THE NEWFOUNDLAND SEALERS
by Bill Gallaher

PROLOGUE AND GLOSSARY

In Newfoundland, back in the early part of the century, young men from the outposts would flock to St. John’s every spring to sign up for a berth to the annual seal hunt. Going “swillin’”, they called it, and for the first-timers it was almost a rite of passage. Yet they rarely made any money from the hunt, and, being for the most part impoverished and uneducated, they were easily exploited by the merchant class, who usually reaped huge profits from the hunt.

It was a dangerous occupation, too. In 1898 the sealing vessel “Greenland” had left more than 40 men stranded on the ice, and most of them froze to death. Then in 1914 the sealer “Newfoundland”, through a series of tragic blunders, left more than 100 men stranded on the ice during a raging storm. When they were finally found, 69 were dead, eight had gone missing, and most of the rest had lost hands and feet to frostbite. No legal or moral blame was ever attached to the ship’s captain or its owners. The survivors and the families of those who died never received one penny in compensation.

Highliner – The ship first back to port with the most seals.
Main patch – The main herd of seals.

“Dance with the ghosts of the ‘Greenland’ boys” – While the men were stranded, they were all aware of the “Greenland” disaster, and as they grew weaker some hallucinated and saw the ghosts of the “Greenland” crew dancing on the ice.

Burned down – Cooled down the boiler fires.
Gaffs – The long pike poles used for swiling.
Harps and whitecoats – Harps are a type of seal, whitecoats are their young offspring.
Glass – Barometer.

Sculping – The actual killing and skinning of the seals.
Rafters and pans – Rafters are buckled ice, and pans are relatively flat ice surfaces of varying sizes.

“Some died while singing, etc.” – Literally.

Having heard Bill Gallaher sing this song at the Islands Folk Festival of 1988, I was curious as to how a west-coaster would come to write such an evocative song on an east-coast topic. I asked Bill to provide an elaboration, in addition to the prologue and glossary he’d sent. He wrote the following:

“With regards to my song, a friend had stopped by for a cup of coffee one Monday morning in June of 1987, and we got talking about song writing. He suggested that a book he’d recently read would make a good subject for a song. The name of the book was Death on the Ice, by Cassie Brown, a native Newfoundlander, and was about the loss of most of the crew of the sealing vessel ‘Newfoundland’ during the spring hunt of 1914. I was interested, and that afternoon went down to the library and picked the book up. By Wednesday I had finished it, and I hated every interruption that forced me to put it down. I was literally stunned by what I read. I still retain vivid images of some of the horrific scenes those pages depicted, images so powerful they’ll likely remain with me forever. It also made me realize that, at least in the early days, it was not only the seals who were being exploited, it was also the men and boys who hunted them. I had no choice but to write a song about it, and by Thursday I’d completed it in pretty much the same form that I sent to you. Afterwards I discovered that several other songs had been written about the tragedy, in most cases not long after the incident occurred, but they are far too ‘romantic’. I hope my song has corrected that; I believe it speaks the truth of the matter.

“By the way, I’ve since read other books by Brown, who wrote primarily about sea tragedies along the wild coast of Newfoundland, and all have been excellent. She wrote Death on the Ice back in the early ’70s, and if her picture on the dust jacket was any indication she appeared to be getting on in years. I don’t know whether or not she’s still alive, but if she is I can think of few other people I’d rather spend an evening with. Her knowledge would likely inspire a dozen more songs.”

Death on the Ice was published by Doubleday in 1972. Diligent research by a Calgary Public Library employee turned up the information that Ms. Brown regretfully died 30th December 1986.
We reached the ice and burned down for the evening,
Made ready our gaffs for the rise of the sun;
The harps and the whitecoats were there for the taking,
And we'd try to take every one!
But first light came slow, for the glass showed foul weather,
As the wind blew a gale from the north;
Still, we slipped o'er the sides of the ship to the ice,
To go swilin' for what it was worth.

The ice heaved beneath us as we ranged from the "Newfoundland"
Sculping the whitecoats and earning our pay;
We laboured hard till we turned the ice crimson,
And thought we were done for the day.
But after our tea the skipper said, "Right, boys, There's plenty of seals on the floe."
And he sent us back out to the rafters and pans,
While the air became thicker with snow.

For the rest of the day we roamed on the ice pans
In fear of our lives in the oncoming storm;
The whitecoats knew better and turned to the water,
When we turned to our ship it was gone!
Do you know what it's like to be lost in a blizzard,
When you don't even know where you've been?
You'd trade your soul just to hear a ship's whistle,
Instead of the wail of the wind.

Out from St. John's on a course for the icefields,
The wind in her spars and the sea rolling high;
We'd be the highliner, the first to the main patch
Where seals were just waiting to die.
Hell-bent-for-leather we steamed to the north'ard,
All hands in the hold for the run;
None of us knew of the fate waiting for us,
Or dreamed of the hell yet to come.

CHORUS:

We'll never go swilin' again,
Never again will we sail to the ice;
We'll dance with the ghosts of the "Greenland" boys,
For the Newfoundland merchantmen we paid the price.
Eb (capo at 3rd fret)

**Newfoundland Sealers**

**Intro:**

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(instrumental)

**Verse:**

In nineteen fourteen when the old sealer Newfoundland laid in her coal and fired upon steam, we were boys from the out ports who'dvideo for berth to the ice for the rituals of spring. Though we knew of the hardships of life as a sealer, the black tea and hard tack for meals; It was a time when the life of a good man was worth less than profits from seals.

**Chorus:**

We'll never go sailing again. Never again will we sail to the ice; we'll dance with the ghosts of the Greenland boys— For the Newfoundland merchantmen we paid the price.

(instrumental)