

Elizabeth Bishop in Newfoundland: "Sad and Still and Foreign"

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Elizabeth Bishop in Newfoundland: “Sad and Still and Foreign”

VALERIE LEGGE

ELIZABETH BISHOP IS CONSIDERED by many critics to be one of the most important poets of her generation.¹ In August 1932, long before she began her professional career as a writer, Bishop, along with Evelyn Huntington, a classmate from Vassar, sailed from Boston to St. John's to make a walking tour of Newfoundland, Britain's oldest overseas colony.² The first of many voyages to interesting and unusual places, this trip to Newfoundland was Bishop's first major journey. Though she had travelled regularly between Nova Scotia and the “Boston States” and had spent time on Cape Cod, the Newfoundland trip was the first time that Bishop, who would become famous for her sense of geography, ventured beyond her childhood world. As such, the Newfoundland trip initiated a pattern of travel to islands as far flung and as exotic as the Galapagos, Key West, and Aruba.

Popular promotional literature at the time referred to Newfoundland as “America's Newest Playground” and a “Land of Picturesque Beauty and Romantic Charm.”³ Advertisements ran regularly in *The Newfoundland Quarterly* promoting the colony as an “unspoiled vacation-land” with a “stimulating climate” and “interesting people.”⁴ During her trip to the island, Bishop collected photographs of the people she met and postcards of some of the places she visited.⁵ She also kept handwritten notes which at some later date she edited and typed, adding handwritten jottings in the margins. Among her papers at Vassar, this brief travel narrative is titled simply “Notes in Newfoundland, 1932.” It begins 19 August (a day after she arrived on the island) and ends abruptly 3 September even though Bishop remained on the island an extra week (until 10 September). If Bishop kept notes during the final week of the trip, they have not survived. However, several photographs of people and scenes from Newfoundland and Labrador have been preserved, though it is

not clear that Bishop travelled beyond the Avalon Peninsula.⁶ Biographer Brett C. Miller describes the surviving journal entries this way:

The entries are recognizably and vividly Elizabeth's in their intense observation on the landscape and its people and interest in why things are arranged as they are. But her position relative to the friendly strangers she meets on the island is the journal's major interest. Here we see her for the first time as the touring foreigner, in the place but not of it, wanting to "stay forever" but finding it impossible. She does not yet ask her "questions of travel," but she presents them. (47)

When Bishop made her tour, Newfoundland was in the midst of great economic and political upheaval. The hardships created by the financial collapse of 1929 (resulting in the Great Depression) were compounded in Newfoundland by a political crisis in the government.⁷ On 5 April 1932, just months before Bishop's arrival, the frustration of the unemployed in St. John's peaked during a public demonstration which quickly turned into a riot. Thousands of angry citizens marched on the Newfoundland House of Assembly, forcing the prime minister, Sir Richard Squires, to escape through a rear door.⁸ In the outports, where people keenly felt the brunt of the collapse in world trade, fishermen broke into local shops to steal food for their starving families.

Walking around the Avalon Peninsula, hitching rides and taking lodgings in small inns and private homes, Bishop observed first-hand this traumatic moment in Newfoundland's history and heard "a great deal more about the dreadful 'conditions'." In Trinity Bay she met a young boy aged twelve whose family was "on the dole [welfare] — 6 cents a day, per person." Bishop poignantly describes the young outport boy as being "very old for his age — he is worried about his one pair of rubber boots that are wearing out." Deeply moved by the plight of the impoverished youngster, Bishop before leaving the community gave him money for new footwear. Practical and generous gestures such as this suggest that, sensitive to the needs of the people she met, Bishop recognized her own position of privilege as the granddaughter of a wealthy Massachusetts family. It is unfortunate that Bishop could not muster the same spirit of generosity a day later at a nearby community, where she encountered a group of curious children whom she described as "wretched" and seemingly "very stupid."

Bishop did not restrict her observations regarding economic hardships to the fishing villages. She described Harbour Grace as "a mysterious, rather *black* town, [with] poor little shops." She also remarked on the impact that the economic and political upheaval had in the capital city: "The Brownsdale [Hotel] is on the corner of Gower — Main Street — and Cochrane, an unpaved, muddy side street, very steep. Wooden houses two or three stories high, very narrow and compressed. They are painted mostly a sad gray-brown but there are a few dead greens, blues and reds — all very sooty-looking. Right across from us seem to be three brothels in a row

— we've witnessed some squalid scenes and two street fights. The buildings on Gower Street are brick, low shop fronts all along, many of them boarded up (since the riots) or empty, or displaying nothing but black beer bottles and sheets of old flypaper."⁹

Bishop's view of conditions in Newfoundland clearly conflicted with the government's view of the island as an ideal tourist destination.¹⁰ What compelled Elizabeth Bishop to make a walking tour through parts of Newfoundland's Avalon Peninsula? And how did she view this "other place," this "foreign" landscape with its diverse inhabitants? Did it in any small way contribute to or help shape her poetic vision?

