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# WoodenBoat REVIEW

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## *Alone at Sea: Gloucester in the Age of the Dorymen*

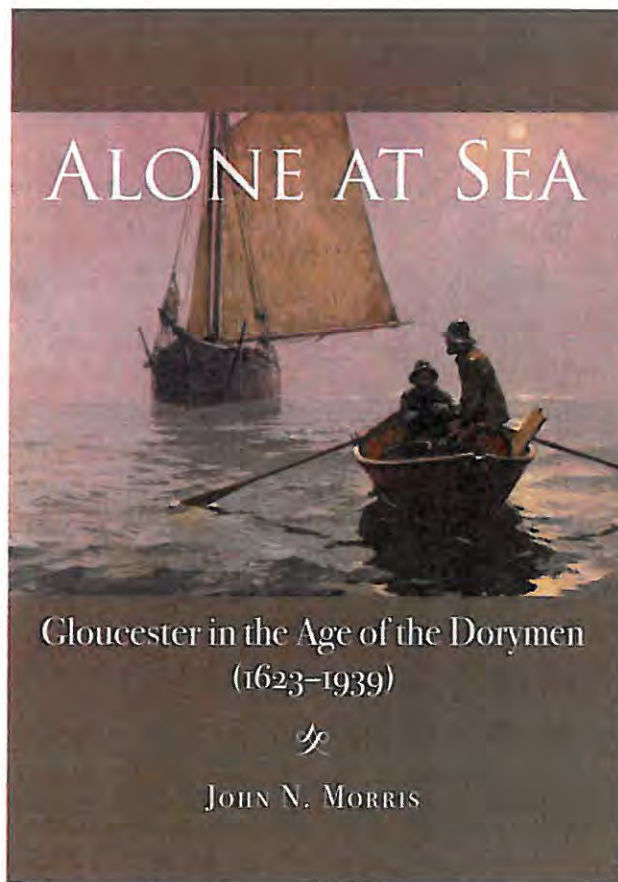
*Alone at Sea: Gloucester in the Age of the Dorymen* (1623–1939), by John N. Morris. Commonwealth Editions, 266 Cabot St., Beverly, MA 01915; [www.commonwealth-editions.com](http://www.commonwealth-editions.com). 448 pp., illus., index. \$34.95.

Reviewed by W.H. Bunting

On March 7, 1935, the big knockabout halibut schooner ORETHA F. SPINNEY, of Gloucester, Massachusetts, dropped off her dozen two-man dories on St. Joseph's Bank, in waters south of Newfoundland, to set their trawls. Sometime later, dorymates Charles Daley, a native Newfoundlander, and Steve Olsson, a native of Sweden, disappeared from their dory and were never seen again. Both were veteran, able fishermen, and exactly how they were lost could only be guessed at.

In 1999, gerontologist John Morris, Ph.D., Steve Olsson's grandson, who was born six years after Olsson drowned, set out to learn more about his storied grandfather. Thanks to the Internet, he was soon connected to the grandson of the SPINNEY's Norwegian-born captain and was astonished to discover that the grandson had been named Stephen out of respect for Steve Olsson. Intrigued, Morris continued his research, expanding his scope to encompass the history of the Gloucester fisheries up to the end of dory fishing from schooners out of that port. *Alone at Sea: Gloucester in the Age of the Doryman* (1623–1939), the result of 10 years' work, is an important contribution to the literature of Gloucester in particular, and the North Atlantic fisheries in general.

A great deal has already been written about Gloucester, this tatty movie set of a harbor town, and of its world-famous fleet of hundreds of fast and able



fishing schooners which once ranged the grounds from the Virginia capes (for mackerel) to Georges Bank (for fresh groundfish), to the Grand Banks (for salt cod), and even to the shores of Iceland (for halibut). Indeed, one



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might be excused for assuming that nothing much of significance has escaped the literary nets, but one would be mistaken. And instead of following the current trend of retelling and repackaging old sea stories, Morris has produced an important and original work that adds to, and complements, all that has been written before.

Morris presents the first detailed chronological overview of the fishing industry of Gloucester during the long era of dory fishing. Work-

ing largely from newspapers, he has recorded the fleet's annual landings, numbers of vessels (and also boats over 5 tons) in the fleet, vessel losses, vessel additions, men lost and wives widowed and children orphaned, and the names of principal vessel owners.

