

## Images of Resettlement

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# Images of Resettlement

BONAVENTURE FAGAN

THIS ESSAY CENTERS ON the response of writers and graphic artists in Newfoundland to the provincial government's 1954-72 centralization or resettlement plan. Under that plan, some 20,000 people were moved from small outposts along the coastline to larger communities named growth centres. The argument I make is that members of the artistic community of Newfoundland countered the images projected by government rhetoric with images of their own. In so doing, they either highlighted elements ignored by official rhetoric or denied the validity of the government's position altogether. The artistic statements on the topic of resettlement vary in theme and approach from the openly polemical to the search for more universal statements.

The number of communities resettled under the government program from 1954 to 1972 was 247; the number of persons resettled from April, 1965, to April, 1972, when the federal government participated in a joint program with the province, was over 19,197; the total cost was \$9.5 million (*Statistics: Federal Provincial Resettlement Program*, Appendix). In other words, the average cost to move each household was approximately \$2,500. This was not necessarily the average each household received; that was undoubtedly less. The \$2,500 included all claims and moving expenses plus mortgage payments for those in the last four years of the program. Householders who resettled under the provincial program from 1954 to 1965 were paid much less, from \$300 to \$600 (Iverson and Matthews 2).

The motivations of the government in devising this program were various, arising out of historical issues, recent as well as remote. Chief among these motivations were: the desire to break with the history of poverty that

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marked the inshore fishery; the belief that a new age of prosperity through industrial growth was possible and imminent; the conviction that larger communities offered economic stability and social amenities; and the underlying rationale that Confederation with Canada, the source of economic and social development, made such a program possible and desirable. (F.W. Rowe, the first provincial minister in charge of resettlement, sets out with certainty the government's motivations in his 1985 book, *The Smallwood Era*.)

When a democratic government wants to bring about a particular social change, it persuades its citizens through rhetoric. The government has certain motives which compel it to act; it sets out to convince the people of the appropriateness of its action. The rhetoric of persuasion is composed of arguments constructed in such a way that the listener associates an image or series of images with the thesis proposed. These images are symbolic in nature so that in time they come to stand for the motivations and reasonings behind the images. The rhetorician can even succeed by asserting the intention to remain neutral. Resettlement rhetoric used by the Newfoundland government was, on the whole, rather neutral in tone. That is, the government asserted over and over again that the decision to centralize was solely the responsibility of the community. The Fisheries Department guidelines stated that "the Government will not force anybody to move nor will it request anybody to move unless the decision is made by the householders of the community" (Iverson and Matthews 147). Only when the decision to centralize was made were government regulations to go into effect. Prior to decision time, government agencies could only provide information. That is why, years later, former premier J.R. Smallwood, in his book *The Time Has Come to Tell* (1979), could write with conviction: "Every settlement that re-settled did so voluntarily, of their own free will. Every settlement that moved, did so because they wanted to. Every settlement that moved, moved because the overwhelming majority of people in it were not only willing but anxious to move. Every settlement. Not one exception. No settlement was pushed" (143). Of course, nothing is ever neutral, ever merely informational. So what the government said and what people heard were often not the same.

The images projected by government rhetoric were in terms of either alternatives or improvements to outport lifestyle. Alternative images were: jobs, meaning the possibility to work on an hourly, daily basis, year-round or seasonally, in an industry of some sort or perhaps at a military base; salary, meaning money earned on a regular basis without depending on the paternalism of a merchant or the vagaries of the fishery; and electricity and indoor plumbing, which promised an end to dependence on kerosene lamps and outhouses and, of course, also implied forsaking any dream of a community dynamo. Images that posited an improvement in outport living conditions were: better schools, meaning a school large enough to avoid multi-

grading of classes and relief from the concern of having no teacher or a poorly qualified teacher for one's children; better houses, which meant houses that were more in line architecturally and in quality with the general designs used throughout the larger communities in the province; medical services, a promise that doctors and hospitals would be more readily available; and better roads, which meant a speedier alternative to sea transportation and direct, easy connection with the rest of the province and indeed with Canada. The theme of all these images and the government rhetoric at large was that resettlement clearly offered a better way of life, a modern way of life that could not be expected by the 1,100 small outpost communities dotting the islands and coves of the larger island (Iverson and Matthews 136).

Graphic artists and writers responded to resettlement with images of their own. Never before in the history of Newfoundland did the artistic community respond in such numbers and with such intensity to a social issue. The main images that the artists and writers used to counter government rhetoric can be categorized under the headings of Departure and Abandonment. Works that consider Departure concern themselves with issues such as identifying responsibility for the resettlement scheme and the actual moving itself. The theme of Abandonment is depicted mainly in the images of the abandoned house, the abandoned church, and the abandoned graveyard, all of which suggest the inevitable loss of values resulting from resettling.

#### DEPARTURE: RESPONSIBILITY

The writers who reacted to the government centralization program drew a line between the outsiders and the people affected. In the view of the literary community, the program took its impetus from politicians and planners who had themselves nothing to lose in the venture.

Ray Guy attributed the impetus for the whole scheme to Smallwood. Time and time again throughout the 1960s, Guy used his daily column in the St. John's *Evening Telegram* to attack the Smallwood administration on a host of fronts, including its role in resettlement. In one column called "We Shall Undercome," Guy writes:

For many years it was stated government policy that all outposts were to be wiped out and the people herded into ten or twelve "growth centers." This was one of the greatest crimes ever committed against the Newfoundland people. Much damage was done. How could the total destruction of our outposts become the policy of the government? First and foremost, it was the result of the whims and brainstormers of one person so established in power that he could ignore anything that didn't fit in with his wild schemes. (49)

But politicians, as Guy well knew, are nowhere men and women without a coterie of civil servants. Resettlement, then, was a scheme brought to fruition by the planners, "the boys who stick pins in a map and refer to the pins as people," as Guy called them — those whose task it was to identify

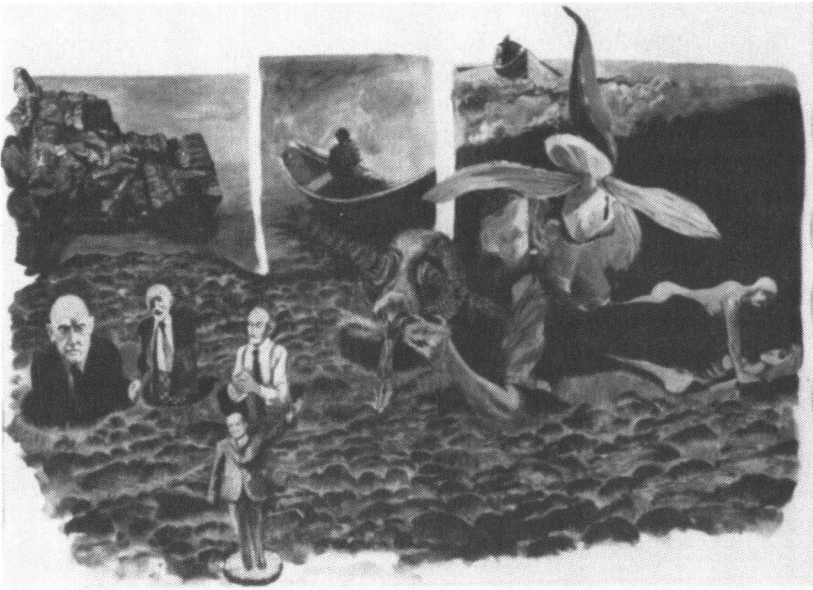
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satisfactory growth centres or receiving towns, to put a percentage on how many households had to move for the community to participate, to price the cost of moving, to be the communicative source of the alternatives. That is to say, it was as much a bureaucratic as a political phenomenon.