Summer holidays often posed a problem for Bishop. Following the death of her father when she was eight months old, Bishop's mother, Gertrude, suffered a mental breakdown and eventually was confined to an institution in Nova Scotia, where she died in 1934. As a result, Bishop spent her childhood moving between relations in Massachusetts (her Aunt Maude and Uncle George Shepherdson and her wealthy paternal grandparents) and Great Village, Nova Scotia, the home of her beloved maternal grandparents, Elizabeth and William Bulmer. After April 1931, summer visits to Great Village, Nova Scotia, were no longer feasible, for that spring Bishop's maternal grandmother had died. Bishop's biographer Brett Miller¹¹ describes how difficult vacation periods were for her:

Holidays became horrible trials for her; deciding where to spend them was a weighing of obligations and impositions, rarely of desires.... She spent many lonely holidays at the school in makeshift quarters with makeshift meals got up by her sympathetic teachers. In summers, she passed among the homes of her friends.... summer cottages rented by parents and occupied by their daughters and shifting sets of friends; Boston hotels; and obligatory and miserable visits to the Bishop family estate.... The fear and hatred of holidays ... stayed with Elizabeth for the rest of her life. (Miller 32)

One way to avoid such situations was to plan a travel adventure of her own. The Furness Steamship Line provided weekly service from New York, Boston, and Halifax to St. John's. So on 13 August 1932, probably on the *Nerissa*, Bishop and Huntington left Boston and, according to a letter to classmate Frani Blough dated 9 August 1932, they travelled second-class. In her notes for 25 August [St. John's], Bishop writes, "Ev gets up and goes out at 7 to see the *Nerissa* arrive and its handsome quartermaster."

Newfoundland was at that time a logical vacation choice for a number of reasons: a colony of Great Britain yet still an independent country, it was sufficiently foreign yet close enough geographically to be attractive.¹² In her 1966 literary critical study titled *Elizabeth Bishop*, Anne Stevenson described Newfoundland in the 1930s as "a primitive, unknown region of North America" (43). A similar lack of knowledge about the island is evident in Richard Ellman's *The Norton Anthology*

of *Modern Poetry* (1973), which republished Bishop's "Over 2000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance" with a footnote identifying St. John's as "a city on Antigua, an island in the British West Indies," an error which Bishop discussed in an interview with George Starbuck (*Conversations* 87) in 1977.

Yet it was well known to many Canadian and American sportsmen, aviators, and artists.¹³ In her travel notes Bishop documents a strong American presence on the island. For example, at Mrs. O'Toole's boarding house in Caplin Harbour, Bishop is delighted to find "a recent copy of the *Mercury* — seems that an American school-teacher left it." In Brigus she lodges with Mrs. Goshire, who "has four sons in Buffalo and New York, all out of work." In Dildo as Bishop signs the guest house register, Mr. Endymion George tells her "how he once signed one from 'Ohio' instead of Dildo, 'for badness'." In Harbour Grace Bishop and Huntington stay at the Cochrane House "run by the famous 'Rosie' — Rose Archibald September 24, 2007."¹⁴ In the guest register, they see listed "many famous aviation names ... including Amelia Earhart's"; several months earlier Earhart had taken off from Harbour Grace, becoming the first woman to solo across the Atlantic Ocean.¹⁵ Bishop learns that Mollison is expected the next day and that his mechanics have already arrived.¹⁶

In the 1930s travel to Newfoundland from Canada, the United States, and Great Britain was relatively easy, with direct steamship services to St. John's as well as a railway link across the island. Even though Bishop had an independent income and had, since turning twenty-one, full control of her own money, the Newfoundland trip was economically feasible for two college students. For example, transportation and accommodation costs in Newfoundland were relatively inexpensive; four days lodgings at the Sea View Hotel in Topsail, Conception Bay, cost Bishop and Huntington \$2.00 per night each with an extra 75 cents per meal and \$1.75 for cigarettes.¹⁷ In addition, Newfoundland was a place Bishop had often heard about from her Nova Scotian relations, so perhaps she harboured some romantic notions about the island and its inhabitants. Unlike the kind of conventional trips which her affluent friends took for granted, Bishop was more interested in odd, unusual places; naturally curious about the world, she actively positioned herself, through travel, to view it from unusual perspectives.

When she first conceived of the Newfoundland excursion, Bishop had hoped that Frani Blough would be her travelling companion.¹⁸ Their correspondence prior to the trip suggests that Blough may have had her own reasons for wanting to go there. In an undated note Bishop playfully asked Frani, "When and where is L [not identified] to be in Newfoundland? Shall we meet in Dead Man's Cove or Cutthroat Bay?" On 8 July 1932 as the departure time grew near, Bishop wrote to Blough again, imploring her friend to join her: "My dear Frani, I certainly wish you would join us as far as St. Anthony's. I'm sure you'll find L there — for after all isn't St. Anthony the patron St. of lost articles? ... I'm going into training for a grueling trip with the mighty Ev, but I've a feeling I'd be thankful for some company."¹⁹ On 9

August 1932 Bishop wrote a final letter to Blough before setting sail from Boston with “the mighty” Evelyn Huntington:

Ev and I are sailing Saturday ... [for Newfoundland on a walking trip]. The boat takes from then until Thursday to get there and we are going second class, so Heaven knows what shape we'll be in when we arrive. I've collected a small knapsack, a small flashlight, a small flask....

American novelist, Mary McCarthy, another of Bishop's Vassar classmates, remembers Huntington as a “very amusing character,” someone fond of jokes and “slightly off-color songs, mostly borrowed from men's colleges” (Fountain 43).

