

THE ISLAND

~~Fifty Years in Penobscot Bay~~

We Lived By Lunar Time

by

Eliot Porter

To ^{a young} (an older) child, reared far from the sea as I was, an Island is a reservoir, never completely knowable, of inexhaustible adventure. The ocean tides that ebb and flow against its shores are a source of never-ending wonder; and in the tidal zone along the edge of the sea the wealth of marine life with its extravagant forms and adaptations compounds the mysteries of the sea.

When I was ten years old an event occurred in my life that effected its whole future course. My Father bought an island on the coast of Maine, a place to take his family in summer. In June of the year he made the purchase he went to the Island to stake out the corners of the house he planned to build, and he took me with him. That day, or rather certain impressions and experiences of that day, are indelible in my

memory. It might have been a cold, foggy day such as are so common during the Maine coast springs; but it wasn't. My impression, had it been like that, would have been entirely different, although I do not venture to say that this island would, in that case, have had a less profound influence on my life since the effect was extended over a period of many years, and did not depend solely on those first few hours. The day of this first visit was, instead, what people prefer, because of their tendency to exaggerate one or another aspect of a time or place, to call a typical Maine summer day; but it set the stage which colored all subsequent experience. The sky was a clear deep blue and the bay, mirroring the color, a darker blue ruffled here and there into an even deeper hue by gentle breezes which left between their erratic effects paler streaks of calm water.

The image that forms most clearly and frequently before my mind's eye when the Island is mentioned, because it must for unappreciated reasons have been burned the deepest in my memory, is a sweep of white beach curving around to my right and towards me but ending undefined. Backing up and above this band of beach is a dark mass of forest primarily black, but what color it contains is green, although this may have been imposed on my memory by subsequent experience; and in the foreground holding the beach

to its arc is a lobe of pure, translucent blue. That is all. Everything else that I remember of this curve of the Island shore comes from unrecorded later times which extend from that day up to the present over a period of half a century. There are in this stretch of time few sign posts or landmarks to blaze the flow of impressions that have accumulated to build the total picture which I now possess of the physical character of this island.

This is not to say that I am unable to recall many events or circumstances of the comings and goings and doings of the large family to which I belonged. These are well placed in my memory. But the mental picture that one paints of a place is a different kind of memory whose ingredients include the faintest and most ill-defined experiences many of which went unrecognized when they happened. The constant batter of impressions adds piece by piece infinitesimal increments to the substance of a memory picture built up in many dimensions of which time and place are less important than sensations and emotions.

I do, however, retain other memories of that first day on the Island, but they are more of the eventful kind. I walked to the top of the hill which forms the highest point on the Island with my aunt to survey its extent and there we surprised a herd of wild cattle pastured here by island farmers who found in it a cheap and fenceless way to keep

them. They galloped off in a whirlwind of alarm down over rocks, through brake and fern, until they had gained safety at the farthest end of the land. We found sheep too but much less wild. The Island then was more barren and open than today, having been overgrazed and repeatedly cut over for wood. A spruce forest now covers the entire hill and most of the then open lower land so that the general impression has changed from one of rock and grass and slopes of hay-scented fern, of open views and easy accessibility to one of dark forests, of fewer vistas, and impenetrable thickets.

Water has a compelling fascination for children which carries over into later life. From the pleasure of infants splashing in their baths to recreational activities of adults, a preoccupation with water is an atavistic impulse. The very young play in puddles and ditches with complete absorption and at an older age (and who among us ^{living} ~~who have~~ ~~lived~~ by a large body of water have not) they build cities in the sand with moats and harbors. Out of this early concentration associated ideas, concepts of the sea, the shore, and islands, become inextricably bound up together in the child's imagination which may determine the course of his life. To ^{fall} ~~many~~ people the oceans, limitless beyond the horizon, of vast, unvarying uniformity are awesome and frightening or irresistibly attractive. To the child they

are incomprehensible, but the smaller features he fits into his scheme of things. Since he needs to have things definite, he pictures an island, for example, as a smallish area of land whose shores are all visible from one vantage point; there are no disturbing uncertainties about its circumference. It would be less damaging to his concept of islands should they turn out to be afloat than could they not be seen to be surrounded by water or could not easily be walked around. And so this island on the coast of Maine affected me.

