



Looking across Monument Cove to Great Head.  
*Photograph by W.H. Ballard.*  
*Courtesy of the Mount Desert Island Historical Society*

## A Sense of Place

*Mary Holway*

Life must be lived forward, but understood backward.  
—Kierkegaard

In the vast canyon of mystery that presents itself as we age, there has been, for me, not only a sharpening of self knowledge but a relentless search for knowing more about the lives of my forebears. I like to think that everything and everyone we come to know intimately during our lifetime, whether they come to us by

design or circumstance, are in some fashion related to us. In that evolutionary sense, wherever we go, we find things and meet people we are meant to know. Everyone came from somewhere and we are all on our way to somewhere else. So in that regard, we are all “from away.”

A keen sense of self and a watchful eye for what truly matters can sharpen with age. We come to understand more about the particular and often peculiar traits we may have inherited from our ancestors and how their beliefs and experiences have shaped our own. But there is another sense of ourselves that often goes unrecognized in our high-tech mobile world. Far from heaven, in many cases, Americans live and work in places to which they feel no real attachment. All too often we lose our sense of place and for some of us, a sense of place is as imperative to our happiness and as central to our purpose as our relationships, careers, and families.

Soul mates can come in many forms. They can be lovers, partners, children, friends, animals, or even places. Between our soul mates and us there is a spiritual connection. A soul mate may appear for a fleeting moment in the convergence of time and space, or it may come over a lifetime of relationship and intimacy. Sometimes a place to which we feel a profound connection can also be a soul mate. Equal to cultivating the love of a person, tending one's place can be as spiritually exalting as any form of reverence and as powerful as any form of worship.

That is how it has come to be for me and my place near the harbor, in Maine. It doesn't matter how many frigid winters I have endured or how many splendid summers I have enjoyed. What matters is the reverence and love I have for the island and for its ever-present beauty, its history, and its guarded future. Whether it is during the soft green season of summer or on a day in February when the cobalt ocean is so blue it looks as if it might shatter, I am certain that my being here is not by chance alone. Maine is no stranger to me, nor I to her. As a steward of the land and of the home I have made on it, I am forever part of the legacy of Mount Desert Island.

The history of Mount Desert Island spans back beyond ten

millennia. There are no records or deeds or charts with which we can trace those who came first. The Wabanaki who paddled the waters and first marveled at the beauty of the island believed that the land belonged to all creatures who walked upon it and that stewardship of the land is more important than ownership. But of course the Europeans saw things differently. As America passed both passively and violently into the hands of the European settlers, the use of the land for profit clashed with the sanctity and holiness of the natural world—a battle that continues today. The footprint left by the Wabanaki is passed on by unwritten stories more than by linear records. But when we go to the end of the land and stand alone on the shore and listen only to the sounds of nature, we can still hear their voices.

Fives families have lived where I now live—a small plot of land that lies at the foot of Carroll’s Hill in Southwest Harbor. Each family who lived here has its own story. The people who lived on my place were neither famous nor rich—no cottagers or rusticators here. There are no family portraits in the book of records, no hotels that bear their name. There is little information about who they were and what they did. So in my history, I have gathered what information I could to give reference to who they were and what their lives may have been like, leaving much to imagination.

The circle that creates the legacy of Mount Desert Island, while never complete, is purposeful and yielding—mindful of those who came before and respectful to those who will come long after we are gone. The island exists much like it always has existed—in a complex and complicated web of past and present and with an uneasy co-existence of wealthy and working people, local folks, and those of us who came “from away.” The island’s natural and majestic beauty has remained the same and the lure that pulls on those of us who make the island our home remains steady, like the tide. The Atlantic crashes onto the granite cliffs exactly as it did a thousand years ago. Rocks are rounded with time. Within the emerald forests, saplings become indomitable pine and spruce giants that reach skyward. And underneath the trees lies the land where it has always been.

From the layers of history, I trace the marks of time from all those who pioneered the island. The ones we know of and those we do not. I breathe in the balmy night air underneath a milky way that falls over the pine trees like crystal. I imagine the light from the stars entering through my lungs and running throughout my body. I feel the pulse of gravity in the rise and fall of the sea. I am aware of the energy that runs underneath the rocks outside my old house.

I know that the timeless story of the island brightens with light and truth when told through the voices of all those who have come to know and love this place. And I know that one of those voices is mine.