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Hymn for Gloucester at 400

A Poem by John J. Ronan

Hymn for Gloucester at 400

BY JOHN J. RONAN

The Man at the Wheel beholds an ocean,
As past the ocean steady eyes
Transfix a deeper, distant horizon
The cenotaph dead will tell you is time.

He sees the Normans, Basques, the Grand
Atlantic Banks, Champlain, a Frenchman
Presaging Smith's Tragabigzanda,
Rechristened quickly the kinder Cape Ann.

Sees Gloucester's birth and Fisherman's Field,
A lively Dogtown, early sloops,
Colonial pride and commonweal
In Blynman's Canal and early schools,

In Murray, Rogers, fish and trade,
Despite the crush of Crown attacks
By savage British troops, charades
Of regal honor, legal tax,

Until he sees on Lexington Green
Both Minute Men and Minute Women
Renounce with arms a king and queen -
The war of independence, won!

The newly minted nation begins
As Gloucester's helmsman now admits
Italians, Irish, Poles and Finns,
The Scot, the Swede, forgiven Brits

Pursuing life and liberty, happiness,
Divergent faiths and customs welcome:
Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist,
The tempest-tossed, rejected, welcome

Where titled idlers must start anew,
Where slowly slave and native claim
Their rightful freedoms, overdue,
And hand-me-down hate is shamed.

The helmsman looks on years of peace
And war, on commerce, art, as sons
And daughters succeed ashore, at sea.
A watch is ended, a watch begun.

As even now, he guides with skill,
This mettled man, heroic cast
Of eye to windward, tacking still
The open ocean's future, past:

The ebb and flow and undertow
Of sorrow, *Patriot, Andrea Gail...*
And yet Fiesta, Horribles, hope,
September schooners under sail.

Below the bronze, Atlantic waves
Anoint the helmsman, his wife, a boy
And baby, fifty states their wake,
Our bright and spangled land in convoy

As we, helmsmen, helmswomen, astride
With Him the foam-flecked deck, converged
As one on time's horizon, recite
America's prayer, the citizen pledge,

And salt of serious earth, as sea-salt hands,
Acclaiming to fourth and future jubilees
This weatherly granite, Gloucester, proudly stand
At history's helm and brave the blustering seas.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John J. Ronan is a former Poet Laureate of Gloucester, a Professor Emeritus at North Shore Community College, and host of The Writer's Block at 1623 Studios. He wrote the first draft of this poem in 2018 and has been revising it since as the city's quadricentennial neared. The form is loosely based on what the English minister and hymnologist Isaac Watts would call a long hymn meter.

ABOUT THE COVER ART

This oil on canvas painting, titled *A Rough Sea*, is from artist Fitz Henry Lane, 1854. The original work is on display at the Cape Ann Museum and its digital reproduction is in the public domain.