

Captain John T. Walbran, 1848-1913

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In 1909 the Government Printing Bureau in Ottawa published a book with the prosaic title *British Columbia Coast Names 1592-1906*.¹ The style smacked of an earlier period for there followed the explanation "... to which are added a few names in adjacent United States territory, their origin and history, by Captain John T. Walbran." Published by the Geographic Board of Canada and selling for the modest price of \$2.00, this first and only edition soon went out of print. By 1956 book-sellers in British Columbia were asking \$50 to \$100 for a second-hand copy. Today the price would be much higher.²

John Thomas Walbran was born at Ripon in the West Riding of Yorkshire on March 23, 1848³ where he was brought up by his mother in the family home, Bondgate House.⁴ He was sent to Ripon Grammar School⁵ and at the age of 14 was accepted as a Royal Naval Reserve cadet in H.M.S. *Conway*,⁶ a training ship for boys intending to become officers in the merchant service. It must have been a change from the placid maternal atmosphere of an inland cathedral town but young Walbran thrived on the rough and tumble life in the old wooden warship moored in the river Mersey off Rock Ferry. In 1864 he graduated with an 'extra' certificate rated 'good' for ability and 'excellent' for conduct.⁷

On leaving the training ship *Conway* boys were indentured to one or other of the prominent shipowners as apprentices. Walbran joined the

¹ Walbran, Capt. John T. *British Columbia Coast Names 1592-1906*. Ottawa; Government Printing Bureau, 1909. *Illus.*

² Nicholson, George. "Rare Book by Walbran," *Islander* (October 7, 1956), pp. 10-11.

³ *List of Officers, Fisheries Protection and Marine Service of Canada*. Ottawa; Government Printing Bureau, 1903, p. 2.

⁴ Captain, H.M.S. *Conway*, to Major F. V. Longstaff, F.R.G.S. (March 12, 1928), B.C. Archives.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

sailing ship⁸ *Bedfordshire* almost immediately. In this he was fortunate for it was a matter of prestige to belong to a smart ship and the *Bedfordshire*, owned by F. Boulton & Co. of Liverpool, was a handsome vessel. An iron barque of 1,155 tons gross, she had been built by W. F. Potter of Liverpool in 1863,⁹ three years after he had opened his shipyard on the Island of Queen's Dock. The firm achieved the zenith of its glory in 1891 with the launching of the *Wanderer*, considered by seamen of the age to be the most beautiful large sailing ship ever built.¹⁰

The normal period of a sea apprenticeship was four years¹¹ during which, in return for a hard living with token wages — or even on payment of a premium by parents in some cases — the shipowner undertook to teach "the business of a seaman". The apprentice for his part, in the wording of the indentures, was required to "keep his master's secrets"¹² and to refrain from visiting "alehouses, taverns and houses of ill-repute." In recognition of their *Conway* education, qualified cadets from that training ship were allowed a remission of sea service before examination for a Board of Trade certificate. In October 1867, after some three years in the *Bedfordshire*, John Walbran obtained his second mate's certificate at Liverpool.¹³

For the ensuing twenty-one years Walbran ranged the oceans of the world before commencing the Canadian phase of his career. Gaining his mate's certificate in 1875, he passed for master at his home port of Liverpool on June 2, 1881.¹⁴ He may have continued in the old *Bedfordshire* for a while and he is thought to have engaged in the Indian trade in a ship called the *British Consul*.¹⁵ At any rate, by 1888 he decided that his future lay in steam for in that year he obtained a berth as chief officer of the S.S. *Islander*.¹⁶

The screw steamer *Islander*, then fitting out in a Clyde shipyard, had been built for the Canadian Pacific Navigation Company's passenger service in British Columbia. Of 240 feet in length and 1,495 tons gross,¹⁷

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Masfield, John. *The Wanderer*. London; Heinemann, 1930, p. 2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹¹ 17 & 18 Victoriae, CAP. CIV. *The Merchant Shipping Act, 1854*.

¹² Indentures between Alfred Holt & Co., Liverpool, and Thomas E. Appleton, April, 1929. (Author)

¹³ Nicholson, *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *List of Officers, Fisheries Protection and Marine Service of Canada*. Ottawa; Government Printing Bureau, 1903, p. 3.

¹⁵ — "Pioneer Shipping Man is Dead," *Colonist*, April 1, 1913.

