose bodies had yet to be found; see *Daily Gleaner*, 29 July 1959.

minute.”<sup>42</sup> For his part, Theodore Williston, a fisher who survived the storm and distinguished himself by his bravery, observed that “the trip to see the Queen was just a wasted day.”<sup>43</sup>

In the end, however, it did not really matter if the survivors were happy about being bused for a photo op with the Queen because they were never really given a choice, just as Violet Kingston was not given much of a choice about going to Ontario. As she put it shortly after the inauguration of the Fishermen’s Memorial, there had been “a lack of consideration on [the fund’s] part for making requests.”<sup>44</sup> The survivors were instrumentalized, apparently successfully, as \$135,000 was collected in the two weeks immediately following the Queen’s meeting with the families. By September the fund reported that nearly 3,100 receipts had been issued to contributors.<sup>45</sup>

By the time that the \$440,000 goal had been achieved in early 1960, two-thirds of the total had come through public contributions; these had been aided by an endless series of events that kept the fund in the public eye, many of which were publicized in Wardell’s newspaper. In an issue only a week after the disaster, for instance, the front-page headline noted in large font “Public Support Grows for Fishermen’s Fund,” below which was a photo of a woman holding a fish, appropriately a salmon, that she had won in a raffle among employees at a Bank of Montreal branch in Fredericton that had brought in \$36. The front page also included a sidebar drawing attention to the contribution by Hazel Simpson of Ottawa, who was handing over her monthly annuity cheque of \$60.74 as well as a list of 25 other contributions, both large (\$5,000 from K.C. Irving) and small (\$250 collected at the Royal Bank’s branch in Fredericton, where “school children appeared with paper bags and boxes of pennies”).<sup>46</sup>

Even though the coverage in the *Daily Gleaner* was considerable, it was also limited in the sense that it barely touched fundraising efforts simultaneously taking place in Acadian communities. Among the men who died, the majority came, in equal numbers, from Bay du Vin (99 per cent English-speaking)

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42 “La tragédie maritime d’Escuminac,” Radio-Canada, *Tout le monde en parlait*, 25 août 2009.

43 Interview with Theodore Williston, Baie du Vin, NB, 30 May 2022, file in author’s possession. Many thanks to Terry Power for setting it up.

44 Notes from visitations to widows’ homes, December 1969, RS942, PANB.

45 *Daily Gleaner*, 14 August 1959; NBFDF, Minutes, 11 September 1959, RS415, PANB.

46 *Daily Gleaner*, 25 June 1959.

and Baie-Ste-Anne (98 per cent Acadian).<sup>47</sup> In this context, the Acadian daily *L'Évangéline*, in its initial reporting of the disaster, described a crisis that was particularly felt in “la région de Baie-Ste-Anne” while also making note of the damage caused by the hurricane across an area from Shippagan (in the Acadian peninsula) to the north to Cap-Pélé (near Shediac) to the south. This was a coastline of roughly 250 kilometres, populated largely by Acadians. In an editorial only days after the disaster, *L'Évangéline* saw it as yet another hardship that Acadians had to endure: “Dans toutes les églises de l'Acadie, on a prié pour ces pêcheurs hier matin. Aux familles éprouvées, les Acadiens disent leur sympathie. Le deuil, qui affecte plus spécialement la région de la Baie-Ste-Anne, touche toute l'Acadie.”<sup>48</sup>

As fundraising took shape in these French-speaking communities, the Catholic church played a central role. In the days after the disaster, as the *Daily Gleaner* was featuring the woman with the salmon, *L'Évangéline* explained how, in the Archdiocese of Moncton, which included Baie-Ste-Anne, a drive was being orchestrated by the Ligue du Sacré-Cœur, an organization of pious laymen established in the late 19th century “to uphold the Catholic spirit in their families and to fight against blasphemy and intemperance.”<sup>49</sup> As the Acadian daily put it, “Les Ligueurs ont jeté les bases de la campagne. Ils organiseront une quête dans toutes les paroisses, dimanche le cinq juillet.”<sup>50</sup>

For its part, however, the *Daily Gleaner's* connection with matters Acadian in regard to the Escuminac Disaster essentially began and ended with Yvon Durelle, the British Empire boxing champion, who had taken a break from training for a world championship fight to come back home to Baie-Ste-Anne for a weekend of fishing. He had indeed gone out to drift-net on that fateful day with members of his family, but they turned back when his father

47 There are no published statistics at the sub-census-district level for the 1961 census, the one closest to the disaster. However, with the help of Alex Guindon, GIS and Data Librarian at Concordia, I was able to extract raw data pertinent to the communities stretching from Bay du Vin to Escuminac from the 1971 data; the 1961 data was not even accessible through this route.

