MERASHEEN: DEATH OF AN OUTPORT

by Al Pittman

In the summer of 1967 I sat in the kitchen of a fisherman's home on the island of Merasheen in Newfoundland's Placentia Bay. The fisherman, Anthony Wilson, had seen my wife and me walking down the road past his bungalow and, because we were strangers, had invited us in for a cup of tea.

In Newfoundland "tea" means a fully laid table including linen cloth, the best china in the house, home made bread, a variety of wild berry jams, a platter of luncheon meat, and always a jar of molasses. After we had gorged ourselves on Mrs. Wilson's "tea", Anthony broke out a bottle of rum. He had had the rum "come in" by mail boat two weeks before and had ever since kept it hidden in the bedroom only to be opened on the day of the annual garden party three days hence. Anthony, however, decided that having strangers in was excuse enough to break the rule and promptly produced a bottle of black demerara. For an hour we passed the bottle back and forth across the width of the kitchen table and talked of Merasheen.

Merasheen lies about five miles off the west shore of Placentia Bay on Newfoundland's southeast coast. Most of the island's inhabitants live on the island's southern end in the villages of Merasheen, Little Merasheen, and Hickey's Bottom.The villages are located in three adjacent harbours, affording the fishermen of the place a choice of landings when weather conditions prevent them from "going in" to their usual moorings. Behind the villages lie the barren sheep-dotted hills of Merasheen which give the island its bleak naked appearance. Beyond the hills, however, there are miles of barrens where caribou roam out of reach of the guns of American big game hunters who come in droves to Newfoundland each autumn. Though the people of Merasheen feast on rabbit stew and caribou steaks in season, their livelihood is harvested out of the dark Atlantic waters that are everywhere around them. The silent rhythm of the sea is the rhythm in which the people of Merasheen have lived since man first set foot on the island's rugged perimeter.

My father was born in Merasheen in 1907 and I was born thirty-three years later in the tiny village of St. Leonard's just across the bay. I had gone there that summer with my wife to put all the stories my father and mother had ever told me into their proper setting. I had been taken out of the bay before I was six months old, and though I knew Chapel Pond and the Jawbones, and Soldier's Point, and the Jigging Cove, and St. Kyran's like the palm of my hand, I had never seen any of them. So I went that summer to see where my father had come from, where my mother had come from, and where, most of all, I had come from.

"Sounds like a hard way to make a living," I said when Anthony had finished telling of one particularly rough time he'd had in winter fishing.

"Well, I'll tell ye Phonse," he replied, "it's the devil's own handiwork betimes, but once ye leave off on a summer morning, heading out, with the sun just peeping up, the skiff cutting clean in the water, and all that shiny sea stretching out ahead of ye to westward, well Phonse, you go out one morning like that and you can put up with winter fishing the rest of your life."

It wasn't at all the sort of thing I would have expected from the weatherbeaten, granite giant of a man sitting across the table from me. Yet, when he said it, it rang so true I felt a sudden surge of sadness rise up within me, for as we sat talking, we, all of us, knew that this would be the last summer Anthony Wilson or anybody else would "head out" from Merasheen.

Centralization, Premier Joseph Smallwood's plan to "drag Newfoundland kicking and screaming into the twentieth century", had already taken its toll in Placentia Bay. St. Leonard's, St. Kyran's, Clattice Harbour, St. Anne's, Toslow and numerous other villages were already being reclaimed by the wilderness into which they had been etched some hundred years ago.

The "livyers" had been paid a subsidy to move to a "better life" in places like Marystown and Placentia, where, they were promised, there would be jobs galore, and motor cars, and television sets, and better educational facilities for their children.

If such well-timed persuasions as these failed to move the people, the church lent a helping hand. It closed down schools and churches and took away the priests. Inevitably the latter did the trick. The people of the Placentia Bay outports could do without cars, and supermarkets, and television sets, but being as religious and as superstitious as they happen to be, they could no more think of living where there was no priest than they could think of living inland. So they moved.

From all the villages of the bay they moved to the government designated "growth centres" where they discovered, too late, that the only growth was the growth in population — the result of their own mass migration. Too often they found the worth of their subsidy not nearly enough to replace the homes they had left behind in the coves and on the islands. Too often they found that the promised jobs were nonexistent. In Placentia, for instance, where so many of them were sent, they found that houses were hard to come by, and jobs even harder. The only sources of employment in the town were the Canadian National coastal boat terminal and the American naval station at Argentia. But cutbacks in the CN coastal service (now that there were fewer outports to serve) and the closing down of the U.S. military base left fewer employment opportunities than ever before.