To Guy and other writers, the whole impetus to move people was misguided. Government plans, they thought, ignored the human costs. By dwelling on what was to be gained from resettlement, planners and politicians were blind to what was to be lost. In a culture with such strong oral roots as the outports had, songs were a major means of social comment, and in these the assessment of centralization was blunt, with titles such as “The Blow Below the Belt” (Ward) and “The Government Game” (Byrne) indicating bitterness and scorn. Joe Byrne’s song, “The Sea Gulls Still Follow on Freedom,” is typical in distancing the planners from the outport people:

Those men who quote figures and count the cause lost,  
They see only the high seas and the lives it has cost;  
They don't see the life as we know it to be,  
Like the sea gulls who follow on freedom.  
So they cheat us and they rob us and continue to say  
That our only salvation is leaving the Bay. . .  
(Breakwater Boys)

Graphic artists also responded to the government’s centralization scheme. Painter Gerry Squires explored the theme of badly conceived and badly executed government plans in his Boatman series. In *Boatman # 4: All that remains of the sea is its sound*, for example, we see a clear demarcation between the natural life of the outport and the rotting and unnatural process of political interference. In the three scenes that compose the upper section, the emphasis is on the rugged coastline and on the fisherman who earns his living on the sea. The dory and the fisherman are at one with the landscape. The scenes that compose the lower half of the painting tell a different story. Here the figures of politicians and planners worm their way out of the beach as maggots that feed on the dead. In front is the figurine of a politician, either Smallwood himself or a Smallwoodite, frozen in a Nazi salute. (Smallwood was on occasion referred to as a Nazi.) To the left of the picture we see two copulating figures under an orchid, *Cypripedium acaule*. The Pink Lady’s Slipper, as it is commonly known, is noted for its poor ability to propagate or, more pertinently, to be grown under the controlled conditions of a wildflower garden (Niering and Olmstead 651). A close look at the copulating figures reveals at least one of them, the female, as only a skeleton, suggesting the sterility and perverseness of their act. In the centre frame of the painting is a self-portrait of Squires holding the model of a gigantically enlarged house fly. For outport Newfoundland, with its daily work centered on the fishery, with its beaches littered with fish, fowl, and kelp washed up and rotting, with its domestic animals and stables — with all these, the housefly was ever present. However, no effort was spared



Gerry Squires: *Boatman #4*, *All that remains of the sea is its sound*

to keep the fly out of the home. The result was a perception of the housefly as a sign of dirt and hence revulsion. The artist, forced to confront the political interference in the outport way of life, sees himself as a handler of dirt and revulsion, personified in the fly. All around him swirl scenes of a society being perverted by politicians and their servants. The painting, like Dylan Thomas's "Ballad of the Long-legged Bait," from which it takes its title, is a lament for the betrayed fisherman, now "lost on the land." Squires' criticism extends as well to the manner in which the provincial government was handling its support for the arts community. The official rhetoric suggested the same altruistic motivation and neutrality of involvement for the arts as for resettlement. It is obvious that Squires rejects the rhetoric in both instances.

Squires maintains that he was not being political in his paintings; rather he was trying to indicate something of the spiritual dimension of outport life. That may be so, but in *Boatman #4*, at least, his political criticism is a strong element.

Gordon Rodgers similarly is emphatic about the government's responsibility, and the poem "Floating Houses," from his volume of the same name, is intended as an indictment of the resettlement policy.

#### FLOATING HOUSES

They stripped the last house,  
left only a wooden cross

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hanging in an upstairs bedroom  
for safe passage.

They rolled empty oil drums indoors,  
tied them down and together  
— floor to ceiling  
in every room — for buoyancy  
But still some houses sank to their second-storey windows.

After the lines were attached, boats  
pulled, dragging the houses  
on wooden rollers  
over gardens  
and wells  
and a way of life  
to the beach, finally,  
into the ocean; pulled

floating across the Channel  
'til all the houses  
were in Newtown — the island left  
littered with rusty oil drums  
like a giant's used cartridges.

A huge government gun,  
aimed at the island,  
had blown the houses away:  
one  
by  
one. (61)

The striking image of the gun turned on the people by their government is called to the poet's mind by the remaining oil drums, which resemble spent cartridges. It is an image of violence and deliberate destruction.

So, too, Enos Watts, in his poem "Precision," from *After the Locusts* (1974), provides an image of the destruction of outpost life by government. The island pictured in the poem and its inhabitants withstood what terrors the sea threw at them, but a certain kind of "half-man" changed all that. Unlike the sea, these destroyers came from within.

### PRECISION

According to the elemental proposition  
the island  
should not have been there;  
but it withstood the assault  
from all compass points  
of unpunctilious waves  
that struck out blindly  
taking only  
the weakest parts of the rock.  
And the men  
were not broken by the sea.  
But other

horn-rimmed, vertically moving  
half-men  
knowing nothing of the taste of tears  
drew neat, symmetrical  
paradigms  
and did  
on some leisurely afternoons  
what the sea could not do  
in a thousand years. (2)

The title “Precision,” the free verse form, and the choice of words and phrases such as “elemental proposition,” “assault,” “unpunctilious,” and “symmetrical/paradigms” are a caustic echo of E.J. Pratt’s vision in “Erosion” and of the erudite poetic expression that is typical of the wider Pratt canon. The ironic contrast between the two poems is caught in the issue of guilt. The sea is impersonal and can be accepted if not understood; such is Pratt’s implication in “Erosion,” which captures so well the ambivalent relationship between the people and the sea in Newfoundland. Watts’s “vertically moving/half-men” may act impersonally but theirs is an attributable guilt. The response of Watts to Pratt, then, is not a criticism of Pratt’s vision; rather it is a criticism of the bureaucrats who have perverted that vision. If government rhetoric disguised the identity of those officials responsible for resettlement by repeated claims of noninterference, the arts community proclaimed the opposite: politicians and bureaucrats, as outsiders, were indeed the culprits.

#### DEPARTURE: MOVING

A second broad image of the Departure theme is that of the actual moving. The trauma of moving is best seen in the divisions it causes within those about to move. Contrary to the popular image of the unified outport family and community, the divisive elements of tension and discord are highlighted by writers in a number of ways. In her short story “The Last Summer,” Jeanne Rogers, for example, expresses the dilemma of moving by alternating moments of silence and angry outbursts. Language is no longer a bond among family members but a negative element. The silence of frustration and waiting counters angry outbursts. Even when open communication does occur, as between Jeanne and her father, emotions run high. When Jeanne asks, “Why are we leaving . . . ?” her father replies:

Because you can’t beat the bloody system . . . In a month there’ll be no mail boat, no coastal boat service. That’s all part of it. And when it’s over, they can sit behind their polished desks and congratulate themselves that they’ve saved another poor fisherman from poverty. In the meantime, I’ve sold my house and gear for a tenth of what it’s worth; I’ve slaughtered all my livestock, and I’m leaving behind fifty-one years of my life. But that’s not their worry. (16)



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This simple outburst exposes for many the subtlety of government rhetoric. While it declaimed a message of impartiality and noninterference, the government was threatening, or perceived to be threatening, to withdraw those services already in place. This pressure to move centered on the issue of local development of services. Robert DeWitt's 1969 observations about the perceptions of Fogo Island residents were applicable generally:

The basic issue for residents is not *just* either to stay or resettle. The Government has acted in a manner whereby the people of [Fogo] Island see the choice as either (i) no resettlement and no development, or (ii) resettlement and some chance for development in the new location. (45)

No doubt there were divisions within communities and families, even where resettling was a totally independent decision. The arts, graphic and literary, illustrated how much more divisive were the various factors when people sensed pressure from the government. In Helen Porter's short story "Moving Day," the divisive factor is gender: Martha Mead wants to move; her husband Peter doesn't. Early in the story, Peter makes the remark: "It's the women that's doing it . . . If it was left to us men we'd all be content to live out our lives here" (18-19). In this, Porter touches on one of the sensitive spots of the whole resettlement issue. The question has often been asked, if everyone was against resettlement, how was it that people went? Martha Mead gives part of the answer. Many women in the outports simply wanted a better life for themselves and their children and, believing that the only way to achieve that was to have a more direct access to social services, they argued for centralization.

