

Robert Mellin. *Tilting: House Launching, Slide Hauling, Potato Trenching, and other Tales from a Newfoundland Fishing Village.*

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cally titled “Hanrahan Saved” he knows that his attempts to find Sharon, an enigmatic former student, “will hit dead ends.”

Few of Mathews’s characters, however, succumb to the bleakness of their condition. They are “saved” from despair by a merciful bent for self-deception. Blind to their own foibles, they are nonetheless trenchant observers of the idiosyncrasies and possibilities of others: the rogues’ gallery of characters in “Proof” is a delicious case in point. Silas Berry “never spoke of any desire to get a better job, to complete his degree, to make for himself a life better than the one he was living.” He is a “cheerful robot,” and so is the narrator. In “Flower Heaven,” Crystal is “salvageable.” In “The Sandblasting Hall of Fame,” Angela Oregano is “redeemable.”

Two stories stand out from the others; they are gentler, less clothed in irony, and somehow sadder than the rest. In both “An Absence” and “Baseball” the narrator recalls time spent with his father. In the latter, the two travel to Montreal to watch an Expos game (the Expos win, “sure sign of an apocalypse”); in the former, the same narrator sleeps in his father’s apartment in Vancouver, after his father has died. The narrator is himself a father by now, and the two stories present a deeply contemplative essay on the nature of the father-son world, an examination of the place “where absence begins.”

The Sandblasting Hall of Fame is about absence. Existence is about all there is to hope for. Mathews’s characters are uniformly “disoriented and uncertain.” They are advised to “Love not the world.” They are convinced that “There is no present.” And yet they survive. They are always stepping back to take stock, to see to what extent some kind of analysis will help them through an impossible impasse. “I have to make sense of my life,” says Hanrahan in “Hanrahan Agonistes.” “That justifies pretty much anything these days.” It even seems to justify the dead ends.

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Robert Mellin. *Tilting: House Launching, Slide Hauling, Potato Trenching, and other Tales from a Newfoundland Fishing Village*. Princeton Architectural Press, Princeton, 2003, ISBN 1-56898-383-2

THE HISTORICAL AGGREGATION of architecture and material culture in particular places intimately weaves a community’s social fabric and mediates its relationship with the natural world. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, this premise prominently grounds a well-established tradition of architectural, landscape, and community studies. Understandably, a broad and sometimes daunting cohort — ranging from academe to community members themselves — share in the outcome of such work. Robert Mellin’s *Tilting* admirably embraces this challenge. Inspired by the palpable texture of *Tilting*’s (on Fogo Island) enduring cultural landscape, Mellin invites readers to follow his quest to better understand the collective ethos

and unforgiving marine environment that historically shaped this community's building patterns.

Tilting's treeless landscape accentuates the appearance of its architecture, and, in parallel fashion, heightens the process through which people and nature animate its daily rhythms. Mellin is inexorably drawn to these details, and is mindful that he must quickly situate his readers within the sublime confines of this remote outpost community. The history of Tilting is based on its proximity to the region's cod fishing grounds and a sequence of European settlement patterns dating to the eighteenth century. Of these groups, it is the Irish who have left the most indelible mark on Tilting; indeed, like much of Newfoundland, it is a place where the stoic Irish temperament and its Catholic expression inspire long-standing contentment and exceptional cultural endurance.

In his opening chapters, Mellin introduces us to the broad outline of Tilting's cultural landscape and the people who have wrought its compellingly lean aesthetic quality. Employing an ethnographically minded, reflexive narrative style, we are seemingly transported to Fogo Island to join him in his enterprise. The author literally walks us through Tilting, taking us to places such as The Rock, The Harbour, The Pond, and Greene's Point. These place names, along with innumerable others, are emblematic of a built environment shaped by social and ecological accountability. In more tangible terms, this is evident in traditional housing oriented towards the water and integrated into "extended family neighborhoods" (46).

Tilting's houses are the center of each inhabitant's cultural map, an expansive territorial perspective whose architectural elements simultaneously guide one's engagement with the sea and the island's rugged terrain. Viewed from the household, each Tilting resident's architectural orbit incrementally expands starting with contiguous and non-contiguous fishing stages, outbuildings, and gardens closer to home and more spatially removed inshore cod trap berths and slide paths for wood harvesting. As Mellin unravels the logic of this building tradition, we are struck by how notions of sustainability or appropriate-use informed decision-making here, long before such ideas became fashionable among classically trained planners. Ecologically synchronized, Tilting's architectural patterns make no claim to dominate nature; instead, they organically respond to the overarching power of water, weather, and the community's profoundly self-effacing spirituality. Mellin's insights, presented alongside the actual narratives of his informants, convey history and nature's seamless hold on Tilting: houses and fishing stages are forever being built, re-built, and reclaimed, prized gardens are tended, berries are picked, and the sea's bounty is humbly harvested.

