
Captain Alex MacLean



Don MacGillivray

Captain Alex MacLean
Jack London's Sea Wolf



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To the memory of

Charles "Duffy" MacGillivray

Isabelle Bryson MacGillivray

Gerald Thomas



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A Note on Word Usage

While Alex MacLean and many others used McLean, "Mc" and "Mac" are only preferences. In Gaelic, it is "Mac." The term "Gael" is the only term Gaelic speakers use. The term is ancient. In sources that are cited, the accepted usage, American or Canadian, is continued. Also, while the spelling of "Behring" is retained in contemporary accounts, the commonly accepted "Bering" is used otherwise in the text. The Commander Islands are more correctly the Komandorskiye Islands, but the former was extensively used during the period under study and so was retained. The term "white" is used with absolutely no suggestion of scientific status. It was simply common usage during the period.



Captain Alex MacLean



Introduction

McLean had an exciting record of adventure and upon his deeds I based my Sea Wolf character. Of course, much of the Sea Wolf is imaginary development, but the basis is Alexander McLean.

– Jack London, 1905

Alex MacLean was a Cape Breton Gael, master mariner, sealer, poacher, adventurer, storyteller, drinking companion, husband, and father. He was an exceptional sailor and a fascinating individual who acquired an enormous reputation in the heel of the age of sail. Although he began sailing the Atlantic in the 1870s, his career centred on the Pacific, and for more than three decades he was one of the best-known waterfront figures on North America's west coast. For a variety of reasons, Alex MacLean's name was recognized in Ottawa, Washington, London, New York, St. Petersburg, and The Hague. His place in Canadian history is sparse and harsh. In Norah Story's *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History and Literature*, MacLean's "career as an international poacher and as a pirate in the Pacific Ocean" began in 1880. She made the connection with London's novel and noted that MacLean "was wanted by many countries, including Canada." Story's sketch did acknowledge that "the testimony of those who knew this outlaw indicates that London maligned him, and that while MacLean ruled his men sternly, he was not harsh or brutal."¹

Alex MacLean was quite representative of his people, his place, and his time. His grandparents were part of that massive emigration from the Highlands and islands of the west coast of Scotland to North America. More than 20,000 people came to Cape Breton Island, on Canada's east coast, in the early nineteenth century – the single largest group, by far, to settle on the island. Their cultural stamp clearly remains to the present. Alex and his older brother Dan were among the many thousands who departed Cape Breton seeking jobs, opportunities, and adventure. MacLean's career before

2 Introduction

the mast carried him from the waters of Cape Breton Island and the Atlantic Ocean into the New England fishing fleet and deep-water vessels out of east coast ports during the 1870s. At the end of that decade, he sailed around the Horn and spent the next thirty-five years working the waters of the Pacific. He was on board a seminal sealing voyage into the Bering Sea in 1883, which solidly established and directed Canada's pelagic sealing fleet on the west coast.² It was a new, and lucrative, industry for the expanding economy of Victoria, British Columbia. Alex and Dan quickly became two of the most successful sealers, operating out of the capital city throughout the 1880s. But there were problems: "Amphibious is the fur seal, ubiquitous and carnivorous, uniparous, gregarious, and withal polygamous," making it possibly "the most controversial animal in the history of modern diplomacy."³ The MacLeans could not have targeted a more contentious mammal.

It was a period of expanding empires and changing frontiers. Canada's colonial relationship complicated British-American dealings, and this particular dispute "was the longest-lasting and most intractable dispute of this pivotal period in Anglo-American relations."⁴ Russia and Japan were also involved in the sealing industry, so five countries had a direct interest in these mammals, and conflict was close to the surface. Not only national interests but also financial considerations preoccupied the diplomats and politicians. Given this constellation of rival state interests, the fur seal question would tax international amity. There was another significant aspect surrounding the fur seals. The dispute between the United States and Britain, with Canada glaring over Britain's diplomatic shoulder, initially concerned international waters and property rights. Gradually, it evolved into conservation issues and environmental diplomacy, which brought together all five countries and culminated in one of the first "comprehensive wildlife conservation treaties in history" in 1911.⁵

The dispute was an issue that received wide public coverage. As one contemporary writer remarked, "perhaps more printer's ink has been spread over the fur-seal, directly and indirectly, than over any species save man."⁶ One of the many personalities involved was Henry Wood Elliott. An outspoken and abrasive American, Elliott was also indefatigable in his quest to save the fur seals, and for more than four decades he strongly criticized the North American Commercial Company, American government administrations, and any expert who disagreed with him. Nor did he forget "Alexander McLean, known as a notorious British pirate" in his public condemnations.⁷ Alex MacLean was literally in the front lines of complex and evolving political, diplomatic, financial, and environmental issues – issues that held the rapt attention of governments, special interest groups, and, frequently, the public in all five countries. Russian authorities would confront Canadian, American, and Japanese sealers, and the Americans would seize both Canadian and Japanese vessels.⁸ Tracing the voyages, attitudes, and experiences of these seal

hunters offers an opportunity to view these international contests of rivalry, expansion, and compromise as well as the political and public debates that accompanied them, from additional, and sometimes individual, perspectives.

On a number of occasions, Alex MacLean's participation in and influence on events ranged far beyond the decks of the vessels under his command. He was the captain of an American vessel, the *James Hamilton Lewis*, which was seized by the Russians near the Commander Islands in 1890. He was a central witness during the Bering Sea Claims Commission hearings in 1896-97. This particular process settled part of the Bering Sea controversy, a major diplomatic difficulty that plagued Canadian-American-British relations for twenty-five years. A few years later, Alex was a leading witness for the *New York Sun* in its defence against a libel suit brought by a rogue adventurer whom MacLean knew all too well. Yet his participation in these legal skirmishes constituted merely some of his more sedentary activities.

