

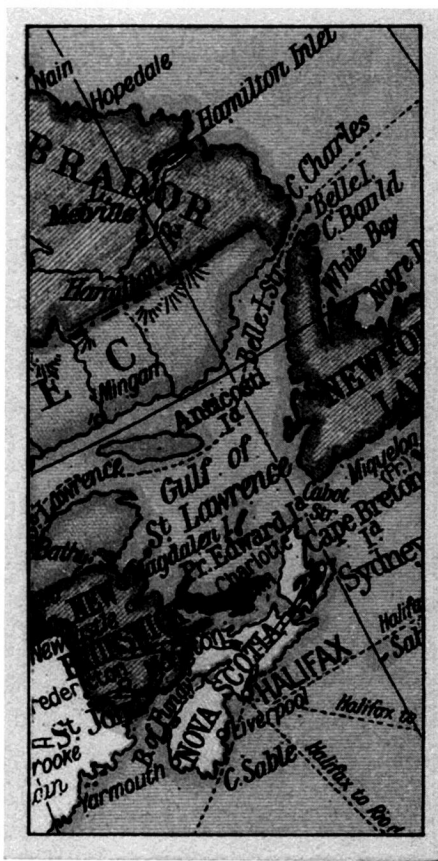
Flat Time

The ebb and flow of life in a Newfoundland fishing village

ROBERT FINCH

The Newfoundlander's concept of time, at least as I have experienced it in the small outpost, or fishing village, of Squid Tickle, is a peculiarly flattened one. I first became aware of this while listening to many of the local stories that had a historical basis: the Magic Arm Disaster, the notorious Cornwall Incident on Flat Island, the Great Fire that destroyed Squid Tickle early in the last century, even the settling of the town itself. When I asked in what particular year an event had taken place, I would usually get a puzzled, even slightly irritated response: "Oh, I couldn't tell you that, b'y," "Some time ago, my son," or a curt "Don't know." Once, when I asked Fred Oldford, one of the elders of the town, about this reluctance to assign dates to events, he replied, sphinx-like, "All bedtime stories begin with 'Once upon a time.'"

At first I attributed this inability or unwillingness to pin down dates to the general lack of written records in most rural Newfoundland communities, but the capacious and accurate memory that so many of the older inhabitants exhibited for details, relationships, locations, and events in the distant



Pocket map of the Atlantic coast from the 1930s

~ Robert Finch is the author of five collections of essays and is writing a book based on his travels in Newfoundland.

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past suggested it was something else. It seemed that it was *because* the culture had been oral for so long, and for so long rooted in a landscape of *known places*, that linear or sequential historic time, demarcated by specific dates, was, if not irrelevant, then trivial. If everything happened in the same place, under essentially the same conditions, then why should it matter exactly *when* something occurred? The Magic Arm Disaster, for instance, in which five men from Flat Island drowned in a boating accident in a cove above Squid Tickle, had occurred within living memory. Several of the men who spoke to me of the incident not only described the exact place where the boat had sunk and the specific conditions under which the tragedy had taken place, but told it as if it had happened just the year before. Yet I only determined the actual year it occurred—1933—when I came across a written history of Flat Island in the house of one of the summer people.

In a place where survival has been so strongly tied to the seasons and where things have changed so slowly for so long that life has been essentially cyclical, the major changes over the past four decades in commerce, communication, transportation, entertainment—even when most people have appreciated and accepted them—remain essentially exuvial growths that are regularly shed by the local mind. “The past,” rather than being conceived of as a stratified formation that, however convoluted, is resolvable into linear sequences, seems more a sea of individual and communal experience, where each added layer of memory runs off and eventually mixes with, becomes equal to and indistinguishable from, the whole.

As in many indigenous cultures, events and names in Newfoundland are tied to places more strongly than to time. For instance, I heard over and over the story of Damnable Bay, the previous name of the nearby community of St. Chad’s, which has a harbor with a very narrow entrance. The name, I was told, originated “in the old days” when a pirate ship hid from a pursuing British man-of-war in that secluded harbor. The inadvertent ringing of the ship’s bell gave away its position, causing the pirate captain to utter the eponymous oath “Damn the bell!” Probably the most resonant place-name in the area is the Bloody Bay Hills, referring to a six-hundred-foot-high ridge of worn mountains across the bay. The name was supposedly bestowed to commemorate a massacre of the native Beothuks by early settlers (or vice versa, depending on the teller) at some unspecified time in the past. At the other end of historical significance, Fred Oldford once pointed out to me a rock in the bay where he had cut a pine tree (“Oh, some years ago, now”) from which he fashioned the table that sits in his living room.