¹⁶ Nicholson, *Ibid.*

¹⁷ — *List of Shipping*. Ottawa; Department of Marine and Fisheries, 1895.

the *Islander* steamed to Victoria by way of the Magellan Straits, a useful experience for Mr. Walbran in the days when most shipping bound for British Columbia, of necessity under sail, took the stormy route around Cape Horn. Shortly after his arrival at Victoria Walbran was transferred to an older and smaller C.P.N. vessel, the *Danube*, as master.¹⁸ This little ship, of 215 feet and 887 tons gross,¹⁹ had been built at Glasgow in 1869, sailing for the Far East immediately. It was on her return voyage that year that she became the first merchant vessel to make the homeward passage of the Suez Canal.²⁰

After three years in command on the B.C. coast, Walbran built up a solid reputation as a capable shipmaster and an excellent navigator. At that time the Pacific Coast was by no means completely charted and, always something of a student by nature, Walbran reinforced his practical experience of pilotage by research into the surveys of the early hydrographers.²¹ These capabilities were recognized by the Department of Marine and Fisheries when it was decided to build a new vessel to take over the increasing work of lighthouse supply and fisheries protection.²² On May 26, 1891, he was appointed to the Marine Service of Canada for command of this steamer, then building in Scotland,²³ to replace the original C.G.S. *Sir James Douglas* which was inadequate for the work.²⁴

The specification of the new vessel originated in Ottawa,²⁵ full particulars being sent with invitations to tender for her construction. Of the ten bids received, the lowest and most favourable was that of Fleming & Ferguson of Paisley who quoted £15,000 complete.²⁶ Mr. Lawrence Hill, a civil engineer, represented the Department in Scotland, while the chief engineer of *Sir James Douglas*, Mr. Gordon Grant,²⁷ was sent to Paisley with his captain to oversee the construction.

On July 23, 1891 the steamer was launched into the River Cart at Paisley by Miss Buchanan of Glasgow²⁸ and named *Quadra* after the

¹⁸ *Colonist*, April 1, 1913.

¹⁹ — *Lloyd's Register of Shipping*. London; 1905-6.

²⁰ Nicholson, *Ibid.*

²¹ *Colonist*, April 1, 1913.

²² — *Department of Marine and Fisheries Annual Report*. Ottawa; Queen's Printer, 1890, p. 32.

²³ *List of Officers* . . . 1903, p. 3.

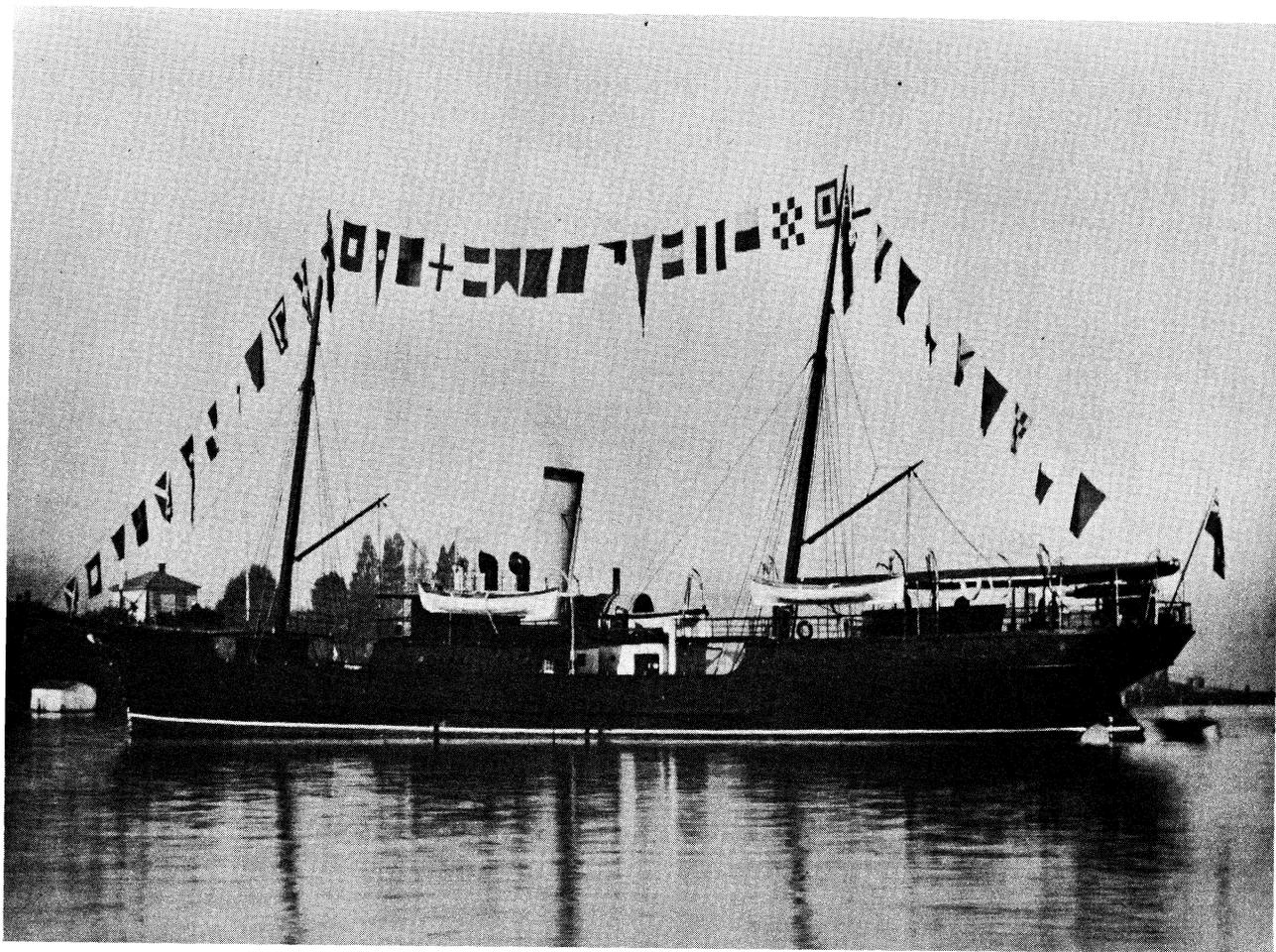
²⁴ *Marine and Fisheries Report*, 1890, p. 32.

