

***The Tancock Schooner: An Island and its Boats.* Wayne O'Leary. (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994. Pp.xiv + 272)**

Marven Moore

Volume 17, Number 2, 1995

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087499ar>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087499ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)
1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Moore, M. (1995). Review of [The Tancock Schooner: An Island and its Boats. Wayne O'Leary. (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994. Pp.xiv + 272)]. *Ethnologies*, 17(2), 171–172. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087499ar>

Lomax, John A. 1957. *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*. New York: Macmillan.

GEORGE W. LYON
Calgary, Alberta

The Tancook Schooner: An Island and its Boats. Wayne O'Leary.
(Montreal & Kingston: McGill–Queen's University Press,
1994. Pp.xiv + 272)

To date, the historiography of Atlantic Canada's maritime past has focused almost exclusively on the large sailing ship and its place in the "Golden Age of Sail." The economic and social history of these seemingly more alluring and romantic vessels has been the subject of many academic and popular publications. In stark contrast, the ubiquitous traditional small wooden craft, usually defined as less than 50 feet in length, has been largely ignored, despite the constant and integral role it played in the evolution of maritime economies and local ways of life. Be they dories, punts, dinghies, sloops or small schooners, their history has not been adequately recorded. Thankfully this neglect will not be the epithet of the Tancook Schooner. Author Wayne O'Leary has compiled an in-depth perspective of the relationship between the 40- 50- foot schooner and the people of Tancook Island situated in Mahone Bay, southwest of Halifax, Nova Scotia.

As a self-described labour of love, O'Leary spent numerous summer vacations in the 1950s and 60s fishing and sailing the waters of Mahone Bay with uncles and cousins absorbing the family lore of Tancook Island, its people and boats. Realizing this oral tradition would soon disappear in the wake of modernization, he began systematically interviewing family members and those familiar with the island's technological heritage and traditional fishing, farming, and coasting economy. In time, oral history was supplemented by collecting information from half models, sail plans, and photographs, and by more formal research in libraries, museums, and archives.

One of the major strengths of the book is O'Leary's success in presenting the Tancook Schooner as a cultural artifact which assumes greater significance when properly described in the context of this time, place, and use. O'Leary weaves a backdrop of the island's early history and the lifestyle of its inhabitants. Against this, the Tancook is portrayed as the linchpin of the island's economy from its genesis the first decade of the 20th century to its gradual demise

beginning in the early 1940s. Meticulously, O'Leary chronicles the early development of the schooner, the evolution of its hull shape and rigging and the methods and materials used in its construction. He further describes the use of the schooner in the local fishery, in rum running during Prohibition, and in the coasting trade of agricultural produce from Tancook Island to Halifax. This approach gives the Tancook Schooner a contextual depth unparalleled by any small craft in Atlantic Canada with the possible exception of the Banks dory. For this O'Leary deserves much credit.

With the exception of a half model or sail plan, the principal source of information usually associated with any traditional boat type is oral history. Although O'Leary has strived to balance this information with other sources, it is evident, however, he relies heavily upon the memories of Thomas Mason and Murray A. Mason. Anyone citing information in the book should be cognizant that oral history inevitably suffers from the vagaries of human memory, particularly when specific details are involved. One assumes the related interviews with the Stevens, Levis, and Langilles were used to substantiate their recollections.

More specific criticisms relate to editorial weaknesses and omissions. In the case of the former, the reduced size of the lines plans make them difficult to read. Similarly, the list of vessels in the appendix should have been alphabetized for easier use.

While it is also tempting to suggest O'Leary should have compared the Tancook Schooner to other contemporary craft, it is abundantly clear this was not possible due to a lack of comparable information. Anyone attempting to redress this lamentable situation, however, should take O'Leary's approach and view the boat as a cultural artifact, documenting it in a similar scholarly and comprehensive fashion. O'Leary has set a standard that others would do well to emulate.

*MARVEN MOORE
Maritime Museum of the Atlantic,
Halifax, Nova Scotia*

The Christmas Imperative: Leisure, Family and Women's Work. By Leslie Bella. (Halifax: Fernwood, 1992. Pp. 252)

Conventional definitions of Christmas as a holiday, framed in terms of leisure and celebration, ignore the massive amount of female labour which underpins the season. Notwithstanding the importance of Christmas in terms of symbolizing, reaffirming and reinforcing bonds between family members and