48 *L'Évangéline* (Moncton), 22 June 1959. The Acadians' self-image as a people marked by a painful history, beginning with the grand déracinement, would have been a common perception at the time. I discuss this self-image in my *Remembering and Forgetting in Acadie: A Historian's Journey through Public Memory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

49 Yves Roby, “Edouard Hamon,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 13, [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/hamon\\_edouard\\_13F.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/hamon_edouard_13F.html).

50 *L'Évangéline*, 23 June 1959. There was a parallel collection of funds in the English-speaking community, most notably in Anglican churches.

sensed that conditions were deteriorating.<sup>51</sup> In the weeks that followed, Durelle appeared frequently in the pages of Wardell's newspaper, not only in regard to his fight (which he lost), but also in connection with an exhibition in Saint John involving the boxer which raised \$1,200 for the fund. Durelle's heart was not entirely in the exhibition only a week after his defeat, but he soldiered on because "many of those who died were his friends and acquaintances."<sup>52</sup>

Durelle was a revelation to the *Daily Gleaner*, providing a connection with an Acadie that was geographically close at hand but off the radar of English-speaking New Brunswickers. Writing a week after the storm, Wardell observed: "The name of Baie Ste. Anne has been on maps of New Brunswick for many years as Acadians carved out a piece of [the province] by fishing and lumbering. But it was not until Durelle began to make a name for himself that people began to wonder where the village was."<sup>53</sup> The disaster fund's blind spot when it came to Acadians emerged in regard to the *Daily Gleaner's* coverage of fundraising, and still others emerged in regard to how the funds, once collected, were employed.

### Funding the fishers

Wardell and his colleagues pulled out all the stops to raise the funds, but towards what end? Or to ask the question a bit differently, were the leaders of the disaster fund interested in employing relief to deal with the root causes of poverty or were they rather content to shore up the fishing families, without dealing with those larger issues – in the process, as Horowitz has put it, "reinforc[ing] existing inequalities"?<sup>54</sup> Wardell suggested that it was the former, when he asserted that there was a larger agenda here, beyond immediate support for lost income and equipment, and noted how "the fishermen's dreadful ordeal will have been in vain unless future relief takes a more basic form." He went on "to propose a complete reorganization of our primary industries in the interests of those who toil in them," a theme repeated a few days later when he called for "a searching national look into the economics of the commercial fishing industry."<sup>55</sup>

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51 *Telegraph-Journal* (Saint John), 12 June 1999. For more about Durelle's life, see the excellent *Durelle*, directed by Ginette Pellerin (ONF/NFB, 2003).

52 *Telegraph-Journal*, 19 August 1959.

53 *Daily Gleaner*, 23 June 1959.

54 Horowitz, *Katrina*, 5.

55 *Daily Gleaner*, 24 and 26 June 1959.



Had Wardell and his colleagues really been interested in the economics of salmon fishing in Miramichi Bay, they might have dealt with reforming a system that tied fishers to local merchants; these businesses often provided the nets in return for the catch, for which the fishers were paid paltry sums. In the process, the fishers were kept tied to the suppliers year after year as in the “truck system” elsewhere in the Atlantic fisheries: merchants provided credit to fishers who were then constrained to sell their catch at whatever price the merchant offered.<sup>56</sup>

In regard to the Miramichi drift-net fishery, the fishers’ dependence upon merchants’ credit was substantiated in a report on the Escuminac Disaster by founding director Joseph Gaudreau of the École des pêches in Caraquet – a school established in 1959 to provide better training for fishers. Gaudreau noted how “the buyers and outfitters have lost a great deal” and estimated that the hurricane had cost them more than \$15,000. He went on to note how they had “made advances to fishermen who are now dead or missing and others who have lost so much that they are unable to repay. . . . These debts will be heavy burdens for the [widowed] wives.”<sup>57</sup> As for the fishers who survived, another report indicated how these men “who sell to private buyers were deeply indebted to them before suffering the heavy losses from the storm. They will have to go to these same buyers for additional credit [which] may put them so far in debt that they may lose their independence and become little more than wage earners.”<sup>58</sup>

Wardell and his colleagues showed little concern with the fishers’ long-standing dependence on the merchants, and, consistent with that attitude, they drew back from the initial idea of providing cash from the fund to allow the replacement of the nets, rope, and lobster traps lost by fishers in the storm. Instead, they came up with a plan by which materials would be centrally purchased and then provided to those who needed them. This course of action might have made sense to reduce costs, but Reverend L.M. Pepperdene, an Anglican rector from Chatham, who effectively ran the fund’s welfare committee during the 1960s, justified the action on the basis that if they

56 Miriam Wright, *A Fishery for Modern Times: The State and the Industrialization of the Newfoundland Fishery, 1934-1968* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 12.

