

Review

A History of Little Cranberry Island, Maine
By Hugh L. Dwelley

(Islesford, Maine: Islesford Historical Society, 2000), pp. xiii, 201; maps, illustrations).

There is much to be said for a close-up view of your subject, whether it's your lover's face or your home place. Hugh Dwelley knows Little Cranberry Island well, past and present, man and boy. He grew up there in the 1930s and 1940s; he summers there these days. With help from long-time residents and the resources of the Islesford Historical Society, which he helped found, Dwelley looks at the island with a focused, caring eye and tells its nearly two-and-a-half century story with a just-the-facts air. A graceful dedication to the island's distinguished pioneer historian, William O. Sawtelle, heads the book.

This history is more chronicle than study, more annals than analysis: the author insists on its limits and sets forth with modesty its posture and purpose. Engagingly, he tells us he wrote it so that others "need not repeat my research but may build upon it." These are estimable motives. He also wishes us to read his pages as a "loose flowing chronology of life as it has been lived on this small island" rather than as a "strictly scholarly work," which raises a question or two about the nature of scholarship.

First settled in 1762, Little Cranberry (aka Islesford, its post office name since 1884) lies a little distance off the southern shore of the eastern lobe of Mount Desert Island. With Great Cranberry, Baker, Sutton, and Bear islands, it shields the Great Harbor of Mount Desert. Since 1830, these outposts have made up the Town of Cranberry Isles. Only the two Cranberries still have full-time residents; in the year 2000, Little Cranberry had 32 year-round families comprising some 61 persons. In the summer, the population swells by seventy-odd families who make an appreciable contribution to the town's life and, of course, to its tax base.

Chapter by chapter, Dwelley pursues his main topics: the island's location and physical character, Indians, pioneer settler families, governance, schools, roads, wildlife (both four-footed and winged critters), churches, stores, post offices, work (farming, fishing, ship and house building) and play, maritime trade, and the summer people. Closing chapters project many of these subjects from World War I to the present day, a period when the all-year population steadily shrank and island earning power became invested ever more exclusively in lobstering and the summer trade.

The overall tone is upbeat; Dwelley quietly passes over the downside of island life in the nineteenth century. Living, we may be sure, was harder before "modern conveniences" arrived (the telephone in 1907, the first motor truck in 1917, electric power and indoor plumbing in the late 1920s, the powerboat and power winch for lobstering by the 1960s), but Dwelley's sense is that life was pretty good for most people most of the time. Even so, the island's story, so apparently placid on the surface, is in fact a dramatic one.

The tale Dwelley tells is one of the endings: the end of the great Grand Banks fishery in the 1870s, of participation in maritime commerce after World War I, of full-time farming after World War II, of a barter economy by the 1930s and the last general store after 1950, of local high-school education in 1903, of the Hadlocks' middleman fish business in 1911, of the Hotel Islesford in 1920. Several of these changes seem to suggest (though Dwelley does not) something like a two-decade lag behind MDI. It should be possible to weave such passings into a structured account of the changing sufficiencies and interdependencies that have governed the way and pace and quality of island life. That, however, is not this book's objective.

Dwelley locates major transitions in the 1880s-1890s (notably, the first summer "cottage" went up in 1890) and the 1960s. He understands—indeed, underscores—the dynamics of change, but looking beyond our time offers only a few speculative words about the "prospects for continuation of a year-round community" on the island. Signing off, he leaves us with the thought that upwards of 200 Maine islands had year-round inhabitants in the mid-1800s; now only 14 do. At what point, one wonders, do too few people stay, in February, to make it desirable and tolerable to hang on?

That is the question for the future. Springing almost in spite of authorial intentions from the book's main story line, it seems to gain urgency as the story rolls. Dwelley's figures give us something to think, maybe to worry, about. The base population of the Town of Cranberry Isles fell from a peak of 410 in 1910 to 348 in 1930 to 201 in 1960 to 61 in 2000. Looking at this long ebb tide, I for one become uncomfortable with the modesty of the book's stated aim. An author surely has every right to do what he wants and stop where he pleases—but at the cost in this case, it seems to me, of missing the longer and larger point.

I wish Hugh Dwelley had chosen to magnify his love for Little Cranberry, and put his talents to fuller effect, by thinking about keeping the island alive and well as more than a really nice place to spend the summer. (Perhaps he is doing just this by other means in other venues.) I wish he had opted to relate his work to a slowly growing but promising body of inquiry into the historical experience of Maine islanders. For example, he might have taken a keen look at such a model work as Esther Binnewies and Muriel Davisson's history of Bartlett Island (reviewed in these pages in 2000). Bartlett, in Blue Hill Bay, is a kind of negative counterpart of Little Cranberry; its last year-round homeowner left long ago. The difference between these islands—one depopulated, the other undergoing a slow but steady demographic shift—lies at the core of the question of persistence.

In a larger perspective, too, I would encourage anyone who sets out to tell an island's tale to bear in mind (above and beyond the essential story of human lives, which must always be the beating heart of local histories) the substance of a broadly common agenda. This goes beyond regretting that Dwelley's book has no index or reference notes, thus making it a good deal more difficult for others to build upon in a broad way. It is really a matter of asking overarching, vital questions about social change along the Downeast coast where the future of islands such as Little Cranberry is now at stake. Why have so many offshore societies wasted and died? What factors predict or determine longevity? Should we be surprised that communities like Islesford still exist? Should anyone who doesn't live year-round on such islands really care? Why? Or will their treasurable histories be, too soon, just...history?

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