(No. 5963).

"SCOTSMAN" (S.S.).

Canada. Wrecks and Salvage Act.

IN the matter of a formal investigation held in the Vice-Admiralty Court, Quebec, on the 23rd, 24th, 25th and 26th days of October, 1899, before W. H. SMITH, R.N.R., Wreck Commissioner, assisted by BLOOMFIELD DOUGLAS, R.N.R., Naval Assistant, and M. P. MCELHINNEY, Nautical Adviser to the Marine Department, as Nautical Assessors, into the cause of the stranding and total loss of the British steamship "SCOTSMAN," on the N.E. part of the island known as Belle Isle, at the entrance of the strait of the same name, between Newfoundland and the Labrador coast, on the morning of the 22nd of September, 1899.

Report and Decision of Court.

The Court having heard and carefully considered the evidence given by the master and the officers and other members of the crew in the master's presence, and attentively listened to the addresses of the counsel employed upon this case, finds as follows :—

That the master, Henry T. Skrimshire, gave the ascertained position of the ship, at noon of the 21st, as in lat. 53° 24′ N., and long. 50° 04′ W., which was obtained by the two morning observations, worked by double altitudes and reduced to noon by dead reckoning. The lighthouse on Belle Isle was then supposed to be 216 miles distant. At noon the course was N. 87° W. by compass (S. 64° W. true), and the vessel was proceeding at a speed of 13 knots per hour, the weather being fine, with an overcast sky and southerly wind.

That at 6.45 the course was altered to N. 89° W., and at 9 p.m. to S. 86° W. by compass (S. 59° W. true).

That the weather remained fine but overcast until midnight, with smooth water, the speed of the ship being estimated to be from 13 to 13·2 knots per hour.

That the said master, in pursuance of his duties, took personal charge on the bridge at 1.40 a.m. of the 22nd. The wind was still moderate with slight mist at intervals, as shown by the log-book. He remained on the bridge until the vessel was stranded.

That at 2.10 a.m. the weather became foggy, the ship still proceeding on the same course, S. 86° W., and going about 13·2 knots per hour ; the master then reduced the speed of the ship to 6 or 7 knots, at the same time ringing the engineer on the "Stand by" in the engine-room.

That shortly after this the fog began to thicken, and at 2.20 a.m. it was a dense fog, and there is ample testimony to show that objects could not be seen much further off than the length of the ship.

That no soundings were taken at any time to test the accuracy of the assumed position of the ship.

That about 2.25 a.m., dense fog still prevailing, and the night being very dark, one of the look-out men suddenly observed broken water or foam ahead and on the starboard bow of the ship, which was promptly reported to the officer in charge of the bridge. The master immediately rang the telegraph bell to stop and reverse the engines, and the evidence of the engineer shows that this order was executed. The helm was also put hard over to starboard, and the ship's head went off to S.W. by W., and a portion of the headway was taken off the ship. She, however, still forged ahead, and struck upon the rocks near the north-east extremity of Belle Isle, and became fixed, soon careening over to port at an angle of 22 degrees.

That water began to make its way rapidly into the various compartments of the ship from some holes made by the rocks and straining, and the master consequently stopped the engines for fear the vessel would slip off into deep water and founder. The fog whistle was then blowing rapidly to call all the crew and passengers on deck.

That immediately afterwards the said master ordered the boats to be launched from the port side, and a number of women and children were put into them, and those in charge of the boats were ordered to pull out to seaward so as to keep clear of the ship. One of the boats was, unfortunately, damaged alongside the ship, and about 10 of the passengers were drowned. The master, officers, and seamen, appear, from the evidence, to have used every effort to save and shelter the passengers, who were afterwards landed on the rocks abreast of the ship.

With reference to the navigation of the vessel, the Court is of opinion that the master is to blame for his negligence in not using the lead when approaching the coast, and he was not justified in attempting to make for the entrance of the Strait of Belle Isle in thick weather.

The Court, after due deliberation, has come to the conclusion that the cause of the disaster must be principally attributed to the total neglect of the use of the lead, and to the master placing too much reliance on the estimated position at noon of the 21st September, when no meridian altitude was taken.

