

## Book Reviews

**Bacon, John U. *The Gales of November: The Untold Story of the Edmund Fitzgerald***

**Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2025**

464 pp., illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, glossary, index

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In observance of the fiftieth anniversary of the *Edmund Fitzgerald* disaster, John Bacon has penned a chronicle focused on the “mighty *Fitz*” as well as on the hazardous Great Lakes shipping industry and the vessel’s crew. The 729-foot, double-hulled, welded-steel SS *Edmund Fitzgerald* was the “queen” of Milwaukee’s Columbia Transport Division of the Northwest Mutual Insurance Company. The book also conjures a mental image of the calamity by way of Canadian singer-songwriter Gordon Lightfoot’s melancholy song about the ship’s demise.

The book is somewhat of a literary tryptic. The first part deals with shipping on the Great Lakes, the peculiarities of dealing with vast stretches of freshwater, the unusual weather patterns in this area of North America, the transport of iron ore, and the unusual designs of the vessels needed to deliver taconite pellets to the iron and steel industries farther southeast. A second component focuses on the crews of these Great Lakes vessels, particularly those who shipped upon the *Edmund Fitzgerald*, their individual positions onboard, backgrounds and training, and their human strengths and vulnerabilities. Finally, Bacon takes the reader through the vessel’s last voyage, how its race ended in a gargantuan storm, her loss, and the aftermath’s impact on the families and friends. Here is where the author attempts to reconstruct the craft’s demise from scraps of information.

In heavy weather waves in the Great Lakes could reach 20 feet high or more, capable of hogging a vessel upon a wave’s crest and then sagging the  
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middle of the ship in its return trough. Typically, Great Lakes freighters had a pilot house and captain's and VIP quarters forward and its galley, crew quarters and engine room at their stern. They also had port and starboard tunnels, enclosed walkways running the ship's length that enabled the crew to safely walk fore and aft during storms and slippery conditions on deck. Unfortunately, they could twist almost like a cardboard tube in violent weather. Compliance with the ship's Plimsoll line made it safe when carrying her cargo and legally sanctioned its insurance. However, this was sometimes cheated by redistribution of weight and altering buoyance matters. Bacon finally describes the peculiarities of the hazards of the Great Lakes shipping industry, its shifting shoals, poorly marked charts, narrow locks, its quite distinctive ports of call, and finally the favorite crew watering holes.

The book then largely focuses on ship's captain, Earnest McSorley, chief engineer George Holl, and then other crew members down to the porter, the oil wiper, and a Great Lakes Merchant Marine Academy cadet. The reader learns about their distinctive jobs on board and lives ashore, allowing the reader to develop a virtual bond with this 29-member, freshwater maritime fraternity of ordinary men with personalities, strengths and flaws, girlfriends and families, and hopes and dreams typical of all sailors.

The last section of the book describes a friendly race between the *Fitzgerald* and the SS *Arthur M. Anderson* across Lake Superior to the Sault Ste. Marie locks. The contest started on a balmy day and ended with the first blizzard of winter. According to many, this was the worst storm ever to visit Lake Superior. Bacon masterfully describes the rapidly changing events as the captains of the two ships make decisions about what to do to reach their destination at the canal locks. The competition changes as it becomes obvious that the *Fitzgerald* is in trouble and the sailors code to help fellow mariners in trouble takes precedence; as one chapter heading states, "We have to go out, but we don't have to come back" (311). From snippets of radio transmission and weather reports, we surmise the details of how the *Fitzgerald* met its fate on 10 November 1975. The book concludes with the location of the sunken vessel and the recovery of the *Fitzgerald's* bronze bell, which is now enshrined in the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum. The moving narration closes with the immediate effects on the families and friends of crew members, of the crew who were left ashore, and what later became of some their lives.

Somehow the reader is left enshrouded by the haunting "The Wreck of The Edmund Fitzgerald," the poetic folk ballad set to an old Irish dirge. Appropriately, the slow quasi-funeral march is dedicated to the dramatic

tragedy and ensuing deaths. It is a song with no chorus or bridge, and the same melody emanates from a bagpipe drone over seven eight-line stanzas. The following are selected excerpts from the ballad:

The legend lives on from the Chippewa on down  
Of the big lake they call Gitche Gumee  
The lake, it is said, never gives up her dead  
When the skies of November turn gloomy

The wind in the wires made a tattle-tale sound  
When the wave broke over the railing  
And every man knew, as the captain did too  
'Twas the witch of November come stealin'

When supertime came, the old cook came on deck  
Saying, "fellas, it's too rough to feed ya."  
At seven PM a main hatchway caved in  
He said, "fellas, it's been good to know ya."

In a musty old hall in Detroit they prayed  
In the Maritime Sailors' Cathedral  
The church bell chimed 'til it rang twenty-nine times  
For each man on the Edmund Fitzgerald

Superior, they said, never gives up her dead  
When the gales of November come early

*The Gales of November* is a heart-rending tale chronicling an historic "freshwater sea" maritime tragedy to mark its 50-year anniversary. This scholarly, very well-written book is likely to become a classic in the maritime history field and is highly recommended to readers of *The Northern Mariner/Le marin du nord*.

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