57 Joseph Gaudreau, Survey of the Disaster in Miramichi Bay, 10 and 20 June 1959: Preliminary Report, 7 July 1959, RS 869, PANB.

58 New Brunswick Fishermen’s Disaster Fund, Welfare Committee, Plan for Giving Assistance to the Fishermen and to the Fishing Industry Through the Miramichi Disaster Relief Fund, n.d., RS 942, PANB.

provided the funds directly to the fishers “there would be no guarantee that the money so distributed would be used to replace equipment.”<sup>59</sup> Pepperdene’s comments reflected the incomprehension of the fund’s leaders about the lives of the fishers, who would have had no reason to pocket funds earmarked for equipment that they required to ply their trade. The surviving fishers, unable to replace most of their equipment, struggled through a rough winter, so much so that on the first anniversary of the disaster *L’Évangéline* noted how some of those men felt that “il aurait été préférable qu’ils se soient noyés eux aussi.”<sup>60</sup>

There was a similar mean-spiritedness when it came to supporting the needy families. The fund provided widows with \$50 per month for life, and an additional \$10 per month for each child under the age of 18. But when it came to setting up a reserve fund to help families out with unexpected expenses immediately after the disaster, the fund’s welfare committee inexplicably decided that this was unnecessary and somehow concluded that “the widows and orphans are, from a financial point of view, as well off as they would have been had the disaster not happened, and therefore they should be in a position to take care of these matters themselves, as others in the same community are obliged to do. . . . The more important matter at the present time is the recovery of the economy of the Fishing Industry in this area.”<sup>61</sup>

In light of these decisions, Wardell’s professed interest in changing the economic system rings hollow. But this should not come as much of a surprise given his long history of working first for Lord Beaverbrook and then K.C. Irving, neither of whom had any reason to advocate for some radical restructuring of the economy. Wardell’s own opposition to any significant redistribution of wealth, in fact, was made clear in the 1960s as he emerged as a determined opponent to Premier Louis Robichaud’s Equal Opportunity Program, designed to move resources from the wealthier to the poorer sections of the province such as the area surrounding Escuminac. Wardell described the program as one that was “based on Swedish socialism.” As for Robichaud himself, the newspaper editor caricatured the first Acadian elected premier of the province as “a little man with a violently expressive mouth which grimaces

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59 “Report of the Chairman of the Welfare Committee re Reparation for Equipment Lost by the Fishermen,” n.d., RS 942, PANB. The report seemed to follow a meeting of the committee on 25 January 1960.

60 *L’Évangéline*, 20 June 1960.

61 Motion passed by Welfare Committee of the New Brunswick Fishermen’s Disaster Fund, 25 January 1960, RS 942, PANB.

as he articulates a torrent of words on any subject in English or French.”<sup>62</sup> The anti-Acadian edge of Wardell’s critique was made clear when he stated that the Equal Opportunity Program was tantamount to “Robbing Peter to Pay Pierre.”<sup>63</sup>

Wardell came closer to an accurate summary of what the disaster fund was designed to achieve in his foreword to Roy Saunders’s book *The Escuminac Disaster* published in 1960. Referring to the individuals who stood to benefit from the funds that had been collected, Wardell described how “they have lived as outcasts, cut off from human knowledge. We believe that modern methods can aid them. But the lesson to be learnt from the disaster is that in this strong and rich young country of Canada, there are patches of life, here and there, as primitive and wretched as the plague spots of medieval Europe.”<sup>64</sup> Starting from this perspective, the disaster fund was less about changing the economic system than fixing the families that remained in communities such as Bay du Vin and Baie-Ste-Anne.

The population of this corner of New Brunswick, to be sure, was poor – a fact that was corroborated by Wardell, who cited statistics indicating that the average annual income for fishers over the previous five years had been only \$690.<sup>65</sup> To put this in some larger perspective, census data indicate that the average family income in 1961 for the stretch of the southern shore of Miramichi Bay, from Bay du Vin to Escuminac, came to roughly \$2,900, as opposed to \$4,155 for the province and nearly \$5,500 for all of Canada.<sup>66</sup> The communities shaken by the disaster had annual family incomes that were almost identical to those of Kent County, widely described at the time as the “worst off in New

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62 Wardell, “Responsible Self-Government: Battle Map of New Brunswick, 1966,” *Atlantic Advocate* 56, no. 6 (February 1966): 14, as cited in Bliss White, “Bringing the Commune to Canada: A Technocrat’s Swedish Tour and the New Brunswick Program of Equal Opportunity,” *Acadiensis* 49, no. 2 (Fall 2020): 185–95. For an introduction to the Equal Opportunity Program, see Laurel Lewey et al., *New Brunswick before the Equal Opportunity Program* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018).

