A man who followed the sea... claimed to have seen a ship in full sail and on fire off St. Peter's Island, where she was seen by quite a few residents of that area and on a number of occasions. At one time, the more venturesome of the viewers, familiar with the Northumberland waters, took off in a boat... when they came in close proximity, the ship, quite a large brigantine, disappeared in a twinkling of an eye, beneath the cold waters of the Strait.

— Walter Shaw in *Tell Me The Tales*

For at least two hundred years, possibly longer, people who live within sight and sound of the Northumberland Strait have reported seeing "...a burning ship out there." To plot these incidents on a map suggests that there are a few prime locations, areas which over the years have reported an unusual number of such sightings. Three sections of the Prince Edward Island coastline stand out: Western Prince County; off De Sable, Canoe Cove, and Charlottetown; and from Wood Islands around to Murray Harbour. Similar cases have been reported on the mainland, from districts opposite those on the Island shore: Pictou Island, Cape John, Brule Point, Malagash, Gulf Shore in Nova Scotia, and from the Buctouche-Richibucto sections of New Brunswick. An intriguing aspect of these eyewitness reports (from both sides of the Strait) is their similarity, tending to prove that a curious light does appear, especially as the harbinger of a storm.

What do people remember seeing? Let the question be answered in the words of those who have experienced these unusual encounters. The following is typical: "One October night I was returning from visiting a neighbour; while walking along I was looking out over the Northumberland Strait where I saw a ship burning. It was a clear night and I could make out the outline of the ship quite distinctly. I watched it for about twenty minutes and then it disappeared. I had heard so much about the phantom ship that I decided this must be it. My sister, who was visiting friends nearby, said she saw the same thing on the same night." Upon occasion the outline of a ship is not reported, as in the following version: "About seven p.m. on a January evening my attention was drawn to a ball of fire out on the Strait about ten miles off to the right of Pictou Island. It was definitely not a lighthouse and the light, in the shape of a half moon, was of a dark red colour." Nova Scotian folklorist Helen Creighton has written that the phenomenon often starts out as a ball of fire which develops before the onlookers' eyes into a three-masted ship. Sightings have taken place during all seasons of the year, winter as well as summer; however, the vast majority of "happenings" have occurred during September, October, and November, usually before a northeast wind.

One can be justifiably skeptical of solitary accounts of the phantom ship;
However, sometimes large numbers of people have witnessed an appearance. Roland Sherwood reports one such incident from Cape John, Nova Scotia, when notice was conveyed by telephone of an appearance of the phantom ship. "Soon word spread to River John some six miles away, and within an hour the road was black with cars as the curious came to see for themselves." Those who made this trek were treated to a full technicolour version of the apparition. In the words of one onlooker, "It was a vessel, outlined with a fiery glow. I wouldn't say it was actually flames I saw... but the whole vessel was aglow and it was moving fast. I watched it for an hour until it went out of sight up the Strait. Two nights later the whole thing was repeated as the vessel sailed back in the opposite direction."

Frequently there have been accounts of people attempting to reach the burning vessel, as in the instance recalled by Walter Shaw at the beginning of this article. On another occasion the car ferry Prince Nova plying the Wood Islands-Caribou route attempted to bring aid to a burning ship, only to have it disappear into thin air when approached at close range. Sometimes these rescue attempts have served to embellish the legend as suggested by the Charlottetown Daily Patriot in 1865. "Another story still more improbable is to the effect that during the appearance of the apparition a good many years ago, a boat put off from shore with several men to see the strange thing, neither boat nor men being heard from afterwards." Possibly the most famous "rescue attempt" took place around the turn of the last century in Charlottetown Harbour. Sterling Ramsay has included the story in Folklore Prince Edward Island. "Late one evening, approaching dusk, a ship [was] sighted in the harbour which appeared to be in peril... Some distance out in the channel was what appeared to be a large three masted sailing vessel ablaze from bow to stern. A group of men boarded a small boat and rowed toward the flaming ship, in hopes of rescuing as many of her crew as was possible. While they were still some distance from the craft, it disappeared into the mist and appeared to vanish completely." Later on a thorough search, including explorations by divers, failed to reveal a trace of the mysterious ship.

Over the years numerous stories have evolved to justify the "return" of a phantom ship. On the New Brunswick side many people believe that they are witnessing a reappearance of the barque Colburn, lost during a violent October storm in 1838. Others call it the John Craig light, since a ship of that name was once lost off the treacherous Shippigan Shoals. Along the Nova Scotia coast residents are convinced that the phantom is the Isabella which set sail with a cargo of lumber in December, 1868. Bound for South America, the Isabella was last sighted by the lightkeeper on Amet Island; thereafter no trace of the ship or crew was ever found. Most witnesses are quite consistent in their description of a three-masted schooner or a brigantine; however, one informant from the Wood Islands area suggested to me that it may be a reappearance of the ill-fated steamer Fairy Queen, wrecked off Pictou Island on October 1, 1853. However, history and folklore do not always blend, since the Fairy Queen did not burn, but rather foundered and capsized. A native of Murray Harbour, while not naming the ship, provides a graphic account of the reason behind the phantom. "A pirate ship pillaged a vessel from the old country and in a drunken brawl both ships caught fire and all hands were lost." Then, too, there are those who assert that it is the return of an immigrant ship bound for Pictou and lost in an autumn gale somewhere in the Strait, or perhaps a pirate ship sunk near Minagish by a British warship during the Napoleonic War.