²⁵ — *Department of Marine and Fisheries Annual Report*. Ottawa; Queen's Printer, 1891, pp. 54-55.

²⁶ *Loc. cit.*

²⁷ *Loc. cit.*

²⁸ — "She is a beauty," *Colonist*, January 6, 1892.



C.G.S. *Quadra*, built by Fleming & Ferguson, Paisley, for Department of Marine and Fisheries, 1890. (BC ARCHIVES)

famous Spanish explorer of the Pacific. Completion was delayed somewhat by a railway strike but, as it was considered that the lost time was beyond the control of the builders, the penalty clause in the contract was waived and the *Quadra* was ready for trials in September instead of June.²⁹

Having achieved a sea speed of 12 knots on the measured mile at Skelmorlie the *Quadra* was handed over to the owners' representative on October 6.³⁰ The chief engineer, Mr. Hodgert, was supplied by the builders under the terms of their contract, it being arranged that Mr. Grant would take over at Victoria on expiry of the guarantee period.³¹ Three deck officers went to Paisley from British Columbia to deliver the new ship, of whom Mr. Oage was chief officer, with Messrs. Turtle and Mc-Millan as second and third respectively.³²

Leaving the *Phoenix Works* at Paisley for the last time, the *Quadra* slipped quietly down the river and, dropping her pilot at Greenock with the last visitors from shore, anchored overnight in Lamlash Bay, Isle of Arran, to secure for sea. As Walbran walked the deck that night he must have been a happy man. He was forty-three, married and settled in Victoria, and was looking forward to applying his talents and energy to the Marine Service of Canada. As for the ship, he cherished her as his own, and she was indeed worth looking at. 174 feet on the waterline, the new vessel was graced by a clipper stem and short bowsprit, balanced by a nicely proportioned counter which brought her overall length to 212 feet. The style of painting suited this graceful profile — a thin white boot-topping setting off black topsides to the rail — above which the varnished deckwork and white boats were crowned by a buff funnel, raked to complement her schooner rig. The saloon and captain's accommodation was under the poop from which a rounded teak skylight would give a glimpse of mahogany and bird's eye maple glowing from electric lights. In the engineroom, much bigger than the cramped machinery space of the *Sir James Douglas*, Mr. Grant made himself at home with a fine quadruple expansion engine and two sturdy marine boilers. Under the forward hatch the builders had stowed the hull and engine of a steam launch to be erected when ready for the lighthouse service.³³

On October 17, 1891 the *Quadra* weighed from Lamlash Bay and

²⁹ *Marine and Fisheries Report, 1891*, pp. 54-55.

