

Scatarie Island

"Nova Scotia's Far East"

"Forest Fire Causes Evacuation by Sea"

"Trapped by an advancing fire, and losing the battle, residents of the small village of Main-a-Dieu in Nova Scotia, had to be rescued by sea." It was late June, 1976, and I was in Europe studying and travelling - fortunately, not having to earn a living in those days. News from home was sparse. Local newspapers, even those in English, had little to report, a sobering sign to us expatriate Canadians of our relative importance in world events. However, on that particular day, tucked down at the bottom of the international page I encountered this obscure report. Having no idea of where this newsworthy spot was, I checked my map of home and followed the coastline until it led me to the eastern tip of Cape Breton Island, and a large, irregular shaped island pointing its crooked finger into the Atlantic Ocean: and out to Scatarie Island.



This remote island with the strange name tugged at my imagination for a long time. I came close to visiting it a few years later, during my circumnavigation of the province in a canoe but on that particular day it was draped in fog and buffeted by wind - and we didn't dare land. Only years later did I finally set foot on this forgotten and forlorn outpost.



Scatarie Island juts into the North Atlantic off the eastern point of the province. Only a narrow channel, the "tickle" separates it from the village of Main-a-Dieu, where the rocky hills still carry the scarred reminders of the previous inferno, but the currents can be treacherous. This is one of our largest offshore islands (over 10 kilometres in length) but perhaps the least known. No causeway leads here, as with Cape Sable Island, nor even a ferry, as with Brier and Tancook on the mainland. It is a raw world, and not a very pleasant landfall to many of the early visitors from across the sea. An ancient bedrock outcrop fringed by an irregular pattern of shoals, or "sunkers" as they were known in local parlance, guard its shores. Errant wooden ships split like fine tinder, spilling out goods and souls into the pitiless fray if they ventured too close. Only Sable Island and St. Paul's Island have claimed as many sailors in the Atlantic provinces. Sheltered harbours on Scatarie are non-existent, vegetation impoverished and the

cold Atlantic fog and winds ever present, especially in winter and spring.



HUMAN SETTLEMENT

No one lives on Scatarie and it is hard to believe that anyone could have ever set roots on this inhospitable terrain. But, at one time, they did. The earliest visitor was undoubtedly the native North American. Basque and Portuguese fishermen certainly passed this way (perhaps even before the voyage of John Cabot in 1497). They could not have avoided it on their fishing forays along the shore of this continent. The name, Scatarie, is thought to have originated with the Portuguese. It was possibly a whaling station. Perhaps they even made it a seasonal post, salting and drying their catch before returning to Europe in the fall. We do know is the French settled Scatarie in the early 18th century when Louisbourg (only 15 kilometres away) was a bastion of French power in North America. The cod fishery was particularly blessed off its shores and the fortress garrison provided a ready market. A census in 1716 noted over 400 inhabitants. Three quarters of them were temporary summer workers, but over a hundred were men, women and children eking out a year round existence.

With the the fall of Louisbourg in 1756, the inhabitants of Scatarie were deported and any permanent dwellings destroyed. The island remained deserted for 80 years until a life saving station was established in 1836, followed by a lighthouse in 1839. Shortly thereafter, several families from Newfoundland arrived and resumed the fishing lifestyle of the earlier Acadians. In fact the term "sunker", although not in use elsewhere in Nova Scotia, is in common parlance on "the Rock".

Life would have been difficult in those years. In spring and summer the fog and storms could render fishing hazardous in the shoal infested waters; in the winter the drift ice made it impossible. They had to drag their boats far up onto the shore to prevent them from being crushed. Add to this their isolation from the mainland communities. Nearly everything (including building wood) had to be brought over by boat. In spite of these difficulties there were over a dozen families by the early part of the 20th century, with their homesteads, a church, and a school. They supplemented fishing with small gardens (potatoes, cabbage and turnips would grow well) and some livestock. Many had a cow and probably all some sheep. However, with the advent of refrigeration and consumer demand for a fresher product, the islanders could no longer compete with the fishermen on the mainland, who had direct access to the processing plants. The demand for salted codfish gradually dwindled and, with it, their sole reason for clinging to this rock - and they left. In a tale repeated often elsewhere, only the light keepers remained but, they too, had left by the time I first visited in 1991. Our only companion then was to be Bob, **Hurricane Bob**.



