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Schooners and Schoonermen, My Grandfather, and Me

When the historic passions series first started in History Workshop Journal, contributors were invited to reflect upon a book that had helped awaken them to history and its possibilities. But my historic passion stems from a book that was never published, indeed, never really written in the first place. It was the book I thought my grandfather was writing about the place where my family comes from.

My grandfather, Jacob Harrison Button, was born in 1929, on a tiny island off the coast of the island of Newfoundland when, in his words, ‘times were not only bad but damned bad’.¹ Silver Fox Island, as it was charmingly called, sat at the mouth of the Indian Bay inlet, on the northwest side of Bonavista Bay—famed for the cape where John Cabot is said to have first seen land in 1497, after setting off from England to discover a new world.

About seven miles around, Silver Fox Island is covered in stands of spruce forest, grass and wildflower meadows and dotted with granite boulders, dropped there like litter by glaciers millennia ago. Thanks to these glaciers, there is hardly any soil at all—you can lift up the grass to expose the bedrock beneath, which, in places where no grass grows, sits grey and inviting, with flecks of white, black and yellow lichen and a sandpaper texture made by a billion years of raindrops. For Silver Fox Islanders, who at their peak numbered just over 250 people, these rocks were an ideal place to sit and think, away from the ants and the flies, or to pose for photographs. In hundreds of pictures of my family, faded black and white and sepia, they are seated upon this bedrock. My grandfather and his friends at the age of eighteen, young and handsome with cigarettes between their fingers and catalogue-ordered suits on their backs; my mother and her sister, their bellies buttoned into handmade dresses; my grandmother at twenty-two, in stylish clothes she had made herself, surrounded by children.



Silver Fox Island had one quiet harbour where the fishing schooners were docked, but most of the rest of its shoreline was steep cliffs and rocky beaches that that spent their years being lashed by the frigid waves of the North Atlantic. ‘Don’t go near the cliffs!’, my grandmother Olive pleaded, clutching my hand, the first time I visited the island. This was her island as well. Olive Feltham was born here in 1932, and it was here that she bore my mother, Linda Button. Both mother and daughter were delivered by my grandmother’s grandmother and my namesake, Julia Ann Feltham. It was as a girl in the small wooden houses of the island, warmed by woodstoves and lit with kerosene, that my grandmother learned to knit and sew with a talent I’ve seen few

¹ Jacob H. Button, *Schooners of Newfoundland and the Men Who Sailed Them, 1800-1945* (unpublished manuscript), 91

match. There was no need to order from the catalogues and wait for the parcels to come in on the coastal boats, my grandmother, to quote my mother, could 'put the ass in a cat'. It was a useful skill to have in a place so remote. Even by the time my mother was born, the island had no running water, no electricity, and no roads or paving of any kind. Laundry, my grandmother tells me, was a real pain.

When my mother was nine years old, and thirteen years after Newfoundland had joined Canada through a contentious referendum, the whole of Silver Fox Island was resettled to the mainland of Newfoundland. My grandparent's house, like most of the others, was filled with empty oil drums, and, with every able bodied man in the community lending a hand, it was lifted off its perch made from wooden stakes hammered down into cracks in the bedrock, and was sent down rollers of spruce logs into the water. It was then pulled across the bay by several small inboard motor boats, or trap skiffs or put-puts as they were also called. The house with the bedroom with the bed into which my grandmother piled her five children still stands to this day on the mainland of Newfoundland, in a small town called Indian Bay. Silver Fox Island is home now to a handful of summer cabins.

