



MEMORY CABIN

The Heart of Centreville

The town of Centreville sits on the northeast arm of Newfoundland, and is not near the centre of anywhere at all. To get there, I exited the Trans-Canada Highway and headed ninety minutes down a two-lane road studded with small towns. The speed limit most of the way was forty kilometres an hour, which Newfoundlanders appeared to universally obey. Eventually, the driver in the car ahead pulled over to let me pass.

I arrived in Centreville by late morning, but the town was so inconspicuous that I was in the neighbouring village before I realized I'd missed it. I did a U-turn in my rental car, headed past the town hall and the blueberry factory, and a few moments later arrived at the home of Esther and Stu Rogers.

Esther greeted me at the back door, clasping my hand warmly and leading me past two coolers by the back door, packed with a picnic lunch. Stu was out buying fuel for the boat. They kept a cabin in Round Harbour, a twenty-minute boat ride away, and were taking me over for a visit, not only as a gesture of Newfoundland hospitality, but also to give me a glimpse of what life was like for traditional outport communities before people were forced to resettle. I'd seen photos of saltbox homes being towed across the water to new communities during the government's long, emotional relocation program, but could only imagine the places they had come from.

Esther and Stu are both in their late seventies. They have lived in Centreville since 1961, when everyone from their

outport communities—she is from Fair Island, he is from Round Harbour, just across the way—packed up and sailed all their worldly goods to the mainland. They abandoned their homes during Premier Joey Smallwood's resettlement programs of the 1950s to 1970s. Smallwood believed that fishermen were living an impoverished, third-world life. Modernization through new fish processing plants to feed the burgeoning frozen fish market, hydroelectric plants, and paper mills would bring prosperity and secure their future. "This shining shovel, a symbol of new life and economic development for the province," the premier said, posing at a construction site in an archival film, "is ready to turn sod anew in another step in the growth of Newfoundland."

When Smallwood became premier, approximately 300,000 people lived in a province one-third the size of England. "For some years past, there has been a lot of talk about the way the population of Newfoundland are scattered into so many hundreds of settlements along so many thousands of miles of coastline," he said in 1957. "It has long been felt by thoughtful people that the terribly scattered nature of our population has made it very expensive for the Government to provide public services to all the people."

It was time for Newfoundlanders to stop hanging on to the "old traditional ways," a brochure from the 1960s reported. Relocation was the only way to prepare "the next generation" for life in a modern, urban society. The propaganda of the time cast an eye toward a gleaming new future: "Yes, today and tomorrow Newfoundland is truly on the march," proclaimed a black-and-white promotional film.

"One thing we will not do is force anyone to move. That would be dictatorship," Joey Smallwood said. He told fishermen to burn their boats, and he promised new jobs. He spoke of "reception centres" and "growth areas."

Centreville was one such growth area, a manufactured town forged from the adrenaline of collective desperation and the autocratic ambitions of a man who had called himself "the latest father of Confederation."

At the harbour, Stu steadied their three-person skiff, and Esther and I handed down the coolers and jugs of water. "This was nothing, just an open space," he said, as we made our way to the wharf. It was cloudy and the air smelled of wood smoke. We passed hills covered with the green tips of young spruce and fir trees. When the people of Fair Island, Round Harbour and the other tiny islands decided to hang up their fishing nets, they ran their schooners aground and moved to Centreville to work in forestry. Families all across Newfoundland floated their homes to similar "growth centres" or loaded them on a government resettlement barge because they couldn't afford to leave them behind.

Clyde Barrow thinks on Buster's party

Clarence brought me & I were not lookin round but when the girl walk in the air just turn to somethin new

blonde hair flyin firecracker eyes explorin everythin & then she seen me

her face just blossom, clear intentions I couldnt let the moment pass stretch out my hand stood close next to the window so I'd show her which one was my fancy ride

talk goin on around us, her blue eyes steady, hair filled with light streamin in from the porch

after I kiss her she give a little smile & crushed near flat against me when I held her in my arms, she no taller than a pony thought I mighta pick her up & run

heard she had a husband in the joint she said it were not real

quick as hiccup she were bored in school, what to do in a hole like Cement City when you hurtin for more & nothin ever happens

never saw another want the same so fierce to drive & be alive the way we should if we had chances & the world ran right

– Carolyn Smart

The year following the move from Fair Island a fire destroyed the area around Centreville. (Rumours were that it started at a lobster cookout in Gambo.) "The last two houses were hardly in the water when the fire came through," said Esther.

Stu pointed the skiff toward the open water. "There was a time when you saw more boats on the water than cars on the road," he said.