Often people themselves live on in the names of places. Cleaves Oldford, Fred’s older brother, once showed me a small rock in the bay called Jimmy Deal Island, which he said his father had named after a local preacher because “he didn’t like him and the island is so ugly.” Another time, when I was out in the bay with Cyril Oldford, he gestured to a rocky point on Summer’s Island known as the Devil’s Lookout, and told this story:

In the old days when there were plenty of Beothuks around, two men were out fishing and they left their lunch on shore. Now the Beothuks, they didn't just steal things, they left things in return, so when the two fellows got back, they found the grub gone, but somebody had shit in their lunch pots. And buddy says, "That's the devil's lookout—we shouldn't have left it there!"

What is common to all these stories, ancient or recent, is a lack of specification of time. The rich memory bank of the people of Squid Tickle seems to exist in a single, fluid layer called the past, out of which stories and events can be withdrawn at will, in great detail, and with a freshness that makes a conflagration that occurred almost 90 years ago seem as recent as last year's fishing season. Part of the immediacy of the local past stems, as it does in other oral cultures, from the fact that important or memorable events were almost always fashioned into poems, songs, or ballads. Most common were the numerous ballads recounting some disaster at sea or some other loss of life. The effect of such ballads was not only to preserve these events in the communal memory, but to mythologize them, the way docudramas and films "based on a true story" do in our electronic media culture, and thus to place them outside the mundane rubric of real, linear time.

Events commemorated in verse or song were not always historic or tragic. Most communities had a "singer" or versifier to celebrate more personal events, and their songs were often used as an opportunity to set down some local history and memories. Here, for instance, is Fred Oldford's rendering of a poem he wrote for the 50th anniversary of Char and Mary Oldford, with some interpretive gloss he threw in for my benefit:

It's nice to reminisce a bit as along life's path we go,
So I was thinking about Char, took his bride just 50 years ago.
Those that weren't born are sure to ask, What was the difference then?
But to us older folks we say, Does you remember when?

There were no telephones nor motor cars in our neck of the woods;
You either went by motorboat or got there the best way you could.
In wintertime we used our dogs, we traveled here and there.
But when we went a courtin', 'twas usually on shank's mare.
["That's by foot, you know."]

What would I give to walk the old line road to all the favorite spots,
The water cross the old footbridge, or set down on Sweet Rocks.
["There was a rock we called Sweet Rock, probably 10 people could sit down on it."]
But life goes on its merry way, we accept whatever comes,
B'y, there are so many times when I could taste those chocolate plums.
["You probably calls them choke cherries."]

We all walked that narrow road in sleet and mud and snow,
 But Charlie made more trips than us just 50 years ago.
 [*“He married a girl from Sandy Cove, see, and he used to walk over on Sundays to see her, in his God stompers.”*]

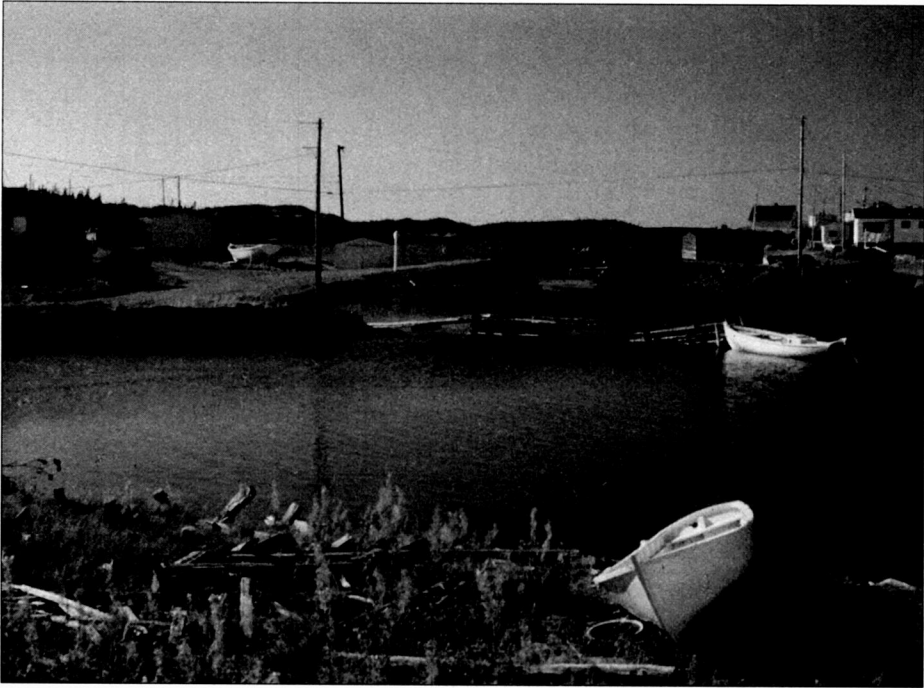
Unlike true indigenous cultures, however, there seems to be little or no genuine mythology in Newfoundland; that is, there are few creation myths or legends about truly fabulous or heroic beings—there are far fewer, in fact, than in American folklore. The closest thing to a creation myth I ever heard was from Jim Moss, who was one day pointing out to me the series of small islands stretching out in the bay between Squid Tickle and Flat Island: “You know, when the Man Upstairs was making Newfoundland, his ladle leaked there, dribbled those islands, you see”—but even then he had a smile on his face and a tongue-in-cheek tone in his voice. And, despite its heroic and often tragic history with the sea, Newfoundland has produced no comparable Paul Bunyan or John Henry figures. In fact, feats of individual accomplishment are rare in Newfoundland folklore, which tends to concentrate on communal events.