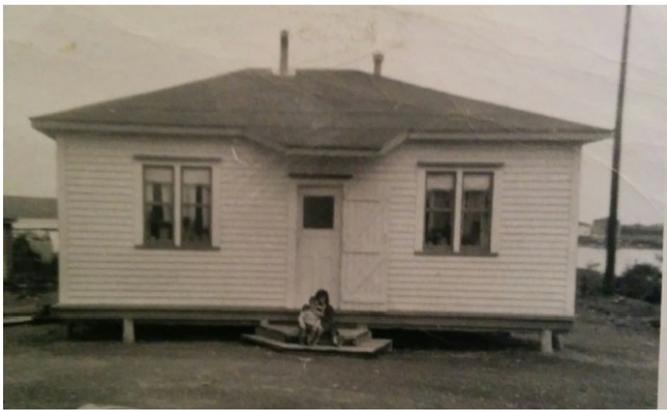


Figure 1 My grandparents' house, after it was floated from silver Fox Island

In other towns around Newfoundland, where the houses were left behind, they tell another, silent story. In a place where wood is the only building material, and where the salt of the sea is in the gusting winds, this story unfolds quickly. Within a few years the paint fades and the wood underneath greys. After a few more the windows break and the rain and wind get at the beams and the real decline begins. Another decade and the house kneels into the earth, window frames askew. Bedframes fall through the floor, their springs rusting. Three decades on and the house is a pile of grey wood fallen round the large woodstove cooker that was too heavy to carry away, the enamel long gone, rusted red-orange like an iron heart.

My grandparents took their stories, and their stove, with them alongside their house. I listened in awe, delight, and fascination to tales of my great grandmother, Muriel, who would row out to the icebergs that floated past the island in the hundreds every spring, to get chunks of ice to make ice-cream. Of the epic journey in a trap skiff to Pool's Island and then on to Greenspond to borrow a car from a friend to take my uncle to the hospital, after he had swallowed a whistle. Of Uncle Sam, who was famous for his witticisms, and who, as an old man making use of new Canadian healthcare, was so shocked at the size of the vehicles on the new Canadian highway that he claimed, upon seeing a transport truck, that the Hospital was coming to him.

There were terrible stories too. My twelve-year-old grandfather running across the island, to bring news to the neighbours of his mother's death from tuberculosis. He told me once that he could still see himself running that morning, as though it were yesterday, and as though he was watching a history of himself. His father soon followed. And then, there was my grandmother's last child, my mother's brother, Andrew, who died after sudden and severe illness when he was nine months old. There was no enquiry into the cause of death, and no grief counselling. His loss stitched a reflex of worry into my family that has echoed down the generations. I feel it every time I hold my feverish sons.

Pieces remain. Uncle Sam's plaid coat still hung in the stage where he docked his boat. I wore it, once, on a cold morning after camping on the island, to the great amusement of everyone who saw me. A little palm cross is still tucked into baby Andy's photograph, on my grandmother's bureau. The landscape of my summers, spent in rural Newfoundland, was dotted by the greying, kneeling frames of windowless houses, their tattered lace curtains flapping in the offshore winds.

Growing up in St. John's in the 1980s, I sucked up the stories of Silver Fox Island like a sponge. That I had ended up here, in a three-bedroom suburban home surrounded by the rocky wasteland of a newly cleared spruce forest, was part of a story of social mobility and urbanization that began with my grandmother's family owning their own fishing vessel in the more hierarchical fishery of Newfoundland's north coast. The story continued when my grandfather finished high school and took a short accountancy course in his late thirties, and was sealed by my mother becoming one of the first from her area to go to university, training as a teacher in the 1970s, where she was told to 'stop talking with that accent or no one will take you seriously', so she did stop, just about. I grew up in the city where my father grew up, where he had joined his own father at sea in the summers as a teenager, before getting his own teaching degree. Captain Harold Laite, my other grandfather who died when I was a baby, was the youngest sealing captain on the ice floes in the 1960s, the decade before Brigitte Bardot and Greenpeace made the seal hunt their cause celebre, broadcasting onto America and Europe's new colour television images of all that blood on the ice.

These are the stories that move me; soft and warm like the plaid coat; brittle and slight; like the faded cross; heart-breaking and breath-taking moments that are ethereal as icebergs, melting then slowly tipping themselves over into the sea. Stories whose backdrop is an unspoken deprivation and injustice, and whose themes are the incredible things people do to survive and thrive despite them. In every bit of history I read and write I look for these kinds of stories, the ones my grandparents told.