Several years earlier Bishop and Frani Blough had taken a three-day walking trip on Cape Cod. Many years later here is how Blough (now Frani Muser) recalled that spring vacation:

There was a little rooming house you could stay in. We had a three-day walking trip on the Cape with Miss Farwell [assistant head mistress of Walnut Hill School]. That was the kind of adventurous thing Elizabeth and I liked, adventurous because nobody else would have thought of walking anywhere. (*Remembering* 30-31)

It is quite likely that Newfoundland promised Bishop a similar sense of adventure but this time she planned a trip to a place rather farther afield and more “foreign,” a trip without the proprietous presence of a college chaperone. Travel to such an insular location may also have allowed Bishop to indulge more freely in drink, for in her notes there are frequent references to the purchase of “bottled beer” and “strong black Newfoundland rum”²⁰ that tasted like “molasses & codfish.” Or perhaps she hoped the trip would provide her with material that could be shaped into stories or poems, for when some of her friends warned her that the insects on the island would “eat [her] alive,” she bravely replied, “even a trip to Hell could be talked about after, ‘Oh — why yes, I've been there,’ and everyone turns to look, and you've taken them all by storm.”²¹ Although Bishop's travel notes were never exploited for commercial purposes (i.e., travel essay), we do, in fact, find that several descriptive sections of her notes did find their way into her published poems.

Shortly after arriving in Newfoundland, Bishop sent Blough a postcard depicting the entrance to St. John's harbour with its distinctive “Narrows.” On the back of the card she wrote,

This place is far beyond my wildest dreams. The cliffs rise straight out of the sea 400-500 feet (this picture is really very tame). I wish, and not just conventionally, that you could see them. The streets and houses all fall down toward the water — apparently supported on the masts of the sealers and the schooners below. The penetrating stink of fish and the after-effects of a sea voyage and floating and up-tipping all combine to make it very strange and frightening....

Later in a poem titled “Over 2000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance,” Bishop imaginatively reconstructed the moment she sailed into the port city: “Entering the Narrows at St. John’s / the touching bleat of goats reached to the ship. / We glimpsed them, reddish, leaping up the cliffs / among the fog-soaked weeds and butter-and-eggs.”²² This poetic passage resembles a section from Bishop’s travel notes dated 20 August: “That evening we took a wonderful climb up the hills on the other side of the harbor [Southside Hills near Fort Amherst] — chased the sun right up and over. The rocks are brown-bronze at that time of day — covered with butter & egg flowers — many goats.”

Besides adventure there may have been another reason for Bishop’s trip to the island. Bishop’s great uncle George W. Hutchinson (on her mother’s side of the family) from Nova Scotia had gone to sea as a young boy. After he returned home from his travels, Hutchinson produced several paintings based on his memories of some of the places he had visited: the far North and Belle Isle.²³ In the poem “Large Bad Picture” from her first collection, *North & South* (1946), Bishop commemorates this great-uncle, his distant travels and his “primitive” attempts at preserving these memories: “Remembering the Strait of Belle Isle or / some northerly harbor of Labrador, / before he became a schoolteacher / a great-uncle painted a big picture.” In her notes Bishop suggests that some of her father’s “distant relations” may have settled permanently on an island near Topsail, Conception Bay.²⁴

Although Bishop was disappointed that she and Huntington were unable to visit St. Anthony, a village which she described in a postcard to Frani as “inaccessible,” several photographs in the Bishop Collection indicate that she had some knowledge of coastal Labrador. Perhaps the poem “The Imaginary Iceberg” resulted from stories she had heard as a child. Or could she have seen a copy of Rev. Louis L. Noble’s beautifully illustrated *After Icebergs with a Painter* (1862)? If she had taken a coastal boat north to White Bay or across the Strait of Belle Isle,²⁵ most likely she would have encountered a scene similar to the one recorded in her poem: “We’d rather have the iceberg than the ship, / although it meant the end of travel. / Although it stood stock-still like cloudy rock / and all the sea were moving marble. / We’d rather have the iceberg than the ship.” Of course, Bishop was an avid collector of postcards, and Newfoundland postcards depicting distinctive icebergs and vast fields of ice floes were quite common in the 1920s and 1930s (in fact, they are still used to lure tourists to the province).²⁶ Or perhaps one of the sources of inspiration for Bishop’s poem was an early lyric (i.e., “The Ice-Floes” or “The Sea-Cathedral”) by Newfoundland poet E.J. Pratt.²⁷

On 19 August, shortly after arriving in St. John’s, Bishop and Huntington hiked out to Portugal Cove and took the ferry, the *Maneco*,²⁸ across the Tickle to Bell Island (identified incorrectly in Bishop’s journal as Bell Isle), where they found lodgings for the night at Mrs. Cahill’s Boarding House. Bishop frequently referred to communities by their previously known names, indicating perhaps that she was consulting an out-of-date map or guidebook. An anonymous contributor to

The Newfoundland Quarterly (July 1901) recommended Bell Island as an ideal tourist site, a place where one could “forget the cares of this wicked world.” Continuing to extol the virtues of the island, he writes,

From every standpoint the island is a most health-giving place, particularly in the summer season.... The beach provides many comforts for the bather, being floored in several places with a sand soft to the touch as velvet. And the green slopes which lie all about, basking in the bright sunshine, serve to give the panorama the appearance of a veritable Eden. (3)

As they explored this “veritable Eden,” Bishop observed the vivid red colouring of the soil and recorded her first impression of outport life: “There is great poverty — prices are high — oranges 3 @ 25 [cents].”²⁹ In 1932 Wabana Mines was partially shut down for extended periods of time and the people on the island suffered great hardships. In the margin of her notes concerning the closing of the mines “except for two days a week,” Bishop wrote, “the men get \$4.20 for the 2 days’ work.”

