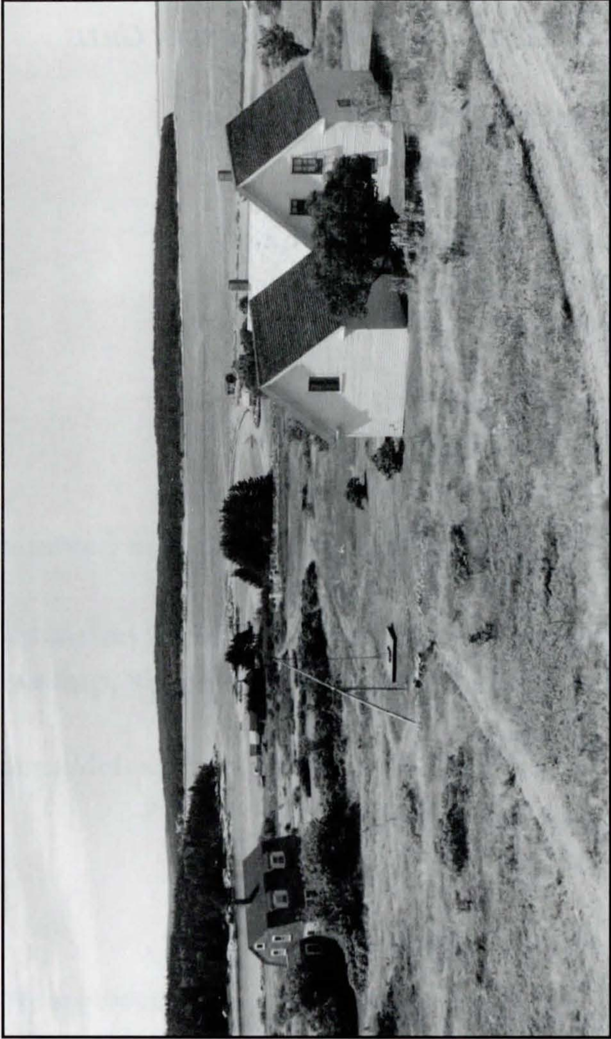


Great Gotts Island, with Little Gotts to the left

Two Voices, One Island: A Dialogue

John R. Gillis and Christina Marsden Gillis

Editor's note: *Christina and John Gillis, summer residents on Gotts Island, have both published books about islands. Christina's memoir,* **Writing on Stone: Scenes from a Maine Island Life**, *was published in 2008 by the University Press of New England and the Island Institute; John's history,* Islands of the Mind, *came out with Palgrave/Macmillan Press in 2004. Though sharing more than forty years of summering on Gotts, John and Christina approach islands from somewhat different perspectives: he as a cultural historian of the Atlantic world, she as a writer trained originally in literature and now interested in memory in the making of place. Here they discuss, in the form of a dialogue, some of the themes – the function of distance in our sense of place, the connected meanings of work and love on a summer island, the imaginative power of emptiness and phenomena like "looming" islands, and the very real issues facing offshore islands – that have emerged in their work and will, they hope, strike a familiar chord with others who occupy and know the special world of Mount Desert's island neighbors.*

Distant Isles

John

A wise geographer named Yi-Fu Tuan tells us that it is "a certain distance between self and place that allows the self to appreciate a place." This would seem to apply especially to islands, for they are most often appreciated by mainlanders, and, most of all, by mainlanders from far distant places. Those born on an island tend to take it for granted. For them it is their existence and therefore nothing special. They see it differently only when they go off island. In my experience, it is summer islanders who have the strongest sense of islands as special places. They come "from away," and they stay for only one or a few months. For them the summer island is not only a special place, but a special time; and it is the combination of these two factors that heightens their experience of islandness.

The way we travel to islands also creates the sense of distance that is so crucial here. The journey to an island is always more than a mere trip. We view trips as one-way, usually never-to-be-repeated events. Journeys

to a summer island are roundtrips, different because they happen over and over. For many summer islanders the trip out is a kind of pilgrimage whose ritualized character is different from other travel. When we lived in New Jersey, the trip to Gotts Island always took the same route and followed the same schedule. Now that we are residents of California we are more in the air than on the road, but the crucial part of the journey, between mainland and island, still has the quality of a rite of passage. There is always a certain uncertainty due to tide, wind, and weather. Crossing water by small boat disrupts one's accustomed sense of both time and place. During the voyage there is a palpable sense of being in the zone of the nowhere and the not yet.

