

## Fitz Hugh Lane: *A Storm, Breaking Away, Vessel Slipping Her Cable*, 1858

by Erik A. R. Ronnberg, Jr.

**A**PREMINENT MARINE PAINTER, Fitz Hugh Lane maintains a pivotal place in the history of nineteenth-century American art. He was a creator of innovative seascapes as well as one of the first American painters to embrace the aesthetic known today as Luminism, a style that emphasized poetic, light-filled views of land and water painted in a meticulous realist manner.<sup>1</sup>

Lane's paintings of ships in stormy seas, under sail and at anchor, form a small and not well studied aspect of his oeuvre. They are so unlike his tranquil harbor views with their delicate atmospheric effects, or his ship portraits that chafe at every convention of the formulaic genre, that it is difficult to think of them as works by the same artist. The melodrama of storm-tossed ships amid mountainous dark seas and wild skies is hard to reconcile with the still water, delicate colors, and exquisite play of light and reflections in the best-known canvases of this great American Luminist.

One tendency among commentators has been to dismiss them as obligatory works—painted to satisfy insistent customers and seafaring acquaintances who had witnessed such conditions. Some were painted for shipowners who may have felt that these views promoted business by proclaiming the seaworthiness of their vessels and competence of their crews. So overwhelming are the depicted sea and weather conditions that one wonders if accuracy has been sacrificed to dramatics. Could Lane, whose physical handicaps prevented him from experiencing such storms as a mariner, have gained the practical knowledge to depict a vessel in heavy weather, correctly handled in all aspects of seamanship? The answer seems to be

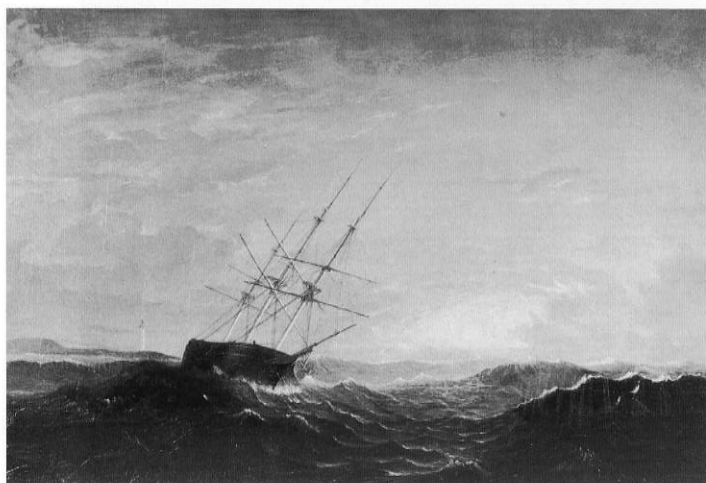


Fig. 6. Fitz Hugh Lane, *A Rough Sea*, ca. 1860, oil on canvas, 23½ × 35½ inches, Cape Ann Historical Association, Gloucester, Massachusetts, Gift of Professor and Mrs. Alfred Mansfield Brooks

yes, that through reading books on seamanship and from discussion with sailor acquaintances, Lane became proficient at depicting purposeful crew activity. His ships are invariably firmly under control and well handled in every respect.<sup>2</sup>

Two of the larger images in this category depict a ship at anchor off a lee shore at dawn, with the sun shining through the breaking stormclouds. One, titled *A Rough Sea* (Fig. 6), is unsigned, undated, and now owned by the Cape Ann Historical Association. In his research on its provenance, Alfred Mansfield Brooks found that Lane painted the picture for Obadiah Woodbury, a Gloucester merchant and prominent shipowner.<sup>3</sup> This image is probably better known from Mary Blood Mellen's copy entitled *A Storm, Breaking Away, Vessel Slipping Her Cable* (Fig. 7).<sup>4</sup>

The title of the Mellen copy is puzzling on several counts: the ship is riding safely with both her anchors out, and any attempt to "slip her cable" in her depicted state of readiness would have ended in disaster. There is no crew activity to indicate that the ship is ready to sail immediately on letting the cable slip. Closer inspection reveals that the square sails are furled tightly on the lower- and the topsail yards, which have been braced sharply at opposing angles to lessen wind resistance. The topgallant and royal yards have been sent down and stowed, while the topgallant masts themselves have been "housed" (partially lowered but not removed) also to reduce windage (wind resistance). In all, this is a picture of competent ship handling with all the safety precautions taken and no avoidable situation left to chance.

The second image (Cat. 2), signed by Lane and dated 1858, was exhibited at the thirty-fifth annual exhibition of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, in April 1858 with the same title that Mellen's painting now bears. Clearly the Mellen work was later given an identical title to Lane's in the mistaken belief that her painting was a copy of his.<sup>5</sup> However, the two works are quite different.

In Lane's *Storm, Breaking Away, Vessel Slipping Her Cable*, the ship is riding to only one anchor instead of two, and a buoy and line have been hitched to the cable. The latter practice was often done when a ship slipped her cable; thus marked by the buoy, the cable and anchor could be salvaged at a later time.<sup>6</sup> Slipping the cable was an emergency measure, which called for smart seamanship to get the ship under sail and on a safe course as soon as the cable had run out.