The master, Henry Truscott Skrimshire, is, therefore, adjudged to be in default, and in pursuance of the powers vested in it by the provisions of the Wrecks and Salvage Act, the Court suspends his certificate for nine calendar months from the date of the commencement of this inquiry, and the certificate of the said master is hereby suspended accordingly.

W. H. SMITH, R.N.R.,
Commissioner.

We fully concur in the foregoing report and decision.

BLOOMFIELD DOUGLAS, R.N.R.,
Naval Assistant, Marine and Fisheries,
Nautical Assessor.

M. P. MCELHINNEY,
Nautical Adviser and Nautical Assessor.

Given in open Court, at Quebec, in the Province of Quebec, Canada, this 27th day of October, 1899.

Annex to Report—s.s. "Scotsman."

FORMAL investigation into the cause of the stranding and total loss of the British steamship "Scotsman," on the North East part of the Island known as Belle Isle, between Newfoundland and the Labrador coast, on the morning of the 22nd of September, 1899.

This investigation was held in the Admiralty Court, Quebec, on the 23rd, 24th, 25th, and 26th days of October, 1899, when Mr. F. H. MARKEY, of Smith, Markey and Montgomery, Barristers, Montreal, appeared on behalf of the master ; and Mr. W. COOK, Q.C., Mr. A. A. COOK, Q.C., and Mr. ARCHIBALD LAURIE, Barristers, for the shipping company.

Witnesses from the ship were produced by the captain and examined, but none of the passengers came forward to give evidence.

The Commissioner read over the authority for holding the investigation, and, having duly subpœnaed the several witnesses, and presented the certificated officers with statements of the case upon which the enquiry was ordered, proceeded to take evidence.

"SCOTSMAN" (S.S.).

The "Scotsman" was a steel twin screw British steamship, built at Belfast in 1895, by Harland and Wolff, and registered in Liverpool, Great Britain.

She was the property of the British and North Atlantic Steamship Company (the Dominion Line), Messrs. Richards, Mills, and Co., of Liverpool, Great Britain, being the managing owners, and David Torrance and Co., of Montreal, the agents. Official number, 105,283.

Her dimensions were as follows :—Length, 470·7 ft. ; breadth, 49·2 ft. ; and depth, 31·9 ft.

The vessel was fitted with triple expansion engines of 499 horse power, her cylinders being 22, 36½, and 60, with 45 stroke, and multitubular boilers, having 18 furnaces, and a steam pressure of 180 lbs., making 74 revolutions of the engines per minute at full speed, the daily consumption of coal being 75 tons.

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The master, H. T. Skrimshire, held an Imperial certificate of competency as ordinary master, issued by the Lords of the Committee of Privy Council for Trade, in August, 1892.

There were four officers serving on board, and five engineers, all with appropriate certificates, and a crew consisting of seamen, firemen and stewards, amounting to 120 hands all told. The vessel also carried a duly qualified surgeon.

From the evidence adduced at this investigation, it appears that the ship was supplied with a proper number of compasses, in good order, the standard or navigating compass being of Lord Kelvin's pattern, and situated upon the upper bridge in such a position that the bearing of objects could be observed in every direction. It had been inspected before leaving port.

The ship was swung for adjustment of the compass in 1896, and a table of deviations supplied; but it was stated that the master and officers took frequent observations of the sun and stars to ascertain the changes, and these were first recorded in a scrap book and afterwards inserted in a record book by the master, for future reference. Both these books were handed into Court (Exhibit "A"), and proved that the master and officers had been very careful in keeping them.

The evidence shows that 12 wooden boats were on board in good condition, and several collapsible boats on deck ready for use at short notice, but these were not required for service after the accident, as some of the passengers and crew landed on the rocks from the bow of the ship.

They had a sufficient number of anchors and chains for the requirements of the vessel, and a proper supply of life-belts and life-buoys for the use of those on board.

The managers of the Company supplied the ship with all the necessary charts, and those which were in use, both previous to and at the time of the casualty, were produced in Court, and had been largely corrected up to the year 1887 upon the local chart, and for 1895 on the North Atlantic Track Chart.