Whatever the legend, many individuals have witnessed something on the waters of the Northumberland Strait and, skepticism aside, the accounts cannot be lightly dismissed. But what is it? William Francis Ganong (1864-1941), noted New Brunswick scientist and historian, is one of many who has attempted an explanation. "In its usual form, the light is roughly hemispherical," Ganong wrote in the 1905 Bulletin of the Natural History Society of New Brunswick. "It has its flat side to the water and at times it simply glows without much change of form, but at other times it rises into slender moving columns, giving rise to an appearance capable of interpretation as the flaming rigging of a ship, its vibrating and dancing movements increasing the illusion... its origin is probably electrical." Others have suggested that it may be a manifestation of St. Elmo's fire—the glow that accompanies charges of...
atmospheric electricity. Many accounts mention a foggy or misty night, provoking the suggestion that the phenomenon may be simply a bank of fog reflecting moonlight. A resident of Canoe Cove who has witnessed the phenomenon and as a fisherman is thoroughly familiar with the Strait, has suggested to the writer that the phantom is a special kind of mirage. People who live along the Northumberland coast of Prince Edward Island are well aware that on certain days (depending upon atmospheric conditions) the shore line of Nova Scotia appears to be very close — so much so that landmarks are clearly discernible and a distant cottage may resemble a tall building half up in the air, half down in the sea. On other days, all that is visible is a faint line on the horizon. This is the legendary fata morgana, first noted in the Mediterranean, but common to many other parts of the world, including the Northumberland Strait. Since the same atmospheric conditions may prevail at night, it is plausible to believe that lights on either side of the Strait may be transformed by optical illusion so that the observer sees what he believes to be a brigantine in full flame. Ignited gas from submarine coal beds and even the lowly squid have been ascribed responsibility for the ghost ship. In the latter case, it is suggested that the blackish-brown phosphorescent “ink” emitted by the squid when frightened or under attack may through “the action of the wind concentrate and when the vapour from the discharge reaches the surface [it] sets off a mild effect of static electricity which accounts for the intense animation present in the scintillating spectacle.”

From time to time reports of the phantom ship have been accompanied by other inexplicable occurrences. Most important of these are the mysterious “booms” or “sea guns” noted over the years and as recently as December, 1977. These, too, have eluded scientific explanation. Sometimes the booms are accompanied by what appears to be a ball of fire in the evening sky. Since the 1977 cases were reported from widely separated locations along the Atlantic seaboard of North America, they attracted the attention of both the American Centre for Shortlived Phenomena and the United States Geological Survey, but neither group could offer a positive explanation. Some of the recent occurrences may be sonic in origin; however, the booms were heard long before the advent of aircraft. The mysterious ball of fire accompanying the “sea guns” may well have a link with the burning ship. Such a ball of fire has frequently been noted over the Tantramar Marshes and has usually been diagnosed as ignited marsh gas.

Ridicule is often close to the surface when people consider the accounts of those who have witnessed the “ball of fire,” the “burning ship,” or heard the mysterious “sea guns.” However, there is today a greater open-mindedness about the unexplained, even amongst the scientific fraternity. The number of incidents are remarkable in their consistency and have gone on for such a span of years that they cannot be glossed over as hallucinations or the result of overheated imaginations. In fact, the phenomenon may well predate the arrival of the white race to these shores, since Micmac folklore contains references to mysterious fire balls. It is not outside the realm of possibility to assume a connection with the “burning ship” and the mysterious “sea guns” of the Northumberland Strait. In the final analysis, the physical world we perceive with our senses may not be the sum total of our environment. The next time you drive along the winding highways which skirt the Strait, glance out over the dark waters, for you too may experience a ghostly encounter of the Northumberland kind.

Sources
Much of the material incorporated in this article is based upon interviews with people who have seen the phantom ship; however, this has been supplemented by newspaper accounts and printed reminiscences. The writer would appreciate hearing from readers of The Island Magazine who have experienced such a “personal encounter.” These may be sent to me in care of the Heritage Foundation, P. O. Box 922, Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island. The most important secondary sources on the topic are as follows:

Edward D. Ives, “The Burning Ship of Northumberland Strait,” Midwest Folklore, VIII, pp. 199 to 203;
Sterling Ramsay, Folklore Prince Edward Island (Charlottetown, n.d.);
Walter Shaw, Tell Me The Tales (Charlottetown, 1975);