The ship is also riding to her starboard anchor. Her port anchor and cable—her heaviest ground tackle—are missing, probably having parted (broken) at the height of the storm. This seemingly minor technicality would have had great



Fig. 7. Mary Blood Mellen, *A Storm, Breaking Away, Vessel Slipping Her Cable*, 1868, oil on canvas, 23½ × 25½ inches, private collection, photograph courtesy Spanierman Gallery, LLC, New York

significance to any competent sailor of the period and lends additional drama to the vessel's situation.<sup>7</sup>

If Lane had intended to show the vessel slipping her cable to get under way, he would have shown the square topsails loosed (unfurled) and ready to set. This would have been attended by much crew activity in the rigging. Contrary to this, the sails are snugly furled except for one jib, which would hardly have provided the needed driving power, even in this tempest. The ship is therefore not quite ready to slip her cable; further procedures are necessary before she can do so.<sup>8</sup>

A more complete explanation of the vessel's situation is that she is riding to anchor and the tidal current has changed, forcing her to shift her position in a maneuver called "tending." Tending an anchored ship meant keeping the anchor cable taut because the vessel could "trip" an anchor, loosening its hold on the bottom, or the loose cable could "foul" (wrap around) the anchor's exposed fluke, dislodging the buried fluke. A tripped or fouled anchor would lose its holding ability under any tension, imperiling the vessel. Preventing such accidents and maintaining cable tension meant that the ship had to be steered in an arc whenever tidal currents or winds shifted its position. In some cases, this was done by actually sailing the

ship around the anchor, setting one or two jibs to provide motive power when the wind was advantageous.<sup>9</sup>

The relative directions of tidal currents and winds dictated the evolutions of tending a ship. Usually, tides were stronger than winds, so an anchored vessel would swing to face the current. When wind and current directions opposed each other, the current was called a "windward tide"; when moving in the same direction, it was a "leeward tide." A ship anchored in a windward tide that was turning would then become a ship in a leeward tide. The ship then had to swing in an arc to face the new current direction; doing so was called "tending to leeward." If swinging to a current changing from a leeward tide to a windward tide, the vessel would be "tending to windward."<sup>10</sup>

Lane's painting shows the ship tending to leeward. Under a single jib, she has worked her way clockwise around her anchor and she will soon swing her bow into the wind and current. Her yards are braced sharply so that if forced to slip her cable and get under way, the topsails can be set to turn the vessel quickly so she can be steered safely past the land and out into the safety of open water.

In sum, Lane's canvas portrays a ship anchored on a lee shore the morning after a severe gale. Her best anchor and

cable have parted; the remaining ground tackle is ready to be slipped. The tide has turned, and she is tending to leeward under her jib. Spars, rigging, and sails are in a state of readiness so working sail can be set at any moment. The greatest danger has passed, but the drama is not yet over, and it will take first-class seamanship to get this ship out of her dangerous anchorage and into open water. A mariner of the period, and no doubt Obadiah Woodbury himself, would have appreciated the situation Lane has portrayed and found satisfaction in the measures depicted to save the ship.

Painted with a skillful orchestration of color, outstanding draftsmanship, crisp details, and a careful balance of lights and darks, *A Storm, Breaking Away, Vessel Slipping Her Cable* is a superb example of Lane's highly personal version of Luminism. At the same time, the painting's deftly constructed drama of seafaring will reward those with the knowledge and curiosity to explore the complexities of nineteenth-century seamanship.

#### NOTES

1. Exponents of Luminism included Frederic Edwin Church, John F. Kensett, Martin Johnson Heade, and Sanford R. Gifford. For a discussion of the style and its practitioners, see John Wilmerding, ed., *American Light: The Luminist Movement, 1850-1875*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1980).
2. Erik A. R. Ronnberg, Jr., "Imagery and Types of Vessels," in John Wilmerding et al., *Paintings by Fitz Hugh Lane*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1988), pp. 68-70.
3. *Paintings and Drawings by Fitz Hugh Lane, Preserved in the Collections of the Cape Ann Historical Association* (Gloucester, Mass.: Cape Ann Historical Association, 1974), no. 60. Information on Obadiah Woodbury may be found in the records of the Cape Ann Historical Association.
4. Michael Moses, "Mary Blood Mellen and Fitz Hugh Lane," *Antiques* 140 (November 1991), pp. 829, 836.
5. Moses, "Mary Blood Mellen and Fitz Hugh Lane," p. 836.
6. John H. Harland, *Seamanship in the Age of Sail* (London: Conway Maritime Press, 1984), pp. 276, 277.
7. Harland, *Seamanship*, p. 237.
8. John Todd and W. B. Whall, *Practical Seamanship for Use in the Merchant Service*, 5th ed. (London: G. Philip & Son, 1904), p. 79.
9. Harland, *Seamanship*, p. 247.
10. Darcy Lever, *The Young Sea Officer's Sheet Anchor*, 2d ed. (London, 1819; reprint, New York: Edward W. Sweetman, 1955), pp. 101, 102.

#### PROVENANCE

J. S. Earle, 1858; [art market, Massachusetts, in 1976]; to private collection, 1976.

#### EXHIBITED

Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, *Thirty-fifth Annual Exhibition*, April 1858, no. 317 (as *A Storm, Breaking Away, Vessel Slipping Her Cable*; p. 18, incorrectly as lent by Mr. Parker); Edward J. Brickhouse Nineteenth-Century Gallery, The Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia, July 20, 1992-April 21, 1997.

#### LITERATURE

Michael Moses, "Mary Blood Mellen and Fitz Hugh Lane," *Antiques* 140 (November 1991), pp. 829, 836, color pl. xviii.