

Rhonda Pelley and Sheilagh O'Leary, *Island Maid: Voices of Outport Women*.

Jess Huber

Volume 26, Number 1, Spring 2011

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds26_1rv02

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

0823-1737 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Huber, J. (2011). Review of [Rhonda Pelley and Sheilagh O'Leary, *Island Maid: Voices of Outport Women*.] *Newfoundland Studies*, 26(1), 123–124.

Rhonda Pelley and Sheilagh O'Leary, *Island Maid: Voices of Outport Women*. St. John's: Breakwater Books, 2010. ISBN: 978-1-55081-325-8.

"ARMED WITH camera and tape recorder" (15) and the ever-important dried refried beans, Sheilagh O'Leary and Rhonda Pelley twice set off from St. John's, Newfoundland, for the summer to photograph and document the stories of women's lives round the bay. *Island Maid: Voices of Outport Women* is the result. Though published many years after the "feminist road trip" (15) took place in 1990 and 1991, this picture book cum archive cum ethnography carefully reveals the lives of 11 women with the same spirit and generosity O'Leary's prints capture. Divided into 11 stories with accompanying photographs of the women interviewed and of the communities in which they live, this text records a moment in time just months before the devastating cod moratorium would fundamentally change outport life in Newfoundland. Beginning with two young women eating fish on the road and ending with one woman's predictions of resettlement and unemployment, *Island Maid* reads like a time capsule.

These black-and-white photographs and accompanying text take us to a different age, an era in which walking six miles to church was simply what was done. The post office was run out of the basement of a local home. Birth control could not be imagined. More than one woman tells of bearing children at the same time as her mother and of watching brothers and sisters being raised alongside their nieces and nephews. Every story is aligned with the refrain "things were different then," a reference to an unspecified time generally understood to be prior to 1949. Missing from these photographs is the hardship. Each of these women looks happy and healthy in her home of at least 30 years. But the stories accompanying the photographs speak of weddings without shoes and of children with empty bellies. However, the optimism and conviction with which these stories are told make other stories absent in this text — for example, of houses being dragged across the frozen ocean during resettlement programs — seem idyllic. Many of the women interviewed predict that the effects of the cod moratorium on their fishing communities — the communities they own and belong to — will be as far-reaching as the effects of the Great Depression. Yet, they speak of lives well lived and kin well loved.

Inspired by a women's studies course O'Leary and Pelley took at Memorial University, this project was rooted in the belief that "every woman has a story" (17). This notion is romanticized in the stories. The voices of many outport women are missing from these pages. O'Leary and Pelley interviewed a very specific demographic of married (with the exception of one) white women privileged enough to have homes and heat and who have stories to tell that do not end in letters to the Social Assistance Office. There is no mention of the Aboriginal women who populated this province for generations, nor do the outport women of Labrador appear. The text specifically engages women of the island, and yet the absence of Labradorians is striking in view of the subtitle "*Voices of Outport Women*."

Both sides of this collaborative text assume the reader is familiar with island geography, politics, people, and presence, and this assumption leaves the “come from away” reader attempting to fill in the gaps. The stories rely on phrases such as “we all,” “we understood,” “everyone knew,” with little mention of those outside these few communities. Though advertised as the voices of outport women, much of this text is comprised of variants on the same story.

Strict lines are drawn in the salt between “townies” and “baymen,” though the term “English” is often used for anyone not from round the bay. Even more stringent lines are drawn between the roles of women and men, while one woman recounts an old joke based on the premise that no one in the community had ever seen a “Catholic.” Though the stories told reveal disagreements about whether outport women would or would not have availed themselves of “the pill,” most stories tell the same tale: each woman was born, helped to raise her brothers and sisters, raised children of her own, and continues to live and work in the community she has called home for more than half a century. Sarah Benoit, one of the few women whose story differs, and whose photograph is featured on the cover, never married and sold shoes in Boston and Salem, Massachusetts, before returning to the island to care for her widower brother and his children (69). She loudly defends her vote in favour of Confederation and recalls the awful attempt at education the Dominion provided for her in her youth. The other woman whose story differs is that of photographer Sheilagh O’Leary’s grandmother, who was raised in a comparatively privileged family in Corner Brook. She, unlike any others present, was fortunate enough to attend high school.

While the photographs featured in this text capture drying fish, rolling hills, church steeples, and lives that urbanization forgot, the emphasis is placed on the oral history captured between the pages: a history both writer and photographer continue to explore. In addition to Rhonda Pelley’s commitment to the St. John’s creative community and Sheilagh O’Leary’s to her role as city councillor, both women continue to photograph the island and the people who call this rocky land home. Roberta Buchanan says in her foreword that “this is a book to treasure” for the value placed on the stories that appear on each page (12). Value is indeed placed on the tales told and lives recounted. While each story needs to be taken with a grain of sea salt with the missing voices echoing in our ears, readers are left with the feeling that telling stories is what island maids do best.

Jess Huber
Memorial University