63 Julian Walker, “The Once and Future New Brunswick Free Press,” *Journal of New Brunswick Studies* 1 (October 2010): 68.

64 Saunders, *Escuminac Disaster*, 12.

65 *Daily Gleaner*, 8 October 1959.

66 Data extracted from the 1971 census indicated average family incomes that were about 70 per cent of the average for Northumberland County, where those communities were located, and about the same as the average for Kent County, which is adjacent to this stretch. By taking that 70 per cent figure and applying it to the 1961 average for Northumberland County, we arrive at average family incomes of \$2907, as opposed to \$2787 for Kent County. See the explanatory note above regarding the use of raw census data in this article.

Brunswick and perhaps in Canada,” whose northern boundary was only six kilometres from the Escuminac wharf.<sup>67</sup>

As low as these figures regarding family incomes may have been they were significantly higher than the fishing statistics relied upon by Wardell and the administrators of the disaster fund because the families engaged in occupational pluralism, resorting to various strategies to access different sources of income. Those responsible for the fund, however, never fully understood how these families worked to stretch the narrow resource base on which they depended, and this stands in considerable contrast to the significant effort invested to use them as publicity props. This is precisely what Jacob Remes meant in explaining how the lives of disaster victims were often “illegible” to those who provided relief.

This inability to understand the lives of the fishers’ families was underscored in a telling letter from New Brunswick’s deputy minister of industry and development, responding to a request from Wardell a month after the disaster that sought information about incomes from fishing. Wardell had clearly been seeking a single statistic that would define the lives of the fishers, but John Patterson explained how this was difficult because the situation was complicated “as there are many factors which could influence the individual.”<sup>68</sup>

Digging into the details of the fishers’ livelihood, Patterson described how they depended upon a range of species other than salmon while making note of how they had been suffering of late because “in the last three or four years the oyster industry which was a large part of the income source for fishermen in this area has completely disappeared through disease.” More broadly, official statistics for 1959 indicated that salmon accounted for less than a third of the value of landings in the area while lobster made up about half of the total. Indeed, lobster gear figured prominently when it came to replacing equipment lost in the storm as it accounted for more than half of the value of losses.<sup>69</sup> There were also fishers who jigged for cod while waiting for the salmon to get trapped in their nets as was the case for Aldore McIntyre, who brought in more than 600 pounds of cod on the night of the storm. Theodore Williston, for his part, spent the week of the disaster fishing for mackerel, which were

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67 Dollard Landry, “Report on Survey of Kent County National Park: A Study of Its People and Their Relocation,” 16 September 1968, RS106, 16/6, PANB.

68 Patterson to Wardell, 29 July 1959, RS 869, PANB.

69 Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Fisheries Statistics of Canada: New Brunswick, 1959* (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer, 1961); Detailed statement of loss of and damage to fishing gear, resulting from the June Disaster, RS 942, PANB.

more plentiful than salmon. As he put it, he “made twice as much fishing for mackerel as [he] would have drifting for salmon.”<sup>70</sup>

Williston’s rational response to market conditions escaped the attention of the administrators of the fund, as did the decision by fishers, as Patterson put it, to access “other sources of income of a miscellaneous nature during the off seasons which would augment the fishing income.”<sup>71</sup> Williston explained to me how his family had a farm, where they raised cattle, pigs, and hens in addition to harvesting “turnips, carrots, and all sorts of vegetables. . . . The farm gave us practically all we needed to exist. . . . Fishing provided cash to buy those things we couldn’t raise farming.”<sup>72</sup>

Williston’s experience was not unique as he estimated that about half the people in the community would have had at least a garden from which they could grow vegetables, either for their own consumption or for barter with neighbours. In either case, this activity would not have shown up in statistics about family income as there was no recorded transaction. In addition, he noted how families further supplemented their incomes by working in the woods: chopping lumber used to prop up the inside of mine shafts, providing logs for pulpwood manufacture, and securing firewood for their own use.<sup>73</sup>

To round out the portrait he was trying to paint for Wardell, Patterson also noted the various forms of federal government support that were available: “The family allowances would be an important factor, and also if the man fished long enough during the fishing season, he could draw unemployment insurance when not so engaged.”<sup>74</sup> While there is no data indicating unemployment insurance payments to local fishers, family allowance payments averaged a bit more than \$6 per child each month, bringing a family like Violet Kingston’s (with eight children at home in 1959) roughly \$50, to which another \$80 per month would have come from the provincial Mothers’ Allowance program.<sup>75</sup>