It is only when we are at the dock and the boat secured that we are in place once more. The dock itself is a clearly marked threshold between mainland space and time and island space and time. We have passed not just from one place to another, but from one world to another. We are now a part of our summer tribe, whose habits, dress, and language are different from those of our winter people. Within a few hours, at most a few days, we will have performed all those rites of initiation – cutting the grass, opening the house, visiting neighbors – that constitute our sense of islandness.

The awareness that in a few weeks or months we will perform all the same rituals in reverse makes island time and space seem all that much more special. Even while we are on the island, it remains somewhat

The dock at Gotts Island

unreal. We bring high expectations with us, and, as a result, we are more easily disappointed. Trivial concerns and mundane problems can seem much greater than they would on the mainlands of our existence. Minor glitches, like a leaking pipe or malfunctioning motor, which at home seem manageable, morph into major crises. Idyl becomes nightmare. The same imaginative capacity that conjured up visions of island paradise now produces an overwhelming sense of island hell. Those from away are most prone to such illusions. It is at such moments that we need a reality check that only real islanders can provide.

CHRISTINA

Yi-Fu Tuan's comment about the "distance between self and place" is a great starting point for thinking about islands and islandness. And yes, it is the ritualized journey to the island – mundane as it may be as we squeeze with all our luggage and groceries into the Old Town boat with the booming outboard – that asserts the distance between our mainland, year-round lives and our summer lives.

Just as important, we tend to think of the "distant" island as a bounded space. Floating, as Ruth Moore said, "in its own sea," it is both spatially and temporally defined. We go to Gotts Island for a particular period of time. Special time John calls it: summer time. Literature gives us a number of examples of summer time stories, some of them, though certainly not all, connected with small islands. I think of Sarah Orne Jewett's classic *Country of the Pointed Firs*, a narrative told by a visitor from away who arrives at the beginning of the summer and departs at the end. Ever an outsider, she moves through a series of chapters or episodes that unfold within the time of her summer sojourn in a coastal Maine community. Most of the action takes place in the village on the mainland; but the most significant episodes are island based: certain truths, of life and mortality, are witnessed, and grasped, by the narrator on small islands. On another continent, I think of the Finnish writer Tove Jansson's wonderful novel, *Summer Book*. Here is another island narrative, another series of apparently unconnected episodes, all providing small lenses on large questions like aging and loss, and all taking place within the specifically defined, but ever-passing summer months.

In a lighter vein, the journey to the summer place is a usual starting point in the so-called "Bar Harbor romances" of the nineteenth century. Though hardly high literature, these narratives, typically portraying an

upper-class family from New York or Philadelphia bound for Mount Desert for the summer holiday, are likely to begin on the steamer, with the group on board exclaiming over the marvelous scenery as they approach their Mount Desert destination. Scenery is important of course because these short fictions are a form of tourist literature, clearly tied to transforming Mount Desert into a summer location for those who can afford such leisure.

Our own trips to Gotts Island in the outboard powered skiff, first with Russie Gott, later with Lyford Stanley, and most recently with Eric Strauss, are very different from the journeys of those rather grand rusticators. We, after all, are bound for an island, a "real" island. Our journey out, John and I would agree, is crucial. And it has to be out. Even if we are traveling less than two miles, and our car is waiting in the ferry lot in Bass Harbor, we are leaving the mainland to arrive at our special place "out there." Life has to be different there. Those nineteenth-century Bar Harbor visitors in the fictional narratives may have felt that they were moving out of their regular lives in their search for romance in the magnificent settings of Mount Desert: but the anticipated lover was likely to be a person who might have been met also in Boston or New York.

