

In Winter Quarters

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PHILIP E. L. SMITH

"THE HABITS AND imperative performances of the beaver for preservation of self and kind are at least equally perfect with those of the European settlers or Indians on the coast. They each have their summer and winter abodes, and respectively provide for their retirement, etc.," W. E. Cormack wrote at the end of his journey across Newfoundland in 1822.¹ In this observation he was perhaps the earliest to describe a phenomenon common to the seasonal behaviour of the white settlers, the (Micmac) Indians and an animal species. He was by no means the first observer to note the mobility of the settlers, but he seems to have been the earliest to put it into a broader context—a context that we might today, without much exaggeration, term ecological. Considering his education in natural history in Scotland, this is not surprising. He thus identified one of the singular features of outpost life in Newfoundland at the time: the dual residential pattern involving the regular withdrawal from the outports to winter quarters in the woods of part of the European population, in response to seasonal variations in the environment.

It is significant that Cormack chose the beaver, and not a hibernating mammal, in his zoological analogy. The people who migrated into the woods did not pass into an inert, dormant state; far from it. Rather, they switched to another mode of living in a different setting. Newfoundlanders called the practice winterhousing. Anthropologists and geographers call it, less euphoniously, transhumance. Whatever the label, it is a most interesting phenomenon, and the Newfoundland instance is almost unparalleled among European settlers overseas. But it also has some important implications in a purely local perspective, in terms of the European colonization of the island and the kind of settlement strategy and society that

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developed over the centuries.

This custom of regular seasonal movement by much of the population from the outport—the locus of activity in the fishing season—to more dispersed communities or household units in the forests during the winter months is a dimension of Newfoundland history and culture that has been lost sight of by scholars. In virtually all descriptions of Newfoundland society there is a gap or flaw in the treatment of the settlement and residential patterns of the outport people. The traditional assumption has been that settlement was primarily orientated to the sea and its resources. Reality was not so simple. There was a long-standing dualism in Newfoundland life, lasting for over two centuries. For a large proportion of the settler population there were two symmetrical foci of activity and interest—the sea and the forest—and the first has been emphasized to the detriment of the second. Balancing the part of their lives that faced the sea was another part that looked away from it, geographically, economically, socially, and perhaps psychologically, towards the land and more particularly towards the winter forests. In a very real sense the centre of gravity shifted in winter from the more or less nucleated fishing settlements to the dispersed, often isolated groups in the woods. Winterhousing is the hidden side of the moon in the Newfoundland past, the sealed room in the collective memory. Yet how can we effectively understand Newfoundland culture and history if we ignore what many outport people were doing for up to half of each year? By neglecting this dualism, we are not only distorting the “received” picture of the past; we are also failing to see many familiar aspects under a different light, and missing the opportunity to ask a host of new and interesting questions about the causes and consequences of this particular behaviour.

Seen in a global perspective, the Newfoundland phenomenon represents a nearly unique departure from both the traditional pattern of settlement in Europe and the typical pattern of European colonization overseas (Smith). In a purely local perspective, on the other hand, this form of transhumance can be viewed, not simply as an oddity, but as an adaptation by Europeans and their descendants to an unusual set of living conditions, and one that was important for successful residence on the island in the early years. Further, its impact on many other aspects of Newfoundland society—family structure, community attitudes, demography, education, health and agriculture—was probably more significant than has been realized. In spite of the occasional published references to seasonal mobility and winter residences in the 19th and 20th centuries, there has been a tendency to regard the outports as basically fixed and sedentary—as, of course, the ma-

jority of them have been for a century or more. We have thereby imposed a modern view on what was, in the past, a very different situation involving considerable residential mobility, economic suppleness and social fluidity. Unless we take this into account, it will be difficult to understand the ways in which most Newfoundland outports developed, how they functioned at various periods, and what gave them their distinguishing features—in short, the nature of outport society itself.

A British historian once wrote of “the abandonment by Englishmen of European methods in colonizing Newfoundland” (Rogers 163). By this he referred to their failure to explore and settle the interior of the island. But winterhousing was another way, not mentioned by Rogers, in which the English and others abandoned the typical European pattern of settlement, and created a dual one. Few students of Newfoundland’s past, whether historians, geographers, folklorists or anthropologists, seem to have realized just how peculiar, even anomalous, this dual pattern is. We do not usually associate Europeans, or people of European descent abroad, with a semisedentary or seminomadic life. The practice of moving seasonally from one residence to another is of course characteristic of many recent hunting-gathering and pastoral groups (as well as of European nobility), and it is a tradition that goes far back into prehistoric times. It is true that on the European continent there are still a few transhumant pastoralists in marginal regions such as the Balkan mountains, the Alps and northern Scandinavia. But in these cases we are dealing with mobile communities based on domesticated animals: sheep, goats, cattle and reindeer. Seminomadic groups with economics based largely or completely on foraging (i.e., on hunting, gathering and fishing) rather than pastoralism, seem to have disappeared from the European continent and the Near East some thousands of years ago. It is all the more surprising, then, to see it reappear on the island of Newfoundland in the 18th century or earlier among a population of unmixed European origin, and persist there until well into the 20th century. Why this happened, and what were the forces that brought it into being and eventually led to its decline and disappearance, are intriguing questions for all who study the transplantation of Europe overseas and the innovations and modifications that developed in frontier conditions—“the simplification of Europe overseas,” as a historical geographer puts it (Harris).