The master informed the Court the Company were very liberal in the supply of charts, books, and nautical instruments.

The vessel therefore appears to have been properly and suitably equipped for the intended voyage, with everything requisite for safe navigation, and had been inspected by the Board of Trade in June, 1899, and by the Emigration officers at Liverpool, previous to leaving upon this last voyage, when several boats were swung out and lowered in the water as the ship was lying in the river at anchor.

The "Scotsman" left Liverpool on the 14th of September, 1899, bound for Montreal, having on board 86 saloon passengers, 106 intermediate, and 87 steerage passengers, and a cargo consisting of general merchandise of about 2,000 tons weight and measurement, and drawing 22 feet on an even keel. The tide was ebb at the time.

She passed the North of Ireland, out through the North Channel, making her courses good by compass from one point of land to another, after allowance had been made for deviation, and the tide being taken into consideration.

At 9.50 a.m. of the 15th of September, the vessel was abreast of Innistrahull Island, north coast of Ireland, three miles distant, and a departure was taken from the lighthouse at 10.30 a.m., the weather being misty.

The course was then set N. 64° W. by compass, with 10° of easterly deviation, to pass on the Great Circle track for Belle Isle, which lies between the coasts of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Nothing particular occurred during the passage across the Atlantic, and the usual weather of that season was encountered.

Observations were obtained for latitude and longitude upon several occasions, and the position of the ship entered in the log book day by day, either by dead reckoning or observation, and the book was kept very well by the first officer.

The dead reckoning was worked up each day by the junior officers, and the master stated that it compared fairly well with the observations, although upon one or two days there was a discrepancy between the dead reckoning worked by himself and that ascertained by the junior officers. On the 20th of September the difference was 18 miles between latitude by observation and dead reckoning, but the master produced a paper upon which he had worked up the dead reckoning himself, which reduced this difference to 11 miles.

On the 21st of September, at noon, the position of the ship, given by the master in evidence, was in latitude 53° 27′ N., and longitude 50° 04′ W., but the latitude entered in the log-book was 53° 24′ N.

This was brought down from the course and distance run to noon, from 10.30 a.m. of that date, when double altitudes of the sun were worked up from two morning observations, and the distance from Belle Isle at noon was estimated to be 216 miles.

No meridian altitude was taken for latitude, as the sky was overcast.

The course of the vessel was then set N. 87° W. by compass (S. 65° W., true) and the speed was estimated to be about 13·5 knots per hour.

An azimuth of the sun was obtained at 2.30 or 2.40 p.m., and the error of the standard compass ascertained to be 28½° West.

No observations for longitude were taken at that time. At 6.45 p.m. the course was altered to N. 89° W. by compass, (S. 63° W. true), and at 9 p.m. the master hauled the ship five degrees to the southward, for the purpose of passing eight miles off the lighthouse on Belle Isle.

The compass course was then S. 86° W. (S. 59° W. true), which course was maintained up to the time the breakers were sighted at 2.25 a.m., of the 22nd of September.

At midnight the vessel was going at 13.2 knots, the weather being overcast, and the distance from Belle Isle Light estimated to be 52 miles.

The evidence shows that the master was frequently upon deck during the night, and went to his cabin shortly before midnight, leaving orders with the chief officer that he should be called at two o'clock in the morning if the weather came on thick, or before if necessary.

A night order book was kept on board, and was produced in Court.

Shortly before two a.m. the master went on deck and remained there until the vessel was stranded, personally conducting the navigation of the ship.

She was then proceeding upon the same course, S. 86° W. by compass, the weather being dark, with overcast sky and wind from S.W., with a rough uneven sea. No reduction in the speed had been made.

The master states it was so dark that he could not call the horizon a clear one, but he supposed he might have seen a light 14 or 15 miles off, if one had been there, as he could see all round.

By that time, however, Belle Isle Light must have been less than 11 miles distant, but as the steamer was proceeding in a direction obliquely to the coast, it could not have been seen in consequence of the high land to the eastward shutting it in.