Piracy was a term used loosely, sometimes interchangeably, with privateer (operating with the consent of a government through a letter of marque), buccaneer (applied to themselves by Caribbean sea raiders who claimed privateer status), and freebooter (a synonym for buccaneer). The terms were frequently applied carelessly. Piracy, however, is defined as "the practice or crime of robbery and depredation on the sea or navigable river, etc. or by descent from the sea upon the coast, by persons not holding a commission from an established civilized state."⁹ Given the severity of the charge, and the penalty for those found guilty, this more restrictive definition should be kept in mind. But piracy was only one of the serious depredations attributed to Alex MacLean, if an account in the *Atlantic Advocate* in 1958 is at all accurate. It states that MacLean "was wanted by at least seven countries for an assortment of crimes ranging from seal poaching and pearl theft to murder and piracy. He was suspected of seventy murders at least, although he was never brought to justice or charged with any of them."¹⁰ The only reference uncovered in the *Canadian Historical Review*, which dismisses MacLean as "the notorious ex-Cape Bretoner," suggests an equally unsavoury character.¹¹

Potential biographers of Alex MacLean have not been limited by a meagre amount of material. Newspaper reports, memoirs, articles, memories, and a variety of other recollections of MacLean, many of them based on stories of his exploits on the high seas, circulated widely on the waterfronts of San Francisco, Victoria, Vancouver, and numerous other Pacific seaports. He was not unknown in Yokohama and Hakodate in Japan or in Apia, Samoa, and the Solomon Islands in the southwest Pacific. The stories were retold in the fo'c's'les of sealing schooners and the cycle continued, acquiring changes and embellishments that were part and parcel of the process of popular folk history. He became, for some, a North American folk hero. The tales travelled back across the continent to his birthplace. Alex and his brother Dan

were probably the most widely known Cape Bretoners of their generation, and local papers and tellers of tales avidly tracked their activities. They maintained contact with the Gaels in Cape Breton, who interpreted the reported actions and activities of the MacLean brothers through the filter of their rich culture. Alex and Dan did not disappoint them.

The stories have been churning out now for more than a hundred years, and this may partly explain why the extraordinary story of Alex MacLean has not received more comprehensive treatment. According to West Coast journalist Noel Robinson, “there is no doubt that Alexander MacLean – who became known from Alaska to San Francisco as the ‘Sea Wolf’ – was a born outlaw, and there are more stories told of his hair-raising adventures and brushes with officers of the law up and down the Pacific Coast than are told about any other man who had made his home – if the word ‘home’ can be used in connection with a man who was hardly ever at home – in Vancouver or Nanaimo.”¹² A number of writers and journalists, and a bevy of bureaucrats and other authorities, occasionally attempted to nail him down. One contemporary of MacLean’s, an experienced journalist who covered the British Columbia waterfront, warned that “he has been a sort of will o’ the wisp ... here, there and everywhere, and chiefly upon the sea.”¹³ Another astute and long-time observer of the Victoria waterfront scene, Charles Lillard, cautioned: “Almost everyone who has written about MacLean has told a different story ... Personally I believe almost nothing of what I’ve read about MacLean.”¹⁴ One must be careful when wandering through the rich fields of waterfront lore, popular legends, and personal reminiscences.

An additional complication arises from the publication of Jack London’s novel *The Sea-Wolf* in 1904. Renewed critical interest in the American novelist in recent years has only reaffirmed his tremendous popularity during his lifetime. Within months of the book’s appearance, the fictional character Wolf Larsen was publicly linked with Alex MacLean, who was not only still quite active but was, coincidentally and simultaneously, involved in an illegal and extensively covered seal poaching episode. Thus, the separation between the fictional character and the historical figure tended to blur quite quickly. Stories about Jack London’s Wolf Larsen and the Cape Breton mariner were tightly woven together during the last decade of MacLean’s life. Increased literacy among the general public, and the appearance of the newly created best-seller list in this period, were part of the backdrop for Alex MacLean and his times. Late in MacLean’s career, the modern movie industry was born, and *The Sea-Wolf* was one of the first feature-length films. Alex MacLean literally sailed out of a pre-industrial, pre-cash environment into a turbulent, rapidly changing North American social and cultural scene and, eventually, was transformed into a mass media commodity. The product of a “tenaciously traditional” and pre-capitalist society that was undergoing significant alterations, MacLean thus fits two of the important characteristics

that Eric Hobsbawm suggests are required for the emergence of a “social bandit.”¹⁵ Others would follow. Herein, perhaps, lies much of the appeal of his story. MacLean was not a western frontiersman, legendary or otherwise, but the American frontier was not the only way of life that was disappearing, being invented, reinvented, or reinterpreted at this time. While MacLean went down to the sea in the early 1870s, thus participating in “the great days of sail,” which Gerald Graham dates between 1850 and 1885, he also spent most of his career in the overlapping “dying world of sail,” which Robert Foulke holds to be the period from 1870 to 1910.¹⁶ For mariners, as for frontiersmen, it was a period of transition.

In the early 1970s, the editor of the *Alaska Journal*, Robert DeArmond, challenged and cautioned individuals who were interested in MacLean: “The whole career of Alexander MacLean has many tangled threads awaiting for some researcher to untangle.”¹⁷ Robert O’Brien was another writer aware of the complications involved in such a project. He was a journalist with the *San Francisco Chronicle* in the 1940s and 1950s. In his column “Riptides” in 1952, he devoted a week to MacLean’s exploits and acknowledged: “Now, at this point in time, when so many of the deep-water sailing men are gone, it is all but impossible to separate Alex MacLean and Wolf Larsen, the skipper of the hell-ship Ghost, and to say where the facts end and the legend begins. London himself could not have defined the dividing line.”¹⁸ A half-century later, the exact separation remains elusive. Yet, the attraction of this topic also persists. Noel Robinson covered Vancouver extensively for decades and was the only journalist to have had a lengthy interview with Alex. After this session, Robinson confessed: “Only to touch here and there upon the fringe of the remarkable skipper’s remarkable career, as I am endeavouring to do, when there is so much matter in that life for a series of thrilling articles, suggests the position of the hungry man looking into the pastry cook’s window and only refraining from smashing it and disposing of some of the contents because of what might follow.”¹⁹ This interview was published in a Vancouver newspaper in January 1913. It was MacLean’s last home port. He was fifty-four at the time and continued to convey a strength of presence. But journalists, conservationists, antiquarians, and academics continued to muddy the waters surrounding the activities and character of Alex MacLean. He remains, in some circles, a name with which to conjure. This book is an attempt to trace his contemporary construction in newspapers, fiction, and memory as well as his evolution, for some, into a legendary figure. It also offers a more complete portrait of one Cape Breton mariner who – because of his maritime career in general and, in particular, his prominent participation in the pelagic sealing industry with all of its successes, conflicts, and economic, environmental, and diplomatic issues – deserves to be more accurately remembered.

