

***They Let Down Baskets*, text Berni Stapleton, photographs  
Jamie Lewis, and CD Chris Brookes.**

Helen Peters

---

Volume 15, Number 1, Spring 1999

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds15\\_1rv04](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds15_1rv04)

[See table of contents](#)

---

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

Cite this review

Peters, H. (1999). Review of [*They Let Down Baskets*, text Berni Stapleton, photographs Jamie Lewis, and CD Chris Brookes.] *Newfoundland Studies*, 15(1), 127–131.

*They Let Down Baskets*, text Berni Stapleton, photographs Jamie Lewis, and CD Chris Brookes. St. John's: Killick Press, 1998. 64 pages and compact disk, \$24.95.

## HELEN PETERS

THE THREE CONTRIBUTORS to this work document and immortalize the 1992 cod moratorium with particular individual expertise. Working with people directly affected by the moratorium, each presents his or her own version of their loss.

Berni Stapleton's text was written as a journal in 1994 while she and fellow actor-playwright Amy House toured *A Tidy Package*, a play they had written about the impact of the closure of the cod fishery on the lives of women who were both fishermen's wives and fish plant workers. The text in this book was awarded the 1999 Newfoundland and Labrador Provincial Book Award for Non-Fiction. Stapleton writes in poetic prose using sophisticated metaphor, and she intersperses in this text speeches from Sarah, her character in the play. This style allows her to be objective and subjective, evocative and concrete, and adds magnitude to the overwhelming sense of loss of the people who are its subject.

The text is full of the smells of fish and seaweed, the jaws of sculpins, the notion of Jesus relaxing and jigging a few cod, the sea in conditions of storm and tranquility, the Northern Lights, mermaids — they all culminate in no fish, no lives to be lived in traditional communities, nothing. But is there truly nothing? Stapleton looks within people, "Anything shiny or new must be found inside of people," she writes in Mary's Bay, Labrador. She finds much that is shiny and new inside the people in the various communities she visits. They know instinctively how to put a good face on hard times and how to retain their dignity and hope. They have a sense of belonging: "it is so good to be 'here' and to belong. No one gets left over. Everyone belongs to someone." There is Dorothy the dragon slayer who unselfishly helps over 200 clients in her community fill out the endless forms required to claim

TAGS; but there is also the TAGS worker who refused to help put up posters for the play because that wasn't part of her job description. This is no starry-eyed, romantic view of Stapleton's province.

Stapleton, a Labradorian by birth, describes in Goose Bay the fog that descends without warning and cancels the flight of Labrador Air's Twin Otter aircraft, "The weather came down, a jam jar over dragonflies." Three weeks later in St. Lawrence the metaphor is developed, "Moratorium came down, jam jar over dragonflies, and started an underwater earthquake. The tidal wave has yet to hit. That's truly when the bottom will fall out from under us. The real tidal wave will come when the money runs out." There is an end in sight. But who in the country cares about the plight of Newfoundland and Labrador fisher persons? "We are already as mysterious and remote as the pyramids," she writes. The situation as Stapleton sees it is clearly bleak, "Displaced. Canada in 1994 and we have a new *displaced* people."

Chris Brookes's audio documentary, "What Happened Was ...," produced in 1993, was awarded the International Gabriel Award for Radio Excellence and the CBC Canadian Radio Award for Best Radio Special for 1994. Brookes brings together Sam Lee from Petty Harbour; Anita Best, traditional singer; Wavey and Albert Brace from Chance Cove, Trinity Bay; George Rose, fisheries scientist with DFO; Federal Fisheries Minister John Crosbie's statements on the moratorium and subsequent scientific findings (perhaps a little too much of Crosbie and fishermen in confrontation); local and national CBC Radio coverage of events; and collages of sounds from these and other sources that produce an echoey emptiness to mirror the emptiness in Newfoundland's once-abundant oceans.

The finality of the tragedy is revealed primarily through the drama of fisherman Sam Lee.<sup>1</sup> His initial response to the moratorium is frustration that he is temporarily kept away from the occupation he loves. Coupled with his frustration is a resolve to make the best of the situation —Newfoundlanders are practised and skilled in pulling themselves up by their bootstraps — to remain busy, to keep his boat in order, and to upgrade his education. He feels he can always return to fishing. But a week as a fisherman observer on the DFO vessel *Gadus Atlantica* in late June, 1993 gives him first-hand evidence of the ocean's barrenness. Sweep upon sweep over the Grand Banks with windowless nets brings up 20 small cod. Conversation onboard ship with George Rose brings the unwanted truth into crystalline focus. There are no fish. Sam shares with Wavey and Albert Brace the feeling of despair that this fishery depletion has been caused by technology which is not part of their existence, the feeling of anger over government policies that allowed it to happen, and the feeling of wishing to protect their interests by gunboat diplomacy, like Iceland, if necessary. But the issues that exist for Sam in 1993 differ from those of 1992: Where will he live? What will he work at? How can he do a job that his heart is not in, in a place that he does not want to be? Will he sell his boat? Will he give up? Knowing that it is hopeless, will he continue to hope? Can the fishermen ever all act together?

