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# *The Wharves of St. John's, Newfoundland*

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by Rhoda Dawson

*In 1930 the English artist Rhoda Dawson, came out to Newfoundland to work for the mission which had been founded in the country by Sir Wilfred Grenfell. Grenfell himself had arrived in Newfoundland in 1892, one hundred years ago, and his purpose there was to save souls, heal bodies, and employ hands and minds. The latter function was the responsibility of the Mission's Industrial Department, which had been started early in the century by the American Jessie Luthur, a pioneer in the field of occupational therapy. It was to work in the Industrial Department, which produced handicrafts for a growing and appreciative market at home and abroad, that Rhoda Dawson was recruited by the Grenfell organization.*

*At Mission headquarters in St. Anthony, she designed hooked mats, a staple of the handicraft trade. In keeping with the tradition of the Industrial Department, her designs depicted local life and work. She also painted many watercolours which have only recently come back into public view. These constitute an important cultural resource for the Province.*

*Dawson returned to England in 1933 and staged two exhibitions of her Newfoundland work. In 1934 she returned to Newfoundland and taught school at Payne's Cove on the Strait of Belle Isle. Thereafter she sojourned at Twillingate, where she worked in the hospital run by the American physician and surgeon John Olds, one of Newfoundland's most celebrated medical practitioners. Her Twillingate work includes some graphic operating room scenes and a strong portrait of Olds.*

*From Twillingate she went to St. John's where she ended her Newfoundland days with an extended visit. Her St. John's watercolours are some of the finest depictions ever made of Newfoundland's salty old capital.*

*The following is her own hitherto unpublished account of her adventures in St. John's. The way of life she describes has, like the country of Newfoundland itself, long since disappeared. But, happily, it is still possible to glimpse the glory she saw in sky and barren. Newfoundlanders and Labradorians are indeed fortunate that such a sympathetic and talented individual touched in on their shores and that her watercolours have survived to light up the otherwise dark decade of the 1930s.*

*The article was edited for publication by Professor Peter Neary author of a forthcoming book on Rhoda Dawson. Explanatory material is indicated in [ ].*



**Grenfell Centennial  
1892-1992**

St. John's must be the nearest town to Europe on the American Continent. It was also probably one of the first settlements; certainly the beautiful harbour, so sheltered that the entrance cannot be seen from the sea until the ship is almost under the cliffs, has been the chief port ever since Cabot returned from his voyage of discovery and reported the waters of the New Isle to be teeming with fish. But although an Island, Newfoundland is definitely part of the American Continent, and of the New World. Its news value is far greater to American papers than to English, and its Capital presents an intriguing ensemble of English and American cultures, ancient crafts and modern superficialities. The well-to-do townspeople bowl along the left-hand roads in American cars built for right-handed traffic; glorious Chrysler taximeters rub shoulders with country carts, two-wheeled floats from the wharves, and a couple of old Victorias, preserved as London preserves a Hansom cab or two; sturdy fisher-girls with permanent waves and gum in their cheeks, spread fish on the flakes [wooden platforms built for drying fish] of the Battery [fishing village on the cliff face at the harbour-mouth]. Schooners with patched sails beating out through the narrow entrance meet shiny white liners from New York coming in.

Americans themselves acknowledge these phenomena; comfortable and at home among the familiar advertisements, magazines, cereal foods and the very smart American frocks, Koka Kola, Chinese laundries and ice-creams, and even the schooners which are built to the beautiful American model, they are brought up all standing by some unexpected British usage or characteristic; I have known them petrified by the stiff official atmosphere surrounding Government House, that modest building which, a trifle dowdy but very solid, hides among trees on the top of the hill near the huge American hotel. While English people find here an aspect of their ancient heritage unspoiled by piers, fun-fairs, or the usual concomitants of the English sea-side, made stylish by the lovely lines of the schooners and interesting historically by the survival of some of the old fishery techniques.

One can live in the town and almost forget it is a port, if one is caught up in the social round, for people have a very good time here, as indeed they do in other Dominions, with Bridge-parties and tea-parties, bathing at the Country Clubs, fishing and hunting, golf and tennis and ice hockey, all intensified by the bright "Colonial" hospitality, and the remarkably good food. On the outskirts of the town the great merchants have their pleasant houses, and far in the woods their summer shacks and log huts, while people tied to the city make trips to the tea-houses and inns around Conception Bay,

where the sea is calm as glass, and the coves are like Devon Coombs, but sometimes a bank of smoke in the sky and the smell of a distant forest fire, the cold threat of fog from the sea, reminds the gay parties that their country is indeed in the New World, with its freedom, its possibilities and its crudity. And everywhere, in town and country alike, is the sweet smell of cut spruce and woodsmoke, for spruce is the chief fuel, and houses, fences, boats, wharves are all made of it and its forests clothe the land.

