

Nostalgia by the Sea

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Villages are nostalgia's epicenters: they seem to stop time and make the past accessible in ways that big cities and sprawling suburbs cannot. Their isolation and small scale offer the illusion of refuge, a home in an otherwise heartless world. The peasant village had long offered an idealized notion of the way life should be, but recently coasts have eclipsed interiors as prime destinations for nostalgia tourism. All around the Atlantic rim – Scotland, New Jersey, Brittany, Nova Scotia, the English Channel, and Maine – so-called heritage trails snake their way along coasts, depositing us at one quaint village after another.

Nostalgia – derived from the Greek word for homecoming, *nostos* – was first noted in the seventeenth century as a serious medical condition among Swiss mercenary soldiers, so overwhelmed by homesickness as to be unfit for duty. Its transformation from physical illness to psychological condition, more associated with longing for a past rather than place, came only in the nineteenth century. Today, nostalgia is a pervasive feature of modern societies, a foundation of the antiques and tourism industries, a motive force in everything from historic preservation to family reunions. We can't seem to get enough of the past, or rather of an idealized version of the past that bears little resemblance to historical reality. If no longer treated as a serious malady, nostalgia does have serious consequences for those places and people towards which it is directed.

Modern nostalgia works in strange ways. People are often most nostalgic about places and pasts they have never known personally. Nostalgia is a free-floating form of yearning that

has attached itself to different objects in different periods, but is now applied to so many pasts and places that one observer predicts a “eco-nostalgic crisis” which will require that we ration of scarce historical heritage. Because it is so much easier to be nostalgic about places and times that we have not actually experienced, remote times and places have come to bear the burden of our longing for the good old days.

Through the rosy filter of nostalgia, fishing villages present themselves as timeless places which somehow have escaped the multiple ills of the modern age. Their inhabitants appear to embody the virtues we associate with the good old days. They seem more rooted and traditional, more in tune with their natural surroundings, more ecologically sound. It comes as a surprise, then, to discover that the fishing village is of relatively recent origin, the product of the same historical forces that brought us the factory and the city. As a specialized occupation, fishing is also the product of the modern age, beset with with all the problems we associate with modern agriculture and industry.

In Europe fishing began as a freshwater occupation conducted by peasants; and it was not until the continent had fished out its inland resources that it turned in the late Middle Ages to the sea. Even then fishing remained a seasonal occupation of farmers, who left their ploughs only when migrating fish came close inshore. Alerted by “lookers,” they rushed to shore and camped there while the fish were running. But instead of settling or building permanent villages, they returned to their farms, leaving only their boats and gear in protected places. When Europeans began to extend their fishing to the far reaches of the North Atlantic in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, they followed the same migratory practices, camping on the coasts and islands of the New World during the summer months, returning

home when winter set in. For hundreds of years, the typical Atlantic fisherman had, as the Swedes like to say, “one boot in the boat and the other on the land.” And the same was true of the native fishers Europeans encountered on the coasts of North America. Neither group settled on the seaside itself. Until the eighteenth century, coastal villages were rare on both sides of the Atlantic, for the shore was associated with danger and death. When fisher-farmers did build, they chose sites well back from the sea, preferring temporary, transportable dwellings.

Fishing villages began to appear on the European coasts only in the sixteenth century, and more out of necessity than by choice. Poor peasants pushed off the land by greedy landlords turned to fishing and began to congregate on the shore for the first time. Working people were not so much drawn to the sea as driven to it as their last resort. In Scotland, so-called “fish-touns” were created by grasping landlords who in the late eighteenth century forced their tenants to go to sea to earn cash to pay their rents. Everywhere, fishing villages were the product of the shift from subsistence to commercialized fishing, for without inland or overseas markets for their catch these communities could not have existed. The same was true in New England, where the Pilgrims and Puritans, finding that they could not wrest a living from the land, turned in desperation to the sea. They had come with a dream of founding inland farming communities, but ended up sponsoring fishing villages in order to feed themselves and produce a commodity – cod – to trade on the international market. As Samuel Eliot Morison put it so memorably: “God performed no miracle on New England soil. He gave the sea. Stark necessity made seamen of world-be planters...Massachusetts went to sea, then, not out of choice, but of necessity.”