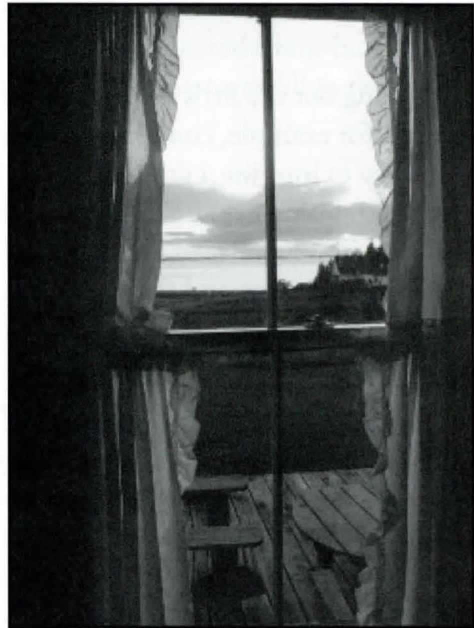
The path to the cemetery

No, we're hardly on the track of "romance" when we go out to the island. For one thing there's too much to be done: all those tasks that John has mentioned. If we're being realistic, those minor glitches, like the lawn mower that won't run just when desperately needed, can turn into more major calamities on an island; getting the non-functioning lawnmower off the island is a pain. But banal as they are, the tasks, the activities of island life, can attain mythic significance. We fit them into the special pattern that we construct of our island lives. And that is never a painful endeavor.

Island Work

☙John

Tina is right about the lack of true romance on a small, isolated island. Island life is more about work than love. Work takes up a good deal of our time in a place without the range of services that mainlanders rely on. In the absence of a store, much less a takeout, you cook or you starve (and this is after you have hauled three wheelbarrows of groceries up the hill from the dock). You also clean, repair, mow, shlep, chop, paint, bail, scrape, cut, launder, and dig. Everyone is, to some degree, a jack-of-all-trades, but some become veritable Crusoes, self sufficient in ways mainlanders rarely attain these days. We work not just out of necessity, but because it pleases us. If the island has an ethic, it is a work ethic. Work, not play, is the island's most visible activity. It enters into every discussion and shapes personal relations. We are Puritans in spirit, if not by religion. We work not to please God, but to please ourselves. On Gotts, work is the way we express love: of family, of friends, of the island itself.



View from the kitchen window

☙Christina

The island forces us to live differently when we are there. That's an important part of its appeal. Where else but there are our comings and goings determined by the movement of the tides? Whether the dock is usable at a particular time is a practical matter; but at the same time, living in tune with rhythms beyond our own control makes us even more aware, on an emotional level too, of arrivals and departures, of who is present, who absent.

Some of those present, of course, are not really there. But living in the same house that belonged to the Moore family, we particularly feel in touch with the presences of the past, still surviving in the fragments that surround us.

Gotts Island cemetery in winter

Pulling out the little money drawer in Philip Moore's store (still in the house), for example, connects us almost physically with a past history. It is so easy to imagine a group of Gotts Islanders gathered there a hundred years ago, making their small purchases, picking up their mail. That little drawer seems literally to draw us in. Temporal and spatial distance are similar in this way; and that is, I think, the wisdom of Yi-Fu Tuan's assertion about distance and our appreciation of place. The more distant the place – and an island by definition seems singularly distant – the more we want to close the gap between it and ourselves.

For the returning summer transients, the first trip of the season out to the island is so full of expectation because the island destination will always be in some sense "new" – ready to be discovered once again – even as it also appears more unchanged than other places we know and inhabit. It's as if the island, and our own house, has waited for us through all the months we have been gone.

Neither the island, nor our own house, has actually waited for us of course. And our own absence hardly leaves the island an empty place where nothing is happening. Such a strictly human-centered, even narcissistic, view would be at best limiting and just plain wrong. But still, that sense of distance that we have been talking about is reinforced by the fact that no one lives permanently on Gotts Island between late fall and spring. Few people now see the island's "first snow" that, in Ruth Moore's words, "flake by flake creep[s] up the bending bough." It's as if the island carries on its winter work in silence, far from us.