1

Cape Breton and Going Down to the Sea, 1858-82

Cape Breton Island, which was barely more than a stone's throw northeast of the Nova Scotia peninsula on Canada's east coast, had a population of around 2,500 in 1801. Then the Gaels arrived. Mostly Gaelic speakers from the Highlands and western islands of Scotland, they formed the dominant ethnic group by the early 1820s. In the late 1820s and early 1830s, more Gaels headed to Cape Breton than to anywhere else in North America. More than 20,000 arrived in Cape Breton between 1802 and 1840, increasing the population to 40,000.¹ Folklorist MacEdward Leach noted they came from "a rich cultural background of story, poetry and song. The beauty, the imaginative power, the dramatic quality, the richness of detail of the old Celtic lore is unsurpassed in Western Europe."² The fact that Gaelic is still spoken today in Cape Breton is testimony that they cherished their culture by maintaining "a vital intellectual link" stretching back over two centuries.³ Scholars attuned to the culture and the language of the Gaels underline that they were hardly in a "constant state of nostalgic mourning for a lost Highland homeland" but, rather, were making "active rational choices to emigrate in order to protect their independence and maintain responsibility for the running of their communities as they saw fit."⁴ When John the Hunter MacDonald arrived in Cape Breton in 1834, just in time to experience the "winter of the big snow," he composed a moving and mournful lament about his unhappy exile, *Oran do dh'America/Song for America*: "I am bound, brought low/In the land of snows and sere grasses." He was quickly taken to task by his cousin, Allan the Ridge, who had arrived a couple of decades earlier and who responded with *Chuir thu bòilich sìos 'us bòsd/You have been loud and boastful*:

Sour to me your idle talk, the speech of your mouth,
For I was knowledgeable over there
In cold Scotland; although it is far from me,
Trifling to me the loss.

He then adds a phrase that, even in English, continues to resonate:

The land that you left is the land without kindness,
without humanity for the tenantry.

Allan the Ridge's response directly challenges the content of his cousin's poem and mimics its poetic structure, thus ensuring that his alternative could be sung to any air that suited John the Hunter's lament. Allan the Ridge's version played well.⁵ It also puts into context Samuel Johnson and James Boswell's descriptions "of emigrants so happy to leave Scotland that they were not only dancing at the sites of departure but had invented an entirely new dance called 'America.'"⁶ The transplanted Gaels in Cape Breton in the second half of the nineteenth century would highlight their cultural characteristics with an outlook that remained Gaelic and was confident and positive. Their Gaelic literary accounts in this period underline "their consistent tone of defiance and optimism, as well as their realism and lack of romanticism."⁷

Their situation in the new world was in striking contrast to the fragmentation of the old Celtic world they had recently left behind. The latter is reflected in the songs composed in the Scottish Highlands and Hebridian Islands by those of their generations who stayed, which were, in Sorley Maclean's description, "naturally depressing and even hopeless in tone."⁸ In Cape Breton during this time, it was a different scene. Here the culture of the Gael flourished. It was a far cry from the lamentations emitting from the old country. In John Shaw's assessment, "the dominant tone in Cape Breton seems to emanate from a different world. The direction is outward-looking instead of introspective; the descriptions of nature are clear and unromantic ... there are frequent strains of an underlying healthy cheer and humour, all of which convey an outlook toward the world on the part of Cape Breton Gaels which differed dramatically from that expressed by their relatives and contemporaries in the Highlands." For Shaw, "a strong argument can be brought forth that New World Gaels during this period, for the first time in at least four generations, had the economic means and the freedom from outside pressures and constraints to develop in directions compatible with their cultural potential."⁹ This would be the early world of Alex MacLean.

Domhnall (Donald) MacLean emigrated from Scotland in 1803, initially settling on Prince Edward Island. The landlord-tenant situation there, which plagued rural society for much of the nineteenth century, not surprisingly prompted Domhnall (and many other Gaels) to move on. He arrived in Cape Breton around 1810.¹⁰ Various sources suggest that the MacLeans who settled in East Bay were widely known locally for "their fighting and seafaring ability."¹¹ Domhnall MacLean acquired a grant of 200 acres at the

head of East Bay, at the crossroads of the main Post Road from Sydney and the road to Northside East Bay, on 24 October 1822. It was at the location that the Mi'kmaq called Tweednooge – the barrachois that served as the portage from East Bay to Sydney River.¹² The farm was described much later, by a neighbour who grew up on an adjoining farm, as “a dandy piece of land ... one big field, so level you could almost use it as an airfield.”¹³ In addition, their house was only a few minutes' walk to the shore of the Bras d'Or, a large saltwater lake in the centre of the island with access to the Atlantic Ocean. Their neighbours, almost exclusively other Gaels settling in to begin a new and productive chapter of their ancient heritage, would remember for generations the “great hospitality of the MacLeans.”¹⁴

East Bay was developing into a dynamic community in these years. Father William MacLeod established a “college” in the mid-1820s, and, although it only lasted a few years, it was recognized as an “important pioneering educational effort.”¹⁵ His younger brother Neil became the first resident pastor when East Bay became a separate parish in 1838 and, within a few months, had opened a school. Father Neil would remain there for decades.¹⁶ Most of the settlers were Highlanders who had moved on from Prince Edward Island or who had come directly from Morar, on the west coast of Scotland, or the Outer Hebridean Islands of South Uist and Barra. It was a “vigorous Gaelic-speaking community,” which took its religion seriously.¹⁷ Yet removal from the old country, “the land without kindness,” did not translate into an idyllic situation. Rusty Bittermann's research has solidly established that, while no longer in the precarious position as tenants, a substantial minority was required to work off-farm and off-island for a considerable portion of the year just to maintain their holdings. They would continue to do so for decades. Up to one-third of the households he studied found it necessary to follow this practice for twenty-five to forty years after they had originally settled on the land.¹⁸

Domhnull MacLean's son Ailean (Allan) and Catriona (Catherine) MacCormick were married in St. Mary's Catholic Church in East Bay on 26 April 1846 by Father Neil MacLeod.¹⁹ Catriona was descended from an old Gaelic Catholic family from the Hebrides. The oldest of nine, she had been born in Kildonan, South Uist. Her father was Iain, her mother was Catherine Ross. Tradition has it that these MacCormicks were descended from a Neil MacCormick who had come from Donegal, Ireland, in the 1600s to build and repair galleys for Macdonald of Clanranald.²⁰ Catriona's six youngest siblings were born in Cape Breton, in the Upper Leitch's Creek area, between Sydney and North Sydney. The spring of 1846 was the beginning of the most miserable half-decade in the nineteenth century for anyone to settle down and begin to raise a family in rural Cape Breton. The island had just entered a period of distress and suffering that would not be equalled for

almost a century. The immigration of the Gaels to Cape Breton came to a shuddering halt.²¹

The main culprit was a potato blight. Secondary factors included a wheat fly infestation, an over-dependence on a single crop, and the fact that Cape Breton was still in a pioneer stage of development. By the spring of 1848, a provincial relief committee reported that "poverty, wretchedness, and misery, have spread through the island of Cape Breton," and the recent refuge of the Gaels would soon earn a description as the "Ireland of Nova Scotia."²² With a pattern already established whereby people would travel off-island for seasonal wage work, emigration now soared, even though many of the recent Cape Breton Gaels had barely had time to settle down. Not all areas were affected equally nor were all classes of people. But even the East Bay area of Cape Breton County was receiving government aid in the form of barrels of meal by 1847.²³