Our lives, my brother's and sister's and mine, were from the first summer determined by the sea. We lived by lunar as much as by solar time. High tide was the time to swim and low tide to explore the shore. We set our clocks ahead before daylight saving time was ^{invented} ~~known~~ in order to enjoy more fully the daylight hours. We gathered shells along the high tide wreck, powdered blue and purple mussels in marching pairs of all sizes that could be nested together in compact families from tiny fragile babies to thick and knobby grandfathers, pale green sea urchins washed clean of their spines, and the brilliant orange carapaces, perfect in every part, shed by the small brown-green crabs that live in the rock weed of the littoral zone. We collected starfish and sunstars and sand dollars to be dried, after boiling to coagulate their protoplasm, under the kitchen stove. We dredged up from the shallow edge of the sea anemones, sea-cucumbers, limpets, and coral-like calcareous algae.

The names and relationships of all these creatures ^{were} ~~was~~ explained to us by our father who took an even greater interest than we in this ever-present museum of marine biology. We soon learned that barnacles were crustaceans and that sea-cucumbers were close cousins of the starfish.

My love for this Maine island and the pleasure it has continued to give me are in large measure derived from an informal education in natural history obtained from my father without any conscious effort or plan on his part. In spirit he was a naturalist. His father, who was an Episcopal minister, died when he was five. My grandmother, a very shy and devout woman, became more and more a recluse after the deaths of her husband and ^{an older} ~~a younger~~ infant son. She assumed deep mourning which she never gave up for the remainder of her ninety years of life. She attended church regularly until she became too feeble to go out, and she always said Grace before meals, a custom that awed and amused but did not arouse reverence in her grandchildren. My father grew up from boyhood at a time when Darwinism and mechanism were gaining their greatest triumphs over fundamentalism. His mother's religious beliefs and religious teachings to which he was subjected in his youth were ^{irreconcilable} insufficiently convincing against the (irresistible) logic of the evolutionist. To the credit of my grandmother's liberality she accepted her son's scientific modernism

without protest. But through the ethical teachings of early childhood on which the influence of the science of his day was later impressed, he developed a way of thinking - a scientific integrity of mind - that led inevitably to a rejection of the theological dogmas concerning the origin of the physical and living worlds, and man's place in them, for a world without design or purpose. However, ^{consistent with his} ~~some~~ ~~what~~ ~~inconsistently~~, he retained an extreme sense of moral responsibility. This feeling was manifest particularly in his attitude towards his children and was the result of his rejection of theology and therefore of Divine solicitude for their well-being. He believed that since parents were solely responsible for the existence of their children they had acquired an inescapable responsibility for their happiness and moral ^{integrity} ~~uprightness~~. Such a view left out of consideration social phenomena as well as environmental and genetic forces that mold the individual. My brothers and sister and I were the beneficiaries of this point of view which was one of the determining factors of my father's buying an island. What the first influences were that determined the direction of his thinking for the rest of his life, I do not know. They resulted early, however, in his forming with his young associates the Agassiz Club, an organization founded for the purpose of scientific discussion, which survived until its members were dispersed by the

requirements of higher education. My father continued to pursue his interests in natural history throughout his college career. Biology, especially marine biology, was his chief interest although he studied geology and astronomy intensively enough to become conversant in both. He kept up with the developments in current theory in these subjects so that later he was able to pass on to us ideas and information that colored our educational background.

Among the earliest pleasures I remember, before we started going to Maine for the summer, were the walks we took with father along the beaches of Lake Michigan. He always had much information to impart to us, not didactically, but quite spontaneously in the course of ordinary conversation, which indeed it probably was since he was constantly in search of mineral specimens or on the lookout for interesting natural phenomena, and talked with us about the things he found and saw, or answered the many questions we asked. We hunted for fossils and learned about crinoids and trilobites and ammonites. We found geodes lined with beautifully refractive quartz crystals and were told the theories on the formation of the earth's crust. We learned about meteors and the stars and the origin of our planet. Once in an argument after school I asserted that the moon was much smaller than the earth. For this statement I was unanimously ridiculed by the other boys, but I remember that I remained

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defiant with my superior knowledge.