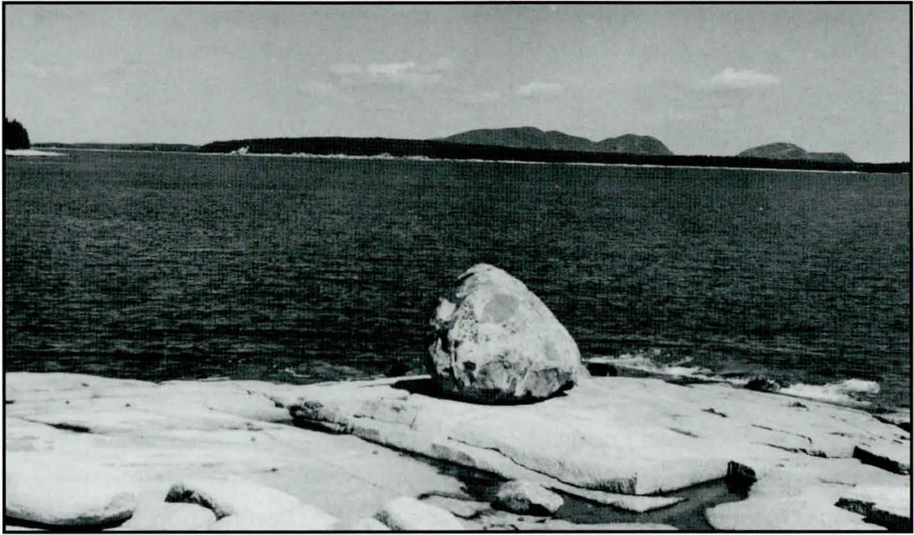
Since we live in California, the island is literally distant from us. But, again in our imagining, I think it would seem less so if the island were the site of a year-round community. This came home to us recently when we visited Lopez Island, a quiet, beautiful island, generally rural, in the San Juans off the coast of Washington. When I spoke about my book in the Lopez Public Library, I could address my audience as "fellow islanders" and point up some obvious similarities between islandness east and west. But I was aware of striking differences as well. It wasn't just that the landscape and climate are considerably more severe on the Maine islands. The essential difference is that Lopez has a year-round population. It is always inhabited, and a regular ferry service allows the residents to go relatively easily to the mainland and to neighboring islands. Unlike Gotts, it is not a place that we can imagine far away, left to itself. An island empty of people for a large portion of the year acquires a certain non-human remoteness. It is always "other," but always inviting us to fill in the imagined emptiness with something of ourselves.

Deserted Islands

John

The archetypal island is a deserted island. There is something about its emptiness that attracts us. It is said that nature abhors a vacuum, but that is not true of human nature. Emptiness suggests potentiality, one of the reasons why empty places have always been associated with the unseen, the supernatural. In the ancient Middle East, early Christians were drawn to the desert as the place to encounter their god. Later, Europeans found a substitute for the barren desert in the emptiness of the sea. Early medieval Irish monks, venturing into what they called the Desert of the Sea, rowed about in search of divine inspiration until they fetched up on the uninhabited islands of the Atlantic. From that point onwards, empty islands acquired a growing reputation as places where the fullness of human potentiality could be realized. Writers and poets made islands their favorite setting for exercising creative imagination. Crusoe's story would not have been the same had he washed up on some inhabited mainland; it would have been hard to conjure up Swiss Family Robinson on anything other than an empty isle.

Islands are the only landscapes we can imagine as having all to ourselves. There is something about a small island that invites us to make it our own, even though we share it with others. Perhaps it is the bounded-



The Calico Rock, Gotts Island

ness of islands that makes them easier to grasp mentally as well as physically. What made them prize possessions of colonial powers now inflates the price of offshore real estate. But it is not so much their material as their spiritual value which still draws us to small, apparently empty islands. Solitude is valued even more than ever in our overcrowded world. Sacredness has always been associated with emptiness; and, since ancient times, sacred places have been spaces set apart, kept empty except for special occasions. We restrict our spiritual lives to certain times and places. It is hard to imagine a 24/7 church, synagogue, or mosque; and, as Tina has suggested, a summer place occupied all year round loses that which makes it special.

But emptiness is now in short supply in a world of almost eight billion people. In the absence of truly empty places, we have learned to create substitutes. Over the last century or so we have sanctified a new kind of sacred space – the park – in and outside cities. We have also invented a new kind of empty time – the weekend and the vacation – free of everyday activities. But these precious gifts to ourselves are constantly threatened by a rapacious economy that would turn our leisure as well as our land into profit. We need to declare that emptiness and the spiritual riches it offers are not for sale. Those who know small islands know them to be priceless.

☙Christina

Of course any land can be viewed as real estate, and nothing intrigues neighbors – whether on islands or elsewhere – like gossip about the most recent sale of nearby property. Few of us have not had the experience of sitting around a table with friends exchanging figures and mentally conjuring up what our own property could be worth.

But if we have learned anything from living on Gotts Island, it is that real estate sales figures hardly describe real "worth." Rather, what is not for sale is the most important element in our appreciation of the property we supposedly "own." That's what I think Ruth Moore was trying to get at in the letters she wrote to the Strauss family in 1958. Those letters, ostensibly about the sale of the Moore property, are more focused on value that cannot be measured or surveyed. A patch of cranberries in the field is Ruth's property marker; the old deed from 1812, no longer a legal document, apparently interests her far more than the actual legal deed being negotiated. Ruth's letters to the Strausses, now themselves historical documents, represent, in my reading, the work of a writer who profoundly understands the complex relationships of people and place. Hence the horror of property development that she describes in her poem "The Offshore Islands": the "era of real estate/Of the hundred thousand dollar lots/ Of the condominiums, side by side."