Ailean appears to have inherited the initial grant, and his and Catriona's first child, Catherine (Kate or Ketty), was born in March 1847. Dan was born in the summer of 1848. Catriona and Ailean would have five more children. The youngest was Alexander, born on 15 May 1858. All would be baptized at St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church in East Bay.²⁴ Ailean MacLean died on 12 December 1859. He was only forty-three. Dan, the oldest boy, was only eleven, and it is possible that Catriona then moved the young family closer to her people for a while. One local source has Alex going to school at Upper Leitch's Creek (MacCormick territory) until the age of twelve.²⁵ These few difficult years would mark the area significantly in numerous ways: "It increased the wealth and power of the island's chief merchants, devastated the new settlers, impoverished established farmers, put a fifty-year halt to immigration to the island, hastened emigration – and forced the diversification of agriculture."²⁶ For many recent immigrants, their beginning in the new world was a difficult one. Those Gaels who survived, and stayed at least into adulthood, would carry with them a healthy attitude and an abundant cultural heritage when they left Cape Breton. Alex MacLean and his older brother Dan would be adequately packed when they departed.

Little is known about the early years of Dan and Alex MacLean. They may well have sailed the Bras d'Or "almost as soon as they could walk," but their early experiences were not exclusively nautical.²⁷ Forty years later, Alex reminisced about breaking in horses in Cape Breton as a child.²⁸ Farm work was strenuous, and Catriona's struggles with a young, fatherless family would only be partly alleviated by her family's assistance. The second oldest boy, John, would eventually take over the running of the farm, but Dan, and later Alex, followed another traditional pattern for the time and the place – they went down to the sea. According to an acquaintance,

Ronald Gillis, "the MacLeans' early life so near Sydney brought them in contact with men from all parts of the world. And in those far off days the first Atlantic cable landed at North Sydney, so this harbour became first port of call on the North American continent."²⁹ It was a convenient stop for bunker coal, and ship's captains would receive their next assignment there. In the 1870s, North Sydney was a leading Canadian port in gross tonnage.³⁰

Dan began his sailing career in Sydney, leaving Cape Breton in the summer of 1868. He was nineteen. He spent time in the Atlantic coastal trade and later sailed out of New York on deep-water ships.³¹ Alex followed a similar pattern. One source has him sailing as a cabin boy with an uncle immediately upon leaving school at the age of twelve. Alex had definitely acquired experience in fishing boats by the age of fifteen.³² Fishing, of course, was a staple of the Cape Breton economy in the nineteenth century. There was a strong American presence in the industry. There was also a substantial Cape Breton contingent within the American fleet by mid-century. A report from Cape Breton County by G.H. Gesner in 1862 maintained that the American fishing vessels would leave their home port with half a crew and then "land on our southern coast and make up a full crew of our best fishermen, and seamen either for wages or on half their catch, if on half hand (as it is called) they go with the vessel to the States, to dispose of their shairs [sic] where every inducement is used to intice [sic] them to stay, and fish the next season, with them by this means they have drawn away some hundreds of our best fishermen."³³ One estimate from the 1870s had fully one-half of Cape Breton fishermen being employed in American vessels, primarily out of Boston and Gloucester.³⁴ They were frequently closer. The American mackerel fleet made tumultuous visits to North Sydney on a regular basis during this period, and these occurrences were long remembered in that seaport town. One Northside historian recalls: "It is difficult to imagine the commotion and uproar resulting from such an invasion. Fortified with the beverage of their choice, easily obtainable at the numerous dives and homes where it was openly sold, contrary to the law, they certainly provided lots of excitement. This sort of thing happened every time the schooners entered our harbour," weekly throughout the summer and early fall. "These men made good incomes and they spent it freely, so that their visits, though not without drawbacks, were very much appreciated by the merchants of the town and these were not the vendors of alcoholic beverages only."³⁵ There were reciprocal visits to American ports. Before the Cape Bretoners in the fleet were paid off, they would return with the vessel to New England, where the catch would be sold and the accounts settled. As maritime historian Captain John Parker notes, "it was then that the wild Cape Bretoners got out of hand and became a legend in Gloucester. Some of these characters were Wild Archie, Big Duncan, John the Weasel and Donald

from Bras d'Or. During the sprees that followed the trips the Cape Bretoners paid a very large sum in fines."³⁶

Court records in Boston indicate that Alex left Cape Breton in 1873 and arrived in Massachusetts in July, although Alex later remembered leaving Nova Scotia late the following year.³⁷ The long Depression had commenced, and the expanding coal industry on the island was experiencing serious difficulties as well. The mining labour force in Nova Scotia, for example, increased over 70 percent between 1871 and 1873, prompting many Cape Bretoners to leave their rural communities for the mining districts. Then came the mining collapse in 1875 and a decline in the workforce of almost 60 percent from what it was in 1873. The volatility of this industry offered little guarantee of steady work. It was not a particularly prosperous period throughout the region.³⁸ It is clear Alex left Cape Breton at a considerably earlier age than his brother Dan. He was one of 5,000 or so Cape Bretoners who departed during that decade, with many heading to New England.³⁹

An autumnal leaving was quite in character for the region. The seasonal economic contours of unemployment were characterized by fewer jobs, lower wages, and higher prices during the harshest months, and guaranteed a regular period of hardscrabble for workers every winter. Many left. Most of these migrants, like Dan and Alex, were single and young.⁴⁰ Dan was operating out of New York at the time, and a married sister was one of the many "provincials" living in Boston.⁴¹ It was not difficult to get there. One Cape Breton paper in the late 1870s lamented "the weekly leave-taking of so many Cape Bretoners for the United States by every Boston-bound steamer, as well as by Gloucester and Boston sailing vessels."⁴² An article in the *Boston Globe* in 1888, entitled "Gloucester Fish Fleet," noted the majority of south shore Nova Scotians who participated in the spring fishery, returned home in the fall, and did "not engage in the hazardous winter fisheries." But "different social conditions" prevailed in northern Nova Scotia and Cape Breton Island for the descendants of the Highland Catholics, necessitating employment in the winter fishery: "These men are the bravest in the fleet, and no idea can be formed of the risks they take and dangers they undergo, unless by personal contact and experience with them."⁴³ Alex acquired deep-sea experience through the remainder of the decade, operating out of Boston, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. According to Alex, he sailed "all classes of ships" on the east coast, sailing and steam, became well acquainted with the western ocean, and ventured as far as the Mediterranean: "He knew Liverpool like a book ... it was his favourite port."⁴⁴ It was an excellent training ground, according to Cicely Fox Smith: "The spirit of Liverpool is the spirit of the Western Ocean ... The Western Ocean, stern, strong, and terrible even in his repose – with his fogs and ice, his storms and hurricanes, praising the Lord – a breaker of strong ships, a maker of strong, resolute, iron men. The Western Ocean is no place for weaklings."⁴⁵