No soundings were obtained at any time, the master stating that he considered his position placed him too far off the land to necessitate soundings being taken, and that he had no idea he could get bottom in any way, and feeling perfectly confident of the position of the ship, he omitted to do so.

It is stated in the Book of Sailing Directions, that there is a bank of soundings lying E.S.E. from the North point of Belle Isle, distant 28 miles, which affords a valuable means of ascertaining the position of a vessel in foggy weather when approaching the island from the eastward.

The least water as yet found upon this bank is 86 fathoms, mud, with 105 to 125 fathoms, sand, between it and the bank which stretches to the eastward of Belle Isle.

This bank has been found to be a good guide to many. Soon after two o'clock a.m. of the 22nd, some drifting haze came over the masthead light, and at ten minutes past two, the telegraph bell was rung upon the "stand by," and a few seconds after, orders were given to the engineer on watch to reduce the speed to half, as it set in foggy.

The engines were previously making 74 revolutions a minute, which were brought down to 37 or 39, giving a speed variously estimated at from 6 to 7½ knots through the water. This was principally obtained by the revolutions of the engines, as it does not appear the log was hove for that purpose.

Two men were stationed upon the look-out, the master and second officer being upon the bridge.

A dense fog then suddenly came on, which prevented objects from being seen at any distance from the ship.

The second officer says, "The fog came on very suddenly, and remained until we struck. We could see about a ship's length off."

Owens, the look-out man, says, "I think I could have seen about the length of the ship off when we ran into the fog."

At 2.25 a.m., the look-out man reported something "ahead and on the starboard," but the master did not catch all he said or what was ahead, but the second officer, who was near the master, said he thought breakers were reported, and the look-out man states that as soon as he noticed foam, he called to the man in the crow's nest, who also saw the breakers and reported to the second mate upon the bridge.

It does not appear that the high cliffs of the land were seen at the time, but the master took the breakers to be the white line at the base of an iceberg.

Orders were immediately given by telegraph to stop and reverse the engines and put the helm hard-a-starboard, and the ship's head payed off to S.W. by W., and in about from 1½ to 2½ minutes afterwards she struck.

According to the evidence of the second mate, about two or three minutes elapsed from the time the man reported breakers until the vessel struck, and the ship was moving at the rate of about 1¼ knots per hour, the speed having been taken off by reversing the engines.

There was not much shock at the time, but a hard grating on the rocks, and the vessel at once careened over to port about 23°, and remained fast on rocks. It was not known where she had gone on shore.

When it was found that the ship was stranded, the master ordered the engines to be stopped. This was a wise precaution to have taken.

Had he moved the engines again, the ship might have slid off the ledge, and sunk in deep water, which was stated to be a short distance astern of her, as in about four or five minutes after she struck, the water began to rush into the ship on the port side in great volumes through the large holes which were made in her by the rocks penetrating her side, and in about 10 minutes after, the water came in to such an extent that the engineers had to clear out of the engine-room, and could not afterwards get to the platform, and the fires were drowned out.

Every precaution appears to have been taken by the engineers before leaving to prevent an explosion.

Subsequent events proved the wisdom of the master's stopping the engines at the time, as some days after, the ship did actually slide off the rocks and disappear beneath the surface of the water.

Had this occurred shortly after she stranded, no doubt the loss of life would have been appalling, the night being very dark with a thick fog surrounding everything.

Immediately after the casualty, the master blew alternate blasts upon the whistle and siren to arouse the crew and passengers. Orders were given to the carpenter to sound the pumps, but the chief engineer soon reported that all the holds were filling with water rapidly.

The crew then having come on deck, were at once employed lowering the boats in the water on the port side, as those upon the starboard side could not be used on account of the heavy list the vessel had.

The master states, in his deposition, that there was no panic, and no attempt on the part of the men to get into the boats which were all lowered and away within the space of half an hour. The women and children were placed in these boats.

Nos. 4 and 6 boats got safely clear of the ship's side, and were rowed out to seaward as there was no prospect at that time of finding a landing place.

The boats afterwards returned to the ship, and the people were taken on board and landed, with all the others, by a ladder placed on the rocks from the bow of the ship.