The documentary is designed to show the devastation of a way of life that has existed for hundreds of years and to identify the causes of the crisis. While Sam Lee and Wavy Brace record the loss of those directly connected with the fishery, Anita Best comments on the fishery collapse with sadness and anger but also in a manner which presents the situation in a larger picture — the Newfoundland psyche, the disruption of society, the creation of a rootless people, the similarity of the situation to the disappearance of the buffalo from the lives of the plains Indians, and the role of greed. Her songs sometimes ring with irony, "Lots of fish in Bonavist' harbour," but other times are closer than is comfortable to the peril which those who go down to the sea in ships endure. Her rendition of the tragic "Petty Harbour Bait Skiff" in Petty Harbour in June 1993 is sorrow on top of sorrow.

Perhaps the most overwhelming desolation in the documentary comes from the admission of the failure of the twentieth century's god, science — science which did not even make it as a half-competent guardian angel. George Rose in a voice that reveals his shock over the failure of DFO's guardianship tells of massive overfishing that began in the 1960s, when the fish stocks in the northern parts were truly abundant, and that continued when overall environmental conditions were declining and continued to decline for the thirty years that led to the devastation of the nineties. "We really did a job on a stock that because of environmental reasons was having a difficult time. And we kicked them down so bad that there are now no quantities of them left," he says. "There was not enough good science applied to the problems that fishermen were rightly pointing out with the fishery."

Jamie Lewis's photographs were taken between the summers of 1991 and 1994 in Petty Harbour, St. Mary's Bay, Codroy, Grand Bruit, Makkovik, Hopedale and other places. The thirty-four photographs in the book, selected from the several hundred shot, were previously exhibited province wide. Their subject matter ranges from people's absolute despair to the resilience of the human spirit. They frequently illustrate Stapleton's text on the adjacent page. Many photographs are of fishermen and fisherwomen at their work, some are double exposures which show transparent workers as ghosts in places where they will not work again. There are pictures of people leaving, of workers idle, of boats moored and empty, of healthy children whose lives will in all probability be lived elsewhere. It is perhaps the pictures of the children that raise the most questions in the mind of the viewer. They look as healthy and as happy as children in any industrial community in Ontario; they appear to be strong boned and well muscled with straight, white, handsome teeth. Good living conditions have brought them to this physical condition, but where will they grow up and develop the ability to pass on what they received to the next generation? Theirs is perhaps the greatest loss of all.

Has anything been learned through what happened to the cod, haddock, and pollock stocks? The answer is "No." George Rose says that the technology that led to the disappearance of the pelagic stocks continues to be used on those remaining

stocks which are not yet in trouble. As Anita Best sings, "They took our small communities and left us FPI." The devastation continues.

Except for the fishermen who observed the decrease in size and number of the northern cod, politicians, scientists and the general public inside and outside Newfoundland and Labrador were either blind to the warnings which fishermen began to articulate eight years before the 1992 moratorium or, if they could see the issues, were hindered in their response. That situation still exists with the remaining stocks. The conditions have not changed today either, with one major exception — the political will has reconsidered who its beneficiary will be. Today's tragedy was caused by the decisions of two levels of government (federal and provincial) to establish the Newfoundland and Labrador inshore fishery as a social safety net — a system which allowed people to make their living through a combination of money from fishing, unemployment insurance benefits, and the innate ability which allowed them to build their own houses and boats. In the meantime, the offshore trawlers and draggers were allowed to use their technological expertise to catch fish, too. It couldn't last. The original two-year moratorium is now in its eighth year and its mandate is two-fold: one part is to fulfil the original stated purpose to allow the cod stocks to recover to the point where they can be fished again, but the other is to ensure that the majority of the people who were laid off will never again make their living fishing from small boats in Newfoundland and Labrador inshore waters. In the future fish will be caught by the draggers and trawlers belonging to the FPI's of Canada and the world. And why not? Business is business, and if you fish, catching fish is the aim. But let us not blind ourselves to the future outcome — factory freezer trawlers are to the fishing industry what strip mining is to mining.

The publisher, Killick Press, has published this work with care and attention to detail; the result is a handsome, tightly integrated physical production. The cover shows dark brooding water with contributors' names and the title in colours that suggest the old Newfoundland republican flag. In the fiftieth year of Confederation with Canada, the question, could Newfoundlanders have managed things better by themselves, has been frequently asked, but how can it be answered? To Berni Stapleton the solution chosen in 1949 is proving far from ideal, "If fish were farmland, things might be different. We might feel closer to our country. But as it is, we are only Newfoundlanders, and that's only fish. What was ever noble about that to Canadians?"

The end of Newfoundland and Labrador fishermen's traditional way of life is confirmed in Mark Kurlansky's book on the cod fishery. After tracing the history of the Atlantic cod fishery and its role in developing the North American continent, Kurlansky can only conclude that we've killed off a sufficient number of wild mammals to be forced to raise animals domestically for meat. He continues, "It is harder to kill off fish than mammals. But after 1,000 years of hunting the Atlantic cod, we know that it can be done." *They Let Down Baskets* is a poignant and lasting monument to the collective heartbreak in Newfoundland and Labrador over this

fact. It should be read by every Newfoundlander and Labradorian at home and abroad.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> Brookes engages his listener in the career of Sam Lee; so this reader is relieved to see Lee appear in chapter one of Mark Kurlansky's book, *Cod: A Biography of a Fish That Changed the World* (New York: Penguin Book, 1997), as a participant in the Sentinel Fishery.