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Life on the Island was a consummate joy attested to by our despair and my sister's tears the first summer when the time came for our departure back to the middlewest and school. We lived together, each with his own bedroom, in the big house whose projection on the ground I had witnessed. The large central living room, rising two stories to the roof, was flanked on either side by covered porches, on the southern-facing one of which we ate our meals in all weather at one enormous table. From either end of the living room the house continued into two stories of small rooms, the kitchen at one end with bedrooms above and bedrooms on both floors at the other end. The upstairs rooms were reached by staircases at the ends of the living room leading to balconies. Four rooms occupied each floor at each end and each group was provided with a bathroom in the middle. Beyond the bedrooms at both ends, the house ended in sleeping porches except on the ground floor off the kitchen where the porch served the practical needs of household management for here were located the icebox, ^{the} ~~and~~ set tubs, the ice cream freezer and racks for vegetables, and other utilities. On the same floor with the kitchen were two bedrooms for cook and maid and above on the second floor the four rooms were always reserved for guests. The other end of the house, to the east, was the family end. My parents occupied the two

rooms on the second floor that opened onto the sleeping porch where we children often slept. On foggy mornings we would wake to find our canvas covers drenched and our hair and pillows wet with droplets of fog. On such mornings a goodly measure of character or adult persuasion was needed to pry us out of the warmth and comfort of our beds into the damp, chill air and into equally damp clothes. My room, entered from the balcony, looked out south across the bay and my next younger brother's also off the balcony was across the hall. Three of the downstairs rooms were assigned to my sister and two youngest brothers, the fourth being reserved for our more intimate guests. 2

A huge brick fireplace capable of accommodating four foot logs extended across most of the kitchen end of the living room and above the long mantle hung a plaster cast of one of the Elgin Marbles from the Parthenon. All the woodwork including the battens holding the interior beaverboard walls was stained brown and the beaverboard itself was painted yellow. The floor after a few years of a sticky oil finish was scraped and painted oxblood red. The high walls on either side above the porch windows were decorated, to break their monotony, with hangings of various kinds. Above one door hung a rather dilapidated though handsome oriental rug of curious weave and above the opposite one a black and gold embroidered chinese dragon. In the wall space on either side

of the oriental rug were hung identical India prints of monkeys climbing bamboo poles against a field of red. But since to fit the spaces they occupied, though intended for vertical display, they were hung horizontally. The monkeys instead of climbing were committed to crawl along their poles.

The opposite wall was similarly decorated, ^{at first} with India prints of the tree of life, ~~but later with Egyptian~~ ^{Arabian} bedspreads of hideous geometrical, applique

design, gifts to father, which he either could not bear to destroy or was concerned that not to use them would hurt the feelings of his friends. Hanging from balcony balusters on either side of the fireplace father had attached two gilt wood, worm-like Norwegian gargoyles, whereas at the other end of the room he had pasted onto empty wall spaces above the balcony Japanese paper fish intended for inflation with hot air at carnivals. The three bulbs that hung from the ceiling, after the house was wired for electricity, were covered by huge Japanese paper globes. To crown all

inappropriateness a ceramic plaque of sea horses, the emblem of father's first boat, ^{facing from both} ~~rampant on either side~~ of the street number of a Chicago building, was set into the railing of the balcony opposite the fireplace, and below it, to the balcony joist across the whole end of the room was tacked up the border of one of the ^{Egyptian} ~~Arabian~~ bedspreads which had to be cut off because the spreads ^{ere} ~~was~~ too large for the wall where ^{they} ~~it~~ hung. The conglomerate and garish decoration

of this room had come about not as the result of any plan but through a process of slow accretion. For us children who grew up, so to speak, under its influence this display was accepted uncritically, even with a certain degree of pride, mitigated only from time to time by the politely restrained, unenthusiastic comments of visitors. My mother, I believe, was more conscious of the atmosphere created by the decoration than the rest of us for she once remarked that she felt as though she were living in a medium's seance parlor.

