

THE WAVE-LINED EDGE OF HOME

A Review Essay

BY SUE WHEELER

Jedediah Days: One Woman's Island Paradise

Mary Palmer

Madeira Park: Harbour, 1998. 224 pp. Illus., maps. \$26.95 cloth.

Lighthouse Chronicles: Twenty Years on the B.C. Lights

Flo Anderson

Madeira Park: Harbour, 1998. 222 pp. Illus. \$18.95 paper.

On Island Time

Hilary Stewart

Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1998. 184 pp. Illus., maps. \$28.95 cloth.

Salt Spring: The Story of an Island

Charles Kahn

Madeira Park: Harbour, 1998. 344 pp. Illus., maps. \$29.95 cloth.

RECENTLY I WAS WALKING with a ten-year-old down a rainy November road. As we splashed through our umpteenth puddle, she asked if I had ever been to a tropical island. Not to the tropics – to “a tropical island.” The very word “island” is evocative of the out-of-the-ordinary, of freedom, of a delicious

isolation (its Latin root, *isola*, means “island”).

An island is a place where an obvious edge is offered – for misfits, originals, free-thinkers, seekers, the lazy, the industrious. You are here; here is where you are. There is the edge, right there, and beyond it is the sea, and after that everywhere else. Milton Acorn, in his

poem "The Island," put it like this:

Since I'm island-born home's as
precise
as if a mumbly old carpenter,
shoulder-straps crossed wrong,
laid it out,
refigured to the last three-eighths
of shingle.

Nowhere ...
is there a spot not measured by
hands;
no direction I couldn't walk
to the wave-lined edge of home.¹

This clear definition of place also defines community. If you and someone you haven't met are on the same island, then you are not strangers. There are obligations to lend a hand because a person in distress can't just call some anonymous expert. On an island all your best resources will be summoned to use. You become the expert. Because of this lack of anonymous somebody's running things, there's an unpredictability, an unironed quality to the texture of daily life. Of course this can be true of country life in general, but on islands it is magnified. Expect to be surprised.

Three of the books reviewed here are very personal accounts of the time their respective authors spent on particular islands (in the case of Anderson's *Lighthouse Chronicles*, on several islands). The fourth is a historical account of the human settlement of Salt Spring Island.

Mary Palmer's *Jedediah Days* is the story of her time on Jedediah Island, a square mile of forest, meadow, rock, bays, and beaches located between the southeastern ends of Texada and Lasqueti Islands. From 1950 to 1971 she came in the summers when she could

and twice lived for longer stretches through the winter. Then in 1972 she and her second husband Al sold their business in Seattle and moved full-time to the island, where they lived and farmed for twenty years. The Palmers stepped into their new life with spirit, courage, imagination, faith, humour, and gusto. This book is a vivid account of the *feel* of life in the Strait of Georgia before the arrival of cell phones and a more general affluence. She gets it right: the sounds, the smells, the air, the make-do clothing, the clocking of life by the tides, the rowing everywhere, the complete dependence upon yourself and your resources, and, at the same time, the great sociability when someone pulled into the bay – the ready teapot, the fresh-baked goodies, the willingness to put anyone up for the night.

There was fun in the challenge. Many of the settlers of these isolated places came from backgrounds that could hardly be more different from the bays and necessities of coastal life. Jenny Hughes, a neighbour on Lasqueti Island, is described as "a gentle lady yet able to cope with primitive surroundings and turn adversities into adventures" (77). These words describe Mary Palmer as well. As she puts it, "each day on Jedediah was a treasure" (136).

In 1994 the Palmers, after lengthy negotiations with the provincial government and an active campaign by many public groups, sold Jedediah as a provincial park. The spirit of this transfer was a continuance of the passion and generosity of the best of coastal life so well described by Mary Palmer in this book.

Lighthouse Chronicles is Flo Anderson's account of her family's struggles and joys as lightkeepers on every part of the BC coast. Each time her husband is transferred to a new posting, the family goes into the un-

¹ Milton Acorn, *Dig Up My Heart, Selected Poems 1952-83* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1983), 52.

known: they are told surprisingly little beforehand about what kind of living conditions they will encounter, which might not matter much to a single man, but which is of great importance to a family with four children. They arrive at Lennard Island, their first posting, in December, to a small old house with an ancient stove and not a stick of dry firewood. The practicality with which they set to bucking up wet driftwood sets the tone for how they will greet the challenges they encounter for the next twenty years.

Anderson tells of educating the children, feeding the family from a sometimes limited larder, and weathering great storms (lighthouses are not stationed in calm bays). The family members were great explorers and naturalists, and she describes many of the flora and fauna they found on and around their rocky homesites.