70 Adams, *Trouble at Sea*, 6, 21.

71 Patterson to Wardell, 29 July 1959, RS 869, PANB.

72 Williston interview, 30 May 2022.

73 Williston interview, 30 May 2022.

74 Patterson to Wardell, 29 July 1959, RS 869, PANB. On the introduction of unemployment insurance for fishers, which came into effect in 1957, see “Unemployment Insurance for Fishermen,” Department of Fisheries, *Trade News* 9, no. 9 (March 1957): 10–12. See also William Schrank, “Benefiting Fishermen: Origins of Fishermen’s Unemployment Insurance in Canada,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 33, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 61–87.

75 Bernice Madison, “Family Allowances and their Major Social Implications,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 26, no. 2 (May 1964): 135; *Mothers’ Allowances Legislation in Canada* (Ottawa: Research Division, Department of National Health and Welfare, 1955), 41.



Some further support would also have been forthcoming for the families of fishers who had purchased insurance from the federal Fishermen's Indemnity Plan. Roy Saunders, writing about the disaster in his 1960 book, patronizingly observed that "none of the boats and fishing gear was insured. The possibility of disaster had not occurred to the fishermen." Yet there was a significant increase in the payouts from the program in New Brunswick between March and December 1959, resulting – according to the Department of Fisheries – from "the heavy concentration of losses in the Northumberland Strait."<sup>76</sup>

In order to cobble together income from numerous sources, families had to show a level of ingenuity that stands at odds with Wardell's conviction that he had found a patch of medieval Europe "cut off from human knowledge." But such views of poor people were widespread at the time of the disaster, when there was much derision of poor people engaging in "occupational pluralism." Such derision was evident in regard to nearby Kent County, where the residents' determination to combine various activities – fishing, gardening, hunting, lumbering – to support their families incongruously proved that they were living in a "culture of poverty" and helped justify their removal as part of the process leading to the creation of Kouchibouguac National Park in the late 1960s. There were 260 families expropriated as planners figured that the residents would be better off by being forced to restart their lives elsewhere, where they could be *rehabilitated* (to use the expression of the time). Planners wanted to instill in the expropriated residents "attitudes and behaviours which will lead to sound decisions and actions," as if how they thought had been the root of their straightened circumstances. Visitors, for instance, usually home economists, would be sent into the homes to "provide families with information on matters relating to health, family relationships and homemaking skills."<sup>77</sup>

Roughly a decade before the removal of the residents to make way for the park, families along the south shore of Miramichi Bay were the object of a program of rehabilitation that was administered by the disaster fund's welfare

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76 Saunders, *Escuminac Disaster*, 71; Canada, Department of Fisheries, *Annual Report for 1959* (Ottawa, 1961), 53. While the program paid out nearly \$17,000 in New Brunswick between March 1958 and March 1959, it paid over \$26,000 in the province over the subsequent six months, a period that included the Escuminac disaster.

77 "Kent County National Park Resettlement and Development Proposal," 8 November 1968, RG 124, box 13, file 916-3-2, vol. 1, LAC; Program Proposal for Kent County, Socialization Services, 3 January 1969, RS124 G30c, PANB. I discuss this rehabilitation project in my *Kouchibouguac: Removal, Resistance, and Remembrance at a Canadian National Park* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), chap. 3.

committee. According to Reverend Pepperdene, progress was being made thanks to the hiring of social worker Sister Mary Ange:

The Sister [has] been busy . . . visiting the homes and becoming acquainted with the mothers and their children and discovering in what ways she can be of the most service to them. Already she is giving them help in arranging their monthly budgets, advising them upon the best kinds of food to buy and how best to cook and prepare the meals. She is also busy helping many of them with their family sewing, conducting afternoon and evening classes in home economics.<sup>78</sup>

When rehabilitation programs were instituted in Kent County, women who had long been looking after large families with limited means bristled at the idea that they had to become better managers. They pointed instead to their need for greater resources. There was a similar disconnect in terms of the disaster fund, whose administrators at one point were reluctant to provide too much funding for education because they were fearful that this might “provide the child with a false sense of reality” and encourage them to dream too high. By contrast, a survey of widows prepared at the same time as these comments indicated that such resources were crucial; respondents suggested that education would be aided through support from the disaster fund for the purchase of clothing and books, or through “sponsoring a course for kids out of school and who with a course, would make a better living.”<sup>79</sup> The widows were looking for ways to transform the lives of their children, while the fund had no larger goal than getting them through a rough patch.

