

The Sinking of the Princess Sophia: Taking the North Down with Her, by Ken Coates and Bill Morrison. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990. Pp. xviii, 216. Illus.; maps. \$16.95.

In Thornton Wilder's famous novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, Brother Juniper, a Franciscan priest who had witnessed the collapse of the bridge, delved into the lives of the five victims in the hope that this would throw some light on the tragedy. Ken Coates and Bill Morrison have adopted a somewhat similar approach to their study of the sinking of the CPR steamer *Princess Sophia* in Alaskan waters in 1918 — the worst marine disaster in the history of the Pacific Northwest.

The loss of all on board, probably 353 in number, was a severe blow to the society and economy of the Yukon, which had been declining ever since the gold rush of the 1890s had subsided. The depression in the years before the First World War and the war itself had taken a heavy toll. The office of Commissioner of the Yukon had just been abolished and the Territorial Council reduced from ten members to three. What remained was "a society with shallow roots . . . most northern residents were either single men or husbands and fathers who left their families in the south." The "essential pattern of northern life" was therefore characterized by a seasonal exodus when "the *Sophia* and other ships took a sizeable portion of the North's non-native population down south with them." The authors feel that this trying period in the history of the Yukon has been largely overlooked, and the stated purpose of their book is to direct attention to it and to place the impact of the loss of the *Sophia* in proper perspective.

To investigate the lives of the 353 victims was a daunting enterprise, but sources proved to be remarkably informative. In some instances friends and relatives were still living. Newspapers, particularly those in Dawson and Juneau, yielded many details. The voluminous records of an unsuccessful action for damages against the CPR, which dragged on in the American courts until 1932, were a major source, for at one time the court had required "testimony on the lives, careers, employment history, health, and spending habits" of each of the 225 victims that the claimants represented. There were no famous people on board, but the passenger list reflected almost every aspect of northern activity, and justifies the book's sub-title. Hardest hit was the White Pass & Yukon Route, whose river steamers had just been laid up for the winter; more than 80 crewmen were passengers on the *Sophia*.

Two aspects of the disaster still arouse controversy: why did the *Princess* impale herself on Vanderbilt Reef, in the Lynn Canal, and would it have

been possible to rescue any or all of those on board before she sank, some forty hours later? The evidence, here presented in considerable detail, answers both questions convincingly.

Snow had turned to rain and the barometer was rising when the *Sophia* left Skagway, late in the evening, but when she reached the full width of Lynn Canal Captain Locke, who had navigated its waters scores of times, found himself running before a blizzard, coupled with a blinding snow-storm that reduced visibility to zero. Radar was far in the future, and the falling snow killed the whistle echoes that might have helped him to judge his position. Vanderbilt Reef is a pinnacle near the middle of a deep channel nearly seven miles wide, and instead of passing east of it, the *Sophia* wandered off course just sufficiently far to crash upon it. She was not being driven recklessly; at most her speed cannot have been more than a sedate 11 knots.

Weather conditions were so bad that any rescue attempt would almost certainly have involved serious loss of life. The *Princess* was firmly ashore — she was almost high and dry at low tide — and only a few hours before she sank Captain Locke was still convinced that she was in no immediate danger and that the proper course was to wait for the tempestuous weather to improve. But instead of improving it worsened. Even the largest of the would-be rescue craft, the U.S. lighthouse tender *Cedar*, was forced to run for shelter. Presently the *Sophia* was driven across the reef, broke free from it, and sank into the depths. Weather throughout had been the villain in the piece.

Appendices provide such details as lists of the passengers (and the fare each had paid) and crew, payments made to the relatives of the crew under the provisions of the Workmen's Compensation Act, and the amounts paid by the CPR for the recovery and burial of bodies. This is as nearly a definitive account of the loss of the *Sophia* as we are likely to get.

Alaskans had been agitating for years for better aids to navigation, and it is ironical that a lighted buoy to mark Vanderbilt Reef, which might have warned the *Sophia* of her peril, was in the hold of the *Cedar* as she hovered nearby, and was installed within a few weeks. And the *Princess Alice*, which the CPR had sent north to pick up those on the *Sophia*, stole quietly into Vancouver harbour with 156 bodies on board, on the evening of November 11 — Armistice Day — when the city was given over to rejoicing, not mourning.