So, when I remembered that my grandfather had been working on a book about Silver Fox Island during his retirement in the 1990s, before his Parkinson's crept in, I naturally assumed it would be a kind of social history of the island.² I saw my grandfather as the family's first historian, and this book inspired me. I knew that it had never been published, and that my grandfather, discouraged by a publisher's request for extensive revisions, let it lie fallow until he lost the interest and the mental and physical ability to continue the project. It was only after he died, and I asked my aunt for the manuscript, that I realised that I had imagined the book my

² In fact, a wonderful social history of Silver Fox Island does exist, Samuel Button's *They Survived the Sweat of their Brows: the story of Silver Fox Island 1836-1961* (St. John's, 1983). He is no relation to me

grandfather was writing. It was not a story of his family and community, but rather a labour history called *Schooners of Newfoundland and the Men who Sailed Them, 1800-1945*. The book charted the history of these vessels, their skippers and sharemen (captains and crew), from the early years of the Labrador fishery to the end of the Second World War. Newfoundland was first settled by Europeans along the southern coasts nearest to the Grand Bank, an enormous continental shelf, and men used dories to fish the richest ground for codfish on the planet; but by 1800 a slowing of the catch in shore and a decline in the American and European fisheries saw the demand for Newfoundland cod rise. More affluent families in local communities built schooners—wooden sailing ships with two or three masts—in order to reach seal herds and cod stocks that were further off shore. These schooners were built by hand in the off season and were financed by the fishing merchants whose mansions still line the well-to-do streets of Old St. John's.³



Figure 2 The schooners *Clara Hallett* and *Silver Jubilee* moored alongside one another, with some trap skiffs, in the harbour of Silver Fox Island

By the late nineteenth century, more and more communities dotted the northern coast, especially its tiny islands, where schooners, newly returned from sealing on the spring ice, took men in the summers across the Labrador Strait to fish the cod in those colder waters. This was called *'going down on the Labrador'*. My grandfather meticulously documented this history.

I was, I admit, disappointed. To be sure, my grandfather's wit came through in the writing, and it struck me how good a writer he was despite having left school to go on the Labrador after grade nine. And of course, in my conceit, it made me wonder whether he would have been an academic historian, if he had lived in a time and place and was part of a social class where that was remotely possible. But the book had few stories: no ice cream, no babies caught and buried, no harrowing treks to hospitals. It took me some time to find the meaning, to reframe what I had thought my grandfather's book had meant.

My grandfather went on the Labrador in the final decade of that fishery for the first time in 1943; in the three-masted schooner the *Silver Jubilee*. He was thirteen, and it was shortly after both his parents had died of tuberculosis. He joined the fishery 'out of necessity and not by choice', as he put it in the closing pages of his book.⁴ He was sick the whole time at sea, he told

³ Button, 34

⁴ Button, 112

me once (though it isn't in the book), and it was why he began smoking. Standing on the deck with a cigarette was the only way to keep the nausea at bay. It was the middle of the second world war, and the U-Boats had reached Newfoundland inshore waters and were regularly torpedoing military craft and supply ships in the Straits of Labrador.

I was fascinated with the models my grandfather built of schooners like the *Clara Hallett* and the *Silver Jubilee* after he had retired but never thought for a minute what it felt like for him to think upon these schooners when they were living ships, sails cracking and ropes whipping in the north Atlantic wind, decks creaking and shuddering upon the breaking combers. I never asked him why it mattered to him.

I never asked him what had happened to the ships themselves, but my grandfather's book told me. First, the changing economy of Newfoundland after it joined Canada in 1949 meant that the schooners were worth more to their owners on the coastal trade than they were fishing down on the Labrador, bringing American food and the latest mass-produced chrome tables from the Sears catalogues to the tiny towns of Newfoundland (the old handmade tables went over the cliff—or were bought up by American antiques dealers). But the real change came with the growth of the 'fresh frozen' fishery.⁵ The schooners were rendered obsolete by the long liners and the heavy-engined, sail-less deep-sea freezer trawlers that ruled the off-shore fishery after the 1960s and continued to do so in the 1990s when my grandfather was writing his book. 'Twenty four hours a day, for 365 days a year there are enormous amounts of heavy fishing gear being dragged over the ocean floor,' he explained 'scooping up whatever fish is in its path, and destroying hundreds of tons of small fish as well as destroying the spawning grounds where the stock would replenish if it was allowed to do so.'⁶ It was not allowed to do so—these ships have been dragging the cold coral from the ocean floor for a half century or more now, helping to plunge us into the environmental ocean crisis we currently find ourselves.