Dan and Alex MacLean were numbered among the many thousands of Nova Scotians who, according to Frederick William Wallace, went to sea, “gaining a name for themselves as splendid seamen, albeit stern disciplinarians, which did more to place their native country before the world than any other thing connected with it.”⁴⁶ The tingling, blood-surg-ing beginning of Wallace’s *Wooden Ships and Iron Men*, with an exchange occurring among the crew on the *Liverpool*, a rolling, plunging barque in the southern latitudes in the mid-1870s, as the *W.D. Lawrence* loomed on the horizon, captured this romanticized reputation: “She was a big ship – a wooden three-master, black-hulled, heavily sparred, and deep-laden – and she was forging through the long green seas with yards almost square and royals and cross-jack furled.” The master and mate witnessing this “exhibition of sail-carrying in a heavy breeze, the well-set and well-trimmed sails and yards, the faultlessly stayed masts, and generally spotless appearance of the big ship,” comment admiringly: “A down-east Yankee, sure enough. They put the crews through their paces on those packets.” What snapped out on the flag halyard, however, was the red ensign of the British Mercantile Marine. “Up on the poop, an old shell-back handling code flags was staring proudly at the big vessel roaring past them. ‘I know that ship, sir,’ he vouchsafed to master and mate. ‘I sailed in her one time ... A splendid vessel, sir, and the biggest built in Nova Scotia’ ... ‘Hard packets – these Bluenose ships. Worse than the Yankees,’” notes the captain. “The sailor replied somewhat hesitantly: ‘Well, sir, they have that name, but for a man what is a *sailor* an’ knows his book there’s nothing better nor a Bluenose to sail aboard of. For bums, hoboos, an’ sojers, sir, they’re a floatin’ hell. They stand for no shenanigans aboard them packets, sir. One bit o’ slack or a black look an’ the mate’ll have ye knocked stiff an’ looking forty ways for Sunday. They works ye hard, but they feeds you good and treats you good if you does yer work.’” The *W.D. Lawrence* was soon only a speck on the horizon, heading for the Horn: “‘There she goes,’ observed the old shell-back who had served in her; ‘a ramping, stamping, hard-driving Bluenose – wooden ships with iron men commanding them.’”⁴⁷

It was not always a pretty portrait, and, to put many of the characterizations that would be applied to the MacLeans in perspective, it was a highly held belief that Nova Scotians did have a more demanding work culture aboard their vessels. A corrective to Wallace’s version is offered in Colin McKay’s *Windjammers and Bluenose Sailors*. Ordinary sailors could also harbour the “iron men” characteristics, although the discipline was still direct and frequently brutal. Tellingly, McKay did not distinguish between the Down Easters from New England and the Bluenosers.⁴⁸ Nor did mariner and maritime writer Basil Lubbock: “On some of the Yankee hell ships the things that go on are almost incredible ... Legs and arms broken were considered nothing, ribs stamped in by heavy sea-boots had to mend as best they could,

faces smashed like rotten apples by iron belaying pins had to get well or fear worse treatment, eyes closed up by a brawny mate's fist had to see ... On board these 'down easters' and 'blue nose' craft, where discipline is enforced by a plentiful use of belaying-pin, knuckle-duster, and boot, the work done is stupendous, and the ship is certainly kept in a wonderfully trim state."⁴⁹ Fox Smith also wonders why both practised such rough handling of sailors and thus acquired such notoriety: "What was the reason for the man-handling habits of the Down-east or Blue-nose skippers and mates? It is hard to say. Perhaps the souring effects of successive generations of Puritanical upbringing may have had something to do with it ... Perhaps too the conditions of the Atlantic packet service tended to create a form of discipline enforced by the knuckle-duster and marine-spike form of argument. And the worst of such a tradition is that – once established – you have to go on with it."⁵⁰

There are numerous stories about Bluenose officers in the *San Francisco Coast Seamen's Journal* in the 1880s and 1890s. An editorial entitled "The Old, Old Story" in February 1890, which was prompted by reports of a particularly brutal "tale of murder and mistreatment on the high seas" and featured a Nova Scotia vessel, states: "Nova Scotia vessels have a bad reputation among sailors. The same can be said of New Brunswick vessels. Sailors say that N.B. means 'No Breakfast' and N.S. 'No Supper.' On those vessels the men are fed on the English plan and worked on the American plan. American ships carry smaller crews and work the men harder than other nations. The Nova Scotia man afloat is considered a breed between an American and an Englishman, and a mighty bad breed it is, as many testify."⁵¹ This particular editorial was prompted by an incident involving a Captain Allen and the Nova Scotia bark, the *Argyle*. It was not an isolated one.⁵² Another incident involving the *Warrior*, out of Pictou, Nova Scotia, under Captain Kitchen should be noted. Upon their arrival in Boston from Manila, charges of cruelty were brought against the first and second mate and the steward. According to the *San Francisco Coast Seamen's Journal*, what gave the incident significant play in the news was the comment that it was a British craft. The paper was quick to rectify this part of the record: "The plain truth is that the *Warrior* is not a British ship in anything more than a name and a piece of red bunting. She hails from Pictou, N.S., and is what is commonly called a "Bluenose" ... It is well known among seamen that the Nova Scotiamen are as bad as, and in many cases even worse than, the simon-pure American in the treatment of crews."⁵³ The breath of this reputation, whatever its accuracy, is suggested in Eric Partridge's study on historical slang. During this period, a "Nova Scotia pump" was a bucket with a line attached to draw water; "Nova Scotia soda" for cleaning paintwork was sand; "Nova Scotia sunlight" was moonlight; and "Nova Scotia towing" referred to the practice of using dories to pull out a vessel in order to save the cost of a tug.⁵⁴ In addition, during these years, as Eric Sager notes, "the

'Bluenose' master was worthy of his reputation for making unusual demands upon his men. Whatever the size of his vessel, and wherever he might sail, the Canadian master expected fewer men to do the work."⁵⁵ While the increase in the ratio of men to tonnage in the last quarter of the century was partly due to changes in the technology, such as the increasing use of double topsails, fewer men were used to move more tonnage for lesser wages, and the "result was the survival of the sailing ship industry."⁵⁶ Such was the work world in which Dan and Alex MacLean gained their seafaring experience.