The final addition to the embellishments of the room came about as the result of father's passion for dragons and a labor, that nearly ruined his health, which occupied him for many weeks when mother was away on a visit one fall and he was left ^{alone} ~~along~~ in the Winnetka house. He spent all his spare time in the unventilated attic breathing the fumes from Duco enamel while he painted panels to fit the slope of the ceiling above the walls of the Island living room. What he created were very ^{bold} ~~static~~ designs of dragons in the most lurid ~~and~~ vivid colors obtainable from du Pont. When the panels were installed the next summer the dragons, stretching for thirty feet along its whole length, dominated the living room. A violet, green and yellow beast with huge, red, bat-like wings - the male of the species - occupied one side. Opposite it, a wingless female, equally garish, hissed at two young dragons, one of each sex, sporting on her tail.

There is no denying the striking quality of this creation. The dragons became famous: they were always shown to visitors and many people, good friends and even casual acquaintances, stopped off on their cruises to see them. But the dragons also created contention in the family which eventually became divided in its judgement on their merit.

Fairfield, one of my younger brothers and a painter, eventually inherited the Big House. I had never heard him comment on the dragons until one evening when we were talking in front of his fire, as in the past, the subject of the house and the room we were sitting in came up. He told me that he did not like the dragons, that they dominated the room and were too much like something out of The Wizard of Oz. He would like to remove them but hesitated to do so for fear of the disapproval of other members of the family. I immediately backed him up because the house was solely his to furnish as he chose, and I offered to remove the dragons for him since he did not want to take the responsibility himself. I know he was glad of my support, and when I went to get a ladder while we were still in the mood, we both experienced the conspiratorial excitement of the occasion. When the panels were down at last the room assumed a much more peaceful and quiet atmosphere. But this was not the end of the matter: the family became sharply divided on the issue into pro and con dragon camps, and

even some of our friends took part in the controversy. One of these who rented the Big House from Fairfield the next summer insisted she would not go through with it unless the dragons were put back, so back they went and have remained up ever since. But anytime my brother wants to remove them I shall be glad to assist him again.

Around the fire our evening activities, whether reading, playing games, or conversation, always centered. Hardly an evening passed through the whole summer when we did not have a fire. The wood burned was spruce cord-wood cut on the Island during the winter. Its abundant supply has never diminished, and, in fact, has increased since the consumption for stove and fireplace, even today with five houses to provide for does not keep up with the growth of the forest. Reading was our most common evening activity, not only to ourselves but much of the time being read to by mother. She was an indefatigable and swift reader and could go on for hours. She had developed the art of reading to her children to such a degree of perfection that, as she sometimes herself admitted, could continue automatically without evident break for moments at a time after she had actually fallen asleep. In any case she read to all of us, individually and together until we were grown up - and to father too. When we were young, of course, the books she read were for children, such as Rewards and Fairies, ~~The~~ Treasure Island, ^{and the King Arthur Tales,} but as we grew

older she read many novels both classical and modern current fiction. After supper when darkness had settled over the Island we would build up the fire, light the kerosene lamps, and curl up on sofas - those who got there first - and while watching the shifting tongues of flame ~~ever~~ stroking the sooty bricks would be carried away into the world of Jane Aust^en, Thomas Hardy, or the latest novelist, or into the excitement of a mystery story.

Sometimes our evenings were ^{varied} enhanced with music - not of our own creation for with the exception of father we were not a musical family and none of us played any instrument - from an ancient Victor gramophone with a large flaring horn as depicted in "His Master's Voice" advertisements. Father had a fairly large collection of operatic and vocal recordings of World War I vintage that he played for his guests on the windup turntable with cactus needles. He had many Neapolitan songs and duets from the classical operas ^{Antonio Scotti} sung by Tito Schipa, Geraldine Farrar, Enrico Caruso, and ^{Enrico de Gogoya} many others. When he turned on the machine, even from the inadequate recording and weak amplification of the period, Caruso's powerful voice would echo through the room, enhanced in volume and resonance by the fortunate acoustics of the high ceiling. Several Victorian favorites of which the lilting, carefree tune of La Donna ^e est Mobile and the ^{Fun Regalato} sentimental ^A La Luz de la Luna particularly stick in my mind.

^{or Linda Mia}

Rigauerro