Some of the 80,000 inhabitants of St. John's resent the fact that visitors are apt to concentrate upon the quaint, rather than the modern, aspects of their city. But while the Park and the swimming pools in the river, and the children's organized games, and the drives and new roads and pretty gardens on the outskirts are desirable and delightful, the function of the harbour as the centre of the fisheries for the whole of the North East Atlantic coast, even as far as Greenland, where a schooner or two goes every year, cannot fail to make the principal interest, and the fact that sail survives here more than anywhere else in the world, adds to that interest. The capital is far more truly Newfoundlandish, for instance, than the modern mill-towns of the lumber districts, which might equally well be in Canada or the States. And St. John's reacts at once to any international situation, as indeed do even the far Labrador and all the places where stock-fish [dried salted cod] is made, for the countries most deeply involved have in the past been the chief consumers of salt cod, and this is the principal reason for the present distress and financial difficulties.

The big shops on Water Street are the emporiums of the firms who buy fish, and to a small extent fur, and salmon, and so on along the whole coast as far North as Cape Chidley [Labrador], and all round the Newfoundland shore. Their windows display the latest New York fashions, (St. John's girls are smarter than their London sisters) while on the wharves behind, schooners are fitted up for the summer with salt beef and pork, biscuits, tea and molasses; and the young ladies inside deal with mail-orders from the outports involving sets of wool-cards for home spinning, flannel petticoats and old-fashioned stays. The stores all over the coast deal in the same way with the local fishermen, fitting them up for the season and taking their catch in payment at the end of it. Many of these smaller merchants are agents or do their buying from the Water

Street firms. In the same way the winter catch of sealskins is bought by the local trader and sent to town, while in St. John's the seal hunt assumes larger proportions, and attracts crowds of men to the city in the early spring, some on foot, some coming by train, others by schooner from the southern harbours, to sign on board

the sealing steamers which go out to the ice in March. They all leave on the same day, to avoid unfair advantages being taken and to obviate argument, and return singly in about 6 or 8 weeks time. The men who join are thus sure of at least board and lodging (and the food is good now-a-days) for nearly two months, and the chance of anything from \$8 to \$80 share-out at the end. In old days the men took their own food or lived on the seal meat they were allowed to cook at the Galley fires, the ship providing only one or two necessaries. I watched one of them, a large modern steamer, coming back to the wharf, her bows crowded with grimy cheerful men, her ancient skipper of 82 on the bridge, her hatches off ready for the unloading. I was allowed to work on the sealers wharves by the two firms who own the vessels, and for weeks I went daily across the harbour in the ferry boat of one or the other, and spent the whole day among the vats and tanks and crowds of sealers in the factory. It was an unsavoury atmosphere, but among the workmen and the regular employees and engineers I met some of the nicest men on the coast. I was invited to eat in the engineer's mess, a tiny room at the top of the vats, where we ate seal-meat stewed or fried, or bully beef hash, washed down by large mugs of potent tea. Once I even dined on board the steamer, in the saloon among the company of sealing captains, old experienced schooner-skippers, the ship's captain and the navigator. They were all a little silent, but extremely polite in the presence of a foreign female.

I was used to seal meat in the North, and the partiality for seal flippers in the South was incomprehensible to me; but while nobody wanted to eat seal-meat in general here, except the liver which is a delicacy anywhere, all the various local bodies had their annual flipper suppers in May or April, even the Cathedral. The steamers always brought a load home, and each man expected a share including the stokers, cooks and stewards who were paid on a different basis. I remember there was trouble on one steamer, the stokers complaining that they had not had their fair share of flippers, assuming a threatening attitude and being ordered off the deck by the Old Man [Captain]. No sooner were they off the ship on one side than they were clambering up on the other, till he was obliged to give way and allow their demands.

I was making drawings and studies of the work, and I penetrated each department at first from curiosity and later because I found that no one wanted to be left out. I had intended only to paint the busy wharves, with the town rising behind the masts and scunners' barrels of the sealers, just like a painted drop curtain, incredibly scenic, the tiers of houses overlapping one another from the water's edge to the top of the hill, capped by the towers of the Roman Catholic Cathedral, spotted with lines of

windows, the whole mass gashed by streets like canyons running athwart the main thoroughfares, designed as fire-breaks after the last disaster. But I found the scheme of work in this odd trade very absorbing and discovered curious rhythms and patterns just as in the fishery business. The skins for instance are packed for a time in salt pickle in a large shed; the men stand on the growing piles, one party moves forward laying down the rolled up pelts, another group follows, spreading them out. A regular pattern is discernable throughout the pile, and it is all done in a damp half-light, salt pickle dropping everywhere, the tall dark figures stooping and rising and weaving about in the gloom, laughter and snatches of song and chaff flying around the shed. I even worked in the super-fatted steam of the room at the top of the vats, where gangs of men fed the pelts to the skinning machines and the blubber to the cookers. Here I realized the danger of working to an admiring audience. An engineer hanging over my shoulder murmured wonderingly, as I carefully drew his machine and the strapping young boys grouped round it, "My, that almost as good as the catalogue picture." He was quite right too; it was.