Many writers, seduced by the beauty of Gloucester's shapely, lofty schooners, have given little note, beyond repeating platitudes, of the men who manned them—in fact, the large sail plans of these schooners, with characteristic huge mainsail, could only be fitted thanks to their having a big crew of fishermen aboard. Morris addresses in particular the thousands of essential immigrant fishermen—principally Nova Scotians, Newfoundlanders, Scandinavians, Portuguese, Azoreans (including the Silvas, the family of Morris's fish-cutting father), and Sicilians who did so much to make Gloucester what it was, and, indeed, is today.

Many newly arrived and seasonally resident immigrant fishermen lived in boardinghouses that were informally segregated by nationality. Certain neighborhoods and also certain fisheries became ethnically differentiated as well. Yet, despite this social patchwork, one of Gloucester's most admirable features was the sense of common community identity, particularly as revealed when tragedy occurred within the fleet.

Morris makes plain the trade-off of drowned fishermen for landed fish. In 1896, during the port's heyday, Gloucester's 343 schooners and smaller craft landed 112 million pounds of fish on the town's wharves, and an additional 40 million pounds at other ports, primarily Boston. During that year 14 vessels were lost, along with 88 men who left 15 widows and 41 children. Nor was this an unusually high toll—in 1894, 137 men were lost. In the terrible year of 1879, out of a fleet of 490 vessels 32 were lost, taking with them 266 men, and leaving 92 widows with 222 children. (Fifteen schooners, anchored on Georges Bank, were lost during a single wicked mid-February gale.) Heavy losses in 1861 had led to the founding of the Fisherman's, Widows, and



Orphans' Relief Committee, which long provided a temporary anchor to windward for families suddenly cut adrift by tragedy.

Winter, of course, was by far the most dangerous season for a fisherman, particularly if he was employed in the fresh fishery, pursuing groundfish (cod, haddock, cusk, etc.) primarily on Georges Bank, or in the allied Newfoundland frozen herring (bait) trade. When a vessel and its crew failed to return from the foggy Grand Banks while on a summer salt cod trip, it was believed that they were likely victims of a transatlantic liner charging blindly through the anchored fleet to keep to a tight schedule.

Ironically, the staggering toll of dead fishermen may have numbed writers to the individual tragedy of each death. Morris, aided by the still-painful memories of two of Steve Olsson's daughters—Morris's aged aunts—and by Charles Daley descendants tracked down in Newfoundland, delivers an overdue course correction. Whereas Steve Olsson's hard-earned doryman's income had provided his wife and five children with a modest but comfortable home of their own, after his death his widow, Hilda, struggled, taking in laundry and working as a domestic for wealthy summer people. She spent her final years living with one child or another. And while the death of any good husband, father, and breadwinner, be he a halibut fisherman or a hat salesman, would be a hard blow to their respective families, the constant worry and waiting suffered by a lost fisherman's family in the years before his death must also be added to the accounting.

Morris deftly integrates large amounts of data into a fact-filled but easily read narrative, with the overflow landing in copious footnotes set in type so small that I needed a magnifying glass. As an author, I have proven to my own dissatisfaction that it is near impossible when writing any book much longer than Jonathan Livingston Seagull to avoid at least the odd error, and obviously it is much more difficult for an author without a lifelong familiarization with his subject—especially when delving into the alien world of nautical matters. All things considered, Morris has done very well in that department, and any questions of fact and usage I noted while reading do not detract from the book as a whole.

The book is well illustrated with a number of photos which were new to me, and much appreciated.

And finally, it is pleasantly surprising, in this day and age, to find such an ambitious book on a relatively narrow topic carried on a trade publisher's list. Much credit is due Commonwealth Editions for this reminder of what the book business was once about. And had it been published instead by a specialized academic publish-or-perish press, it would have been priced at the hefty cost of a Harken ratchet block, rather than that of a small cam cleat.

*Bill Bunting's most recent book is Live Yankees: The Sewalls and Their Ships. Many tides ago he seined and tub trawled out of Gloucester.*

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