We arrived at Northwest Cove by kayak on a mid August afternoon, under an ominous sky reflected by a perverse calm. We decided to forgo testing our new tent and secured the door and boarded up the windows of the lone boat house. We then braced for the anticipated onslaught. However, Bob reserved his full brunt for our friends in southwestern New Brunswick and our humble hovel remained intact and we rose to a morning sky of sparkling clarity. Crisp, northwest winds had swept away the monotonous greys replacing them with intense greens and blues that contrasted with the white crests dancing and swirling onto the horizon of ocean. We were storm bound and set out to explore the island on foot.

Scatarie (roughly 3 km by 6 km) has a number of trails leading through an interior tangle of spruce and fir. Other than the alders, reclaiming the roadway which leads from the boathouse to the light station, there is scarcely a deciduous tree on the island.

Spring and fall would look much the same. The colourful tapestry that cloaks the Cape Breton hills later in the season, is absent here. The road to the light station passes by a wooden church (now just a jumble of prostrate, shingled walls) and the remains of some of the early homesteads. Only one building was still standing, it too, soon to go the way of the others. In a clearing of golden grass, bending to the salty gusts we poked around for treasure, turning up a cast iron stove grill, a rusting kettle transformed into a colander from a burst of buckshot (a frustrated or bored hunter, no doubt) and an intact staircase leading from nowhere to nowhere. A human past was still palpable.

At the tip of the island any pretence of forest dispersed totally, yielding barren rock and heath - and the spectacular sight of breakers thrashing shoal and shore, throwing up a haze of salt spray. A few lonely, rotting poles, as straight as the rest of the island forest was crooked, marked a winding route over the fields to the station, probably supporting the power lines of an earlier era.

THE LIGHT STATION



A light station dominated the most easterly extremity of the province (if you exclude Sable Island) since 1839. Its white tower is 74 ft above the water and its warning beacon, still visible in the bright sunlight, reaches out over 20 miles. The keeper's houses were boarded up but were still in good condition when I visited in 1991. An open basement door, conveniently kicked in by a previous passer-by, led into a concrete basement with several wooden partitions. It was empty, except for an assortment of liquor bottles (unfortunately empty) neatly arranged on shelves. I have sipped more than the occasional rum on my visits to other lights in past. That won't happen again. All the lights in the maritime provinces are now unmanned.

Next to the tower is was a small grave, bordered with a miniature picket fence.

Here is the final rest of one of the keepers children. Remarkably, the house hadn't been vandalised and its solid walls and hardwood floors would have needed little to prepare them for moving in. They had been leased by the College of Cape Breton as a field trip station, but budgetary constraints have ended that. Eventually the buildings will deteriorate until they are ultimately destroyed by the Department of Transport (or vandals), and with them the last symbol of settlement on the island. When I visited again in 2011 the houses were still standing but in an advanced stage of deterioration. They were open completely to the elements and rummanging through the interior over rotting floor boards was not for the faint at heart. However, the tiny graveyard was still intact.



THE NATURAL HISTORY



Coastal islands have a raw hold on the senses that help us break through our predictable view of the world. Scatarie Island is special. The perimeter is open land. Miles of undulating crowsberry mats, sand and cobble beach, trail and barren allow a freedom of movement that has so often been denied me by streams, lakes and dense wood elsewhere. It

reminds me of the English moorland or the Scottish hills where the only barrier is one's own endurance.

It is possible to hike around the entire island. Rock outcrops above the bakeapple barrens overlook the south coast and the mainland beyond. On the north shore, dry crowberry mats, which from a distance appear as a grassy meadow, provide a springy bed. Up close it is fragrant and soft. The interior tangle of coniferous wood can be avoided or traversed by trails. A particularly lengthy one, appropriately named "Long Lane" winds through a moss and lichen draped hobbit wood from one side of the island to the other. There are only a few small ponds on the island and no major streams. An all terrain trail links some hunting camps.