³⁰ *Loc. cit.*

³¹ *Loc. cit.*

³² *Colonist*, January 6, 1892.

³³ Appleton, Thomas E., *Usque ad Mare*. Ottawa; Queen's Printer, 1968, p. 50; 165.

proceeded down the Irish Sea. From Ushant she experienced five days of exceptionally heavy weather which thoroughly tested the ship and inspired her crew with confidence.³⁴ Stopping for coal at the Canaries and St. Vincent, Cape Verde Island, she steamed down the tropics of the South Atlantic at 9 knots, canvas set to steady her in the Trades, until the ocean blue gave way to the gloomy Straits of Magellan. Putting in to Lota in Chile for more coal — 124 tons had been shovelled into her furnaces since leaving St. Vincent — she steamed up the West coast of South America and after a visit to Valparaiso, anchored in San Francisco Bay for a general clean-up, more coal and a few tons of ballast to compensate for lightness due to consumption of stores.³⁵

On January 5, 1892 the *Quadra* anchored off the drydock at Esquimalt. The *Colonist* was ecstatic and a front page column, headed "SHE IS A BEAUTY" went on to relate the story of the voyage, commencing in poetic vein:

"A little before midnight last night a schooner-rigged vessel bore round the coast into Esquimalt Harbour, her whistle pouring forth notes of gladness at her arrival."³⁶

The newspaper further assured its readers that the machinery had worked perfectly, never stopping except in port, and had not even run a hot bearing throughout the entire voyage. With the pleasing appearance of the new ship and the growing reputation of her master, the *Quadra* soon became an object of special interest to the marine community of Victoria.

Captain Walbran set about the permanent organization of his new command, an appointment which he would hold with distinction for a total of 13 years. Most of the original officers and crew returned to other employment, Mr. Grant duly took over the engine room from the guarantee chief, and new officers were appointed. Although three mates had been shipped for the ocean passage, Marine Service ships then carried two in normal operation.³⁷ The chief officer was Mr. W. G. Owen and the second, Mr. Charles Barnes, both of whom rose to command. The second engineer was Mr. W. J. Cullum who later became a steamship inspector at Victoria.³⁸

A number of other likely young men commenced successful careers in

³⁴ *Colonist*, January.

³⁵ *Loc. cit.*

³⁶ *Loc. cit.*

³⁷ *List of Officers . . . 1903.*

³⁸ Nicholson, George, "Gallant old *Quadra*," *Islander* (May 24, 1964), pp. 10-11.

the *Quadra* under Walbran. Among the first of the permanent crew was seaman James E. McDonald who became an officer in the ship some years afterwards.³⁹ In 1906, by which time the *Quadra* was under the command of Captain Charles Hackett, McDonald was specially promoted to chief officer after distinguished service in charge of a boat when the *Quadra* rescued the crew of the American sailing ship *Coloma*, stranded and breaking up off Cape Beale.⁴⁰ In 1909 a young messman called Tom Morrison joined the ship; he transferred from the stewards list to the stokers shortly afterwards and eventually, after a long and notable career as marine engineer, became the Marine Agent for the Department at Victoria in 1948.⁴¹

When the *Quadra* commissioned in 1892 she was in great demand for a wide range of official duties, being the only government vessel on the Pacific coast except for British warships which were unavailable for civil purposes. Like other ships of the Canadian Marine Service, officers and men wore uniform of a style very similar to naval pattern.⁴²

As the *Quadra* visited many lonely settlements which could be reached only by sea, Walbran was made a magistrate, often taking with him a police constable.⁴³ Because of such law enforcement duties, particularly those of Fisheries protection, the vessel carried rifles and the men were trained in their use. Although entirely a vessel of peace with crew signed on in the usual way, the *Quadra* had a naval air about her at that time, partly because of her Fisheries role but also from the close proximity of the Pacific Squadron of the Royal Navy at Esquimalt. On Sunday mornings, lying at anchor among warships on the Station, the C.G.S. *Quadra* would be seen with awnings spread smartly fore and aft, ship's company mustered on the quarterdeck, as Captain Walbran read divine service in frock coat and sword.⁴⁴

In May 1892 the *Quadra* was returning from a fisheries patrol on the sealing grounds off the Aleutians when she struck a rock in the Houston Stewart Channel at the southern end of the Queen Charlotte Islands. The vessel was under a relief master at the time, Captain Gaudin, who

³⁹ — *List of Officers, Marine Service of Canada*. Ottawa; 1908.