Traditionally, in the Newfoundland outport, the roles of men and women were divided in a fairly clear way. The man's role revolved around his work as breadwinner, the fishery generally but logging as well, and occasionally mining in other provincial centres or even work in Canada or the United States. This economic role gave men control of the transportation system, since boats were the main means of movement. In a political role, the men participated in informal discussion of party politics on a daily basis, and more formalized discussion in public meetings or in church organizations such as the Orange Lodge or the Star of the Sea. Women often had economic control within the house. While men brought the money in, the women were the bankers. In fact, cash was all too scarce in most households; all the more important, then, was the banker's thrift. In politics, the role of women was mostly informal, although they were not above speaking out at a public meeting called by a visiting politician. The work of women was crucial to all families in the traditional outport. While the men fished, the women helped cure the cod, backbreaking work because the labor was dictated by the ever-changing weather. Women also looked after the vegetable gardens during the fishing season and helped with other labor, such as harvesting the gardens and hay meadows, milking the cows, preparing butter, and the other duties

associated with the household. Two other areas of outport life were generally left to the women: education and medicine.

It is against this background that Martha Mead speaks in Porter's "Moving Day" and declares her views "about the men being away in the lumber woods or on the Labrador when things were really tough on the island, and how she was sick and tired of not being able to get a doctor when she needed one, and of having her children go to a one-room school under teachers too young or too stupid to get a job anywhere else." Martha contrasts temporary residency on Grassy Island with permanent residency:

I wouldn't mind coming back here for the rest of my life. But it's living here, day in, day out, season in, season out, year in, year out, that I can't take any longer. It was bad enough when there were twenty or more families here, but now there's only eight left, and more going all the time. Things'll get worse instead of better. (19)

Here Porter identifies the frustration many women felt in living in the remote outport, the sense of being trapped. Centralization represented the first opportunity many such women had to make a change in their lives. In his book, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (1965), the French sociologist Jacques Ellul argues that "For propaganda to succeed, it must correspond to a need for propaganda on the individual's part . . . There is not just a wicked propagandist at work who sets up means to ensnare the innocent citizen. Rather, there is a citizen who craves propaganda from the bottom of his being and a propagandist who responds to this craving" (121). There is much in Ellul's insight that is readily applicable to those who participated in the resettlement program.

Hand in hand with the need to effect change went the need to justify one's decision to move rather than to stay. Within the same community of trapped women were those who felt no desire to move. And within and outside the community, the polemics of the situation were such that openly to advocate resettling was interpreted by many as a partisan political stand. The solution to this sensitive issue, in literature at least, was the declaration by or for the person or family considering resettling that they were not the first to go from the community. Rather they had to go because the others had gone. Thus, despite her desire to move, it is Martha who finds the parting difficult. In the end, it is she who delays the boat while she cries her good-byes to an empty kitchen.

Tom Dawe explores a different kind of division in the short story "An Off-Shore Wind." He knows that the educated young will move on anyway; the old will remain behind. Caught in between are the uneducated young. The traditional means of livelihood are gone or so reduced that these youth cannot participate in them. Without education, they cannot move out of the community with confidence. Thus, lacking ambition and self-motivation, and able to express themselves only in negative putdowns, the uneducated young can offer nothing to their home community but laziness and tension. They

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must move on if they are to have any chance. It is not, then, change as a radical departure from the past that has come to the outport through resettlement; rather, for Dawe, change has already come and, at least for some, further change is a necessity.

Yet another division highlighted by writers and graphic artists is that between the knowable past as the elderly remember it and the unknown empty future into which they walk. David Blackwood is a painter and print maker who has sought to capture something of the spiritual values of outport life from a number of perspectives — the seal hunt, the great sealing and fishing captains, the disasters, and the daily interaction between humankind and the natural world. Naturally, he was affected by the resettlement of his home community, Bragg's Island. In prints like *William Lane Leaving Bragg's Island* (1971) and *Gram Glover's Dream* (1969), the focus is on the nature of departure itself as much as it is on a particular group of people. The evocation of loss — of the dissipation of strength and vitality — is captured by the artist as visionary. Indeed, the placement of figures in *Gram Glover's Dream* establishes a line of visions or insights into the whole process: that of Gram Glover, of the empty house, of the artist, and of ourselves as viewers. Al Pittman's poem on the print, from his volume *Through One More Window* (1974), captures much of the spirit of the work and becomes one more example of vision as response:

### GRAM GLOVER'S DREAM

(from a picture of the same  
name by David Blackwood)

A long thin line  
thinner and thinner as it goes  
becomes a dot  
disappears where there is nothing

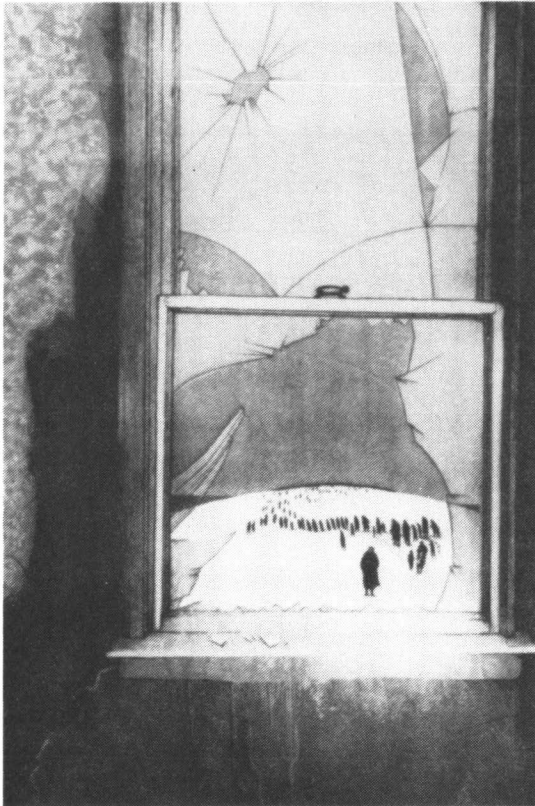
these are the villagers  
they are leaving their village  
huddled into the wind  
they are going away

out where there is nothing  
they have gone away to nothing  
the long thin line dissolves itself  
into the emptiness of snow

at the end of the line  
turned to the wind  
she stands looking back

if she had been farther up the line  
she could have been spared this instant  
but where she is  
at the end of it  
she is forced to confront  
face to face  
the final moment of their going

in a second  
when this scene unfreezes itself  
she will turn  
become again the last of the line  
will turn and walk away  
will become nothing in the windy distance  
  
in this instant however  
she is frozen where she is  
solidified against the wind  
turned back toward the house  
  
on the window a flower pot  
and in it a flower bloomed open  
to the day's bright light  
outside everything is frozen still  
everything except the wind  
and the wind's white howling  
(36-7)



David Blackwood: *Gram Glover's Dream*

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The most enduring image of departure, however, is not that of a line of people leaving home; rather it is that of moving a house from one outport to another by floating it across water. This was not unique to the resettlement program, but the image of the house being towed by skiff or small boat has become closely associated with that scheme. Not surprisingly, graphic artists have best captured the process.

Blackwood's images are the best known on the subject. In the etching entitled *Resettlement* (1982), we see the typical Blackwood elements: man depicted in a gigantic, elemental world that dramatically displays forces that could overpower the humans at any moment. It is a Genesis-like world. The reluctant house has some of the characteristics of a graveyard, with the windows bearing crosses and the doors looking like coffin lids. The dramatic light from the rising sun suggests something apocalyptic rather than the rays of comfort one would expect if the move was a reaffirmation of outport life. In another etching entitled *Uncle Eli Glover Moving* (1982), we see the old man looking stoically over the gunwales while his house is hauled behind him. Blackwood, like Squires, insists that his pictures are not political; he says he is depicting something like the spirit of the people, and that therefore his works are anecdotal.