Two of the vessels definitely linked to Alex during this period are fishing boats. He was an able seaman on the *Eddie D. Morrison* and on the *Electric Flash*. The latter was an eighty-two-ton fishing schooner operating out of Gloucester. For part of this period, Alex fished for mackerel out of this Massachusetts port under John McDonald.⁵⁷ He also acquired some experience in cable laying. He was in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in January 1879 aboard the 2,000-ton steamer *Minia*, which was owned by the Anglo-American Telegraph Company. (The *Minia* was based in Halifax and had been laying cable since 1874. She would remain in service until 1922 and was one of the vessels that recovered bodies after the *Titanic* disaster.)⁵⁸ Alex got into a scrap in Halifax that earned him a charge of assault and jail time. In Alex's version, it was a pretty straightforward sort of affair: "I left the ship and went ashore without liberty, and there were two watches, port and starboard watches, and the watch went ashore that evening that I didn't belong to. I wanted to get ashore that evening for some purpose, and when I was going aboard the ship about 11 o'clock in the evening I happened to get into a row with a man ... Being insulted, of course I had to protect myself ... The principal reason that I was put in jail for was on account of leaving the ship without liberty."⁵⁹ A watchman at the Liverpool wharf on the Halifax waterfront was the target of the assault. He was probably the source of the objectionable remarks, although a twenty-year-old seaman returning from a night on the town without permission may have been under the influence and more intolerant of supposed insults. Alex neglected to mention he had help. H.D. MacLean, a twenty-five-year-old Cape Bretoner, assisted him, although it is clear that Alex led the charge. He was fined \$10 or ninety days in the Stipendiary Magistrate's Court, while H.D. MacLean received a \$5 fine or fifty days. They were released from Halifax City prison five days later, after a cash payment, and sent back on board their vessel.⁶⁰ It was not an unusual incident. David McLeod was another Cape Breton seaman. One of Alex's contemporaries, he was born in 1857 and went to sea in 1873, as he explains, in a matter-of-fact way, in his reminiscences: "It was a standing joke to have a run on a Cape Bretoner. Unfortunately, I was always thin-skinned and if you wanted a scrap, I would not go much out of the way to avoid it. Kind of took to it, like an old maid to drinking strong tea."⁶¹ In the next eleven years 1,237 sailors appeared before a Halifax magistrate. Almost 40 percent

were natives of the Maritime provinces, and 58 percent of those cases were related to drinking.⁶² A few weeks later, on 20 February, a fierce gale sent thirteen schooners and 143 fishermen from the Gloucester fleet to the bottom of Georges Bank. As the fleet limped back to port late that month, the survivors agreed: "It was the toughest gale they ever encountered." The Gloucester fleet lost twenty-nine schooners, almost one-tenth of her entire tonnage, and 249 men that season.⁶³ If Alex was looking for reasons to move on, both the dust-up in Halifax and the February gale may have soured him somewhat on the east coast.

By heading west, Alex would also have been following a fairly familiar path trod by Cape Bretoners over the previous few decades. People had been leaving Cape Breton since the 1830s, initially pushed by local conditions and pulled by perceived opportunities in the "Boston states." The California gold rush in the late 1840s added an additional attraction. The frontier and other opportunities kept moving west.⁶⁴ In 1879, at the age of twenty-one and with over seven years of sailing experience, Alex headed out to San Francisco. The boom years of the California grain trade had begun, and he worked his passage as an able seaman on the 1,535-ton *Santa Clara*, out of Philadelphia, "a first class ship in all respects and for many years one of the best known vessels engaged in the California trade."⁶⁵ The *Santa Clara* was a Down Easter, built in Bath, Maine, in 1876. Designed specifically for the Cape Horn passage, the Down Easters had "a good turn of speed, very strongly put together and economical to work, yet requiring only half the men needed by an out-and-out flyer."⁶⁶ The designers and builders evolved "a magnificent type of a wooded full-rig ship, which soon became known the world over for her smart, spic and span appearance, and fierce discipline."⁶⁷ The *Santa Clara* was commanded in these years by Captain William Tobey Jr., "one of the best known and most highly esteemed shipmasters engaged in the California trade."⁶⁸ It is likely that the experience on the *Santa Clara* was a valuable one for Alex. His later reputation, when he acquired command of his own vessels, suggests he could easily have fit in with the American Cape Horn fleet. Dan MacLean arrived in California around the same time, possibly on the same ship.⁶⁹ The west coast waterfront scene would never be quite the same again.

After his voyage around Cape Horn in the *Santa Clara*, Alex MacLean checked out the San Francisco scene "for a few months."⁷⁰ In the spring of 1880, he headed north to British Columbia. Alex and Dan are two of the 777 – out of 50,387 British Columbians – enumerated as being from the Maritimes in the 1881 census. Alex is registered as a twenty-two-year-old navigating officer. Both he and Dan were residing in Victoria at different addresses.⁷¹ Cole Harris has cultivated this statistical field extensively, noting that "social spaces were changing" at the time and "society and space were recalibrating each other, and something like a larger British Columbian

society ... was beginning to emerge."⁷² In this western colony, "whites could find many landmarks of a familiar world." Victoria, with a population of 6,000, had the largest middle-class component, the largest urban centre, and was "the most English." For Harris, "class identity was most developed among the elite" in the British Columbia of 1881. Neither Alex nor Dan would have been eligible for membership in this group because of their occupation, financial status, and religion.⁷³

Alex's initial role was as an active participant in the transportation and communication links in this emerging society. Steamboats were an important element of this system at the time, and Alex spent the next couple of years on the rivers and lakes, initially serving on the sternwheeler *Gertrude*, working for doughty Captain William Moore, and travelling from Vancouver up the Fraser River.⁷⁴ In 1881, he began a stint on the steamer *Sir James Douglas*, a revenue boat in the Canadian customs department. The Canadian government had recently purchased the telegraph lines in British Columbia from the Western Union Telegraph Company and was busy connecting Vancouver Island and the mainland via Nanaimo, Gabriola Island, and Point Grey. The project would be completed by 1882.⁷⁵ Alex's sea time and his east coast experience with cable laying would have been attractive to his employer. He served as an able seaman for five months and then as mate for a year on the *Douglas*, a flexible vessel that was "pressed into service for all kinds of work," including cable laying.⁷⁶ Alex mentioned that they "had a boat at the time specially built for the purpose ... called the *Electric*." Possibly, he served on both.⁷⁷ While the project was still underway, the federal minister of railways and canals, Sir Charles Tupper, a Nova Scotian, went west in August 1881, primarily to further the interests of the Canadian Pacific Railway. While in Victoria, the *Douglas*, with Alex among the crew, was placed at Tupper's disposal, and the prominent politician boarded the vessel for a jaunt up to Nanaimo. History is mute as to whether or not the two Nova Scotia natives exchanged words, but Alex remembered the trip and made reference to it more than thirty years later.⁷⁸ However, the main purpose for the *Douglas*' voyage at this time was cable laying, and, for this, Alex soon drew attention to himself. The story from this early part of Alex's career on the Pacific is suggestive and came from another individual who was involved in the project on the *Douglas*: "The cable, being unwound from a drum placed in a large tank, kinked and began flying in all directions. In such circumstances the only way to save the situation was for a man with sufficient nerve to run around inside the tank at the risk of his life, endeavouring to fix the cable in position hand over hand. The two men in the tank had jumped out, but MacLean jumped in and accomplished this feat." Much later, when asked about this incident, Alex made light of it but acknowledged that it was true.⁷⁹