⁴⁰ Paterson, T. W., "Minnie Paterson braved storm," *Islander* (November 20, 1966), p. 6.

⁴¹ Nicholson, *Ibid.*

⁴² Appleton, *Ibid.*, pp. 243-246.

⁴³ Nicholson, *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Appleton, Thomas E., *Usque ad Mare*. Ottawa; Queen's Printer, 1968, pp. 245-246.

was exonerated from blame by the commissioners who investigated the stranding. Their findings were that the master:

“... was exercising all due and proper precautions known to skilful navigators...”

This incident is commemorated in the Quadra Rock, named after the ship,⁴⁵ and provides an interesting sidelight on Walbran's generous nature. No seaman likes to be connected with a serious stranding, whatever the circumstances, and although the origin of the name is duly noted in *British Columbia Coast Names*, the author goes on to say that he commanded the ship on her ocean passage without mentioning that he was not in charge at the time of the accident. Walbran was by then widely known as the captain of the *Quadra* and a casual reader might well have assumed that he was also connected with the regrettable affair which laid-off the ship for three months and cost the taxpayers \$17,000 in repairs plus \$100 a day for a salvage ship.⁴⁶

In the ensuing years Walbran took an increasing interest in the hydrography of the B.C. Coast and reports of the Department of Marine and Fisheries contain many acknowledgements of his surveys which were particularly valuable because of his reputation for accuracy in placing aids to navigation. Apart from work of this nature he came to be equally familiar with Pacific coast history; he embarked many interesting people on official tours, ranging from election officials and judicial bodies to police detachments, and witnessed events of all kinds from labour disputes to commemorative ceremonies.

The Governor-General, Lord Aberdeen, embarked for a short while in 1896⁴⁷ to be followed, in 1900, by another vice-regal cruise when Lord and Lady Minto were on board for over a month on a trip to Skagway.⁴⁸ In 1901, when the Duke and Duchess of York crossed from Vancouver to Victoria in the liner *Empress of India*, which was royal yacht for the occasion, the C.G.S. *Quadra* was attached to the fleet as additional escort.⁴⁹ This participation in imperial splendour followed a long estab-

⁴⁵ Walbran, *Ibid.*, p. 408.

⁴⁶ — *Department of Marine and Fisheries Annual Report*, Ottawa; Queen's Printer, 1892, p. 40.

⁴⁷ — *Department of Marine and Fisheries Annual Report*, Ottawa; Queen's Printer, 1896, p. 7.

⁴⁸ — *Department of Marine and Fisheries Annual Report*, Ottawa; King's Printer, 1901, p. 9.

⁴⁹ — *Department of Marine and Fisheries Annual Report*, Ottawa; King's Printer, 1902, p. 16.

lished British tradition whereby Their Majesties when afloat on visits of state were preceded by the Trinity House Yacht. In Canada, the presence of the graceful little *Quadra* under command of a pilot of Walbran's professional standing, was a compliment to the man and his work.

Captain Walbran was now a well known figure and several of his historical papers on coast names were published in newspapers or read before the Natural History Society of British Columbia.⁵⁰ Like his surveys he conducted historical research with painstaking thoroughness. He knew all parts of the coast from his work in the *Quadra*, but his extensive acquaintanceship with Indian chiefs, traders and missionaries, and the naval hierarchy at Esquimalt, provided plenty of original material. All sources were questioned and Walbran's correspondence at this period, both in British Columbia and abroad, was extensive.⁵¹

1904 brought a change to Captain Walbran's life. In that year he came ashore. Command of the *Quadra* passed to Captain Hackett.⁵² Walbran was now able to devote much of his time to the compilation of *British Columbia Coast Names*, an activity which had then emerged from the research stage. In this occupation, he was encouraged by the Minister of Marine and Fisheries, the Hon. L. P. Brodeur, at a time when interest in geographic and naval matters was of rising concern to the Government of Canada. Of more immediate help in the actual work, Mr. William P. Anderson, F.R.G.S., who was Chief Engineer of the Department and a member of the Geographic Board of Canada, co-operated closely with Walbran in the final preparation of the manuscript. In the Spring of 1909 the book came out.