All around the North Atlantic, fishing remained until the mid-nineteenth century the

seasonal occupation of small farmers. The term “maritime” still referred to lands bordering the sea, not the sea itself, and those engaged in fishing were more sea fearing than seafaring. They were not a “breed apart” but rather indistinguishable from the rest of the coastal populations, jacks-of-all-trades who moved back and forth across the tide line over a lifetime, men who went to sea in their youth, returning to farm and raise families in their later years, women who tended the farms while the men were away, assisting with the catch when they returned. Highly vulnerable to trade fluctuations, coastal communities were very unstable, their populations dependent on mobility for survival. It was said of Mainers that “in the old days, a good part of the best men knew a hundred ports and something of the way people lived in them.” Early fishing villages defy the image we have of them. By no means traditional, they were far more cosmopolitan and innovative than many of their inland neighbors.

Initially, inlanders had a very negative image of coasts and coastal people. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries they imagined them as ugly and repellant. Fisher-farmers were frequently portrayed as savage as the sea itself, thanks in part to the smugglers and wreckers among them. But by early nineteenth century, a more positive, if romanticized, image of the maritime population had begun to emerge. Artists and writers became enamored of peoples they imagined to be untainted by industrial civilization. Just as geologists had turned to eroded sea cliffs for the fossilized evidence of deep time, intellectuals influenced by Rousseau scoured the coasts for examples of natural, original mankind. By the end of the nineteenth century, coastal people had become, in the words of John Stilgoe, “specimens and characters, something they remain – in the popular imagination at least – to this day.”

Like the peasants, fishers came to be known as “folk,” an honorable if stereotyped

designation that associated them with a fictitious genealogy of great antiquity. Writers and artists portrayed them as preserving all the virtues that had been lost in the process of urbanization and industrialization. In England, the country village became an icon of true Englishness, while in Scotland it was the fish-toun that came to represent authentic Scottishness. In the Canadian Maritimes and New England, “old salts” became symbols of national virtue. It seemed to the inlanders, who knew coastal people only from their summer visits, that they were more rooted, of purer, better stock. Although the fishing population constituted a smaller proportion of the Cape Breton population than either miners or farmers, they came to stand for all that was worth admiring and preserving in Canada.

The absence of fishing made the fishing village even more attractive. It was in the wake of the collapse of the whaling industry that the port of Nantucket became a major tourist attraction. Its rotting wharves and deserted housing became a real estate bonanza once local entrepreneurs learned to market history as a scarce commodity. Unsightly reminders of the island’s fishery were hidden behind the quaint facades of refurbished colonial houses. Places with active working waterfronts, like Gloucester, had little attraction for the first wave of touristic time-travellers seeking vestiges of the past, but its near neighbor, Rockport, where fishing was in eclipse, was one of the first villages to become an artists colony, a simulacrum of a fishing port. Its Hodgkin’s Wharf was painted so often that it became better known as Motif #2.

Photo of fish house on Hodgkin’s Wharf, Rockport, Mass. Known to artists

as Motif #2. from An Eye for the Coast: The Maritime and Monhegan

Photographs

_____ of Eric Hudson, eds. Earle Shettleworth, Jr. and W.H. Bunting, Forward by Jamie Wyeth, Gardiner, Maine: Tilbury House, 1998, 94.

At first, newcomers who coveted working waterfronts as scenic spots were resisted by local people. Fisherfolk objected to the takeover of the beaches where they landed their boats and dried their nets, but, eventually dispossessed, they were forced to move to ports better suited to industrial scale fisheries. Once they were no longer a real presence, they became objects of intense nostalgia, symbols a better bygone era. People once described as “queer folk,” lawless and menacing, became in the twentieth century models of virtues thought to be endangered in big industrial cities. By the 1930s, Maine people previously portrayed as wild as the coasts they inhabited were being portrayed by Bernard DeVoto as the “People of Granite,” Yankees of unshakable character, models for a troubled nation in the depths of the Depression. In Nova Scotia, the artist Marsden Hartley found a similar “bedrock in a shifting world,” an apparently timeless culture that could withstand the furies of modernity.

By the mid-twentieth century certain isolated coastal villages had become, like islands, idealised places where time stood still. In the 1940s, Nova Scotia’s Peggy’s Cove was brought to the attention of Canadians by the writings of J.F.B. Livesey, who found there “a little pulsing human cosmos in an uneasy sea.” By then the artist-writer William deGarthe had also found his way there, calling it “the most beautiful place on earth.” Both Livesey and deGarthe were immigrants, newcomers to the coast whose nostalgia knew no bounds. DeGarthe, who became the impresario of the village’s fame and fortune until his death in 1983, painted and wrote Peggy’s Cove into existence. providing it with indelible image and an unforgettable

mythology. Despite the fact that it was place of fisher-farmers, he portrayed it as entirely maritime in nature. The name of the cove derived from St. Margaret's Bay, but deGarthe's endorsement of the undocumented story of a shipwrecked woman named Peggy, who married one of her rescuers and then lent her name to the place, insured its romantic associations. Locals were convinced that he "made it up," but they did not object once the story became a boon to tourism.