The disconnect between the fund and the widows became even clearer by the end of the 1960s when a series of home visits were made by Paul Daigle, who became the new chair of the welfare committee when Pepperdene retired only weeks after inauguration of the Fishermen’s Memorial. Daigle noted that there was a consensus “based on information all around, that past decisions

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78 Rev. L.M. Pepperdene, “New Brunswick Fishermen’s Disaster Fund: A Progress Report,” *Atlantic Advocate* 52, no.6 (February 1962): 15. It would be useful to know more about Sister Mary Ange, who was brought in when Pepperdene contacted Mgr. Norbert Robichaud, the Archbishop of Moncton. It is hard to imagine that this nun would have been welcomed in the Protestant homes in Bay du Vin, let alone in the Catholic ones.

79 “Survey Study to Estimate the Number of Children Eligible to Receive Financial Assistance for Education from the Fishermen’s Disaster Fund,” n.d., MC 2038, MS5, PANB.

seemed based on ‘moral judgments’ rather than on the basic needs and welfare of the people.” Daigle had also heard complaints about “a lack of information or very poor and distorted information as to the purpose of the fund or guidelines (whatever they are).” As a result, there was “a lack of trust for those connected with the fund now and in the past.”<sup>80</sup>

Some of the comments were particularly aimed at Reverend Pepperdene. As Daigle put it, “Some people expressed surprise and appreciation that the [new] chairman had visited them to explain the little that he knew about the fund and to show interest in them. Some said that the [past] chairman never before did this, [although] others said he did.” There were concerns, more specifically, that Pepperdene, an Anglican priest, had been less than even-handed in dealing with the two communities that, as we have seen, lived apart from one another, divided by both language and religion. Daigle observed that “the Bay du Vin people seemed to have [had] much more contact with the past chairman [Pepperdene] than the people of Baie Ste-Anne.”<sup>81</sup> That Daigle was trying to level the playing field was reflected in the decision to hold the first meeting of the welfare committee that he chaired in the Acadian community.

The sense that Acadians were disadvantaged in the operations of the fund is supported by the numerous letters in the archival records written by widows from Baie-Ste-Anne, both individually and collectively, to complain about their treatment. By contrast, there were no such letters in the files from English-speaking widows during the 1960s. Particularly striking was a letter included with the minutes of the first meeting of the fund’s executive committee following Pepperdene’s departure. It was read into the record, presumably translated from the French, by Norbert Thériault, the MLA for the region. Signed by nine of the twelve widows from Baie-Ste-Anne, the letter let the fund know “that we need help . . . because it costs more to keep [our children] in school, since the price of everything [has gone] up even on food. Our houses need repair, and we don’t have enough money to dress the kids and keep them in school.” There was, at the time, money available in the coffers of the fund that had invested its capital well, and so the widows observed: “Now we are

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80 “Observations from visitations,” appended to minutes of Education-Welfare Committee, 4 December 1969, RS 942, PANB.

81 “Observations from visitations,” appended to minutes of Education-Welfare Committee, 4 December 1969, RS 942, PANB. For more on the histories of the two communities, see Anglican Church Women (Bay du Vin, NB), *Looking Back: A History of Bay du Vin, New Brunswick* (Chatham, NB: Walco, 1979) and Audrey Daigle, *Historique de Baie-Sainte-Anne* (Baie-Sainte-Anne, NB: Société culturelle, 1979).

asking ourselves how come the money is there and we can't get it. We have to borrow money from the finance [company] to pay our bills."<sup>82</sup>

These complaints by the Baie-Ste-Anne widows were not simply a function of that community's poverty, because census data indicate similar average family incomes in the Acadian town and English-speaking Bay du Vin.<sup>83</sup> The marginalizing of Baie-Ste-Anne was connected to the sense within the largely English-speaking leadership of the fund that the Acadian community was slightly foreign, if not inferior, which would hardly have been unusual in New Brunswick on the eve of Robichaud's election in 1960, before an Acadian university had been established, and before official bilingualism had been introduced.