It was an immediate success. From the first entry, "Actaeon Sound" on page 11, to the last, "Russell Cape" on page 545, Walbran's book is full of interest and, because of the unique origins of Pacific Coast names, it is a treasure house of history and biography, both Indian and naval. The author was a stickler for accuracy and, although he claimed only to have striven towards this end and not necessarily to have achieved it, the book is in fact the definitive work on the subject.⁵³ Technically, and rather surprisingly, it was marred by an embarrassingly long list of printing errors which necessitated a hastily produced *errata*. Doubtless there were production difficulties, the business of proof reading was not helped

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² — *Department of Marine and Fisheries Annual Report*, Ottawa; King's Printer, 1904, p. 96.

⁵³ Walbran, Capt. John T., *British Columbia Coast Names 1592-1906*, p. 5.

by the distance from Ottawa, and the Printing Bureau, as other authors have occasionally found out since, is not a publishing house.

Above all, the character of the author shows through this scholarly presentation. Enthusiasm and extensive professional experience and knowledge are evident; on the personal side, Walbran's innate gentleness and consideration for others, already mentioned in connection with the stranding of the *Quadra* appears again under "Cooper Inlet."⁵⁴ Captain James Cooper, the first Marine Agent at Victoria, a colourful and well known figure in the early days of the Colony, had been involved in a fraud culminating in his dismissal after criminal proceedings.⁵⁵ Walbran records only that Cooper was:

"... agent of Marine and Fisheries for British Columbia 1872-79 when he was succeeded by Captain F. Revely, subsequently leaving with his family for California."⁵⁶

Actually James Cooper had forfeited bail, failing to appear at his trial, but Walbran treated the affair with characteristic regard for sensibilities.⁵⁷

John Walbran died at Victoria on March 31, 1913. His health had been indifferent in later years and had not been helped by an injury sustained when on Fisheries patrol in heavy weather, and from another, sustained when he was accidentally thrown from a motor car. In 1912, when the Department decided to build a larger vessel to augment the *Quadra*, Walbran had been offered the command but had declined. The *Colonist* published his obituary⁵⁸ and, such was Walbran's reputation in the life of Victoria, the paper also ran an editorial column which summed him up as:

"... a fine seaman and a very likeable gentleman... Captain Walbran took a great pride in his profession... his retirement from the *Quadra* some years ago was a great loss to the Service."⁵⁹

He had known the sea in all its moods, in a way which can hardly be duplicated today, for despite greatly increased scientific knowledge of the sea, few individuals can now have the intimate physical and emotional

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁵⁵ Smith, Dorothy Blakey, "James Cooper," *British Columbia Historical Quarterly*, 1957-58.

⁵⁶ Walbran, *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁵⁷ Appleton, Thomas E., *Usque ad Mare*, Ottawa; Queen's Printer, 1968, p. 233.

⁵⁸ *Colonist*, April 1, 1913.

⁵⁹ *Loc. cit.*

contact which was so much a part of sailing ship life. This training greatly moulded Walbran, as did the ships in which he served. Another *Conway* cadet, John Masefield wrote of that era:

“Yet though their splendour may have ceased to be
Each played her sovereign part in making me.
Now I return my thanks with heart and lips
For the great queenliness of all those ships.”⁶⁰

For his favourite, fate had a sad ending. In 1917 the *Quadra* was in collision with the C.P.R. steamer *Charmer* at Nanaimo and had to be beached to prevent her sinking in deep water.⁶¹ She was refloated and was converted to an ore carrier. Even this drudgery was not the dregs of a bitter cup. In 1924 she was seized by the United States Coast Guard cutter *Shawnee* for running illicit rum into California.⁶² Eventually sold at auction by the United States Marshall, the rust scarred remains of the dainty *Quadra* fetched \$1,625 for scrap.

Apart from the *Quadra* Rock, memories of the Marine Service of Canada are recalled in Paisley Point, named by Captain Walbran to commemorate the birthplace of his ship. The British Admiralty, who at that time conducted the hydrographic survey of British Columbia, honoured the master of the *Quadra* in Walbran Island in Rivers Inlet, and Walbran Rock off Lama Passage, Fisher Channel, named in 1890 and 1894 respectively. Not to be outdone, the Geographic Board perpetuated the name in 1898 with the addition of Walbran Point, Observatory Inlet. These things came about in his lifetime and it must have given him a great feeling of honest satisfaction to look at his modest immortality on the charts of the British Columbia Coast.

⁶⁰ Masefield, John, *Selected Poems*, London; Heinemann, 1930, p. 104.

⁶¹ Appleton, Thomas E., *Usque ad Mare*, Ottawa; Queen's Printer, 1968, p. 168.

⁶² Nicholson, *Islander*, May 24, 1964, pp. 10-11.