

Tale of mutiny, murder off Nova Scotia in 1840s

By LORNA INNESS

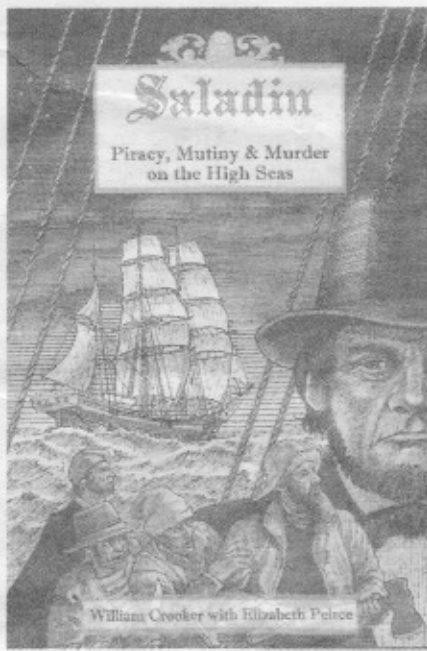
Treasure Island, the story of the Saladin mutiny is not. It's no swashbuckling, "Avast there, me hearties!" Sabatini tale of the Spanish Main, either; only greed and gore, plenty of blood flowing into the scuppers and a scaffold at the end of it all.

The story of how the Saladin with its crew of mutineers grounded off the coast of Guysborough County, how they were caught, taken to Halifax, tried and four of them hanged remains one of the more sordid incidents in Nova Scotia's maritime history, and a perennially popular one.

A detailed account of the trial and related events culled from Halifax papers and published in 1844 was compiled and republished by the late William McCurdy's Petheric Press in 1967. Jack Zinck included a brief account of the Saladin in his *Shipwrecks of Nova Scotia*, Volume 1, published in 1975 by Lancelot Press. In 1991, Dean Jobb turned his fascination with famous trials to the account of the mutiny and included it in his *Crime Wave — Con Men, Rogues and Scoundrels from Nova Scotia's Past* (Pottersfield Press). The story surfaced twice in 2004: Bruce Nunn included an account of it in his *59 Stories* (Nimbus) and William S. Crooker retold the story in his collection, *Pirates of the North Atlantic* (Nimbus).

The story has reappeared in *Saladin: Piracy, Mutiny and Murder on the High Seas*, with William Crooker and Elizabeth Peirce as co-authors. This is a Nimbus publication, as well. It has been given a fictional treatment, a novel rather than straight non-fiction. Given what we know about the times and drawing on old accounts, it should not have been hard to add dialogue and give the story the "you are there watching the axe swinging" quality.

If ever there was a motley crew, this was it. In the fall of 1842, Capt. George Fielding, a mean-spirited bully if there ever was one (albeit a good navigator), gathered a crew on the docks at Liverpool for his ship, the Vitula, and round-



Saladin: Piracy, Mutiny & Murder on the High Seas

by William Crooker with Elizabeth Peirce

(Nimbus Publishing, softcover, 138 pages, \$15.95)

ed the number of hands off with his young teenage son who had never been to sea. Setting sail with a cargo of assorted goods, which he hoped to sell at a profit in South American ports, Capt. Fielding proceeded to make himself hated by just about everybody aboard.

Eventually reaching South America after a hard voyage, Fielding found few markets and little profit. Taking his unhappy crew around the Horn in hopes of loading his ship with smuggled guano, for which there was a market in England, he ran into more trouble, losing his ship in the process and landing in jail. After a series of adventures, Fielding and his son reached the port of Valparaiso where he tried unsuccessfully to obtain passage to England.

Eventually, Capt. S. MacKenzie agreed to take Fielding and his son aboard the barque Saladin and on Feb. 8, 1844, the ship left for England.

Unfortunately for Capt. MacKenzie, his ship's cargo included not only guano but silver bars and money. Capt. Fielding was not a man to resist temptation and when he learned of the cargo, MacKenzie's days were numbered. Capt. Fielding managed to persuade some of the crew to join him and they mutinied, killing Capt. MacKenzie and those crew members who would not join with them.

With Fielding in command, the Saladin might have reached a port but suspicions flared among the men and there was yet another mutiny with Fielding, his son and several others killed and / or thrown overboard. With her cargo of drunken seamen arguing over division of the spoils — and without a competent navigator — men and ship drifted at the mercy of the sea and winds, eventually nearing the coast of Nova Scotia and wrecking on an island off the entrance to Country Harbour.

It's surprising that such a crew of bumbling, barely keeping their hands off each others' throats, managed to get as far along the coast as they did. They were rescued but, once ashore, they answered the inevitable questions with a tissue of lies that quickly came apart. They were rounded up and shipped to Halifax to stand trial for mutiny and murder.

The result was inevitable for the four men who were found guilty and sentenced to death. Two others, whose participation had been somewhat different, were eventually freed and promptly left the area.

In due course, the sentence was carried out and if your travels take you past the Victoria General, on Tower Road, you will pass the spot where the gallows stood.

Well-known or not, the story remains good "Shiver me timbers" reading.

Lorna Inness, a freelance writer, is a former senior editor for *The Chronicle Herald*.