

Renée HOUDE

Ph.D, professeure retraitée,
Département des communications sociale et publique, UQAM.

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Un document produit en version numérique par Jean-Marie Tremblay, bénévole,
professeur associé, Université du Québec à Chicoutimi
Courriel: classiques.sc.soc@gmail.com
Site web pédagogique : <http://jmt-sociologue.uqac.ca/>
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Courriel : Renée Houde: houde.renee@uqam.ca

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BÉLANGER, JEAN-BAPTISTE, ship’s captain and office holder; b. 1 Jan. 1852 in the parish of Cap-Saint-Ignace, Lower Canada, son of Édouard Bélanger, a sailor, and Flore Fortin; m. 22 Oct. 1878 Caroline Côté at Cap-Saint-Ignace, Que., and they had at least ten children, six of whom reached adulthood; d. 6 Sept. 1924 in Quebec City and was buried four days later at Cap-Saint-Ignace.

Raised in a family that had a passion for boats, the St Lawrence River, and sailing, Jean-Baptiste Bélanger was introduced to them at an early age; they would be central to his life. His father was a sailor and builder of sailing vessels at L’Anse-à-Gilles. Two of his brothers, Ariste and Joseph, would make sailing their career. His brother Arthur, after starting out as a mariner, became a lumber merchant. From 1863 to 1867 Bélanger took a commercial course at the Collège de Sainte-Anne-de-la-Pocatière, where he was a boarder. While it is not known how he learned to sail, it can be reasonably assumed that his father taught him the basics. He began his career as a pilot with Captain C. Bernier on a French yacht. At the end of April 1879 he passed his examinations and received a second-mate certificate.

In 1877 Bélanger had entered the service of the federal Department of Marine and Fisheries and until 1879 he held the position of qualified first officer on the steamship *Napoléon III*. He then worked for the next 17 years as commanding officer of the coastguard vessel *La Canadienne*.



In 1896 Bélanger was in command of the *Savoy*, a steamer owned by French industrialist Henri Menier, who was in the chocolate business. Menier needed a vessel to make the trip back and forth between Anticosti Island, of which he was the new owner, and Quebec City. For 14 years, as soon as the Gulf of St Lawrence was navigable, Bélanger transported workers and prominent individuals as well as supplies to the island, which Menier wanted to turn into a natural paradise. Bélanger sometimes assisted in refloating ships that had run aground, such as the *Merrimac* in Baie Ellis (Baie Gamache) on 16 July 1899.

Bélanger became captain of the *Eureka* in 1910. Since 1906 this Canadian government pilot boat had provided the ocean mail service (or trans-shipment of mail) from the station at Pointe-au-Père (Rimouski). The station included a wharf (1904), telegraph equipment (1907), and a large lighthouse (1909). Bélanger was also in charge of piloting operations; in accordance with a Canadian government

requirement, only properly qualified pilots were permitted to navigate vessels through the St Lawrence River. Aboard the *Eureka* in 1910, Bélanger participated in the arrest of the American physician Hawley Harvey Crippen, who was charged with the murder of his wife. Bélanger took Inspector Walter Dew to the *Montrose*, an ocean liner under the command of Henry George Kendall, on which Crippen and his mistress were trying to escape. Furthermore, he lent some of his sailor's clothes to Dew so that he would not arouse the suspicions of the alleged murderer. He was also on board the *Eureka* when, on 29 May 1914, he was the first to arrive at the scene of the sinking of the *Empress of Ireland*.

Owned by the Canadian Pacific Railway Company, the *Empress of Ireland* had been launched on 27 Jan. 1906. This 14,000-ton liner was 550 feet 8 inches long with a beam measuring 65 feet; it could reach a top speed of about 18 knots. It made regular crossings of the Atlantic, between Quebec City and Liverpool, England. The crossing took six days, including two days on the St Lawrence. On Thursday 28 May 1914 she left Quebec City at 4:27 p.m. Adélarde Bernier was her pilot as far as Pointe-au-Père, where Kendall, who was in charge of the Atlantic crossing, took command. The liner was carrying 1,477 persons, of whom 1,057 were passengers and 420 crew members. At 1:30 a.m. on 29 May, about a mile and a half west of Pointe-au-Père, Bernier transferred to the *Eureka*, commanded by Bélanger, who was waiting for the collier *Wabana* in order to take on her pilot before returning to Pointe-au-Père at about 2:10 a.m.

Not far from the *Empress of Ireland*, which had resumed her journey, was the *Storstad*, a Norwegian collier under the command of Thomas Andersen, which was heading towards Montreal from Sydney, N.S. Kendall was at his post. Andersen was in his cabin and had been replaced by the chief officer, Alfred Severin Gessen Toftenes. The two vessels were in view of each other up until the moment a thick fog bank rose. When they caught sight of each other again, it was too late. A little more than six and a half miles east of Pointe-au-Père, the *Storstad's* bow rammed the *Empress of Ireland* on the starboard side, nearly amidships. The two vessels separated, creating a 14- by 45-foot hole in the *Empress*, into which water poured at the rate of 265 tonnes a second. The radio operator on the *Empress of Ireland* sent out his first distress

signals at 1:56 a.m. The liner keeled over to starboard and sank in less than 15 minutes.