After No. 8 boat was afloat, she became damaged, either by collision with one of the other boats, or by striking against the ship's side, or by some other cause unknown, and she commenced taking in water rapidly, and the crew asked for a bailer.

Evidence shows that Edward Dobbin, quarter-master, put in the plug in the bottom of the boat. He says, "we lowered her down a little below the rail, and I jumped into her, and put in the plug. I could not tell, when she was first lowered, whether the water was coming in or not. The water came in at the bow pretty rapidly, and I sung out to the 2nd officer not to lower any more passengers. I felt the other boat strike her pretty hard on the bow."

"After that she was swamped by the water coming in so much that she settled down, and a sea came in over the stern, and she then went down quickly."

"We were all thrown into the water. The painter was fast to the bow. I got up by the life-line."

"The passengers did not cry out much. One person I am told was hauled up the ship's side."

"Some of the boat's crew went up by the life-line. None of the crew were drowned. About all of the passengers were drowned and four saved."

"We lowered down No. 10 boat as soon as possible, so as to save the people. Four of those saved had life jackets on. It was very dark then."

"I tried all I could to save the people. I could not say if any life-buoys were thrown to them."

The second officer says "the first boat that I lowered, No. 8, was swamped. It was kept on the saloon deck in chocks and griped down and covered. We had no trouble in getting it out. It was a boat capable of carrying from 45 to 48 passengers."

"We lowered her level with the saloon deck and put the men in who were to take charge of her, and then put in the women and children."

"Eighteen or 20 passengers were put in that boat and four of a crew. While she was fast alongside by the the painter, the quartermaster said that water was coming in and gaining on them, and an extra heavy sea filled her."

"The quartermaster thought one of the other boats had damaged her."

"I sung out to one of the other boats to drop down and try to rescue the passengers."

"The people were very quiet and did not shout out much. They all had life-belts on."

"It was so dark we could hardly see the boats from the deck. All that were saved were saved by the other boats. This was in about half an hour after the ship went ashore."

"Then No. 10, the aftermost boat of all, was put out to rescue the drowning people."

The master states that he did not hear of the boat being swamped until all the other boats were lowered and away.

It may appear to be unaccountable that further effort should not have been made to save more of the women who were in No. 8 boat.

There were two boats in the water alongside the ship ahead of her, and it is said that some of the drowning persons were rescued by their crews, but ropes and life-buoys might have been thrown to them from the ship's deck until the boats came to their assistance.

It is, however, possible that a large number of people rushed to the rail of the ship, looking over the side, and prevented the officers and seamen from giving that aid which was promptly required.

With regard to the navigation of the ship, it can be seen by the compass record book, Exhibit "A," that care was taken to ascertain the deviation of the compass on every available opportunity, that the senior officers, who held master's certificates, took independent observations for latitude and longitude, and the junior officers worked up the dead reckoning daily.

The master, however, states he did not accept the position by account, given him by the junior officer on the 21st, as he found the ship had maintained the Great Circle course.

It was recorded in the log book, and should on that account be accepted as official.

As no observation was obtained at noon of the 21st for latitude, it was necessary for the safe navigation of the vessel that the master should have taken every known precaution afterwards, when steaming towards the coast; and an officer in command of a passenger steamer cannot expect to be exonerated from blame when he neglects any responsibility.

The "Scotsman" was going at full speed, of about 13·2 knots an hour, from noon of the 21st until 2.10 a.m. of the 22nd.

It may therefore be inferred that at that time, when the vessel's speed was reduced, she could not have been more than 3⅛ miles from the land, as after suddenly entering into the dense fog, she struck the rocks at 2.25, and it was impossible for those on board to see ahead or in any direction more than the ship's length.

It did not occur to the master that under the circumstances in which the ship was placed when the fog came on that icebergs might have been encountered at any time.

The fact of the ship going into dense fog so suddenly might have indicated the proximity of land.

Men experienced in the North Atlantic trade find that fog will sometimes lie like a mantle enveloping islands or portions of the mainland.

It was therefore imperative for him to have stopped the engines and taken a cast of the lead.

It would also have been prudent and proper if the

ship had been turned round with her head to the eastward, and steamed slowly off in that direction until daylight came in.