Newfoundlanders found themselves there before some others: in 1992, the inshore and offshore cod fishery—the *raison d'être* for the colony since John Cabot first claimed it for England in 1497 and all the centuries after—was officially declared in moratorium because of a catastrophic collapse of the cod stocks. As accusations flew in newspapers and the televisions, my grandfather had his own sense of a much deeper history: 'The unions blame the provincial government, the provincial government blames the federal government, the federal government blames the foreign fleets for overfishing on the Grand Banks, the inshore fishermen blame the offshore dragger for scooping up everything that floats or crawls out there,' he wrote in his manuscript. 'I have heard just about everyone blamed for the shortage of fish with the exception of dear old John Cabot. Now if the crew of the *Matthew* jigged say about thirty or so good size fish, there went thirty or so fish that did not spawn that year, so the stocks started to decline as of June 20th, in 1497.' He went on to point to accounts from the eighteenth century which documented declining stocks.⁷ Indeed, the Labrador fishery itself was a response to the initial collapse of cod stocks closer to shore in the nineteenth century; and the larger, more costly

⁵ Richardson Wood and Company, New York. Newfoundland Fish for the Frozen Food Markets of Canada and the United States. New York: IBEC Technical Services Corporation, 1951. Print.

⁶ Button, 6; 14

⁷ Button, *Schooners*, 3. He goes on to cite references of declining stocks from British imperial officials throughout the eighteenth century, pages 20-21.

schooners were the hallmarks of a fishery that required more heavy equipment and more social hierarchy to function.⁸

With the moratorium in the late twentieth century, the island plunged into profound economic crisis: communities emptied, fish plants closed, unemployment skyrocketed, teenagers such as myself struggled to find any kind of job. I remember my grandparent's dinner table in these years, alive with politics and argument and anger: at the Canadian department of fisheries, at local MPs, at the Spanish and Portuguese trawlers that continued to fish on the tip of the Grand Bank—just beyond Canada's 200 mile territorial waters. This was an old history indeed—the same States fighting over access to Newfoundland's cod stocks, as they had done for five centuries, embroiled in the enormous story of empire, exploitation, and trade. My grandfather saw this too and painted a powerful image of the collateral damage of imperial competition. 'As they fished the British and the French fought over this rocky island, mainly because of the wealth from the fish that surrounded its shores. Every time one of their cannon balls missed, it went to the bottom with a big bang and dead fish floated up all around, but no one noticed, no one cared; it was just dead fish coming up from the bottomless pit under the sea.'⁹

The 'West Indie Grade' Newfoundland cod was cheap protein for the enslaved of the Caribbean; the better grades were destined for Europe's Friday markets, alongside the sugar and the tea from the plantations; Newfoundlanders caught somewhere in between, in the middle of nowhere, clinging to the bedrock.¹⁰ All of this was worn into the wood of the Schooners that so fascinated my grandfather. I didn't have a clue at the time, as I watched him carefully place the tiny coils of rope on the model decks of the Clara Hallet and the Silver Jubilee in his basement workshop.

This was the book my grandfather was writing, while all around him a new world order of empty oceans and foreign-processed fish took hold. He was remembering a past for the people who only really knew this world of freezer trawlers and falling-down houses, for whom a beach covered in drying salt codfish and tiny communities clinging to small islands would only ever be a distant, childhood memory. The fishery was his politics, it was his protest, and his pride. His historic passion, as it were.

Reading the book my grandfather wrote in the light of the book I wished he had written felt like returning to my undergraduate days in the late 1990s at Memorial University of Newfoundland, where in my historiography seminar us children of the cultural turn debated with our dyed-in-the-wool labour historian professors. Where are the women? How do we know this account of work is representative? Where are the stories?