Washed by the sea, the exposed siltstones and sandstones display the colour and textures of an ancient geology. Even away from the incessant battering of angry seas you don't have to probe far under the surface to strike bedrock. It has been moulded and fractured by water, ice and crustal movement over millennia and is among the oldest in the province. "Pristine" is how Sandra Barr describes it. Dr. Barr, a geologist from Acadia University, has studied this coast of Cape Breton for the Geological Survey of Canada. She means that the rock has been altered little since its deposition. The original layering is still very much apparent. The geology also borders a pivotal time in evolution, the Cambrian/Precambrian boundary, which outcrops as a conglomerate at the head of Southeast Harbour. It was during this era that a burst of multicellular diversity transformed life on the planet and, with it, created the beginning of our fossil record. However, no fossils have yet been uncovered here.



Few large mammals make their home on Scatarie. The rugged terrain is scarcely more hospitable to them than it was to humans. There are signs of deer, but none of the red fox which were reportedly once numerous. Over two decades ago, arctic hare and ptarmigan were introduced from Newfoundland but the foxes, great horned owl and poachers put an end to that experiment. None have been spotted since 1986. Eiders and gulls nest in quantity on Hay Island (in Southeast Harbour), petrels on the main island, and this is a stopping place for many migrants, most notably the Wimbrel which is relatively uncommon elsewhere in the province.

The major mammal in the area is marine - the Grey seal. In Eastern Harbour, we encountered well over a hundred, the largest congregation I had ever seen. They were unperturbed by the swells that made me leery of navigating these waters and much less skittish than the seals that I have closer to home. Maybe they were aware that this was their domain. The island is still a wildlife management area and the Dept. of Natural Resources staff make frequent visits. It has recently been designated one of the province's 31 protected wilderness areas.



Eventually the storm winds abated on that initial visit and we were able to continue our journey around the island, poking about the ragged shoreline which bares the marks of its incessant confrontation with the sea. Few visit this outpost anymore. It is far from the more travelled shores of the province. Aside from the occasional kayaker exploring the fringe, maybe a geologist will visit, probing for clues of our ancient history, or picnickers over for a day outing. Just offshore, divers continue to seek treasure from the wrecks that are scattered among the shoals (the Feversham, sunk in 1711 with a treasure of Spanish, Dutch and early American colonial coins, was located nearby). The native vegetation will continue its inexorable march to obliterate the remaining traces of settlement. Trails and cabins will eventually succumb, as will the lightkeepers houses. Scatarie awaits quietly for another era while across the tickle, on the mainland, the scars of that earlier forest fire also fade - gradually blending into the rich greens of new vegetation.

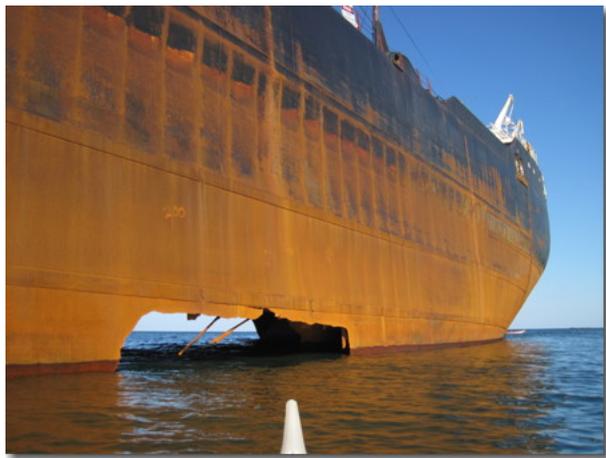
After a lull of many years I returned to Scatarie with my kayak (several times, in fact) and with a newfound interest in weaving in and out of the myriad shoals, ledges, and outcrops that fringe the rocky coastline. These times I view the challenging island perimeter from an entirely different perspective - one that offers some of the most exciting "rock hopping" in the province.



The MV MINER



In 2011, an additional attraction landed on the island when a huge Great Lakes freighter washed up on the northeast shore during a storm. It was being towed to Turkey to be disassembled for scrap when the towline snapped. Initial attempts to pull it off were unsuccessful since the jagged bedrock pierced the bottom of the hull, immobilizing it. It is an impressive sight, especially when viewed from the perspective of a tiny sea kayak. The government has promised to have it removed but the challenges and cost of such an operation render that unlikely. Our limited funds can certainly be better spent elsewhere. It will probably remain where it is and gradually subcomb to the incessant onslaught of ocean, as have many another shipwreck around our coastline - including the *Fury* along the Eastern Shore.



2011



2013

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which contains a detailed route discription for Scatarie Island.