On the other hand, the storytelling *manner* is old and often reminiscent of ancient forms. One day at Fred’s house, he turned to me without preface and said, “I’ve got a riddle for you. Goes like this: ‘I washed in a water never rained nor flowed, dried my face in a napkin never spun nor sewed.’” It gave me satisfaction to guess the answer (dew and grass), but I was more impressed with the very old Anglo-Saxon form in which it had survived here. Riddles themselves, in fact, are an ancient form of verbal competition, and I answered him with one or two I remembered from readings in early English literature—“I Gave My Love a Cherry Without a Stone” and “I Have a Gentle Cock”—which he seemed to appreciate.

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Often, when telling stories, the teller will proceed partway in the narrative then stop and start again; or the person will start partway back, giving the tale a slightly different turn. He or she will proceed in this manner throughout the story, giving a fractured, overlapping effect. At first I thought that the teller’s memory was failing. Then, one night, while reading in *Mimesis*, Eric Auerbach’s magisterial survey of modes of representation and narrative in Western literature, I came upon his description of Merovingian and *chanson de geste* histories and epics of the early Middle Ages and found that they have a similar loose and overlapping narrative



The tickle and bridge

structure. Auerbach describes this structure as “not evenly progressive, but spastic, now gaining, now losing ground, like generation or birth.” Such a style, still alive in obscure places like Squid Tickle, may mimic, or represent more “realistically” than conventional linear narratives, the raw processes of memory and interior narrative in a form that existed centuries before Joyce and Woolf.

The nature of the seasons, and of the sky itself, work to usurp the sense of an ordered and sequential, if cyclical, progress here. The Newfoundland growing season in particular is so short and compressed that normal subdivisions of time seem hopelessly confused to one used to more expansive summers. Strawberries, for instance, can still be harvested in early September, along with the first cranberries, and apple trees on some of the outer islands bloom in late July, just as the first blueberries are ripening. In contrast, the sky here is so wide that the day itself seems broader, holding multiple times in a single moment. At dusk the eye, looking westward, still holds onto the dying day, its draining light and color; eastward, the soft cowl of night has already settled on the land and its scattered inhabitants.

In Squid Tickle, even the local geography seems to foster a sense of flattened, or nonlinear time. The “tickle” of Squid Tickle is a narrow tidal channel that separates the mainland part of the community from Squid Island. It was formerly a communal gathering place where the squid were harvested in August.

This is still a central experience for the remaining residents, since most of them have to cross the bridge over the tickle at least twice each day to pick up their mail from Christine Moss at the small shed next to her house, which serves as the post office. Because it's a tidal channel, one might expect the flow through the tickle to follow the diurnal tidal patterns—that is, to change direction



Squid Tickle girl on rocks

roughly four times a day at regular intervals. But because of a complex fractalization of the currents as they approach the tickle, the water running under the bridge actually reverses course irregularly, sometimes as frequently as every 20 minutes, and in no predictable pattern. Thus even the tides confound the question of “when?”