David Blackwood: *Resettlement*

What these artists mean when they affirm their non-political stance is that they are not attacking or criticizing the resettlement program from a partisan point of view. In other words, their works are not anti-Smallwood statements. I argue, however, that they are political; their works depict the disruption and passing of a way of life, precarious though it might have been, a way of life that is lost forever. The loss may have been inevitable with time and is perhaps more properly understood as part of a change already occurring within the context of the 20th century. In that sense Blackwood (and Tom Dawe as well) are not anti-Smallwood. But in the larger sense they

are definitely political — perhaps more enduringly so than more overtly didactic writers and painters.

More recently, Conrad Furey's paintings on resettlement have demanded attention. Furey argues that resettlement should never be forgotten. His paintings are a study in bewilderment. We see the distended, doll-like men caught in the unnatural work of moving houses. Always there is the threat of haphazard destruction, as in the depiction in *Roll Along* (1984) of moving the house down to the water's edge by rolling it on logs. The absence of men in the picture suggests lack of control. In the water scenes, the houses are distorted in reflection because they are not meant to be there (*Sinking House* 1984). This contrasts with the boats whose curves are more at one with the sea. So too with the men. In their handling of the houses they are either absent or they handle the movement awkwardly, as if they were attempting to lasso the house in the manner of cowboys. But in the boat, the oars are an extension of the rowers' arms. In most of the scenes, the men are depicted as looking skyward, seeking perhaps some sign or some explanation that will make the moving of homes understandable. As it is, these men are victims of something beyond their control.



Conrad Furey: *Roll Along*

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Conrad Furey: *Sinking House*



Conrad Furey: *Resettlement*

Much of the art about resettlement, then, depicts a people stoically moving from their homes. Not comprehending fully just what it is that is happening to them, the men and women move with passive resistance. Environmentally and historically, survival by determined resignation was the chief means of coping with the demands of external forces. Such passiveness was “akin to wisdom”; that is how Patrick O’Flaherty put it in his 1975 essay “Looking Backwards.” Enos Watts captures that spirit of stoic resignation. Not a prolific writer on resettlement, Watts’s insights are as perceptive as they are disturbing. In his poem “Looking Back,” from *After the Locusts*, he draws on the image of the seer who cannot change his vision of doom. Tiresias-like, he can only witness and move on. In the first half of the poem, the old man hears all the sounds of his community as the people are preparing to depart, among them the sounds of hammers closing up the church. In the second part, he visits the graveyard for one last time. With his fingers, he reads the inscriptions on the stones and realizes the magnitude of the impending departure by the community. He takes solace in his blindness because that physical handicap serves as a cover for the inner spiritual and emotional scarring that has taken place, and, equally, it removes any delusion of return or sentimental attachment he would have if he could look back and see the community getting smaller with distance.

LOOKING BACK

Even when he knew  
they had all decided to leave the island  
the old man  
sat, with his face to the sea,  
and was not heard to make a sound.  
For days now  
he had been silent auditor  
to the sounds people made  
in preparation for moving away.  
He heard many sounds  
but the one that grieved him most  
was the ring of the hammer  
boarding up the church;  
and with each irrevocable stroke  
one could see his hands  
tighten into a claw,  
but the agony that lined his face  
spoke poignantly  
of something that pained him more  
than the mere ripping of nails  
into rotted pine.  
On the final day  
in the yard behind the church  
he moved like an outcast  
among the half-sunken, tilting stones  
until his sensitive fingers read



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the time-shallowed symbols  
shrieking out at him  
their cruel, eloquent truth;  
he was certain now  
that the gulf between them  
would always be widest  
at this rock.  
And as the boat took him away  
from his home  
he, for the first time, was glad  
that he was blind  
knowing there'd be no purpose served  
in looking back. (41-2)

The theme of Moving, in short, is best placed in the overall context of the history of outpost life. The paradox between the desire to remain and the decision to move anyway can be understood in the livyer's passiveness to external forces. Resettlement, we might say, was a half-child of the environment. In countering the government's rhetoric of official impartiality, literature and painting represent those people who reacted to resettlement as they had reacted to the environment. By and large, art is not concerned with those goodly numbers who wanted to go without regret. Rather, the reluctant, the pressured, the mesmerized, and the unsure are the ones whom writers and graphic artists generally depict.

### ABANDONMENT: THE HOUSE

The other major view of resettlement depicted in literature and painting is in terms of Abandonment: abandonment of the home, of the church, of the graveyard. Generally, all of these are mentioned together under the embracing concept of the abandoned community. For example, there's the personal lament of Annie Brennan for St. Leonard's in Placentia Bay.

St. Leonard's, my dear old home,  
Deserted and forlorn,  
The people forced to leave it,  
With no choice of their own.  
Good-bye, good-bye, St. Leonard's,  
Good-bye, good-bye forever.

In contrast, there's the experience of the visitor trying to perceive what it was like to live in such small, remote places. John Steffler went to the Grey Islands off the Great Northern Peninsula to do what countless North Americans have tried to do — to find himself. His poetic journal, *The Grey Islands* (1985), is a fine account of his sojourn. He comes across signs of the former community and wonders about the people who dared to live in such a place. When he asks "Who were they?" he is not satisfied by the statistics he has from official sources; what he wants to know, what he finds hardest to perceive, is the set of values by which these people lived. They

could see what the poet is trying to see and cannot. Similarly, the narrator of Gordon Rodgers's poem "The House," confronted by the dilapidated building, asks: "who were they,/ why did they come,/ why did they leave?" (9) In this, Steffler and Rodgers, among others, identify a key concept behind the various images of abandonment. The images are an attempt by the artists to suggest the values that outport people lived by, values that are lost in the physical abandonment of the community.

Both Al Pittman and Tom Dawe have written much on the resettlement issue, and in their use of the images of abandonment we see the difference between their insights. For Pittman, the resettled community is nearly always an identifiable one: Merasheen or St. Leonard's. The St. Kevin's of his play "West Moon" has about it a strong sense of a particular place. In addition, Pittman's poems are most often marked by a strong personal involvement by the narrator. With Dawe, though, the community nearly always seems mythical or generalized: Hemlock Cove, or a Cove, or the Coast, or an outport. When he does identify a place, as in the poem "At Western Arm," from *Island Spell* (1981), there is the sense of intellectual distance between the narrator and the scene.

AT WESTERN ARM

There was once a saw-mill here  
 giving a swift brook its last fling  
 before it found the sea again.  
 There were houses here too  
 with small front gardens  
 where lilacs shook  
 in the fiord winds  
 and somebody turned rich earth  
 to plant an apple  
 or a rose tree  
 or some corner spot  
 of bleeding-hearts.  
 Between the gardens  
 there were snaking, narrow lanes  
 where sweating horses toiled  
 between mist of dawn  
 and lantern light.

Now everything is gone down  
 in a tangle of alders  
 and the slow revenge of the birch.

(30-31)

Or in a poem like "Vortex," where the narrator speaks of himself, the subject seems less about an empty house than it is about how distanced memory and values make insight possible.