While Alex was laying cable and gaining experience in steam vessels, his older brother Dan was sailing British Columbia and Alaskan waters in the seven-ton sloop *Flyaway*. He was questionably linked with discoveries of both gold and coal.⁸⁰ Alex was also lured north. In 1882, he left Victoria and took a steamer to Juneau, Alaska, where he tried his hand at mining in partnership with one Archie McCulligan, remaining there for about seven months. Juneau, founded in 1880-81, was the first boom town connected to the discovery of gold in Alaska. Occupationally, mining was far removed from the sea, and it comes as little surprise to learn that Alex disliked it.⁸¹ He met up with Dan again in Juneau, although he did not join his older brother on his jaunts in the *Flyaway*.⁸² He would hardly have had time. Other vessels that Alex has been linked with in these early years in British Columbia waters, primarily the Fraser River, include the *Western Slope*, the *Pacific Slope*, and the legendary *Beaver*. The former two were also associated with Captain Moore. The latter was the first steamship on the northwest coast, which operated between 1836 and 1888, although Alex's links with her are tenuous.⁸³

For about three years, Alex and Dan MacLean would survey the wider picture on the Pacific coast, separately working on various vessels and at varied occupations. It seems as if they were searching for an opportunity that had so far been overlooked, some activity to which they could direct their considerable energies and talents. Dan appears to have done most of the exploring in his sloop *Flyaway*, and, in his travels along the Alaskan coast and in the Bering Sea, he noted the large number of fur seals in the area.⁸⁴ This period spent along the coast and in the northern Pacific also enabled both MacLeans to learn "a great deal about the uncharted waters which served them well later on."⁸⁵ Indeed it did.

Late in 1882, they returned to the east coast. As Alex later explained, "I just wanted to take a trip down east."⁸⁶ However, this response is more indicative of a character trait – never volunteer information – than an explanation. During that trip, they made a number of significant moves. On 1 December 1882, Alex and Dan became American citizens in Boston. It is unclear why they made the switch. It is possible that they had already made arrangements to ship out on a San Francisco-based vessel in March of the following year, and maybe they were intending to use the California city as homeport.⁸⁷ If they had already decided to concentrate on the North Pacific and Alaskan waters by shipping out of San Francisco (which would happen the following year), maybe they felt becoming American citizens made sense. Besides, Alex and Dan may have been British subjects in a legal and political sense, but culturally they were Gaels – the most "English" aspect about them would have been their second language.⁸⁸

While discarding their status as British subjects, they do not seem to have been clearing the decks of their Cape Breton connections. After their business

in New England, they continued home, visiting for a month. In East Bay, the original two hundred acres acquired by their grandfather Domhnull were now divided, with Alex and Dan each acquiring fifty acres of the eastern portion of the land, along with small house plots on the main road. Their brother John, who had remained in Cape Breton on the farm, acquired the remaining 100 acres.⁸⁹ Alex and Dan were still in their prime, and the land division suggests that they were continuing their ties to their Cape Breton Gaelic community. Neither of them would ever build on, or plough, their grandfather's land. They continued to look to the sea and soon headed out west again.

It was now time for the MacLeans to go sealing. A new industry was about to expand significantly. Seal hunting was hardly a new activity on the west coast. The Russian rookeries in the Bering Sea were on the Commander Islands, Bering and Copper, which had been discovered in 1741. The American rookeries for the Pacific fur seals were located in the Pribilof Islands, on the Alaskan side of the Bering Sea. St. George and St. Paul had been discovered in the 1780s.⁹⁰ These were the breeding grounds of the North Pacific fur seal or *Callorhinus ursinus*. The Pribilof Islands, 160 miles from the nearest land, attracted around 80 percent of the seals from the Pacific Ocean. Two smaller breeding grounds on the Asiatic side of the Pacific – the Commander Islands and Robben Island in the Sea of Okhotsk – accounted for most of the remainder.⁹¹ From Attu, the easternmost point of Alaska's Aleutian Islands, it is only 180 miles to the Commander Islands and from there it is less than 100 miles to Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula. The Pribilofs, which are of volcanic origin, treeless, and usually submerged in mist, were 220 miles northwest of Unalaska and the port of Dutch Harbor in the Aleutians.⁹² The discovery of these rookeries led to a tremendous slaughter, which continued when the islands came under the control of the Russian-American Company in 1799. Eventually, the killing was brought under control, and by the early 1860s there was an annual harvest from the rookeries of 70,000 seals.⁹³

Captain William Spring of Victoria, "the pioneer of modern sealers," began trading along the coast, in association with Captain Hugh McKay, in the 1850s. Occasionally Aboriginal hunters would barter sealskins at their trading posts. Customs records at Victoria suggest that the schooner *Kate* went sealing in 1865 and 1866.⁹⁴ Early in 1866, prompted by suggestions from Aboriginal hunters, Captain McKay made an attempt at open sea or pelagic sealing in a small trading schooner, the *INO*. Until this time, the Aboriginal hunt was based on land, although they sometimes travelled forty miles offshore. Except for the adult bulls, who wintered in the Gulf of Alaska and the Bering Sea, most of the Pribilof Island fur seals migrated annually from the Channel Islands of southern California northward 7,000 miles along the Pacific coast, usually staying between thirty and seventy miles offshore. The *INO* proved to be too small. The following year, in 1868, the

seventy-five-ton *Favorite* was launched.⁹⁵ The *Favorite* was primarily intended for cod fishing and trading – sealing was initially an auxiliary occupation – but her sealing successes “more than that of any other vessel demonstrated the possibilities of the industry.”⁹⁶ The vessel’s reputation would be acquired, in part, because of her association with Alex MacLean.