The educational history of the island, I think, has also contributed to the preservation of this fluid, mythic view of the Newfoundland past. Before confederation with Canada, and for some years after, the history books used in most outports, and even in St. John's, were usually histories of England, or mainland Canada, or even the United States. As one resident explained, “That was all the books we could get.” Schoolchildren thus grew up with a more or less ordered idea of the sequence of British monarchs or the course of the American Revolution, while their own history survived in a dreamtime of stories, verses, ballads, and jokes and in a dialect that shared more with 19th-century Devon than with 20th-century Toronto.

There is still a widespread skepticism, even resistance, among many older Newfoundlanders to the idea of a deep and ordered history developed by modern archaeology and geology. One evening, as I was chatting with Bert Burden, another local man in his 80s, I mentioned that I had been out to the quarries, an archaeological site at the top of the Bloody Bay Hills. The site is an ancient rhyolite mine. Rhyolite is a mineral used for shaping arrowheads, knives, and other implements. Laurie McLean, the archaeologist in charge of the local Heritage Foundation, believes the mine was worked by three different indigenous cultures over a period of 6,000 years. This chipping away during several millennia has left an enormous cut in the side of the ridge and over

a half acre of solid rock flakes lying about. The foundation is currently building a wharf at the base of the quarry in order to be able to take tourists to the site by boat.

“That’s all nonsense, you know,” said Bert.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Building the wharf and all that over there.” He gestured contemptuously out to the hills across the bay. “A damn waste of money, that is. It cost 30,000 for that museum and everything so far and it ain’t worth a pot to piss in. It was a *thunderbolt* blew that mountain apart. I used to go up there once or twice a week with Father to cut wood. I remember when that was solid rock all the way across. Y’s, b’y, I were about 10 year old when we had a big storm in the bay, and the next time we went out, it were all blown apart. I talked to Brock Bradley about it the other day, but he don’t remember it no more.”

Oh, well, I thought, there’s nothing for it but to break the bad news to Laurie and tell him to pack up and go back to St. John’s. Or, conversely, I can imagine Bert standing at the end of his wharf, as boatloads of tourists go by to visit the quarries, raising his fist and shouting, “You durn fools, go on home—it’s all nonsense!”

Others are not so autocratically dismissive of archaeological and geologic theory as Bert, but remain skeptical, or at least ambivalent. Cleaves Oldford, for instance, was cagily noncommittal when I referred to a large boulder in the middle of his field as a glacial erratic.

“I don’t know about that, b’y. Now, Father, he said that stone was brought here by a big piece of ice—but he didn’t say how or when.” In this way he does not necessarily reject science’s view of the past, but he also stands by his father’s stories of indeterminate, or flat, time.

Such views of the past are changing, of course. As younger people, even in the more remote outports, are being exposed to the more standard views of geology, prehistory, and history, their idea of themselves and their island is expanding and ordering itself into the accepted corridors of historical time. And with this change will come—is coming—a greater self-consciousness of both how their history stands in relation to that of the rest of the world and how their history differs from that of their fathers and their grandfathers. As history in Newfoundland is becoming more linear, Newfoundlanders are becoming more alienated from the past—even as they are becoming more aware of the past’s potential value as a “commodity.”

What is lost, it seems to me, in exchange for this greater “accuracy” and increasingly sequential narrative of time, is a felt connection with place and the sense that one can draw on the features, stories, and figures of an amorphous, but still living past, in which all narratives are equally available and relevant. In Squid Tickle, more than in many older and more densely settled areas of the continent, for the older people at least, the past is everywhere. It has not yet been routed by the omnipresent, has not yet

undergone a sea change into history, into that which we are done with and which is done with us.

Such a rooted intimacy with the past and with a generous, un-demarcated sense of time still manifests itself in the casual, diurnal rhythms of life in Squid Tickle. I have noticed, for instance, that when I am visiting one of the local residents and get up to go, whether I have been there five minutes or two hours, I am sure to be met with what seems a universal mantra of all visiting here: "Plenty o' time, b'y, plenty o' time."

Of course there is, literally, plenty of time for most of the residents here, nearly all of whom are either retired or unemployed for most of the year. But the phrase, it seems to me, predates current conditions, goes back to a time when there was always lots of work to be done by everyone. One likes to think its persistence is a sign that human intercourse—chewing the fat, sharing stories, discussing prospects, neighbors, and fish—always had a certain importance for these people and that, like the dream of every Orthodox Jewish man to be in a position to spend all his time studying the Torah and discussing it with others in the temple, the dream of Newfoundlanders is to have time to talk and visit to their heart's content. This is a dream that this aging generation seems, to its own surprise, to have found itself living.