The contrast between the approaches of Pittman and Dawe to the theme of Abandonment can be illustrated in their poems "St. Leonard's Revisited,"

## 18 *Fagan*

from *Once When I Was Drowning* (1978), and “Abandoned Outport,” from *Island Spell*:

### ST. LEONARD'S REVISITED

We came ashore  
where wildflower hills  
tilted to the tide  
and walked  
sad and gay  
among the turnip cellars  
tripping over the cremated  
foundations  
of long-ago homes  
half buried  
in the long years' grass

Almost reverently  
we walked among the rocks  
of the holy church  
and worshipped roses  
in the dead yard  
and came again to the cove  
as they did after rosary  
in the green and salty days

And men offshore  
hauling traps  
wondered what ghosts  
we were  
walking with the forgotten sheep  
over the thigh-high grass paths  
that led  
like trap doors  
to a past  
they could hardly recall

(20)

In its identification of the sadness and gaiety on walking among the ruins of houses, this poem evokes the emotional paradox one encounters in returning to a deserted homestead. A flood of memories brings pleasure. This is countered by the sadness evoked by the present emptiness of the scene, the absence of homes, of loved ones. The qualifier “almost” that opens the second stanza reminds us that the narrator continues to perceive the paradox of the situation — contemporary religious perceptions countered by those of the past, the reality of the moment countered by nostalgia. It is this element of paradox that keeps the poem from being sentimental and makes it a strong statement on the passage of time and people. The contrast between the onshore visitors and the offshore fishermen solidifies Pittman’s perspective. The fishermen are, as they have always been, preoccupied by necessity and immediacy; namely, “hauling traps.” They may wonder who the strangers are but they do not, indeed they cannot, dwell on the past. They survive,

as their forefathers in the deserted St. Leonard's survived, by accepting their fortunes, by remembering, yes, but not memory as sentiment, rather memory as fact. Only the poet has the leisure of opening wide the "trap doors/ to a past/ they could hardly recall."

Dawe, uncomfortable with the personal perspective, reaches for a more objective stance:

ABANDONED OUTPORT

Sun on boarded windows  
and gull-cries  
high in the August clouds.

On a small beach-path:  
blue-bells nodding  
over driftwood.

A bee is buzzing  
inside dark cracks  
in a window pane.

Clover meadow:  
above the rusting ploughshare  
a butterfly.

A sudden fog  
and sea-winds  
bend the sting-nettle.

Deep in graveyard grass  
snails and lichens  
cling to the headstone.

Across the schoolhouse floor:  
paper scraps, dry sea-weed  
and a dead moth.

Against the cold twilight:  
dark picket-fences  
and a crow's flight

In a rising moon:  
a church steeple  
and lilac leaves.

(28)

Emotion here has been stripped away. The presence of the narrator is no more obvious than that of the people who once lived in the community. What we get is a series of images, images of distilled memory. Dawe's vision is, as it were, more at one with that of the fishermen of Pittman's poem. The fishermen and Dawe project memory of fact only. The powerful emotions and sentiments behind each image are left to the individual reader to divine. This inferential process is partly what gives Dawe's poem its appeal (along with devices like the framing of the poem in time suggested by the sun of the opening stanza and the moon of the final one). Each stanza contains

a reference to a human presence through which we associate the values of community, of vision, of industry, of learning, of worship: a cracked "window pane," "the rusting ploughshare," "dark picket-fences," "a church steeple/and lilac leaves." Superimposed on these values is the loss implied by the state of abandonment in which we find the outport. Even the most apparent description of nature, in stanza five, implies the two central occupations of the former community, fishing and farming.

For Dawe the issue was less the wrongness or rightness of a particular government's social plan than it was the danger of losing a rich culture so tied to its utilitarian lifestyle. To change that lifestyle meant an inevitable change in its culture. If something was gained in resettling, for Dawe something great was lost. Yet he is no sentimentalist. In this, he is aligned with Blackwood and Squires. Change was already occurring, the inevitable result of a changing 20th century economy in general and of Confederation in particular. In a very real sense, Dawe sees the artist working within the context of change. The sharp relief that marks change lets one see what is valuable in the old, in the "about to be discarded." Artistic documentation from this perspective is a vital role for the artist, literary and graphic.

In his collections *Hemlock Cove and After* (1975) and *Island Spell*, Dawe returns again and again to consider various aspects of outport life either lost or in danger of being lost. His stance is not didactic or polemical but that of an observer. Generally the reader is left to make connections for himself. Thus, even the thirty-three line poem "Babel" (*Hemlock Cove* 61) can be seen, despite its obvious urban setting, as a statement on the dangers of resettlement. Here are the familiar contemporary echoes of warning about engineers who persist in building edifices which ignore people. The result is a people who are neurotic, depressive to the point of suicide, ignoring or misreading the insights of children. "Babel" is not a direct comment on resettlement; it is rather a prophecy about planning gone mad, with citizens forced into a way of life with which they cannot cope. It is significant that the resettlement plan was accompanied by the pursuit of an industrial dream, including mechanized fish plants (Walsh 23). Indeed, the two concepts were as one in the minds of many politicians and planners. Dawe brings the two issues together in "Babel," the development theme openly and the resettlement theme by inference. The danger is in seeing Dawe's position from a narrow political, perhaps partisan perspective. In the 1960s you were either for or against Smallwood. Dawe shows the fallacy of those who argued that you couldn't be critical without declaring yourself against Smallwood. His criticism has a more general, cultural dimension. His poems place the abandoned outport in the universal context of the abandoned; in this they resemble Georgiana Cooper's "Deserted Island," Al Purdy's "Lament for the Dorsets," or even Shelley's "Ozymandias." Sites of previous human occupation provoke for all of us an inquisitiveness and imaginative

reconstruction, whether by family or racial descendant, whether by archaeologist or poet.

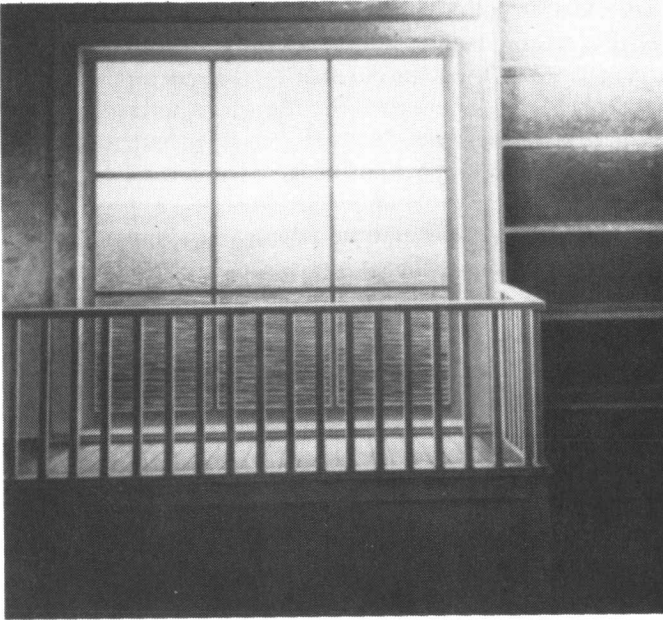
Of all the people affected by the resettlement plan, the middle-aged and old provide the most poignant moments. Government's resettling these older folk meant that what was lost was a way of life — their livelihood of fishing, certainly, but also the values that stood behind the fishing life. These values were often associated with the house, so it is not surprising that graphic artists and writers turned to the image of the abandoned house to project their insights.

The typical Newfoundland outport house was of a salt-box design: a two-story building on front with a single story addition on back, the roof of which was in a long slant. In many instances the basic salt-box was modified, with the additional back story raised or replaced with a small side or back porch (Mills). Like much about the life of fishing, the ordinary outport house is often a contradiction in itself. On the one hand, it is the product of one's own labor; no mass produced materials here. On the other hand, most observers see the outport house as valueless in terms of originality. The outport house has the appearance of being flimsy and weak, yet it has often been strong enough to transport to another community by sea. It reflects a stubborn determination to exist in a forbidding environment, yet it fits in somehow with that same environment. For Cyril Poole, the design of the outport house and other buildings bears the marks of "the expectation of imminent abandonment," the result, he says, not of economic want so much as a spiritual lack of a belief in permanence (48). The history of the battle between the authorities and the livyers and between the sea and the people confirms this view. Yet for Harold Horwood the houses in outport Newfoundland are eminently practical, suited to the climate: "low-ceilinged, heavily-beamed, securely fastened down to withstand winds of a hundred miles an hour" (70). Some outport houses see a life span of well over a hundred years, and one of eighty years is quite common.