I was followed about by an acolyte with a box for a stool, covered reverently with a green flag from the signal locker and I was handed up ladders, and over gang-planks, and shewn all the sights, with the most tender care and never a hint of familiarity or offence. Asking for a model one day, one of the managers sent up the ship's carpenter. I saw him on the desk, running round in great excitement telling his friends, but he soon found that sitting for his portrait wasn't so much fun, and finally allowed it to be "tejus." He was the Sunday School Superintendent in his home town, an upright person, and he offered me a lift on the schooner he and his mates had chartered to take them back home, a few bays away. I was sorry not to accept, for he promised to look after me well, but I could see no justification for the jaunt, and a female on board is apt to be embarrassing, but I should like to have gone, and been looked after.

The last vessel was empty and the men being paid off, when I climbed a ladder and found myself in the culling-chamber, almost empty, the last wheel-barrow load being taken away. "We expected you yesterday, Miss" the Culler said reproachfully, "Howsumever, bring the barrer back, Byes, we'll do 'em again," and they staged a whole scene for my benefit, re-culling the pelts while I "sketched off a fotygraf" and pleased not to have been left out.

The sealing vessels were moved to the end of the wharf, steam-cleaned and purified after the dirty trip, and overhauled. The bows of one of them were opened up for repairs so that we could see the enormous

thickness of the greenheart sheathing, and the tremendously strong construction of the fore-part. Finally they were towed out to the middle of the harbour and moored there all together, the big new steamers on either side of the old converted sailing ships, a shabby battle-worn group. One at least is famous [The *Terra Nova*]; she carried Captain Scott to the Antarctic. Now the work is over, the machines are still, the wharves blister in the heat, and the oil lies in the sun tanks in the roof of the factory, refining in the strong light, water white and almost as thin; then across the harbour to the town again, for now the schooners are coming in and soon the town wharves will be a mass of sail.

The bosses of the big stores spend time on the wharves talking to the skippers, most of whom have known them from childhood, doing business with that curious mixture of friendliness and shrewdness which is so characteristic of the country; recounting old yarns and listening to new ones, talking interminably of the price of fish, the possibilities of strife abroad, and the gossip of the coast and the capital. Most fishermen and their wives too, can keep a conversation going very ably, from constant practice in a life that has few opportunities of amusement apart from the daily contacts, and full of long waits, waiting for wind or for wind to stop, waiting for a boat to come in, waiting for the ice to go out or the snow to come. And the schoormen take the opportunity to cruise about the town and see their friends, while other men anxious to fish from the Labrador shore take passages on board, bringing their supplies and gear.

Sometimes a big Banker, the larger schooners that fish the Newfoundland Banks, comes in for water or repairs. After a storm two or three vessels may limp in to go into dry-dock. One day a fine four-masted Portuguese banker came up the harbour, damaged in a recent hurricane, her rigging fluttering with washing and oilskins hung up to dry and her decks piled high with the 72 dories of her 72 men, some of them with spread sails, their sacred emblems giving a curious ritualistic finish to the general clutter on board.

As the schooners leave for their summer work, the local fishing begins, and the two Batteries, the fishing

quarters on either steep side of the harbour mouth, all that is left of the old fortifications, become places of interest. The scrambly paths climbing up hill and down among the little houses and shacks and flakes, sometimes drop into green gloom right underneath a great platform, where you have to walk carefully if fish is spread and dripping overhead. Here the men keep their boats, pulled up among the piles, and under some better-lit ones, make their nets. These shore fishermen work with motor-boats, visiting their nets, or traps, at the harbour mouth 4 or 5 times a day, the more substantial families working as a crew, under the head of the group, eldest brother or father. The poorer men work either alone with lines and a row-boat, in which case they are called "hook-and-line" men, or as share-men with a group, paid by a pre-arranged share of the catch. Hence these parties of men we see working together under the flakes on one of the great nets, or standing at the splitting table till far into the night, splitting and gutting the fish as it comes in until two in the morning, on the job again at five. Quite likely the white-collar boy of the family, a clerk in the town, will lend a hand, at night, and his typist sister will go out to the trap with the boat in the evening, just to see the fun. These groups seem on the whole to work very harmoniously. There are no feuds in this country, and the fishing-village, odourous as it may be in season, is far more healthy and pleasant than some of the town slums, where the tattooist and the shroud-maker ("Robes for the Dead") ply their weird trades.

At the end of a day's work it is pleasant to climb up to either headland, and in half an hour to be sitting beside some lonely tarn, back in the primeval Continent, nothing to see but sky and the barrens with the cotton grass blowing, and a snipe beating somewhere in the evening light. Below in the basin of the hills the town is bustling like an ant's nest, but up here the land is the same as it was when Cabot sighted it, or the first Icelander set foot on America 1,000 years ago.