Anderson also details the workings of the lights themselves. Particularly interesting is her description of the old-style kerosene light at Lennard, a mantle-type similar to a Coleman lantern. The finicky lamp had to be maintained, the huge lenses cleaned, and the clockwork rotation system (which floated on 2,000 pounds of mercury) adjusted according to weather. A strength of this book is the clear descriptions of the day-to-day mechanics of lighthouse life and the politics of coastal governance. She fought the bureaucracy with determination and eloquence, from her own experience, and can take credit for some of the changes the government made over the years (such as allowances for education).

The family moved up and down the inner and outer coasts, finishing with sixteen years at Race Rocks, near Victoria, where the older daughter was eventually hired as the first female relief keeper in the system. Over their last years as

keepers, Flo and Trev Anderson built a fifty-two-foot sailboat that they eventually sailed to Fiji and lived aboard for thirteen years. This book underlines the importance of staffed lighthouses not only for boating safety, but also for the life it offers for the self-reliant and adventurous. One more lifestyle gone, as we head for the monoculture culture.

On the islands, if you're going to a meeting or other scheduled event, people who arrive at the posted hour will often ask, "Are we starting now, or was that 7:30 island time?" Dead batteries, a last flat of seedlings to transplant, a conversation to finish, the fact that most people don't wear watches – all this leads to time being more flexible on the islands than it is on the mainland (except with regard to the school bus and the ferry). Hilary Stewart captures this flavour of island life with her title, *On Island Time*.

Stewart is well known for her beautifully illustrated books about the history of life on the BC coast, particularly First Nations life. (The map of Jedediah Island in Mary Palmer's book was drawn by Hilary Stewart.) This book features her pen-and-ink drawings on almost every page: animals, flowers, sea life, beach cabins, her own house in various stages of completion. She commuted for years, working in Vancouver, until she was finally able to move full-time to Quadra Island in 1990. The book is an account of her becoming "an islander," as she meets the local wildlife and island ways of doing things.

We are also given glimpses into Kwagiulth life on Quadra, as Stewart works on illustrations for a book on Harry Assu, hereditary chief at Cape Mudge, and is invited to attend various ceremonies and celebrations. Stewart hikes the beaches and bluffs, sails

around the island, weathers many storms, and watches the natural life around her. The book's strength lies in the descriptions and drawings of the animals and plants that are right outside her door. Stewart's close observations and vivid reports really take the reader with her. My only wish, reading this book, would be for a more social account of island doings. But this chance to be right in the natural environment, to watch it and note it in detail, is another aspect of "island time."

Charles Kahn's *Salt Spring: The Story of an Island* is a very different book from the other three. Chapter 1 is entitled "In the Beginning: Aboriginal Salt Spring," and the last chapter is entitled "Salt Spring in Transition, 1986-1998." It is a detailed, thorough history of the island, with extensive notes, bibliography, and index.

Kahn describes the polyglot nature of early non-Aboriginal settlement: Portuguese, English, Irish, Scottish, Greek, American (both Black and White), Hawaiian, Japanese, Chinese, German, English, and French-Canadian. Representatives of all these groups stayed, intermarried, and, in most cases, have descendants living on the island today. He examines various people's and groups' reasons for coming to the island (opportunity, poverty, chance for a better life, here and there a crazy dream). Stories of early elections, the first schools and churches, the growth of businesses (with the rise of both cooperation and petty quarrels) show how little the spice of island social life has changed. Early on, the still-extant North/South division developed, with the North half of the island attracting the proper English, the South being settled by the wilder and woolier, including the "dreamers and strong individualists" who undertook to homestead the remote Musgrave area.

How people got from place to place, how a wooden water pipeline is built and maintained, how early logging shows dealt with the huge timber they took out – this book is rich in detail, giving a tangible feel for life on the island through the decades. It is also rich in its descriptions of individual people, from Harry Bullock, "the squire of Salt Spring," who asserted his squiredom in spite of the occasional amusement of his more democratic neighbours, to Winnie Watmough, a tiny woman who logged, "had arms like Popeye," and outlived several husbands.

The book relies for much of its information on direct interviews and quotes from diaries, giving it a fresh, immediate quality. There are many photographs of islanders working, picnicking, boating, or standing on the lawn of their homesteads. Some of the finest are by Jesse Bond, who came to work as Harry Bullock's houseboy in 1906. Trained in photography by Bullock, Bond's eye was his own. His photographs of islanders at work could hang beside many exhibited in art museums.

As one old-timer put it: "You sort of made your own good times." This is still true on the islands, even with satellite dishes. You make your own employment, too. Seventeen per cent of the people on Salt Spring were self-employed in 1991, compared with 7 per cent in the province generally. Kahn ends the book with a summary that could apply to island life everywhere: "The island's contrariness and inconsistency have caused some to move on in disgust, but for many others they are its essence ... [T]he sheer beauty of the place remains ... No wonder the island has attracted so many interesting, creative, and idiosyncratic residents" (316-7).