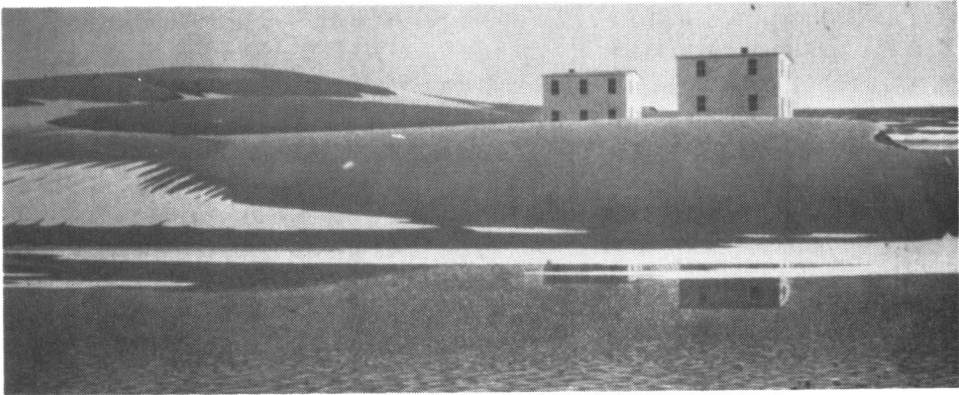
The outport house embodied the values associated with settler independence — self-motivation, strength, safety, and the more rounded values of family life, love, warmth, relaxation, story, song, and prayer. The house was equally a source of support and strength to the community. Doors went unlocked; visitors never knocked; privacy never replaced reception and entertainment; a cup of tea (anything from tea and bread to a full meal) was always offered; children of all families came and went. The kitchen was the most lived-in space with its wood-burning stove, rocking chair, day-bed, dining table, chairs, and lamps ready for night use. The walls were hung with photographs, usually of the older members of the family, and religious pictures. The parlor or front room was reserved for distinguished guests — the clergy, the politician, the courting couple; and for special occasions — christenings, marriage receptions, and wakes.

The significance houses had for the outport preoccupies Christopher Pratt. In his works on houses, and buildings generally, Pratt reaches for something essential that stands for the people whose lives centered upon the buildings. To say that Pratt's works are a direct statement on the government's centralization scheme is much too narrow a perspective. Like those of Dawe, Pratt's concerns are more universal in nature. Nevertheless, Pratt's buildings, set in a landscape devoid of humans, have about them a sense of abandonment, readily associated, by the Newfoundland viewer at least, with resettlement. In their most romantic moments, resettled people like to imagine their abandoned homes in their pristine state, as if they could be lived in again without repair. Pratt's buildings suggest that pristine state. Behind the clean, geometric lines is a heavy emotional quality; but, says Pratt, this emotional aspect is not easily detected because it has been harnessed and calculatingly processed (CBC Interview). Often the closeness of the artist and his subject is indicated by the titles that Pratt gives certain works. *Shop on an Island* (1969), with its empty display corner and window, looks out over an empty ocean towards an unbroken horizon. The meticulously drawn woodwork, the hazy aura around the edge, and the subdued effect of the grey-blue color give one the sense that the only solid place is in the foreground, that is, on the island itself. We are left, as the shopkeeper was left, looking out from a known, rooted place towards the unknown, an unknown that is not particularly inviting. This picture, so unrelated to the subject of resettlement on the surface, is the perfect counter to the surface impartiality of the rhetoric used by the government. A comparison of *Shop on an Island* with some of Blackwood's works which explore the same theme illustrates the difference between the visions of the two artists; the personal lament in Blackwood becomes an impersonal statement by Pratt. Yet both are intensely political.

Pratt's *Two Houses in the Spring* (1968) presents an obvious contrast between the vertical houses and the horizontal environment. The subdued colors suggest a kind of muted existence, where spring will work its magic slowly and less dramatically than in more hospitable climes. The two houses are a challenge, as it were, to the landscape, which here is a thin layer of soil between the two bodies of water (or perhaps there is only one body of water — the sea). Other paintings by Pratt reveal that a house is really a shaping of natural energy lines. The rectangle is composed of a series of horizontal lines hemmed in or contained within the vertical corner boards. This is a precise description of the environment in which the outport exists: the horizontal sea with its succession of horizontal waves moving towards vertical cliffs that shape and are shaped by the sea. The houses are Pratt's vision of man reflecting his oneness with the environment as much as his confrontation with it.



Christopher Pratt: *Shop on an Island*



Christopher Pratt: *Two Houses in the Spring*

To abandon one's house, then, was the same as abandoning one's values. The livyers could not easily walk away from their homes with all that they meant to them; they had to be driven away by force, either real force, as in the days of the Fishing Admirals, or the psychological forces at play



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in the time of resettlement. In John Connors's short story "The Only Practical Way," an eighty-four year old man dies of pneumonia developed from exposure. For some observers it was the old man's persistence in fishing that killed him; for the doctor the cause was the use of an outboard motor. Unfamiliar with the risks of high speed motoring in freezing temperatures, the old man's body could not take the exposure. In a sense, the story is about the disastrous effects of forcing late middle-aged and elderly people to live by unfamiliar means in communities not their own. For Connors, though, these are subsidiary insights. It is when we get inside the old man's mind that we see what lies behind his death. He lives in his son's house but this is not his home. The play on the distinction between house and home is developed through the old man's image of himself as a fallen tree:

But the old tree was finished, he knew. Even if you wanted to, and you had the strength to do it, you couldn't transplant an old tree. You might take young roots from their native soil all right, but old roots are too deep in the land where they were formed, and they've spread too far to be hauled up and put in a brin bag with a bucketful of mud . . . A momentary feeling of weariness passed through the old man. It seemed so unfair that he should be uprooted from his home at his age. What business had governments to force him to move to the mainland? (31)

Even if the receiving community tries to make the change acceptable, the truth is that the old man cannot adjust. The physical change prevents the retention of old values. The fact that the old man has been resettled twenty years and still has not adjusted to the new way of life indicates how great was his loss on leaving his island home. A similar outcome is depicted in the popular song "Outport People," in which songwriter Bud Davidge warns that forced movement accomplishes nothing because a man will "move without leaving, and never arrive."

On one occasion the old man of Connors's story returns to his old abandoned house. For some reason, he feels the house must be moved after some years of abandonment, though his motivation is unclear. He says it has been "decreed," but we are uncertain whether the decree is a personal one or from some outside agency. The alternative is to let it rot and fall down. In the outport way of life, every scrap of material was put to use; to let any building (except the church) rot was unthinkable. So when the old man comes to tear down his house with no particular use in mind, it is himself, his family, his community, and all the values that stood behind them that he is destroying. Once the house is gone, little of value remains.

### ABANDONMENT: THE CHURCH

The abandonment of the church is yet another image used to illustrate the loss of values suffered through resettlement. The outport way of life was a deeply religious one and the word of the clergy carried enormous weight with the community. In his essay "Death of an Outport," Al Pittman sees

the Catholic church as an instigator or collaborator in the resettlement scheme as it applied to Placentia Bay:

It closed down schools and churches and took away the priests. Inevitably the latter did the trick. The people of Placentia Bay outports could do without cars, and supermarkets, and television sets, but being as religious and 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. (49)

Certain priests did support resettlement. For some, there was basic agreement with the government position. For others, it was a reluctant nod to a situation that seemed to have no alternative. But some priests proposed an alternative plan, one in which small communities would resettle together close to the fishing grounds and so be big enough to warrant government services (Doody 13). That was not to be, because the government would only fund resettlement to designated centres. Of course, resettlement was not unique to Catholic communities and the lack of clarity about the position of the Catholic church and clergy was equally prevalent among the other denominations affected. The fact is that coves were left and the church was often among the empty buildings abandoned.