It was courting disaster to attempt to enter the Straits of Belle Isle under the conditions then existing, and to the lack of taking these necessary precautions the cause of the casualty must be attributed.

The number of ships which have been stranded in the Straits of Belle Isle and Gulf of St. Lawrence during the last few years, and the loss of their valuable cargoes, has caused the insurance companies to increase the rates.

In nearly all the cases of these wrecks the overconfidence of the masters in their positions has largely contributed to the disasters, but above all other causes, it appears that the neglect of the use of the lead, and running at too high a rate of speed in foggy weather, have been instrumental in the destruction of so many fine ships.

Evidence shows that after the people were landed, the master, officers, and seamen did everything they possibly could to assist in taking care of and making the passengers comfortable under the trying circumstances.

The precipitous cliffs near where the ship was stranded were difficult to climb, and the women and children were got up with great difficulty, some of them having to be carried a portion of the way.

Tarpaulins and other coverings were provided as soon as possible, and stores were landed in abundance, with blankets, &c., for warmth.

The sailors and stewards appear to have worked cheerfully and willingly with the officers in saving food.

On the 23rd the people from the lighthouse, which was a distance of eight miles away, came to their assistance, and on the 24th, Mr. Coulton, the keeper, conducted a large number of the people to the lighthouse, the master sending provisions with them.

About noon of that day the steamer "Monterey" stopped off the lighthouse, and sent a boat on shore and took five saloon passengers and one steerage on board, and the master took the opportunity of despatching all firemen and trimmers, and four stowaways, who were taken in that vessel, to England.

It appears that the day after the ship was wrecked a gang of men, supposed to be firemen, went on board and broke into the spirit stores, and abstracted a quantity of liquors, which they secreted among the rocks.

As soon as this was discovered, an engineer, well armed, was sent on board to prevent further robbery and mischief, and the chief officer was ordered to destroy all the spirits he could find in the store-room.

These depredations were not known to the master at the time, as he was on shore, and they were beyond his control.

It appears from the diary of the master that everything that was possible was done for the comfort of the passengers after they reached the lighthouse.

Warm clothing was supplied, hot meals, and a hearty welcome from Mr. Coulton.

The master expresses his gratitude to Mr. Coulton and family in the following words:—"These good people at the lighthouse, from the day of the wreck up to this time, have been untiring in their kindness and attention, and constant sympathy and help to all our suffering passengers and crew. Their advice, and assistance and guidance of people across the island, has been invaluable, and has without doubt in the largest degree contributed to the safe deliverance of all from a very dangerous position here. I am afraid to think of what might have happened to many of our weaker ones were it not for their unwonted help, co-operation, and watchfulness in the matter of intercepting and inducing the several vessels to come to our assistance, to say nothing of the labour willingly endured to bring people in from the wreck, entertaining them with the best in the house, and finally assisting them to the landing jetty a distance of a mile, and seeing them all safely in the boats. May God reward them."

With reference to the report that the master of the "Scotsman" was misled by the change of the fog signal on Belle Isle, it may be said that notice of the change was published on the 27th of July, in a "Notice to Mariners," stating that a siren would be substituted for the bombs hitherto used at that station, and he should have had this information.

He states in evidence, "I did not hear any other sound except the breakers before the ship struck, neither did I hear the fog alarm on Belle Isle after we struck. It was 8 miles distant. The change of the fog alarm from a bomb to a siren did not have any influence on my navigation of the ship."

Captain Skrimshire has always borne a high character upon previous voyages, and Mr. David Torrance, the agent of the Dominion Line of steamers, stated to the Court that he had been in the employ of the company for many years, and his reputation is first class, and one of the underwriters told him not long ago that owing to the fine condition of the vessel and the reputation of the master, he was taking larger risks than usual.

In consideration of these facts, and upon the application of the master, whose conduct after the accident was praiseworthy, the Commissioner recommends that a mate's certificate should be granted to the master during the time of suspension of his master's certificate.

W. H. SMITH, R.N.R., Commissioner.

(*Issued in London by the Board of Trade on the 8th day of December*, 1899.)