Indeed, as Donald Savoie explains in his memoir about growing up in the 1950s near Bouctouche, only 100 kilometres down the coast from Escuminac, Acadian communities such as Baie-Ste-Anne "were relatively self-contained, and thus we had limited contact with the outside world."<sup>84</sup> A local elite of priests, lawyers, and merchants held sway within those communities, but larger institutions, whose reach extended beyond the community, such as the disaster fund, remained firmly in the hands of English-speaking Protestants. In part this was the result of that local Acadian elite eschewing a larger stage, but such exclusion was also a function, as Joseph Yvon Thériault has put it, of "discrimination by the Anglo-Protestant majority."<sup>85</sup> Savoie describes how, particularly after his family moved to Moncton in the late 1950s, Acadians would openly speak with one another about their second-class status at the same time that "relations [between the two communities] were just fine from an English-speaking perspective because Acadians knew their place. Their place was to be happy with where they were in society; this meant that they should not agitate for language rights, be overly ambitious in the workplace, and above all that they should learn to speak English."<sup>86</sup>

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82 Minutes of executive committee of NBFDF, 20 November 1969, MC 2038, MS 4, PANB. Janice Daigle, daughter of one of the widows, Léocade Daigle, explained to me that this last reference was to money lenders charging exorbitant rates of interest; see interview with Janice Daigle, Baie-Ste-Anne, NB, 31 May 2022, file in author's possession.

83 The data from the 1971 census, referred to previously, indicate an average family income of \$4,532 for Baie-Ste-Anne and \$4,872 for Bay du Vin.

84 Donald Savoie, *I'm From Bouctouche, Me* (Montreal and Kingston: MQUP, 2009), 53.

85 Joseph Yvon Thériault, "The Robichaud Period and Politics in Acadia," in Canadian Institute for Research on Regional Development, *The Robichaud Era, 1960-70: Colloquium Proceedings* (Moncton, NB: Université de Moncton, 2001), 45.

86 Savoie, *I'm From Bouctouche, Me*, 57.

This situation gradually changed during the postwar era as Acadians became increasingly integrated into a modern economy, with the result that a new Acadian elite emerged (embodied by Louis Robichaud) who sought involvement in province-wide institutions and equality for all citizens. As Joel Belliveau has explained, “the era of isolationism” was over; but this was not yet the case for Baie-Ste-Anne in 1959. The result was that the English-speaking leaders of the fund, already hamstrung by their inability to decipher the survival strategies of fishing families, were ill-equipped to respond to the needs of Acadians, who had traditionally looked after themselves.<sup>87</sup>

In that context, Yvon Durelle became *the* Acadian in fundraising efforts and was one of only two fishers on the initial 24-member board; the other was Roy Lloyd, one of the men cited for bravery. Most of the members were local political and religious leaders, relegating the fishers to the role of outsiders whose names never show up on lists of those who actually attended meetings. But even at the level of the ex-officio members, there was a sense that the Acadians were an afterthought.

While the board overseeing the fund was established within a week of the disaster, neither the Archbishop of Moncton nor the curé of Baie-Ste-Anne were added until several weeks later. This led *L'Évangéline* to acerbically observe “Apparemment les autorités provinciales viennent de s'apercevoir que ce serait une bonne idée d'avoir des représentants officiels de la foi catholique sur le comité qui administre le fonds de secours pour les familles éprouvées par le désastre maritime dans la région de Baie-Ste-Anne.”<sup>88</sup> In practice, however, the ex-officio members – in whose numbers there were more English-speaking Protestants than Acadian Catholics – only attended meetings intermittently, leaving effective control of the fund to Wardell and a small number of colleagues, such as Pepperdene, who ran it from their particular class, linguistic, and religious perspective.

### The inauguration

The inauguration of Claude Roussel's Fishermen's Memorial showed how some things had changed over the course of a decade. While the fund would remain under Wardell's watch until he retired in 1971, the choreography of the event suggested a parallel presence of English and French-speaking New Brunswick.

87 Joel Belliveau, *In the Spirit of '68: Youth Culture, the New Left, and the Reimagining of Acadia*, trans. Käthe Roth (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2019), 32.

88 *L'Évangéline*, 4 July 1959.



This reflected, in a sense, the bilingual province that had been officially proclaimed only months before while mirroring the transition in the leadership of the fund's welfare committee from Reverend Pepperdene to Paul Daigle. As the *Daily Gleaner* noted, with some exaggeration, "The ceremony was a moving example of the harmony that, in general, exists between the races and religions in New Brunswick. Both Roman Catholic and Protestant clergy officiated, and the language alternated between French and English."<sup>89</sup>

Among those who spoke were two of the children of men who died in the hurricane, selected because they had been able to receive a post-secondary education with the support of the disaster fund. Lucien Chiasson, who lost his father and two brothers, was studying at the Radio College of Canada in Toronto. As for Jane Kingston, the daughter of Violet, she was often depicted at the time of the fundraising as a cute, little girl. A decade later she was studying arts at St. Thomas University in Fredericton, hoping to become a teacher or social worker. She expressed her gratitude to the fund for having provided "the benefits of a higher education," an opportunity she might not otherwise have had.<sup>90</sup>