In many outports the church was set on the highest piece of land. Some might see this as representing the social dominance the clergy exercised over their flocks. No one denies this was true in many instances, but the visible church building also stood as a beacon for the fisherman at sea. These were not communities of religiosity but ones where the church was a built-in resolution to life's conflicts. If wooden fences served to keep domestic animals in, they were also the accepted means of dividing precious land, the visible sign of a family's worth and drive to succeed, a social process reemphasized by the church's call to respect another's property. The church building was common to all; it symbolized the community itself and its spiritual values. This is the real significance of the church dominating the landscape, and it helps to explain the wrenching of values that occurred through resettlement. All this is brought out in a work like Blackwood's *Leaving Bragg's Island* (1978), where the church is the last building the people can see as they leave their beloved island. It is easy to romanticize and thereby trivialize the spiritual life of outports before resettlement; some observers argue that there was in these places a closer integration of such values as Christian love and service with everyday life than one encounters in much of twentieth-century North America (Doody 10). No doubt the precarious relationship with the sea engendered values that found acceptable expression in the Christian church.

When communities were resettled, churches that were not needed in the receiving communities were abandoned. It was generally understood that no one touched the property of the church for secular use. Nevertheless, scavengers took what they wanted. Tom Dawe, however, reworks the idea of forbidden use of church property in his short poem "A Consecration," from *Island Spell*:

## A CONSECRATION

Luke remembered  
 their last days on the island  
 gathering what was  
 to be taken  
 as young gulls swayed  
 above the sun-grazed swell  
 and a lingering mist  
 ghosted in the garden gleam.  
 And he remembered  
 the clergyman telling them  
 to burn all the boards  
 from the dismantled church  
 because such wood was consecrated.  
 But next day Luke's brother came  
 in the big white skiff  
 and took the wood away  
 to build a house.  
 And as the months passed  
 Luke was uneasy  
 about the anointed wood  
 until that morning  
 when he heard the meek cry  
 of his brother's firstborn  
 within the sanctuary  
 of the new walls  
 as dawn stroked window glass  
 and kettle mist ascended  
 to the sturdy beams.

(29)

By continuing the outport tradition of using well whatever materials are available, the young resettled fisherman forges a blessed link between the old and new ways of life.

To vandalize an outport church, however, was tantamount to declaring war on the community. Moreover, vandalism was a display of a different and weaker set of values. In "The Madonna," a narrative poem by Dawe, two juveniles come to an abandoned island, see the empty church, and begin to shoot holes in the windows and statues. The poem is a verbal triptych, the opening and closing frames picturing an abandoned church on a deserted island and the middle section depicting the visit by the two boys. The narrative works chiefly by contrast. In the opening ninety lines we are given the church in a series of pictures. The sturdy church contrasts with the "empty, grey cottages/ and a few uncertain sheds/ that seemed to lean/ with the whims of each wind." The omniscient narrator draws attention to the walls and steeple, but makes connections between the church and its environment that go beyond any time limitation. Here time works "in the sun and the fog/ and the moon and the tides/ along the passive edges/ on the island." Clouds

sail, winds blow, gulls glide, emptying their bowels, while the “fallow slopes” and cemetery go to grass. The scene is one of natural life, where nature is gradually reclaiming the abandoned buildings and land. When the scene shifts inside the church, the picture we get is that of an empty church with dust reflecting the window light. But the fact that this is an empty church in an empty community suggests the profoundness of the silence. The metal spans help explain the literal sturdiness of the building, yet the emphasis is clearly not on fact alone. The statue of the Virgin dominates the scene. As the church is to the world at large, the Madonna serves as the protectress of the inside world. These first ninety lines themselves serve as a poetic monument to all that the outport church stood for — dominance, protection, invitation, explanation, endurance, and a timeless interaction with nature. What is evoked is a kind of spiritual aestheticism that stirs deep memories for and of the folk who once lived on the island.

The second section of some 219 lines contrasts sharply with the first part of the poem. With the exception of seven lines (143-9) that revert to the narrator’s vision of the church interior, the second section of the poem is devoted to the visit of the two juveniles. Through the use of narration and dialogue, Dawe brings into focus a value system diametrically opposed to that symbolized by the church and its Madonna. The world of plastic and nylon conflicts with the environment of the island. The fibreglass boat, the binoculars, the camera, and the sporting rifle identify the boys as the spoiled and bored brats of another, foreign world. These are the youth of the hourly waged folk, not the sons of the traditional outport. Not valuing anything, they shoot at what they see — a school of mackerel and a gull — not because they have a need for such animals but because they have a gun and bullets. These boys can only make flippant remarks and are unable to appreciate their art teacher’s words about the relevancy of artistic insight. Ignoring the gravestones, they pass through them to the church. They recall old Protestant superstitions about Catholics. This disturbs one of the boys and he wants to leave; but his companion laughs. He begins to shoot holes in the windows on both sides of the church and finally at the statue of the Madonna. One bullet goes in at the eye. The boys leave the church to continue their wandering on the island. We infer that their next hours are as destructive as the first ones. The only connection with creativity, with the recognition that something is worth preserving for its inherent value, the camera, goes unused.

The last lines of the poem return to the empty church, but now we see the effects of vandalism — the slow but inevitable destruction of the church. At this point the full significance of the church is made apparent. The church as a building takes its meaning from humankind. Churches and statues are symbols. People make them into symbols by imbuing them with positive values. And people destroy them by their negative values. As the church took its strength from the island people, so it manifests its weakness through the

teenage boys. By evoking a unified association between the church and the island, Dawe notes the thoughtless rejection of all the values for which the outpost stood, the social as well as religious (*Hemlock Cove* 44-5).

#### ABANDONMENT: THE GRAVEYARD

Perhaps no image stirs as many feelings of guilt in those who resettled as that of the abandoned graveyard. Of course, graveyards cannot be moved, at least not easily. When the people of Argentia were resettled in the 1940s on the establishment of the military base, American authorities agreed to dig up and transport the three small graveyards to Freshwater, the new townsite. The whole process was carried out at night in keeping with the wishes of the priest and people (Foran 3-4). Once established, the new graveyard in Freshwater was a source of great pride and consolation. In the outpost resettlement program, no such opportunity to move graves was ever considered.