In 1966 Ashley Brown, interviewing Bishop at her home in Brazil, asked if her writing during the 1930s had been affected by her political experiences and if she believed that “radical political experience was valuable for writers” (*Conversations* 22). Bishop responded, “I was very aware of the Depression — some of my family were much affected by it. After all, anybody who went to New York and rode the Elevated could see that things were wrong. But I had lived with poor people and knew something of poverty first-hand. About this time I took a walking-trip in Newfoundland and I saw much worse poverty there.” In that interview Bishop also told Brown that in her early travels she had a “taste for impoverished places” (*Conversations* 27).³⁰

In fact, Bishop describes intimately how outport Newfoundlanders in their “lonely” and “cluttered little houses” suffered and struggled to survive those dark days of the Depression. Her notes record that most women in outports kept cottage gardens and some livestock (sheep, goats, cows) in order to supplement their fish diets with vegetables, meat, milk, butter, and cream. They also raised sheep to provide an abundance of wool, which the women then spun into yarn for sweaters, cuffs, and stockings. In late summer and early fall they gathered raspberries, marsh berries, squashberries, blueberries, and bakeapples to make jams, tarts, preserves, and wines for the winter months ahead and to provide local delicacies for tourists. More privileged women like Captain Bob Bartlett’s two sisters, who had been sent to Boston for schooling, ran boarding houses, small inns, and tea shops to supplement their income, while others ran general stores. In St. John’s, Bishop observed that less fortunate women resorted to working in downtown brothels.

Bishop also provides detailed descriptions of the inns and boarding houses where they lodged, many of which contained religious paraphernalia: “steel-engraved holy pictures”; “a statue of Jesus on a glass case”; another “with a Little Beauty Night

Light, poppy red, burning in front of it"; and "a white plaster Christ holding out his arms off the roof" of a church. She sees chromographs, visual representations of historical events such as the sinking of the *Lusitania*; odd collections of books (D.W. Prowse's *History of Newfoundland*, E. Phillips Oppenheim's popular novel *Mr. Marx's Secret*, Rainer Maria Rilke's poetry, the classics, and Greek tragedies); and popular British and American magazines as diverse as *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Mercury*. In one boarding house Bishop and Huntington are entertained by two stereopticons: *The Professor Gives a Kissing Lesson* and *King of the Belgians' Conservatory*. References to stereopticons later find their way, in altered forms, into Bishop's short story titled "The Housekeeper," where the professor from *Kissing Lesson* is transformed into a postman.³¹

Bishop's careful observations provide a rare glimpse into the lives of Newfoundland women.³² Most of the establishments where Bishop and Huntington took lodgings were owned by women: Mrs. Cahill on Bell Island ran a "tiny, cluttered little house" with "2 or 3 men boarders"; Mrs. Costello in Bay Bulls had 22 boarders; Mrs. O'Toole at Caplin Harbour served wonderful "bread & butter, marsh berries, & Devonshire cream"; Mrs. Breen at Cape Boyle [Broyle], who kept "a rather odd place," openly yearned to live in St. John's so she could go to the movies³³; Mrs. Williams ran the Cabot House at Bay Bulls; Bob Bartlett's two sisters ran the "elegantly furnished" Benville Tea Room in Brigus, which Bishop describes as very like "a tea room on Cape Cod — a fancy one — flowers in vases, *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, etc., paintings and etchings ... [and] Sofa cushions"; the "famous 'Rosie' — Rose Archibald," who operated the Cochrane House in Harbour Grace, is described by Bishop as "very rough and cheerful and [she] wears trousers." Many years later in "Exchanging Hats," an odd poem about cross-dressing and gender stereotyping, Bishop notes the "complexity" of "costume and custom."

How did Newfoundlanders respond to Bishop and Huntington, two rather unconventional women travellers? Not all inn-keepers welcomed the odd couple. Mrs. Costello at Calvert, who was "rather disagreeable" toward them, had no room for them at her Boarding House. Another Mrs. Costello at Ferryland "didn't like [their] looks & [they] didn't like *hers*" so they pushed on to Cape Broyle, where they found more welcoming lodgings. Mrs. Williams at Bay Bulls was initially "very cool, then more friendly." In many of the small communities along Conception Bay and Trinity Bay, the two young women attracted unwanted attention. At Spaniard's Bay when they stopped to rest, "The people ... were ruder than any before — they followed us through the street.... and gathered a real mob. We fed the children molasses candy ... but the older boys were awful, all sniggers." Between Chapel Arm and Norman's Cove, they were "followed all the way by several children." Mrs. Green at Norman's Cove gave them lodgings but the crowd would not disperse. Bishop writes, "I play the parlor organ — it's near a sort of bay window that's open, and the crowd (the children from Chapel Arm are still there too) in the twilight gets larger & larger. It is sinister. They just stare, don't say anything, at

least 20 people.”³⁴ In *Questions of Travel* (1965), Bishop asks, “Is it right to be watching strangers?” Here in these small Newfoundland communities the tables are turned and the traveller experiences the discomfort of being the person watched.

Did Bishop’s visit to the island contribute to or reflect in any small way her poetic vision? Can we view her travel journal as a portrait of the artist as a young woman? In *That Sense of Constant Readjustment*, Lloyd Schwartz identifies dramatic tension or an “awareness of ambiguities” as a crucial element in Bishop’s work. I am not sure how developed that awareness is in her travel notes, but I do believe that the seeds or the beginnings of what will be the major tensions in her work are already evident, as are some of the key images that Bishop will later rely on. On her first excursion, she looks around Bell Island, then describes it this way in her handwritten notes: “Barren town — East, West, South.” In the typed version she writes, “There are North, South, East, and West ... all barren” with the word “North” crossed out.