Significant changes came about in 1867 when the United States purchased Alaska from Russia and gained control of much of the area, although there had been a “ruthless slaughter” of seals during the transition period of the late 1860s.⁹⁷ American entrepreneurs were quick off the mark. Initially, the US government considered fourteen competing bids, but one group moved faster and was more influential. Hayward Hutchison, representing several San Francisco capitalists, and Captain Ebenezer Morgan, who had the backing of New London, Connecticut, interests, with southern sealing experience, were both in the Pribilofs in 1868. They, along with important San Francisco commercial men, such as Louis Sloss and Lewis Gerstle, eventually combined into the Alaska Commercial Company (ACC).⁹⁸ The combined interests of the ACC carried considerable clout. While Hutchison was unsuccessful in his quest for a ninety-nine-year contract, the American Congress did pass legislation on 3 August 1870 giving the ACC a twenty-year lease on the Pribilof Islands to ensure the orderly care of the rookeries. There was a yearly quota (100,000), an annual fee (\$55,000), and a royalty (\$2.62 per skin).⁹⁹ The twenty-year monopoly would prove to be highly lucrative: “A low-investment, low-overhead operation produced net profits of \$18,102,140, or just under an average \$1,000,000 a year. The risk was small, the labour force immobile, the market assured, and monopoly enforced at law: even in the age of the ‘robber barons’ this was success to end all successes.”¹⁰⁰ It was a deal well worth defending. In 1871, the ACC also secured a lease on Robben Island and the Commander Islands from the Russian czar’s government. Since pelagic sealing was almost unknown at this time, these leases “constituted a practical monopoly of the fur-seal industry.”¹⁰¹ During the course of the lease, the American government, through fees and royalties, would recoup the purchase price it had paid Russia for Alaska. But there were also costs involved, and not only for the seals.¹⁰² While the ACC provided a school, medical care, and other provisions for the Aleuts, prompting a later company claim that they had “advantages unequalled by any other group of aborigines employed commercially by a superior race,” the real labour practices of the company and the policies of the government were far more devastating. The difficulties experienced by the Aleuts would continue well into the twentieth century.¹⁰³

There were more immediate concerns to the south. As E.W. Wright’s *Lewis and Dryden* notes, the grant entailed “ramifications on the international scene. This grant was practically the beginning of the Bering Sea trouble, and in maintaining its policy of protecting the monopoly the United States

Government [had] spent millions of dollars and driven scores of American vessels to the protection of the British flag."¹⁰⁴ The problem was that the seals did not stay around the rookeries. They travelled far and wide, and, while at sea, they were generally considered a common property resource. Only during the summer breeding season were they on or near the rookeries and, thus, a private property resource of the ACC.¹⁰⁵

The sex ratio of the fur seals at birth was approximately equal. Equality ended there. A mature male could weigh over 600 pounds, while females rarely topped 100 pounds. The males, including the younger bulls and the surplus bachelor bulls, had a relatively short journey, spending their winters just outside the Aleutian Island chain. The strongest males reached the rookeries in late May or early June and began to stake out their territory. Females and immature males returned in late June and early July after migrating maybe, in some cases, 7,000 miles along the continental shelf from south of San Francisco. Others wintered just south of Japan and moved along the Asian coast. They joined two smaller herds with rookeries on the Commander and Robben Islands. The females usually gave birth shortly after arrival and then proceeded to breed again. Then they would be off, sometimes travelling considerable distances, seeking food, before returning to their pups. Meanwhile, the old bulls aggressively and fiercely protected their sites, usually containing forty to fifty cows but sometimes twice that number. Thus, there were a lot of surplus bachelor males on the perimeter. These were the ones that the hunters targeted. For a few weeks in late July and early August, before daybreak, a few men might herd as many as 1,000 males toward the "killing grounds," often at a slow pace as the fur seals tended to overheat on land. Upon arrival, those considered too old, too young, females accidentally included in the herding, and those with damaged pelts were culled, and the "killing gang" methodically struck the selected with a heavy, wooden club. They were followed by young boys who knifed the dead or stunned seals and older boys who ripped the seals open and cut around the head and flippers. The skimmers finished the task. The land harvest on the rookeries was bloody, brutal, and efficient. The hunters could harvest up to 5,000 pelts in a day.¹⁰⁶

Canadian pelagic sealing, with some American involvement, was a gradual development that had evolved out of the coastal trading with Aboriginal villages. Initial efforts out of Victoria in the 1860s and 1870s, with mariners such as Spring, McKay, and James Warren, were tentative forays in the early stages of a potentially significant industry. None of the vessels entered the Bering Sea in their quest for sealskins. The large herds that migrated northward along the coast of California, Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia were enough to keep the few vessels that were involved occupied. They competed with a small fleet of schooners out of Neah Bay, Washington.¹⁰⁷

There were also occasional thrusts out of San Francisco.¹⁰⁸ Through most of the 1870s, the Victoria sealing fleet consisted of the *Favorite*, the *Thornton*, and the *Anna Beck*. Two other schooners with which the MacLeans would be closely associated, the *Onward* and the *Mary Ellen*, were added to the slowly developing fleet in 1879 and 1880 respectively. These trading vessels were quickly evolving into pelagic sealers.¹⁰⁹ Until then, the cruises were relatively short.

The early 1880s witnessed a significant expansion of both the Victoria fleet and the length of their cruises.¹¹⁰ While returns in these years are difficult to establish, one estimate reveals that 20,000 skins were acquired "in the immediate neighbourhood of Vancouver Island alone" in 1880, with seven vessels and 186 hunters working out of Victoria. Also, the price of skins more than doubled to \$10 in 1881.¹¹¹ In that year, there were ten vessels, 292 hunters, and between 13,000 and 14,000 skins harvested, worth between \$150,000 and \$180,000. By 1882, it was thirteen vessels and 400 hunters, and, for the first time, the London fur market purchased over 20,000 skins from the pelagic sealers.¹¹² These increased activities, and the fur seals' complete disregard for political and geographic frontiers, ensured political, financial, and diplomatic difficulties for decades. Canada and the United States had a number of major issues to resolve in this period. The fur seal problem would just be the one that "ragged the most intensely and the longest."¹¹³ Britain, as Canada's imperial motherland, was intimately involved. The sealing schooners out of Victoria were British vessels. Once out of territorial waters, they became an imperial responsibility. The evolving, sometimes turbulent relationship between Canada and Britain was a complicating factor, as was the British perception of the United States as a potential ally.¹¹⁴ For their part, the Americans were on the verge of expansion and were adjusting to the relatively recent acquisition of Alaska. Besides, they had to concern themselves with the interests of the ACC. Russia and Japan would eventually be immersed in the mix as well. Alex and Dan MacLean, recently returned from their visit to Boston and Cape Breton, sailed right into the maelstrom. The pelagic sealing industry, and the diplomatic, economic, and political difficulties, would expand significantly throughout the 1880s, partly because of the successes of the MacLean brothers.