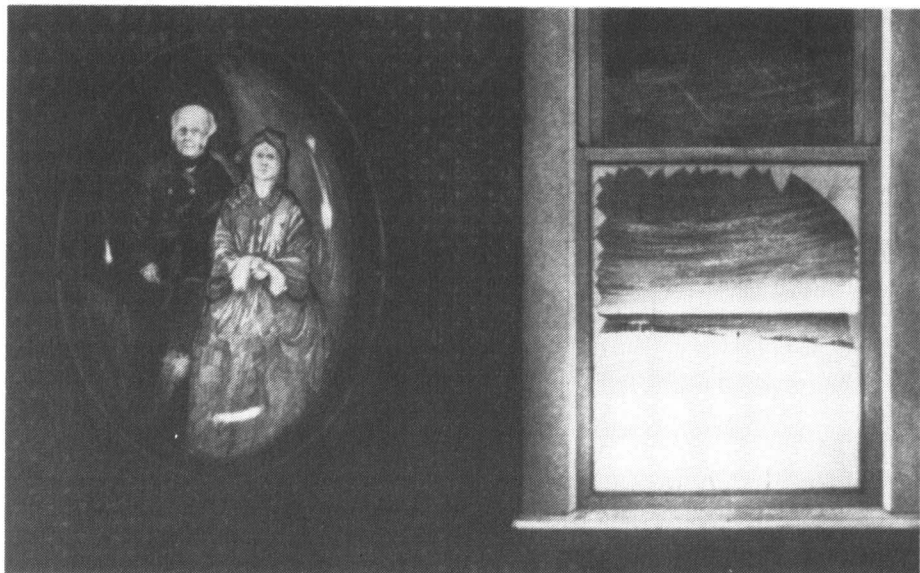
In his print *Abandoned Ancestors on Bragg's Island* (1971), David Blackwood gives a poignant vision of the abandonment of the dead. In the picture we see a double panel as it were, the left with the picture of the couple, and the right, an image of the outside world through broken glass. The shattered glass reminds us again of the destruction of outpost life through resettlement. Outside, the falling fence is a mute reminder that this is a place where no one lives anymore; there is no one to take care of animals and property. The left half of the picture contains an oval frame with a richly dressed couple, perhaps the husband and wife of the house or the grandparents. We are reminded in their dress that the Bragg's Island of Blackwood's art, and of history, was a place of great captains, great hunters of seal and fish. The thought of leaving behind a picture of one's relatives was inconceivable. Such, for Blackwood, is the magnitude of the loss due to resettlement. For the real ancestors are not in pictures but in the hard soil of the island.

The most extensive literary work centering on the abandoned graveyard is the play "West Moon" by Al Pittman. Although performed on stage in the early 1980s, "West Moon" has not been published and is now undergoing revision. Nevertheless, in its original form it did make an impact on audiences, and it stands as an important work in the resettlement canon. A play in two acts, "West Moon" approaches resettlement from the perspective of the dead themselves. It is All Souls' Night, November 2, a solemn day in the church calendar when the faithful are asked to pray for the dead, specifically for those in Purgatory who are being purged of their sins before they enter Heaven. On this night, it seems the dead get the power of speech. The characters Ray and Ned explain it to a newcomer, Nish.

Ray: . . . All Souls' Night every year . . . we get our voices back. God only knows why it's so, but it seems that's the way it goes.

Ned: I suppose it makes some kind of sense. Remember how we was always told that the souls of the dead would be up and about on All Souls' Night? As I recall nobody went anywhere near the graveyard on All Souls' Night. Some wouldn't hardly step out the door for Godsake. That could have had something to do with this fitout here, this business of us being able to talk the way we can.

As the prologue indicates, we are in the abandoned community of St. Kevin's. The night is given over to the sounds and stirrings of animals and the silent presence of gravestones. A roll of thunder brings us to the voices of the dead — Jack, Maggie, Ray, Rose, Skipper Bill, and Sheila. But these are not the dead we associate with the dead of Christian belief. For one thing, they retain their earthly personalities. For another, they have no glimmer of understanding of where they are in the chain of Heaven, Purgatory, and Hell. They cannot communicate with or sense anything about the world above. They are simply voices trapped in coffins of rotting flesh, but voices that are lively, humorous, sceptical, sharp, eager for information about their home community of St. Kevin's, and inquisitive about their own situation. They believe in God but their faith is a combination of ritual prayers and existential leaps into the void, a void accepted for the most part by naive explanation. There are more than just traces of the absurdists here — the grim humor, the inability to create any real meaning, the sense that this is all there is, waiting and more waiting, an eternity of waiting reinforced by the play's conclusion that there will be no more arrivals, no more information because above there are no more people to bring new possibilities when they die.



David Blackwood: *Abandoned Ancestors on Bragg's Island*

The second act, entitled "The Coming of Winter," quickly brings us to the topic of resettlement. Through Ned, the others hear the arguments given in favor of the program — education, medical facilities, amenities, poor inshore fishery. Ned tells of the pressure people felt to move — that the government had made regulations that trapped people with no choice left to them but to move, and that the church added to the pressure. The news of resettlement is heartbreaking for the dead. They picture themselves as lonelier than ever, their graves grown over by weeds and alders. "Not a very nice thing," says Bill, "to think you might be forgot about altogether."

The heaviest indictment of the resettlement scheme comes from Nish, the latest arrival. Dumb all his life, Nish now has the power of speech. He seems to be the only one who has gained anything by dying, though in gaining speech Nish can only face the same existential dilemma as the others. What he relates about his death shocks the others. He had been so overcome with sorrow and sadness at the thought of resettling that he hanged himself inside the church just as he was sent to lock it up for good. Nish recalls the negative effects the resettlement proposal had on St. Kevin's. He concluded that he would never be able to fit in wherever they moved. It finally dawns on the dead that St. Kevin's has already moved. Ray tries to picture what the deserted community looks like.

Ray: It's a hard thing to picture. Nobody at all up there. No smoke from the chimbleys. Nobody stoppin' at the spring well for a yarn. No lights in the windows. Nobody walkin' in the road. No dogs barkin' in the night. Nobody goin' into the droke for firewood. Nobody laughin' or singin' or dancin'. Or dyin' even.

It is obvious that Pittman wanted his audience to see a parallel between this purgatorial nowhere world and the land to which the people of St. Kevin's go. All are only voices, hoping through ritual, naive logic, and endurance that things are not as bad as they seem. Resettlement, then, is an evil most clearly witnessed in what the abandoned dead have to say. The resettled outports certainly won't be in the heaven suggested by politicians. They may well be in Hell. At best, the resettled will be in a never-never land, unable to make meaningful connections except with a few of their own. Here Pittman identifies yet another difficulty with resettlement, the failure of the government to prepare the so-called growth centres for the reception of people. Inadequate planning and funding often resulted in a negative reaction by the permanent residents to their new neighbors.

One difficulty with "West Moon" is that the existential dilemma of the dead dominates the play and the issue of resettlement merely appears attached to it. Perhaps this is one reason Pittman is dissatisfied with the work. As it is, there are two plays in "West Moon" and the absurdist drama is by far the more interesting. Yet the social question remains important. The play reiterates the feeling of helplessness that many outport people felt in resettling. It also addresses the question of the responsibility outport people

must take for their part in moving. As noted earlier, this motif of the guilty victim provides one of the central paradoxes in resettlement literature and art. Writers and graphic artists tended to note the paradox without blaming the characters too harshly. Some suggested that people moved very reluctantly, only after most had already gone, and under the pressure of government regulations. Others created a narrator in the first person, who passed judgment on his own conduct. Paul O'Neill, in the poem "Lost Outport," reflects on his immaturity when he left home: "something knocked upon/ the open door/ and I went out" (93). The final stanza of Joe Byrne's song "The Government Game" judges the narrator and the government as one:

And when my soul leaves me for the heavens above,  
Take me back to St. Kieran's the place that I love;  
And there on my gravestone right next to my name,  
Just say I died playing the government game.

In "West Moon" the dead are the accusers of those who resettled, while the arguments for the defence have a hollow ring. Those who abandon the dead do not get off lightly.

In summary, the images that the artists of Newfoundland used to counter the rhetoric of government provided the means for the public to recognize that the attempt to move into the twentieth century had human and cultural costs that were as important, if not more so, than the social and economic gains promised through centralization. It was no accident that many of the writings on resettlement were printed in collections directed in the main at school children. The countering we have been considering received much impetus from the publishing industry (particularly Breakwater Books under the direction of Clyde Rose and Al Pittman). Departure and Abandonment serve as two comprehensive categories for the images which depict the concerns of artists. For some, like Dawe and Blackwood, the countering, not polemically partisan, included the universal theme of the inevitable passage of time. For others, like Pittman, Furey, and Rodgers, the countering is most often specific in nature. For nearly all, the interest in the countering continues because they either wish to remember a way of life now past or hope to keep resettlement fresh in the public consciousness as a warning against similarly motivated government programs. In doing so, they have made government and people more aware of rural values that they perhaps too readily take for granted.

## Note

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