In an interview with Ashley Brown in 1966, Bishop discussed the creative process: “A group of words, a phrase, may find its way into my head like something floating in the sea, and presently it attracts other things” (*Conversations* 25). Her travel notes contain many stray images and phrases that later Bishop incorporated in her poetry. The “brothels” on the corner of Gower and Cochrane reappear “in Marrakesh” (“Over 2000 Illustrations”); the “wild road” between Portugal Cove and St. Phillip’s surfaces in “Cape Breton”; the “palings” in the O’Toole’s garden figure into “The Monument”; the “wonderful coffee and toasted rolls” that she enjoys at Brigus later appear in her Depression poem, “A Miracle for Breakfast.” Bishop’s description of outport “fish houses on stilts” creeps into “At the Fishhouses,” a poem inspired by the sights and sounds of Ragged Islands in Nova Scotia and also from her memories of fishhouses along the Parrsboro shore road near Great Village; and her description of “paper roses” and “lonely little [outport] houses” anticipates the setting of “Roosters.” Some of the other images that occur in her notes are “mackerel” and colours such as orange, red, green, and grey.

When Bishop was teaching in Seattle in 1973, she told her students, “When you use a metaphor or simile, don’t use it casually. It should clarify, not just ornament. Make it accurate” (*Remembering* 208). In her notes we see several examples of Bishop’s own search for apt and accurate figures of speech. On 20 August, she and Huntington go exploring the cliffs near St. John’s. Her notes contain a brief description which, with its images, near rhymes, and figurative language, may easily be viewed as an embedded prose poem: “we took a wonderful climb up the hills on the other side of the harbor — chased the sun right up and over. The rocks are brown-bronze at that time of day — covered with butter & egg flowers.” Late one afternoon near Cape Broyle, she compares the cliffs covered with “orange and grey” lichen to a fiery “sunset.” At Bay Bulls, she and Huntington stay at the O’Toole’s guest house: “There is a green and red glass over the front door — going

downstairs [is] like going underwater.” The men in the community fish in “clear, clear water, like dark ice.”

Bishop’s careful attention to names, especially place names, is evident throughout her notes (e.g., in her earlier references to imaginary places: Dead Man’s Cove and Cutthroat Bay; and the particularly evocative Cupids is underlined). Frequently she uses original place names, for example Bell Isle [for Bell Island] and Tickle Harbour for Calvert, as if she were consulting an outdated map.

Also Bishop’s delight in strange or peculiar objects like stereopticons, chromographs, and mechanical toys (“Cirque d’Hiver”) is evident when Mrs. Ambrose Williams at Bay Bulls winds up and displays a toy mechanical seal for her. She also reveals her own playfulness and quiet sense of humour. At the Cabot House in Bay Bulls, there is a “little iron stove” in their bedroom, for Bishop “too suggestive of the human form” so, before retiring for the night, she dresses the stove in her own clothes “from underwear up.” In one establishment, Bishop spies a first edition of Prowse’s *History of Newfoundland* and wonders, “Should I steal it?”

Bishop’s ear for different dialects is also evident in the fragments of conversations that she carefully records. At Heart’s Desire a young boy with a strange air of formality asks the girls, “Have ye gone astray?”³⁵ An old woman near St. Phillip’s stops to chat with them about the “hile” [oil] under the ground.³⁶ Other phrases that she records are to “piddle around,” to “jig” fish, to be “put up” for the night, “me dear man,” and to “bile [boil] your kettle out.”

In her travel notes Bishop often shifts from past tense, which she uses to recall the general sequence of events, to present tense when she wants to develop a particular moment or impression, “to dramatize the mind in action rather than in repose” (*Conversations* 26). For example, here is a segment from her notes dated 21 August: “Walked from St. John’s to Bay Bull’s. We were given a ride by a ‘mail-car’ — two rather drunken men, the driver all dressed up, with a large dead rose in his lapel. We went as far as Calvert with them.... we were directed up around Caplin Harbour to Mrs. O’Toole’s.... This is one of the most beautiful places I have ever seen. The sides of the harbor are steep & rocky — but the thin grass is deep emerald green. It is foggy & rainy — the fog drifts back & forth.... Everything is very irregular.”

Did Bishop find in her Newfoundland trip whatever it was (“commerce or contemplation”) that brought her there? Her travel notes indicate that certain segments of her trip were very rewarding. For example, she describes Caplin Harbour as “one of the most beautiful places [she had] ever seen.” In an entry dated 21 August, she writes, “We would like to stay forever.”³⁷ Described in idyllic terms, this small Newfoundland outport and others like it may have reminded Bishop of Great Village, Nova Scotia, where she had spent her earliest and perhaps happiest years.³⁸ As David Staines suggests, Great Village “offered Elizabeth Bishop a first world of family affection, simple dignity, and life close to the soil and the sea.” In “In the Village,” a prose work written in the early 1950s, Bishop describes the geography,

people, places, and events of Great Village in ways similar to her descriptions of Newfoundland and its inhabitants. Women like Mrs. Naomi Hopkins in Heart's Content, described as "a nice old lady," may have reminded Bishop of her own Nova Scotian relations, women like her maternal grandmother and her aunts, Grace and Maude, who had struggled to make do with the little they had.³⁹

In an acceptance speech for a literary prize delivered at the University of Oklahoma in 1976, Bishop said, "all my life I have lived and behaved very much like a sandpiper — just running along the edges of different countries, 'looking for something'" (*Collected Prose* viii). Newfoundland was just one of the many "sad and still and foreign" places that Bishop was drawn to during her lifetime. In *An Unspoken Hunger: Stories from the Field* (1995), Utah naturalist Terry Tempest Williams writes, "Each of us harbors a homeland, a landscape we naturally comprehend" (12). For Bishop, this imaginative homeland (or "motherland"⁴⁰) was a composite of all the islands and safe harbours she had ever visited, "felicitous places"⁴¹ all echoing back to her first "real" home, her grandmother's house in Great Village, Nova Scotia.