And now there was talk of Merasheen.

It seemed there was nothing Anthony Wilson or anyone else could do about it. The government fish plant was closing down, therefore there'd be no market for their fish. They could as they did for years before the fish plant opened, take their catch to Wareham's in Harbour Buffett. But Wareham's too were curtailing operations because there weren't enough fishermen left in the outports to supply them with sufficient fish to maintain operations.

In addition to closing down the fish plant, the government would also halt operation of the dynamos that had, for the past few years, delivered electricity to the islander's homes. The school had already closed. And the priest was leaving in the fall. So the people of Merasheen would have to move. What else could they do?

Anthony Wilson didn't want to go. He had his own home, and a comfortable and sturdy dwelling it was too. He had a garden out back where his wife grew turnips, potatoes, carrots, beets, cabbage, and a variety of currants and gooseberries. And when I suggested that his fishing take would probably do no more than pay for the gear, he said, "No, Phonse me son, we does a bit better than that."

And when his wife went to the bedroom and returned with the new clothes she had bought by mail order for the children and herself so that they might look "fine" on the day of the garden party, it wasn't hard to tell that the pleasure of the newly acquired finery was in no way diminished by the thought of payments, installments, or "time" as Newfoundlanders refer to credit.

But they would go. There was no other way.

Mike Casey would go too, and his wife Elizabeth, though she kept saying over and over that they would have to drag her away.

Stan Ennish and his son Andrew would go too, though they owned the best boat in the bay and Andrew was as good a "fish-killer" as his father.

And George Wilson would go too, Skipper George Wilson, white haired, as tall and dignified as a church spire, skin the texture of rawhide, "bread 'n' buttered" there some eighty odd years ago, a legend in his time, father to Anthony, village elder, as gentle as the waves lapping the shores below his house, as rough as the rock that threw the sea back upon itself when it erupted with all its fury upon the Jawbones. He would go too. Go leaving his wife's grave to the delinquent sheep. Leaving all he would have passed on to his sons to the wind and the rain and the sea. Would go leaving everything but his memory and his old man's heart. But he would go.

"I could see it", Anthony said, passing the bottle, "I could see it maybe if they moved us all into St. Kyran's or anyplace downthere in the bay. There's good harbours, the fish is here, and the men is here what can catch 'em too. I can see they wants bigger schools. I understands that. We been having hard enough time getting a teacher to come here and they only stays a year at the most. I can see the priest wanting one church to look after 'stead of a whole bunch of 'em. God knows, he has it hard going at it all the time. And a lot of priests don't like it in the bay no more. Well, they isn't fishermen so's I don't know ye could blame 'em any. All the same though, I can't for the life o' me see why they shifts us to Placentia. Ye knows yourself there's no living to be made there. The base is closing down bit by bit. Where's the men going to work, I asks. A man can't fish outa Placentia, that's for certain and for sure."

I took a long swig on the bottle and regretted that we couldn't stay for the garden party on Sunday. If I had my time back now, I would have stayed no matter what. But at the time the significance of it all passed me by. It didn't strike me as it should have that this garden party would be the last ever to be held in Merasheen. it would be the end of a tradition that went back before my father's father's time. The end of a way of life.

The morning after our visit with Anthony we walked past the parish hall and saw the tarpaulin booths all in a row in the church yard. Sunday they would be ringed by little girls in floral print dresses; by the men of the place, coat pockets bulging with bottles, Sunday tweed caps angled on their heads; by women with babies on their hips, white aprons looking altogether fine in the outdoors; by young girls with the dishes already done and for the first time in three days no rollers in their hair, flirting openly with the Peters and Andrews and Jims of Merasheen; by the boys who made root beer from extract and carried it in bottles, as druck as their fathers in their fantasies.

Sunday the booths would house ice-cream in heavy canvas khaki bags, wheels of fortune, cabbage-roll dinners, ticket peddlers, bean bags, balloons and darts, sacks for the sack race, ropes for the three-legged race, steaming boilers of good things to eat, coca cola in cases, peanut butter kisses, licorice, and home-knit scarves and caps and socks and mitts to be won as prizes.

But that morning the booths stood empty, their sides slapping noisily in the wind, as they had on that same morning for hundreds of years past.