Picture of Peggy's Cove

Livesey's original representation of the place an "island of calm, a friendly haven from the confusion of the world" was itself the product of a moment when Nova Scotia was barely surviving the Great Depression and rapidly losing population. The worst of times generated a vision of the best of times. Today, with the cod fishery is closed and few boats leave the harbor, the image of a pristine fishing village is carefully cultivated by preservation regulations that guarantee that Peggy's Cove will not change visually, even if the fishery should vanish entirely. Now Peggy's Cove has a new impresario, Ivan Foster, whose books, dolls, and other "Peggy Products" tell an even more sentimentalized story of a child Peggy, washed up and adopted by local fisherfolk.

Many Maine coastal places have been renamed in order to enhance their touristic appeal. Bass Harbor, named McKinley after the president in the early twentieth century, got its old name back in 1966. Cold Arse isle became known as Ragged Island, while a ledge off Great Cranberry Island, once called Bunker's Whore is now simply Bunker's Ledge. Herring's Gut became Port Clyde. Even places that had never been working waterfronts got makeovers, transforming them into what John Cheever called in Wapshot Chronicle "a second coast and port

of gift and antique shops, restaurants, tearooms, and bars where people drink their gin by candlelight, surrounded by ploughs, fish nets, barnacle lights and other relics of an arduous and orderly way of life of which they knew nothing.”

Cheever’s second coast is nostalgia’s coast, the product of strangers’ imaginations, sustained by inlanders’ needs and desires, often ignoring coastal peoples’ reality. In Scotland, the Fishing Heritage Trail directs tourists mainly to places where fishing no longer exists because it generally assumed by tourism experts that “the maritime landscape is attractive only in the past or at a distance.” In Gloucester, where the fishery is now dead, visitors follow a red line around the harbor to spots it used to be.

Where fishing survives, the clash between newcomers and residents continues. When developers wanted to introduce cobbled streets in the little Scottish port of Pittenween, the remaining fishermen objected on the grounds that these were slippery and made their work dangerous. But perhaps the greatest danger is nostalgia itself. In the twentieth century positive stereotypes replaced negative ones, but left village inhabitants feeling, as one Newfoundlander put, as being “on a reservation,” more like museum exhibits than real people. As tourism replaced fishing as the single largest source of income and employment, many coastal people reluctantly adopted the identity assigned to them. They became resigned to ordinances that privileged the scenic over the functional, dictating the colors they could paint their houses and the amount of gear they could store in their side yards. As marinas take over working waterfronts, many Maine fishermen have become commuters. No longer able to afford waterfront property, they have themselves become strangers, subject to the same sense of loss as outsiders.

But the sense of loss expressed by locals should not be confused with the nostalgia of outsiders. Fisherfolk are far less likely to idealize the past, to want to freeze it in place. For them the past is a living presence, something to build on, or as, the members of the Heritage Society in Buckie, Scotland, put it: “We’re still here. Let us tell you how we lived.” Newcomers arrive seeking a refuge from what they know to be the deficits of progress. They cast a jaundiced eye on the future, something that the underemployed people of Buckie cannot afford to do. Heritage is not for them a luxury, but a necessity. Their motto, “Our Future Lies in Our Past,” expresses their determination not to let their village become a maritime theme park. “We’re not particularly interested in tourism,” they say, “we’re interested in preserving the community.”

At Port Clyde, a “post-card perfect” village on Maine’s St. George peninsula, a place associated with three generations of the Wyeth family, the community seemed on its way to losing its entire fleet. Realizing that they could be “the last fishermen in Port Clyde,” ground fishermen there responded in the spirit of the people of Buckie. The Midcoast Fishermen’s Cooperative founded Port Clyde Fresh Catch, a community-supported fishery modeled on community-supported farming. With the support of the Wyeths and the Island Institute, the Cooperative has opened a way to the future based on past practices of selling direct to local customers.

Picture of Port Clyde

Nostalgia comes in different varieties. It can be a paralyzing malaise that, like the homesickness of the Swiss mercenaries, can make us dysfunctional. In its milder forms, it can be inspiring, even utopian, providing us with visions of better times and

idyllic places to model the future on. Unfortunately, the less desirable forms of nostalgia are most prevalent among those who wield the greatest economic and political power. What is satisfying to them is often detrimental to others. It is therefore important that we recognize nostalgia for what it is, a set of feelings that have consequences that we need to be aware of, confront, and negotiate rather than passively accept.