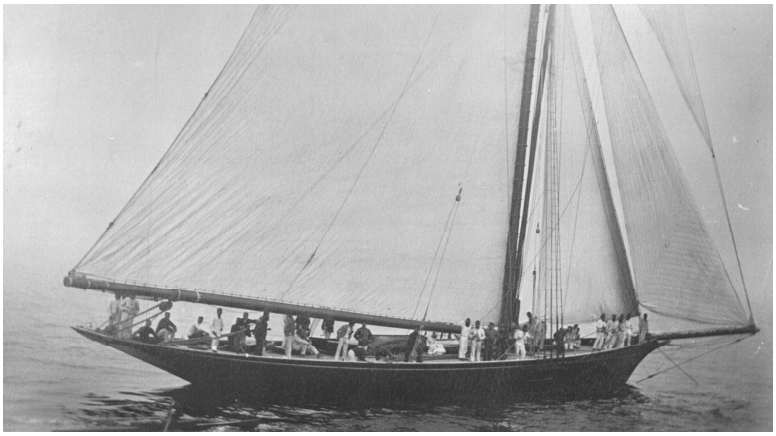
Chapter 6
The *Matilda* Mystery

Despite its natural beauty and the calming influence of its blue waters, Lake Simcoe and its environs have seen their share of violent acts. In fact, the course of the lake's history can be traced in blood. While we can assume the native population saw its share of killing—the murder of fur trader Etienne Brûlé and the wholesale slaughter of Jesuit missionaries and their Huron allies in Huronia suggest as much—the first murder on record occurred shortly after European settlers arrived. The Lake Simcoe area was still wilderness when, in 1824, Corporal James Cannon, who watched over government stores at Fort Willow and operated a tavern, was killed for his rumoured hoard of wealth.

Since then, many other lives have been claimed by



A sailing sloop like the Matilda

human hands, leaving a shameful legacy for the region. Two murders in particular seem to have entered local lore. One was the apparent quadruple-murder aboard the sailboat *Matilda*. We will explore the other in the next chapter.

In October of 1866, the sailing sloop *Matilda* disappeared beneath the waters of Cook's Bay, taking four young lives with her. The only survivor was a good-for-nothing named George Doolittle. Doolittle's varying accounts of the fateful voyage were conflicting in their details, and in many cases so full of lies and obvious misdirection that they carried little weight. It was clear to investigators that he was hiding something, but what? Was it multiple murders, as many came to suspect? The true story of what happened aboard that vessel remains one of Lake Simcoe's most enduring mysteries.

The *Matilda* was owned by Captain McCullough of Orillia, and was one of numerous vessels plying the waters of Lakes Simcoe and Couchiching transporting goods from one port to another. In the summer of 1866, the *Matilda* had collided with the steamship *Emily May* in the Narrows connecting the two lakes. The *Emily May* escaped lightly, but the impact caused structural damage to the *Matilda*. Taking on water through her hull, the sloop limped into Orillia and spent the remainder of the season moored alongside the wharf, awaiting repair.

On Saturday, October 13, while Captain McCullough was away, the devious George Doolittle approached Mrs. McCullough and inquired about borrowing the ship. He lied to her, vowing that her husband had already given him permission. Doolittle had a poor reputation around town as a drunkard and a "shiftless kind of fellow, never caring to work if he could by any means avoid it." Mrs. McCullough flatly refused his request. Whether his unsavory reputation played a part in her decision is unknown, but she could not in good conscience allow anyone to sail out into the storm-tossed autumn waters of Lake Simcoe in a vessel that was not seaworthy.

Doolittle was undeterred. Under the cover of darkness he quietly slipped aboard the *Matilda*. He was accompanied by his wife, two daughters, and a young lad named Alex (or Adam) Birch, a native of Barrie. Silently, they cast off and

headed out into the moonlit waters, heading for the town of Sutton. According to Doolittle's later testimony, a sudden storm came howling across Lake Simcoe and began tossing the *Matilda* around. Buffeted by wild wind and crashing water, the tears in the ship's hull ripped open further. Where previously only a trickle of water was pooling in her hold, now there was a torrent.

Doolittle realized that the ship was beginning to sink and alerted his wife to the danger. She handed him one of their children, then raced below deck for the other, who was still sound asleep in her bunk (this despite the pandemonium topside—one of many odd statements in Doolittle's account). While his wife was below, the gybing mainsail supposedly swung across and blindsided Doolittle, knocking the child out of his hands and into the angry waters. Instantly, the baby was swallowed up by the waters and lost. Doolittle, according to his testimony, was powerless to save the child. By this point, the *Matilda* was sinking so fast that Doolittle barely made it to the ship's small lifeboat. His wife never emerged from below deck. As the ship slipped beneath the waves she and her second child were trapped by the inrushing water. The ship's hold became their tomb.

As for Alex Birch, Doolittle never could decide upon his fate. In one account, the last he saw of the young man was as he jumped from the swamped bow into the turbulent water. In another, he was in the skiff and then presumably washed

overboard by a massive wave that crashed over the boat. And in yet another version he was last seen walking aft on the ship. In any event, Birch was claimed by the lake that night as well. Doolittle was the only survivor.

Alone in a small rowboat, Doolitle made for the nearest point of land, which happened to be Fox Island, off Georgina. He was discovered a few days later, cold and hungry, but otherwise none the worse for wear. Immediately after his rescue newspapers began following the story, and the more that reporters dug the more a foul stench began to emerge. The *Barrie Northern Advance*, for example, noted "the circumstances [of the incident] look rather gloomy and suspicious." Almost everyone who took note of the tragedy—reporters, police investigators, readers who eagerly followed the story in local papers—believed that Doolittle had killed the other passengers. It was the only way to explain the wildly different versions of the events, and his suspicious behaviour that night and in the days that followed. And yet, no charges were ever laid. There was simply no concrete evidence against the man.

What happened aboard the *Matilda* that night remains a tragic mystery. Were four people murdered? Did a desperate man alter his story to cover up his own negligence and cowardice? Only one man knew the true story, and he went to his grave unwilling to share it.

In the 140 years since the event, some have questioned