So what, we ask, belongs to whom or what; and in the large view, what does ownership really mean? Our own identity on the island, we have already suggested, is ambiguous on this point: as the transients who come and go each summer, we cannot say that we ourselves "belong" to the island. These days, some writers on the environment – Yi-Fu Tuan definitely not being one of this group – tell us that our relationship to place must be either starkly materialistic, depending on a model of property and ownership, or strictly subjective, a version of early nineteenth-century romanticism in which the physical environment is entirely subsumed into the imagination. This dichotomy leaves no space between two opposing conceptions, neither of which is in itself adequate. Such a view can bring no satisfaction to those of us who want to find and negotiate that space in between: to take into account the physical attributes, both natural and human-made, that the island makes available to us, to value the physical environment in itself, but also to understand it in terms of the history, lore, and personal experience that we ourselves bring to it.

To feel the presences of others in ordinary objects that came to us with the Moore house, to walk the path along the island's edge and wonder how many others have also meandered there, to jog along the old town road and imagine a single woman pushing her wheelbarrow along that same route (just as John did each day when we rented a small house on the eastern edge of Gotts Island for the entire summer of 1964), to walk among the cemetery stones and feel that all the islanders buried there are in a sense still with us – these experiences have little to do with notions of ownership. And if they cast a particular light on what is fundamentally unknown and unknowable, such perception surely transcends mere self-centered introspection. Rather, in the words of our friend, writer Rebecca Solnit, it enables us to "make connections between disparate things."

Even in a coastal Maine fog we all know so well, we always can see something. The islands that "loom" under certain atmospheric conditions are not "real," but they too have stories to tell us. An elderly character in Tove Jansson's *Summer Book*, a woman sensing her own mortality on a small island in the Baltic Finnish archipelago, tells her young grandchild that "the big events always take place far out in the skerries [small rocky islands]; only small things happen in among the islands." This doesn't mean that the "small things" are unimportant and that they don't help us understand the large. Rather, I think Jansson wants us to look carefully at "small things," to find the large in the small. And what better place to look than on a small island?

Islands Looming

John

All those who frequent the Gulf of Maine have experienced the phenomenon of looming. Objects seen across the water can seem to levitate, even invert. Islands are particularly subject to looming, increasing in height, sometimes seeming to float above the surface of the ocean. Loomings do not last for long. As we approach, islands settle down to their normal scale. Our ancestors experienced the same optical illusions that we do, but for them loomings had supernatural significance. What appeared to them to be magical floating islands found their way into legend and ultimately into literature. They belonged to a mythical geography that for a very long time was at least as important as physical geography in providing people with an understanding of the world they inhabited.

For centuries, islands have been appearing and disappearing on naval charts and world maps. Legendary isles began proliferating in the later middle ages, filling up the then unexplored, empty oceans, giving Columbus and other voyagers stepping stones with which to venture across the forbidding seas. As late as the nineteenth century, many mythic isles still lingered on admiralty charts, finally to be swept away when mankind's last great ocean frontiers were finally explored. Satellite Global Positioning Systems have now introduced a degree of certainty that has finally banished the idea of the floating island.

Historians have no counterpart to GPS which would allow them to fix, once and for all, the place of islands in the historical record. Islands are more visible in some periods than others. They loom larger or smaller depending on the approach that the historians take to them. Thus, the importance assigned to islands in the historical narrative changes as history itself changes. We are always projecting our current view of islands on the archipelagoes of the past and this kind of retrospection is inevitably distorting. The modern historical profession came of age in the late nineteenth century in the era of the territorial nation state. At that time, continents were ascendant and the great age of islands, which had begun with 1492, had come to an end. Islands had once been the power points of the Atlantic economy. Until the mid-eighteenth century, for example, Maine's archipelago had been much more important than its interior. Everything had once moved by water. Islands had privileged access not only to natural resources like fish, but also to the most valuable trading networks. Islands and coasts were the most densely populated parts of America, the most productive, and, often, the wealthiest. The local histories written in the early nineteenth century reflect the self-consciousness and pride of the islanders, but these were soon to be superceded by the national histories which were written as if nothing offshore really mattered. Until quite recently, historians have paid relatively little attention to islands as opposed to continents.