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Notes

¹Harold Bloom identifies Bishop as one of the five principal poets of her generation. See Bloom, "Books Considered," *The New Republic* 176 (5 February 1977), 29; "The Necessity of Misreading," *Georgia Review* 29 (Summer 1975), 267; and "Introduction," Elizabeth Bishop: *Modern Critical Views* (New York: Chelsea House, 1985).

²From around 1907 Newfoundland was classed as a "dominion" but it did not adopt the title until around 1918. Even then its official name remained "colony" since the letters patent were not changed and it never exercised all the powers to which it was entitled. From 1934 to 1949, it was technically a dominion but constitutionally a colony until it entered Confederation in 1949.

³The Newfoundland government regularly took out full-page ads in *The Newfoundland Quarterly* during the early 1930s.

⁴See *The Newfoundland Quarterly* (Summer 1932), 43.

⁵The Elizabeth Bishop Papers, Vassar College Library Special Collections, Poughkeepsie, New York, contains Bishop's Notes, Newfoundland Trip (Folder 77.1), several postcards and photographs related to the trip (Folder 100.24), and many letters to Frani Blough.

⁶There are four postcards (three are titled: “Logy Bay, Newfoundland”; “The Narrows,” “Entrance to St. John’s, Newfoundland”; and “Portugal Cove, near St. John’s, Newfoundland”). The fourth postcard shows a scene under stages near the St. John’s waterfront where fish was “made.” There are five photographs. The subject of one is identified in Bishop’s handwriting as Miss Dorothy Somers, Hudson Bay Co., a nurse. Could this be the same Dorothy Somers who graduated from Snoqualmie High School, Fall City, Washington, in 1928? One of the unidentified people in the other two photographs appears to be Cluny Macpherson (1879- 1966), famous for inventing the gas mask and for suppressing two outbreaks of smallpox, one on the southern coast of Newfoundland (1904 and 1909) and the other on the Labrador coast (1902). From 1902 to 1904 he took charge of the Grenfell Hospital, Battle Harbour, Labrador. After the war he became the president of the St. John’s Clinical Society and the Newfoundland Medical Association. With Bishop’s history of illnesses, it seems reasonable that she would have made some medical arrangements before or after she arrived in Newfoundland.

⁷An economic depression hit Newfoundland at the end of World War I as saltfish prices fell, so the worldwide depression in 1929 was a continuation of the end-of-the-war decline. Before 1924, when the United States began to restrict immigrants, many Newfoundlanders had migrated to the Boston States.

⁸See Gene Long, *Suspended State: Newfoundland Before Canada* (St. John’s, NL: Breakwater Books, 1999) for a contemporary look at “the coup of ’32.” See also S.J.R. Noel’s *Politics in Newfoundland* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971). On 31 August, Bishop and Huntington lodged with Mrs. Bryant in Heart’s Delight. Bishop writes, “Squires’ ‘yacht’ is at the pier here, just a small tug-like boat. He and Lady Squires are sailing tomorrow.”

⁹A city directory gives the address of the Brownsdale Hotel as 194 New Gower St.

¹⁰See James Overton, *Making a World of Difference: Essays on Tourism, Culture and Development in Newfoundland* (St. John’s, NL: ISER Books, 1996). Overton suggests that such propaganda was standard policy for decades and even promulgated in the nineteenth century. See also Gerald L. Pocius, “Tourists, Health Seekers and Sportsmen: Luring Americans to Newfoundland in the Early Twentieth Century,” in *Twentieth-Century Newfoundland: Explorations*, ed. James Hiller and Peter Neary (St. John’s, NL: Breakwater, 1994), 47-77.

¹¹Miller is the first critic to make any significant observations regarding Bishop’s trip to Newfoundland (47-48). There is one error, however, in her report: Bishop and Huntington did *not* get rides in “donkey carts.”

¹²Technically Newfoundland was no longer a “dominion” after 1934 but precisely which year marked the transition from “colony” to “dominion” is unclear, even in Neary’s *Newfoundland in the North Atlantic World, 1929-1949*.

¹³For example, at the turn of the century, women travellers Agnes C. Laut and E. Pauline Johnson (“the Mohawk poet”) came to boost and exploit the place that Beckles Willson called the “Cinderella of the colonies.” Sent to Newfoundland in 1898 by American and Canadian journals to report on the island’s sporting, mining, and tourist activities, Laut published an article titled “Cruising on the French Treaty Shore” in *Westminster Review* in 1899. Johnson made at least two trips to Newfoundland: in 1900 and 1902. Like Laut she published articles on sport and tourism in Newfoundland; in an article published in the *Globe* in 1902, she referred to Newfoundland as “Our Sister of the Seas.” From the 1920s to the 1930s

American painter-photographer Edith S. Watson travelled with her companion Victoria Hayward across Canada and to outport Newfoundland, where she documented the lives of working people. See Frances Rooney's *Working Light: The Wandering Life of Photographer Edith S. Watson* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1996). Visual artists like the Canadian Group of Seven's Lawren Harris and the American artist Rockwell Kent made painting trips to the island in the early decades of the twentieth century. See also, for example, Dr. Arthur Selwyn-Brown's "Attracting Tourists to Newfoundland," *The Newfoundland Quarterly* 34.1 (July 1934), 5-8.

¹⁴Rose Archibald (1891-1972) was born in Harbour Grace. She attended a woman's college in Nova Scotia, then returned home to work in her family's business (Archibald Brothers Ltd.). When Major F.S. Cotton made his historic flight from St. John's to Harbour Grace in 1922, Archibald was with him on his return flight.