"See that opening?" said Esther, looking toward the near distance between two islands. "If you went over there you could go all the way across the Atlantic."

We passed Yellow Fox Island and Silver Fox Island, Partridgeberry Island and Sydney Cove. A smooth granite rock that arched into the air was known as Whale's Back. After ten minutes, we reached the dock at Fair Island, which was settled in 1780 and had a population of 750 when it was abandoned two centuries later. Despite the government's

directive to never return, many people built new cabins on the plots where their families once lived. Esther and I climbed ashore and Stu hung back in the boat, agreeing to pick us up at the other end of the island to save Esther a walk back.

We headed toward a short rocky hill covered with crackerberries. "I'm only going that far and then I'll stop," Esther announced, as much to herself as to me. She has arthritis in her hips, but was compelled to keep walking. "I used to run up this hill," she said. She knew what was on the other side, but wanted to have a look anyway. To our right was an old cemetery with white stone markers; to the left, a slope of rocks she and her friends played on. This was how they spent their evenings on Fair Island as children, walking and running over the rocks, ice skating in winter on a frozen bog.

Down among the cabins were white signs where the town store and a church and other establishments had been. In

1946 there were three churches on Fair Island. People from Pork Island, Sydney Cove, Round Harbour and the other smaller islands—the “people across the tickle”—came to Fair Island to shop. The island had a government wharf and a one-legged postmaster who would stump out to the point and raise a flag to tell someone on the next island over that they had a telegram waiting for them. (At the Resettlers Museum, across from the Rogers’s house, I saw the postmaster’s wooden leg. It was a kind of puppet, with ropes to manipulate the limb and a socket for the knee.)

The people of Fair Island and Round Harbour were isolated, but there was no time to be bored. Women woke at four a.m. to make breakfast for the men, and their days were filled with “making” fish, doing laundry, tending the garden and children. They kept vinegar plants to treat fevers and headaches, and drained myrrh bladders from fir trees to tend wounds. Before bed, Stu said, they readied the dough for the next day’s bread. As in other parts of Newfoundland, the men were often away, cutting trees in winter and travelling to Labrador to fish in late spring. When they returned, the entire family was busy curing the catch.

Stu followed us slowly in the boat as we walked along Fair Island. We passed a small green cabin that belonged to her family. It hadn’t been kept up and looked as hospitable as a garden shed. A hundred metres or so down the shoreline, we climbed aboard the boat and steamed over to Round Harbour, where Stu and Esther came each summer. We hauled the coolers and water to the cabin, which had two serviceable bedrooms, a new boathouse the size of a double-car garage and a freshly built dock, and Stu made a fire in a small stove in the corner of the living room.

“I don’t think you put enough wood in the stove. I’m cold,” Esther said to Stu, as she set out a lunch of cold roast chicken, macaroni salad, slabs of sourdough bread and a spinach salad. Esther seemed embarrassed she hadn’t made the food herself, but said she had been too busy; the previous day she’d had to drive all the way to Gander for a doctor’s appointment.

Stu pointed out the spot at the end of Round Harbour where fishermen ran three schooners ashore when the fishery collapsed. It was a small beach, buffered by shrubs and trees. Logs lay across the sand, but there was no trace of those schooners. He glanced around the perimeter of Round Harbour, his eyes following the route he used to take from his house on the other side, through the trees to the school. He ran this four times a day, coming home for a hot lunch. The trees were thick and green, and there hardly looked to be space for a trail let alone houses.

Little more than fifty years earlier, people would have sat around the kitchen table of their tiny cabins eating chicken they raised themselves, or fish they caught. When they moved to the mainland and started working for a large logging company it was not merely their trade that would have changed. They lost their gardens and boats. They lost access to the water, so they had to buy more food. They had to buy land and perhaps take out a mortgage to build a house. “Moving,” Esther said, “probably tore the soul right out of you.” It was hardest for the older people, like her parents.

After lunch, I asked her if people are nostalgic about the place and forget how hard it was to live on Fair Island. She stopped loading up the cooler, turned and said, “Yes.” She paused, but didn’t elaborate. Then she went back to her packing.

We closed up the cabin, loaded up the skiff and unfastened it from the wharf. As we rounded the corner and Round Harbour passed out of view, Esther said, as if to the wind, “Yeah, that’s our cabin. I call it our memory cabin.”

The rain pelted our faces as we made our way back to Centreville. With no cover, Stu squinted and steeled himself against the weather. He liked to slow and point out various sights—there’s Little Sugar Loaf, he said of a nubby rock poking out of the water—but Esther was getting cold.

“It’s beginning to rain harder, dear. Bring us home.”

– Craille Maguire Gillies

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