Maritime history did have its proponents and notable practitioners. Mount Desert Island was fortunate to have had the devoted attention of Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison, one of the great historians of the twentieth century. Morison's short history of MDI is a gem, as is Charles W. Eliot's brief biography of John Gilley of Bakers Island. But they had few peers and virtually no successors, so that islands were largely absent from the pages of national history until quite recently. This disappearance

The foreharbor at Gotts Island

coincided with the eclipse of island economies and their depopulation worldwide. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Maine had four hundred year-round islands; at its end, only fifteen remained. Had such a collapse occurred on the mainland it would have been regarded as a national disaster, but the decline of islands all around the world passed without much notice, and even less lament. Many islanders were happy to turn their backs on the sea; and mainlanders seized the opportunity to establish themselves as summer residents. In any case, it was not until the 1970s that public consciousness of the fate of Maine's islands was raised by organizations like the Island Institute and the Maine Coast Heritage Trust.

It was in the wake of this contemporary reevaluation of islands that historians began to show renewed interest in islands. There were not only those interested in local heritage, like the Mount Desert Island Historical Society, but also those like myself, with global interests, who invested themselves in this cause. By now it seems that virtually every island in the Gulf of Maine has its memoirs and chronicles. A historian appears to be perched on even the smallest isles. Since Rachel Carson raised our consciousness of the seas around us, the oceans, and virtually every species of fish and crustacea, have a history. At the University of Prince Edward Island there now exists a flourishing Institute of Island Studies, led by an enterprising Maltese scholar, Godfrey Baldacchino, Canada's first chaired professor in that field.

What accounts for this sudden looming of islands in time? In part this can be explained by the growing desire of people to connect with the past in a rapidly changing world where time seems to slip away at an ever accelerating pace. As Tina has demonstrated so effectively in her own memoir, islands are ideal for claiming heritage as well as creating a sense of place.

For ecologists, islands have become laboratories and an early warning system for impending global climate change. The ocean itself has come back into focus as we realize how quickly we have depleted its resources. It has become the last real frontier of scientific exploration on this planet. Now that the continents have been so thoroughly overpopulated, humanity is turning back to the sea. Maritime history is undergoing a renaissance, this time enriched by the findings of marine biologists and ecologists. In recent years, maritime museums and heritage sites have multiplied far faster than their mainland counterparts. With sixty percent of the world's population living within one hundred kilometers of the sea, it is no wonder that islands are at the forefront of consciousness, not only in America but around the world.

For those of us who know our islands, we must be both pleased and a little wary of this latest looming. In many places, such as the Carolina Outer Banks, the pressure of tourism has already overwhelmed the human as well as the natural environment. Though drawn to islands, we must also recognize that they often cannot sustain all the insatiable desires focused on them. We have an obligation to distinguish between fantasy and island reality, to craft policies of sustainability that will preserve that which makes islands so appealing in the first place. If we can do this, and put islands back on a firm footing, their looming will not be an illusion.

Photographs

Page 6: *Great Gotts Island with little Gotts Island to the left.* Right center is the house of the photographer Edward Northwood Kenway, who has been a summer resident of Gotts Island most of his life. He started taking photographs of the island with a postcard-sized folding camera when he was 13 years old. In the mid-1940s, just out of the service, he tried his

Gotts Island view of the hurricane of Thanksgiving, 1964,

hand at making and selling postcards of Gotts and other islands. Now a winter resident of Southwest Harbor, he worked for the 3M Company in St. Paul, Minnesota for more than 30 years.

Page 8: *The dock at Gotts Island*, photographed by John Gillis.

Page 10: *The path to the cemetery.* John Gillis.

Page 11: *View from the kitchen window.* John Gillis.

Page 12: *Gotts Island cemetery in winter.* Edward Northwood Kenway.

Page 14: *The Calico Rock, Gotts Island.* Edward Northwood Kenway.

Page 18: *The foreharbor at Gotts Island.* John Gillis.

Page 20 (above): *Gotts Island view of the hurricane of Thanksgiving, 1964,* "when the foam was 6-8" thick and the wind was 75 miles per hour." Edward Northwood Kenway. Little Gotts is to the right; Ram Island, left; Frenchboro in the distance.

Page 21: *View of Great Gotts Island from Little Gotts.* John Gillis.

View of Great Gotts Island from Little Gotts