After delineating the broad contours of Tilting's landscape, Mellin focuses on its specific features. Not surprising, significant attention is given to the community's housing stock. Typologies of house forms and house additions are used to explain the dwelling's vital social purpose. The house's ability to accommodate visitation is of paramount consideration in all these housing schemes. Most con-

spicuous among these arrangements is the back kitchen, the place where Tilting's residents engage in regular rounds of informal, friendly visitation. Architecturally, the kitchen and back kitchen are crucibles of Tilting's social ethic and are supported by other rooms used for wakes, mumming, and formal visitors.

While Tilting's Irish tradition certainly influences these architectural conventions, Mellin cautions us not to overlook an equally strong tradition of architectural mutability in this community. Owing to topographical factors, this is most evident in the practice of house launchings, the actual movement of buildings from one location to another (a practice Tilting shares with other North American maritime communities). But other factors drive the island's tradition of adaptability. The cod fishery put Tilting, like the rest of Newfoundland, squarely within the cultural and economic cross-currents of the Northwest Atlantic world. These forces, along with the social and environmental outcomes they instigated over two to three centuries, in no small way engendered a view that an "old house was not considered complete without the construction of additions" (77). Most recently, Tilting residents find themselves attempting to reconcile bungalows, split-level forms, and permanently affixed foundations into their building tradition.

This book's successful treatment of architectural sentiment is buttressed by its handling of technical and artistic considerations surrounding house construction. Building techniques in locations such as Tilting are heightened given the challenges posed by isolation, scarcity of materials, and environment. Quite simply, Mellin's meticulous description and contextualization of building techniques reveals the basic tools for advancing the social and environmental fit of Tilting's architecture. The fate of these objectives hinges on framing systems, door and window placement, house sheathing, and paint color; more importantly, Tilting's tradition of house moving ("house launching") precipitated the development of light, easily removed foundation systems in older structures. Known as "shores," these foundation systems give the unique appearance of buildings hugging Fogo Island's landscape. These techniques — although geared to adaptation and change — foster a historically charged mindset by encouraging the use and re-use of old buildings, furniture, and hooked rugs.

Mellin devotes the second half of *Tilting* to the community's outbuildings and work-related landscape features. His clear documentation of building form and function animates the outport's variety of work patterns. Through locational analysis of wood stores, carpentry stores, hen houses, fences, and potato and cabbage beds we see not only the proportionality and gendered nature of daily working life, but also, with sustainability in mind, architecture keyed to the community's ecological memory.

Tilting's North Atlantic context is starkly cast through its outbuildings, but never more so than when these structures unambiguously illuminate water's inescapable grip on the island. "House launchings" bear both a semantic and technological connection to maritime life's symbiotic effect in Tilting, while the re-use of a

ship's cabin as a shed and inverted boats (punts) covered with sod serving as cabbage houses further underscore Mellin's description of the waterborne community's permeable architectural norms. Tilting's architectural practice is perpetually responsive to nature's challenges; less affixed to permanency, the tradition reaches a crescendo as building patterns get closer to the water. This is evident in Mellin's exceptional handling of fishery outbuildings — the visual signature of a community whose gateway is the sea. We make the journey from Tilting's cod fishing grounds to structures called fishing stages and flakes where fish are gutted, split, salted, and dried. These structures, along with adjacent outbuildings, mirror water's continual motion with fish being processed, boats being moored and hauled, and gear being repaired. Mellin's clear prose, along with his extraordinary drawings and photographs, depict a working environment whose demure efficiency is tempered by the waterfront's liminal power. In short, fishing stages embody the healthy tenuousness of Tilting's material life with their "open floor of spaced beams ... open to the air and the sound of the water below, producing a slight feeling of exposure or vulnerability" (149).

Tilting is an important book for all who have a stake in Newfoundland's history and the preservation of its cultural patrimony. Its eloquent prose and compelling visual format make it useful to a broad readership. Mellin respects the voices of his informants and uses their narratives extensively to not only illuminate his analysis but to make Tilting's residents agents of their cultural conservation. Mellin is to be applauded for his active involvement in Tilting's preservation efforts — an academic doing important public-sector work — and also for the way in which he expands the parameters of preservation practice and theory. Tilting's landscape is a living history text, a place whose residents are acutely aware that their past is socially and ecologically operative. Mellin takes his ethnographic lead from these dynamics and challenges us to think about preservation not only as the maintenance of architectural fabric, but as the maintenance of building process, forms, and values. *Tilting's* interpretation and substantive connections constructively echo the antimodern sentiment of Gerald Pocius's *A Place to Belong* and Henry Glassie's *Passing the Time in Ballymenone* and remind us — particularly in a maritime community so subject to nature's forces of change — of the many enduring reasons to artfully invest ourselves in life's labour.

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