As it turned out, Jane Kingston was the only child being supported for a university education by the disaster fund at the time of the inauguration of the monument; and in 1971 an internal study found only one other child who would need such support in the years to come. Resources would not be required, the study asserted, because the "cost of post-secondary education today is not the deterrent it was 10 years ago."<sup>91</sup> The directors of the fund were looking for ways to keep down expenses and were successful to the extent that a report on the educational fund in 1971 indicated that over the previous ten months roughly \$1,000 had been spent on educational payments, this in contrast with the nearly \$2,000 that the education fund had received from interest on its balance of nearly \$250,000.<sup>92</sup>

In this context, Lucien Chiasson and Jane Kingston were the success stories, leaving a more complicated picture behind the scenes. Notes taken from visits to widows' homes just after the inauguration indicated some families that appeared relatively secure. There was one widow, for instance, who still had 6

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89 *Daily Gleaner*, 20 June 1969.

90 *Daily Gleaner*, 20 June 1969.

91 "Survey Study to Estimate the Number of Children Eligible to Receive Financial Assistance for Education from the Fishermen's Disaster Fund," n.d., MC 2038, MS5, PANB.

92 N.B. Fishermen's Disaster Fund, Education Committee Report, 1970-1971. MC 2038, MS5, PANB.

children under 18, which brought her \$110 per month from the fund, to which she was able to add \$56 in Family Allowance and a further \$10 youth allowance as well as \$205 in other income not attributed to a source. Out of her \$381 in monthly income, she paid \$200 for food and \$50 for miscellaneous expenses, leaving her with a buffer for unexpected needs. The report closed by noting that she owned her own home which “was bare looking, but not bad.” On the other hand, there was the case of another widow, who also had 6 children at home. Her \$110 from the fund, together with \$186 in Mothers’ Allowance and \$24 in Family Allowance, provided her with \$320 per month; but without any other source of income she was in a bind as she had to pay \$200 for food, and \$150 for other expenses, not to mention debts that had to be serviced. The visitor to her home – which she owned – described it as “poor-bare-cold.”<sup>93</sup>

This more complicated reality was not on display at the inauguration, where praise was heaped upon the men who had watched over the fund. Hugh John Flemming, who had been premier at the time of the disaster, thanked Wardell for “using his influence and publicity media to raise funds.” Wardell was “a great man with a great heart.” As for Reverend Pepperdene, about to be replaced as head of the welfare committee, his Archbishop, Reverend A.H. O’Neill, spoke about how he had “given of himself in love of his friends.” The archbishop also remembered to “thank God especially for Lord Beaverbrook and his son, Sir Max, who were extraordinarily generous.”<sup>94</sup> The latter paid for the Fishermen’s Memorial, which might help explain the tribute to his father on the base of the memorial, alongside those who had died or had exhibited exceptional bravery.

Out of sight that day was the role played by Wardell in seeing that Roussel’s monument was constructed. He had been drawn to the design when Roussel showed him a small, wooden version shortly after the disaster. But when the memorial had still not been constructed as the tenth anniversary approached, Wardell took aim at the citizens of Baie-Ste-Anne, noting how they had “suddenly awoken to the fact that they missed having the monument to the 35 fishermen which was discussed after the 1959 disaster.” Wardell attributed this to “dissension at the time, when some of the local people appeared not to want it,” never considering that they might have had other, more pressing

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93 NBDF Correspondence, Visitors’ notes, 1969, RS 942, PANB. The names of the widows have been anonymized.

94 *Daily Gleaner*, 20 June 1969.

matters to attend to.<sup>95</sup> In the absence of the involvement of the residents of Baie-Ste-Anne, the fishers from Bay du Vin were commemorated by way of a simple tablet installed in 1960, on the first anniversary of the disaster, in front of the Anglican church with Bliss Kingston, another one of Violet's children, unveiling the memorial that included the name of his father.

The two communities, throughout the 1960s, stood apart in terms of remembering the victims of the disaster and this, in a sense, reflected the differences that families frequently reported in terms of their treatment by the disaster fund, which was as much under Wardell's control as the efforts to commemorate what had happened in 1959. Wardell and his colleagues consistently indicated a certain paternalistic interest in improving the circumstances along Miramichi Bay, at least in the short term; but they had difficulty in responding effectively either to the economic circumstances of the families or to the linguistic and religious divisions within the community.

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95 Wardell to Roussel, 16 April 1968, Fonds Claude-Roussel, doss. 0245-169, Centre d'études acadiennes Anselme-Chiasson, Université de Moncton.