The devil was there too, looking very much out of place in the middle of the empty yard. On Sunday every man and boy in Merasheen would take a crack at knocking his head off. How long ago was it that some expert young "chucker" first knocked the devil's head off, sent it rolling beneath the feet of the crowd, heralding good tidings for the people of Merasheen?

We left the parish ground and went over the hill into Hickery's Bottom. Mike Casey came then and invited us " 'ome to 'ave a shave and to meet the missus." As we walked along the beach road, Mike pointed out to me the precise spot where my grandfather's house used to be, and the path he used to take "luggin' 'is long tom", going into the barrens to get rabbits.

I could see my father, a little boy, running up the path at dusk to great him, tall like timber, coming home from a day's hunting on the barrens with his long tom over his shoulder and a brace of rabbits dangling at his side. A vigorous man, still vigorous after a day's trip on the barrens, tossing his young son high into the air and carrying him secure on his shoulder to the house.

"I'm too old to be going anywhere's at my age", Mike said as we sat in his kitchen nipping on his garden party rum. It seemed the invitation to shave was just an excuse to having strangers in to get at the rum without his wife objecting.

"What the jesus ye expect a man my age to be doing in Placentia, I ask. Lived right here all me born days. Ain't no time to be gallivantin' around at my age."

So he talked on through half the bottle of dark rum, but he would go too. Would go to Placentia or wherever and spend the rest of his days remembering the times back home. What else was there for him to do?

"They's 'll have to drag me", said his Elizabeth with the defiance of a young whippersnapper being sent off to school to repeat a grade.

"They's 'll have to drag me. Without they do, I'll not be going very far. They's 'll have to drag me is all."

She knew in the fall, when the time came, she'd be packing the old clock and her good linen and the quilt her mother gave her for a wedding gift, and she knew in the fall, when the time came, she'd be going too. But she wasn't about to admit it. Not yet. Not until she had to.

In the afternoon we met Stan Ennis. He had heard that Phonse Pittman's son was in and came out to find him. He did find us soon enough and invited us up to his place for a "drop 'o rum".

"One time," he said, "Phonse was coming over from St. Leonard's to play football, and we was in the same boat together, and I 'ad a bottle o' rum on board, and I passed 'er around to all leaving Phonse out because 'e being the school teacher I didn't know as it't be right to ask 'im to 'ave a drop, and I been mindin' a long time that it weren't right not offering 'im a drop so I wants ye to come up to the 'ouse and 'ave that drop 'o rum that yer father should of 'ad that day."

So we went up to Stan's and had hot toddies — boiling water and sugar laced with black rum, good for what ails ye whether ye be man or beast.

"Don't know what I'll be doing to 'er," Stan said when I asked him what would become of his boat if he had to move off the island.

"Don't allow as I'll be able to sell 'er. Ain't no one'll be left to use 'er anyways as far as I can' see."

The hot toddy was fit for a king.

"Always was good fish in the bay, leastwise up 'ere. Man could always make a livin' at the fish. But if they takes the plant, my God, what's the use of catchin' 'em."

So Stan Ennis, the most renowned fish-killer in the bay, would be leaving Merasheen, and his son Andrew would be leaving with him.

"Ere's to your father, Phonse, as fine a man as ever broke a cake of the world's bread. Tell 'im I gave 'is son the drop 'o rum I owed to 'im."

The next morning the coastal boat Petitforte came in as she was scheduled to, doubling back on the bay run, and we went aboard.

It seemed the whole of Merasheen came to see us off. Men, women, and children crowding the small wharf, waving and wishing us well, and saying it was too bad we couldn't stay for the garden party.

Just as the CN boys were pulling the ropes, preparing to set off, a short stocky man in blue serge, pipe in the corner of his mouth, face eroded like a cliff, came over to ramp, walked straight up to me, and, very businesslike, introduced himself.

"I didn't get to have a chat with ye while ye were in which I'm sorry about but I used to know yer father right well when we was young, fished together, first trip for the both of us, didn't want it said that Phonse Pittman's boy was in and I never got to say hello to him."

The whistle blew then and he went back over the ramp as suddenly as he had come. Back on the wharf he merged with all the other pipe smoking blue serge that stood hands in pockets waiting for us to shove off.

The people of Merasheen, as warm as we'd always remember them, stood there and waved us away. They waved us past Soldiers Point and out to the Jawbones where we could see crosses almost everywhere upon the cliffs marking the spots where men of the outports had run foul of the sunkers and gone down in the sea that was at once their sustenance and deprivation, their life and their death.

credit: Mysterious East