It is a contagious dream. One afternoon, shortly after I arrived, I was walking back from visiting with one of Squid Tickle's summer residents, an octogenarian from St. John's who was the scion of one of the old Water Street merchant families. I was coming around the curve at the high part of the tickle

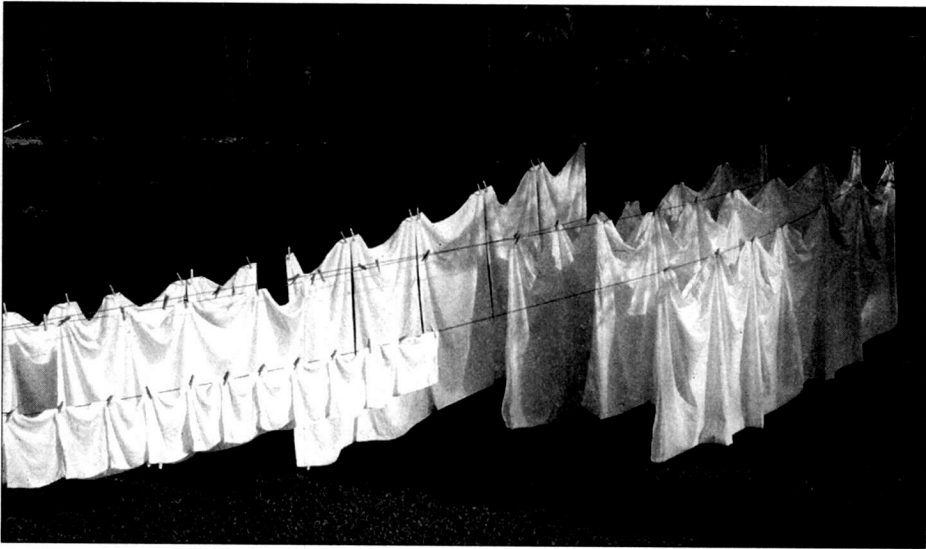
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road, watching the banks of fair-weather clouds ranked in the west with the sun slipping down between them, and I realized that my days here, though less than a dozen so far, had already begun to blend together into Squid Tickle time, that I had already begun to lose track of dates or days of the week or even how long I had been here, a few days or a few years. I seemed to experience, for the first time, just how time compresses

here, how events and people and generations meld seamlessly together, and how, though there is no apparent timeline to hang them on, they can be picked out of the plastic time stream with remarkable clarity and detail, like a trout plucked out of the depths of a clear, flowing stream. Like the tickle itself, time here is not linear but diastolic, pulled by centripetal and centrifugal currents. Like the year, all things here go out from and return to this one place.

The patterns are subtle, but deep, and at times one can, almost without



Linen hanging, Squid Tickle

knowing it, slip out of the present and into something older, wider, and unbounded. One evening, after a supper at the Mosses, we all sat in the living room: Jim and Jesse, Jim's daughter Julia and her husband Jerry, Jack Casey from St. Brendan's, Jack's girlfriend, Ruth, and her mother, Bea, from down at the ferry wharf, and me. The talk flowed softly as the men sipped rum and ginger ale and the women smoked and knitted. As the light began to fade (which happened at about nine o'clock on that summer evening), the figures inside became dim outlines. No longer able to see their mouths, I tried to pick out individual voices, but instead I heard only an indistinguishable overlapping of voices, especially among the women—counterpoints, descants, obbligatos of sound. It was as if they were disappearing into their own past, into a time when, on summer evenings, there was no reason to turn on the lamps and burn oil—there was nothing to read and no one to read it. They stayed in touch through the sound of their own familiar voices, telling stories, singing songs, commenting on the world and its familiar doings. The women probably knitted in the dark, as the voices wove together the familiar repetitions of kinship, boats, health, generations, and weather. As a child, forced to listen to my parents and their friends converse in this desultory fashion, I had been bored to tears, feeling that I was being involuntarily withheld from my own life. Now, I found myself strangely content to sit there, bathed in the susurrus of disembodied voices that seemed to move like fish between past and present. Sometime after 10 o'clock, when it had grown completely dark both inside and out, someone switched on a lamp, and, like that, we were all back in the defined present, familiar to one another again. Then Jack Casey took out his button accordion and began to play some old tunes, beating time in his cotton socks. ❖