I have always wanted the stories. My grandfather wanted details, testament. I wanted quilted experiences, snapshots of sisters sat upon rocks, babies in lacy caps and homemade dresses, the projectors brought in on put-puts to show the latest Hollywood films on the wall of the schoolhouse. My grandfather wanted a record of the work that men did and a place for it in the

⁸ For environmental and maritime histories of Newfoundland, see the work of Sean Cadigan and Kurt Korneski and the Maritime Research Unit and Memorial University of Newfoundland <https://www.mun.ca/msru/> [accessed on 6/11/18]

⁹ Button, *Schooners*, 6

¹⁰ See Shannon Ryan, *Fish out of Water: The Newfoundland Salt Fish Trade, 1814-1914* (Breakwater Books, 1986).

historical record, amid an economic and environmental catastrophe of incredible proportions. Our historiographic battle raged, unspoken, across our generational divide.

Growing up with historic passion but no historical training, and persistently reminded of my status as a 'Newfie' from 'the middle of nowhere', I had thought that the cod fishery was a small story. It was a marginal history, set in a backwater of the white empire. I thought the Newfoundland cod moratorium was a parochial politics, something old men with thick accents and little education shouted about on the radio. Twenty-five years on, I now understand that the history of fishing lies at the heart of our planet's story of community, empire, economics, and the environment. I have learned that Newfoundland's place in the building of empire was far from marginal. It was the protein that ran an empire of enslavement; it was one of the first global commodities; it was fish that started wars.¹¹

The collapse of Newfoundland's once incredible cod stocks was discovered in the late 1980s but only formally acknowledged by the Minister for Fisheries as he announced the moratorium in 1992, famously shouting 'I didn't take the fish out of the god damned water' to a mob of angry community members who had confronted him.¹² I now understand that these local political fractures were a canary in a massive coal mine, warning of the global ocean disaster that was soon to be at hand. My grandfather, with his grade nine education and his heavy North Bonavista Bay dialect, understood this long before I did. 'Is it sheer coincidence or part of nature's plan that 70% of man's body is water, while exactly the same proportion of water covers the earth's surface?' he pondered as he wrote in 1995. 'Can the sea continue to help mankind live rather than simply exist? I believe it can, but only if we take seriously the fact that the sea is not a bottomless pit of species that can forever sustain us.'¹³

My grandfather died three years ago now, but the Parkinson's and Lewy body dementia he suffered from meant that his face and mind closed, like a book, years before this. I'd ask him questions about Silver Fox Island and he would answer gladly, but the stories didn't flow like they had before. He never mentioned *Newfoundland Schooners and the Men who Sailed Them, 1800-1945*, despite knowing I was a historian and cared about such things, and I've only just realised that the book had been an important part of his life.

My grandfather was a historian, though he never published and never self-identified as such; he was in the business of marking the losses and changes and persistence of time. The scrapping of the three-masted schooners and their rebirth as tiny models built by retired fishermen-turned-accountants; deep-sea factory trawlers with their petrol-guzzling engines leaving rainbow slicks on the waves; the conglomeration of major fish processors and the explosion of the fresh-frozen market; fish fingers in my suburban freezer and the collapse of the cod stocks; the disappearance of a way of life and the passing of people, and dead fish coming up from the bottomless pit under the sea. My grandfather's history was written while the cost of breaking the covenant between people and the earth upon which they live was first being reckoned. It was historical passion as a kind of mourning.

¹¹ For more on the history of the Newfoundland fishery and the moratorium see the essays in the collection *How Deep is the Ocean: historical essays on Canada's Atlantic fishery*, James E. Candow and Carol Corbin (Sydney, N.S.: University College of Cape Breton Press, 1997)

¹² <https://www.cbc.ca/archives/entry/1992-newfoundlanders-protest-cod-moratorium> [accessed on 6/11/18]

¹³ Button, 8

And so, I seem to have been inspired to become an historian by stories that were never written down, by a book that never existed, by a history that I invented, at least in part, in my own head. But in reading the actual manuscript of *Schooners of Newfoundland and the Men who Sailed Them, 1800-1945*, I was reminded that my love of history stems from the perpetually unfolding connections between small stories and larger ones. Not that the small ones don't matter for their own sake; but at the heart of my historic passion is that vertiginous journey that sweeps me from the rock upon which my grandmother sat with her arms full of children, to the history of the whole vast and churning ocean system that sustains our planet; teeming with fragile life. I am coming to see that my job as a historian is to communicate this vertigo; to reconcile the big picture with each of its tiny pieces. Or, at least, the pieces that remain.