¹⁵Amelia Earhart (1898-1937) was a famous American aviator. In June 1928, she was the first woman to fly across the Atlantic as a passenger (from Trepassey, Newfoundland). She was lost during a flight in 1937. Nearly a decade earlier, in September of 1920, Agnes C. Laut flew over and photographed from the air the Peace River district with World War I fighter ace Wilfred "Wop" May.

¹⁶According to Calvin Coish's *Newfoundland Datebook* (Grand Falls, NL: Lifestyle Books, 1983), on 24 August 1932 aviators Lee and Brockton landed at Harbour Grace in the monoplane *Green Mountain Boy*. On 28 August, a Shell Sikorsky amphibious plane with pilot R.T. Wickford and two others landed at Harbour Grace. When Bishop and Huntington arrived in Harbour Grace on 29 August, Bishop went looking to see the aircraft but she could not find it.

¹⁷For a photograph of a 1931 train excursion to Topsail, see Fred Adams's *St. John's* (St. John's, NL: Creative Printers, 1986), 122. *The Newfoundland Quarterly* contains a number of essays regarding tourism: Anon, "Bell Island," *The Newfoundland Quarterly* 1.1 (July 1901), 2-3, and Dr. Arthur Selwyn-Brown's "Attracting Tourists to Newfoundland," *The Newfoundland Quarterly* 34.1 (July 1934), 5-8.

¹⁸Frani Blough and Bishop had met and become friends at Walnut Hill School. Later they both attended Vassar College.

¹⁹Among Bishop's favourite antiques from Brazil was a wooden carving of St. Anthony (see Miller 500). Her concern with lost objects is best expressed in "One Art."

²⁰According to the Bishop correspondence (and biographers like Brett C. Miller), Bishop began drinking at an early age and, by the time she attended Vassar, her drinking may well have become problematic.

²¹For example, when she went on a river trip to Bahia in 1965, she kept a travel diary, fully intending to sell the story about her trip to a magazine (see Miller 463).

²²See Bill and June Titford's *A Traveller's Guide to Wild Flowers of Newfoundland Canada* (St. John's, NL: Flora Frames, 1995), 50 & 64.

²³See Sandra Barry's *Elizabeth Bishop: An Archival Guide to Her Life in Nova Scotia* (Hantsport, NS: Lancelot Press, 1996), 31-33.

²⁴In the entry for 26 August, Bishop describes her stay at "*Sea View House*, run by two Germans, Will Kuthe & his sister Annie, real Prussians.... They have a beautiful vegetable garden. It is all very German. The floor and all the furniture in the kitchen is scrubbed white with sand and there are rows of china jars with German lettering in blue.... They take us up

the hill in the back of the house to a little fir wood where friends are camping out — named Bishop & probably distant relations.”

²⁵For the coastal service season in 1932, there were a number of vessels she may have taken: the SS *Kyle* began its service to Labrador on June 1; the SS *Prospero* made the White Bay, Humbermouth, Battle Harbour run; and the SS *Sagona* also visited Battle Harbour.

²⁶Among the most popular postcards in circulation at the time of Bishop’s visit were the following: “A Crystal Cathedral, St. John’s, Nfld.” and “Iceberg Scene Off St. John’s Newfoundland,” a visual representation supposedly depicting a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Appearing in the Narrows of St. John’s on 24 June 1905, this mysterious natural wonder was hailed by many Newfoundlanders as a “beautiful and wondrous” sign.

²⁷See E.J. Pratt, “The Ice-Floes” in *Newfoundland Verse* (1923) and “The Sea-Cathedral” in *Many Moods* (1932). Pratt’s first narrative was *Rachel: A Sea Story of Newfoundland in Verse* (1917). “The Ice-Floes” was first published in *Canadian Forum* 2.19 (April 1922), 591-593. There are some similarities between Bishop’s “The Fish” and Pratt’s “The Shark” and “The Big Fellow.” Pratt, like Bishop, believed that poetry “came best out of the imagination working upon the material of actual experience.” He wrote, “My aim was to get the emotional effect out of the image or the symbol operating on the facts of sense perception.” See E.J. Pratt, “On Publishing,” in *E.J. Pratt on His Life and Poetry*, ed. Susan Gingell (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), 33.

²⁸See Hammond’s *Wabana*, 38-39: “During the winter of 1931 a new ferry for the service between Bell Island, Portugal Cove and other points in Conception Bay was under construction for the B.I. Steamship Co. The keel of the *Maneco* has been laid in January at Mahone Bay, Nova Scotia. She was to be ... the first car ferry to be built for service on the Bay. The *Maneco* officially entered upon her regular service on July 1, 1931.”

²⁹For a history of mining on Bell Island, see Wendy Martin’s *Once Upon a Mine: Story of Pre-Confederation Mines on the Island of Newfoundland* (1983) and Rev. John W. Hammond’s *Wabana: “The Place Where Daylight First Appears,”* vol. I (St. Stephen, NB: Print ’N Press, 1982). See also Kay Coxworthy’s *Tales from across the Tickle: Bell Island, Newfoundland* (Bell Island, NL: The Royal Canadian Legion, 1994) and “*The Cross on the Rib*”: *One Hundred Years of History, Bell Island, Newfoundland* (1996).

³⁰In this interview with Brown, Bishop describes “A Miracle for Breakfast” as her “Depression poem” (24).

³¹Stereopticons were improved versions of magic lanterns. On a screen they threw magnified images of photographs, drawings, pages from books, etc. Later, moving pictures utilized the principles applied in the stereopticon.

³²See Hilda Chaulk Murray, *More Than Fifty Percent: Woman’s Life in a Newfoundland Outport 1900-1950* (St. John’s, Nfld.: Breakwater Books, 1979).