On arriving at Pointe-au-Père, between 2:20 and 2.25 a.m., Bélanger was immediately alerted. The *Eureka*, still under steam, left dock about 2:30. Bélanger was the first to reach the site of the sinking, around 40 minutes later. After receiving the radio operator's message, Jean-Baptiste Pouliot, captain of the steamship *Lady Evelyn*, another Canadian postal vessel, restarted his engines and left Saint-Germain-de-Rimouski (Rimouski). He was the second to arrive, about 3:45 a.m.

The *Empress of Ireland* was already under water when the *Eureka* reached her destination. In his report of 9 July, Bélanger would describe the scene as follows: "I could see no lights when I started but about fifteen (15) Minutes after, I could see the S.S. "Storstad", as the day broke, with Head, South, and no "Empress" in sight but wreckage; it took me about forty (40) Minutes to reach the Scene; on arriving there, I observed four (4) boats, a collapsible boat that I boarded, immediately some loaded, some partly loaded, some empty and upset and saw some dead bodies floating and some bodies sinking; ... My boats were instantly lowered to the water and proceeded in saving, picking up in the water Women, Men and children who were not dead." During her first run, the *Eureka* took on board 150 people and brought them to Saint-Germain-de-Rimouski, where help was arriving. The *Lady Evelyn* returned from her first round trip with more than 330 people, most of whom had been rescued by the *Storstad*. Both vessels made two additional trips, during which they were only able to pick up bodies. In the course of his searches, Pouliot discovered the ship's log of the *Empress of Ireland*. Joseph-Oscar Bélanger, Jean-Baptiste's son, lent a hand on board the *Eureka* in the search for bodies. *Le Soleil* would report on 27 May 1939 these words of Captain Bélanger: "I can say that I have seen many things in my career as a sailor, but I will never forget the spectacle that appeared before my eyes on that fateful night of 29 May."

A total of 1,012 people perished in this disaster, including 840 passengers and 172 crew members. The speed of the sinking and the fact that the passengers, who had boarded the day before, were not familiar with the ship are among the factors that may explain the high number of victims. A number of survivors would die of their injuries. Bélanger's contribution to the rescue was quickly recognized: on 2 June

L'Événement published an article about him entitled "A hero," which mentioned that he had given away all his clothes, that he had gone for several hours without sleep, and that his devotion had been heroic.

Bélanger participated in two inquests. The first, whose findings were inconclusive, was conducted by the coroner Josué Pinault and took place on 30 May, the day after the tragedy, in a classroom in Saint-Germain-de-Rimouski. But a commission of inquiry very quickly proved necessary. Headed by Lord Mersey, who had presided over the British commission of inquiry into the sinking of the *Titanic* [see Arthur Godfrey [Peuchen](#)] in April 1912, it sat from 16 to 27 June in the Quebec City court-house. The federal government appointed as commissioners the former chief justice of the Superior Court of the province of Quebec, Sir Adolphe-Basile [Routhier*](#), and the chief justice of New Brunswick, Ezekiel McLeod. Bélanger was one of the 61 people questioned.

In its report, submitted on 11 July, the commission arrived at the following conclusion: "Mr. Toftenes ... was wrong and negligent in keeping the navigation of the vessel in his own hands and in failing to call the captain when he saw the fog coming on." It also made recommendations for improving conditions related to navigation (watertight compartments, lifeboats, a piloting service). Subsequent inquiries would come to contradictory conclusions.

From 1915 to 1918 Bélanger was in command of the *Lady Evelyn*. In 1915 he refloated the steamer *Romeny*, which had run aground on the rocks east of Île Verte. Later he worked at the Quebec Harbour Commission, until his death on 6 Sept. 1924 at his home in Quebec City.

Known as the captain of the *Savoy* for 14 years and as the first captain to arrive, aboard the *Eureka*, at the site of the sinking of the *Empress of Ireland*, Jean-Baptiste Bélanger was no ordinary sailor. According to the obituary published on 8 Sept. 1924 in *L'Événement*, "On the day after [the rescue], the Canadian Pacific authorities expressed their appreciation to him in very eloquent terms.... The declaration of war prevented him from being decorated." At the time, the tragedy had been the focus of attention in the international press, but the outbreak of World War I a few months later did indeed quickly occupy the front pages.

Renée Houde

Information on the sinking of the *Empress of Ireland* comes from Can., Commission of inquiry into the loss of the British steamship “Empress of Ireland” of Liverpool (0. no.123972) through collision with the Norwegian steamship “Storstad,” Quebec, June 1914, *Report* (Ottawa, 1914).

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