³³On 19 August 1929, Newfoundlanders viewed their first sound motion picture at the Majestic Theatre in St. John’s. On 24 August 1932 while Bishop was visiting the island, she and Huntington went to the theatre to see the movie *So Big*. There is another Breen character, a Miss Breen, that Bishop encounters on her ocean trip to Brazil in 1951. Brett Miller suggests that “what Elizabeth got from this brief acquaintance was a vision of an accomplished and successful lesbian life, not at all secretive or ashamed, at a time when she was herself at a major transition” (239).

³⁴Firestone and other American ethnographers encountered the same behaviour in the 1960s. When W.H. Auden visited Iceland, he referred to a similar phenomenon as “the Arctic stare.”

³⁵*Ye*, the second person plural of *you*, is a common dialect feature found around Placentia and indeed throughout the Avalon Peninsula region. Brought to St. John’s, Newfoundland, by the Anglo-Irish, it reached to other parts of Conception Bay and around the Avalon. The lexicon item *astray* may indicate the speaker’s perception of class difference; or it may be a sign of politeness, a mark of the “good manners required” in this situation. See Bishop’s poem “Manners.”

³⁶The addition of an *h* (like the dropping of an *h*) is a dialect feature inherited from descendants who originally came from the southwest of England.

³⁷“We would like to stay forever” anticipates a line from her late poem “Santarém”: “That golden evening I really wanted to go no farther; / more than anything else I wanted to stay awhile....”

“Santarém” is about a boat trip on the Amazon. Even late in her life, with plenty of financial resources, Bishop continued to seek out the roads less travelled. The quotation from “Santarém” indicates how important Newfoundland was in preparing the ground for her future work. This was one of her first experiences of travelling far to a place where she wanted to stay forever, but, as “The End of March” reveals, to stay forever was “impossible.”

³⁸See Miller 315.

³⁹See Victoria Harrison, *Elizabeth Bishop’s Poetics of Intimacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

⁴⁰See Miller 194.

⁴¹See Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Boston Press, 1964), xxxi. Bachelard refers to *felicitous space* as “the space we love” and which needs to be “defended against adverse forces.”

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Elizabeth Bishop's Travels in Newfoundland, 1932

- August 13 Leaves Boston, Massachusetts (probably on the *Nerissa*, one of the Furness, Withy Company's steamships).
- August 18 Arrives in St. John's, Newfoundland. Takes lodgings at the Brownsdale Hotel, a seventeen-room boarding house on the corner of Prescott and Gower. Unlike a regular hotel, it provided accommodations for longer periods of time and at cheaper rates.
- August 19 Walks to Portugal Cove and takes the ferry *Maneco* across the Tickle to Bell Island. Takes lodging at Mrs. Cahill's Boarding House.
- August 20 Takes the ferry back to Portugal Cove. Walks to St. Phillip's. Hitches a ride the rest of the distance to St. John's on a "gravel truck."
- August 21 Walks from St. John's to Bay Bulls. On route, hitches a ride on a "mail car." Walks from Bay Bulls to Caplin Bay (renamed Calvert in 1922). Lodges at Mrs. O'Toole's.
- August 22 Walks around the northern side of Caplin Bay to visit Mr. Tom Powers, then walks for two or three miles to Ferryland. Rests before walking back to Cape Broyle. Finds lodgings with Mrs. Breen and her sister-in-law, the "Scotch Lassie."
- August 23 Gets a ride back to Bay Bulls. Finds lodgings at the Cabot House run by Mrs. Ambrose Williams.
- August 24 Leaves Bay Bulls to walk to St. John's. Hitches a ride for three miles, then walks the rest of the distance. Arrives in the city in time for the St. John's Regatta.
- August 25 Rests for a day in the capital city. Evelyn Huntington rises early to watch the *Nerissa* sail into port at 7 a.m.
- August 26 Leaves St. John's by bus for Topsail, Conception Bay, a well-known summer resort for the St. John's elite. Stays at the Sea View House run by two Germans, Willi and Anna Kuthe. Evelyn Huntington leaves to visit their friend Drodge at a nearby inn.
- August 27 Walks to Holyrood, passing through Foxtrap along the way. Stays at the Byrne's.
- August 28 Walks from Holyrood to Brigus. Along the way, gets a ride in a private car by a "very 'cultured' man & his wife." Walks to nearby Cupids for a swim, then takes lodgings with Mrs. Goshire, Captain Bob Bartlett's "old nurse."
- August 29 Walks from Brigus to Clarke's Beach, Bay Roberts, Spaniard's Bay, and Harbour Grace. Lodges at the Cochrane House run by the famous "Rosie"—Rose Archibald.

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- August 30 Walks from Harbour Grace to Carbonear, then across “the Barrens” to Heart’s Content. Finds lodgings with Mrs. Naomi Hopkins.
- August 31 Walks from Heart’s Content to Heart’s Desire, then on to Heart’s Delight. Stays with Mrs. Bryant. Sir Richard Squires’s yacht is at the pier.
- September 1 Walks two miles to the Crossroads, then on to Islington, Cavendish, and Whiteway. Hitches a ride to New Harbour, then walks on to Dildo. Stays at Mrs. Endymion (Dimmy) George’s.
- September 2 Leaves Dildo. Walks to South Dildo and on to Chapel Arm. Then continues on to Norman’s Cove. Is “put up” by Mrs. Green.
- September 3 Walks to Bellevue. Stops at Thornlea for lunch. Huntington becomes ill. Hires a car to take them to Whitbourne. Catches the train to St. John’s.