Ethnographers have long appreciated the role of seasonality in the societies of foraging peoples. Although there is not complete agreement on the precise definition of transhumance, in essence it is an adjustment to

scattered and/or seasonally available resources, particularly in marginal geographical zones or in those with strongly contrasting seasons. The contrasts may be between wet and dry conditions, hot and cold, or some other dichotomy. Transhumance is part of the coping strategy that reduces the long-term vulnerability to those natural and economic forces that affect the food supply and such requirements as shelter and warmth. The island of Newfoundland is characterized by a rather simple ecosystem, and the natural limitations on agriculture meant that the human articulation with that ecosystem was direct and compelling. The adaptation of the early European settlers in Newfoundland was to an environment with considerable spatial and temporal variability in terms of resource distribution and climate. Some resources—codfish and seals, for example, but also some terrestrial game species—were migratory and available only at certain times of the year; and the fixed resources, especially wood and cultivable land, were not evenly distributed in space. The adaptation was accomplished by means of a fairly efficient and flexible procurement strategy, considerable residential mobility and a good deal of social fluidity. This strategy, particularly in the form of winterhousing, permitted families and communities to survive an annual critical period of energy scarcity. Put another way: decreased sedentariness was the means by which open access to basic resources was maintained and the expenditure of effort reduced.²

The residential dualism inherent in winterhousing was only one aspect of the more general spatial mobility, occupational versatility and economic flexibility that have long characterized life in Newfoundland and Labrador. Economic insecurity and the unpredictability of climate, resources and markets have made mobility a necessity in the lives of the outport people. This was noted even in the 18th century, particularly by missionaries who deplored it as an impediment to their work. Bishop Edward Feild captured this nicely in the mid-19th century:

In fact the Newfoundlanders, men and lads, are continually on the move, especially now the practice of going to the Labrador in the summer has become so general. In the spring they (perhaps the majority of the young men) are absent in pursuit of seals; in the summer, they proceed to the Labrador or other favourite fishing banks; in the months of September and October, they are engaged in procuring wood from the Bays for their fires; and before Christmas, many of them with their families remove into the woods for their winter residence. They are more commonly and generally at their proper homes in the early spring, before the seal fishery, or in the latter part of autumn, when preparing for their migration or removal to the winter tilts. (99)

Indeed, in terms of the number of moves made per year and the distances travelled, the average outport Newfoundlander may well have been, in the 18th and 19th centuries, the most mobile European in North America.

The main obstacle to a serious study of the winterhousing phenomenon is the lack of a reliable data base. The number of published descriptions of winterhousing communities is very small. Virtually all such references come from the pens of men—mostly 19th century missionaries, surveyors and soldiers—who, although often shrewd observers, were not usually involved in transhumant life. Thus their accounts are brief, incomplete and sometimes ambiguous. Certainly the eyewitness accounts of actual winter communities encountered by Edward Wix (1836) and Cormack provide invaluable glimpses of the system in operation. J. B. Jukes's descriptions (1842) of tilts and camps he encountered in the summer months during his geological surveys are also very informative. Richard Bonnycastle (1842) has a useful general discussion of winterhousing, while that remarkable man William Wilson, perhaps the only writer who actually spent a winter in the woods, gives (1866) one of the best descriptions we have of a winter tilt. L. A. Anspach's treatment (1819) is rather ambiguous and probably based on hearsay. The accounts by J. G. Mountain (1857), Julian Moreton (1863) and F. E. J. Lloyd (1866) are brief but apparently reliable.

Besides these published accounts, there are several other sources of information. Unquestionably the best and most abundant are the many hundreds of largely unpublished official letters and reports of missionaries, particularly in the 19th century. Although they are (with the exception of Wilson's) based on short visits to the winter communities during pastoral tours, they sometimes give not only the locations of the camps and the names of the parent outports, but also descriptions of the buildings, the length of time spent in the woods, the activities carried out, the number of families or individuals present and even the names of some of the people. Other clues to the former existence of transhumance in some areas are suggested by place names involving the terms tilt or winterhouse. In a few cases there are oral accounts on record by elderly people who participated in the tradition in the late 19th and 20th centuries. Government and commercial documents as well as personal missionary journals and letters should also yield much useful information on the subject when thoroughly studied.³

It is unfortunate that there is not yet much possibility of quantitative analysis in this field. Even in the 19th and 20th centuries information tends to be sparse about the number of places where winterhousing was practised, the proportion of the people in a given outport who migrated to the woods,

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the distances travelled, the number of months spent there and the activities that took place. Before the 19th century the figures are even fewer. It will probably never be possible to state with confidence how many people in the whole island migrated in given years, but it may be practicable eventually to make some reasonable estimates. For the moment, then, we must be content with making rather general and impressionistic statements, and these will be subject to modification when the time-consuming task of searching the unpublished records for more precise data has been done.

It would be tedious to cite a large number of examples of winterhousing from the published and unpublished sources; nonetheless a handful of cases may provide some idea of their content and flavour. One of the earliest fairly clear references to winter migrations by families was given by Robert Killpatrick, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) missionary at Trinity, who wrote to his superiors in London in 1739

That your Petitioner . . . humbly begs leave to Acquaint the Venerable Society, that his Church is in a flourishing Condition, having a very large Congregation during the Summer Season, but very few in the Winter; because the People generally move up the Bay for catching of Seal & Furr &c. in order to maintain their Families. . . .
(SPG, Series B7, pt. II, p. 249)

A generation later the next missionary in Trinity, James Balfour, reported that

Evil disposed Villains, in their drunkenness have of Late set the Neighbouring Woods of the Harbour on fire: So that the Inhabitants are oblig'd to go, some one way, some ano^{yr}, & some to great distances of [f], to build Hutts, & reside in the Woods, untill the last of April or May, for the sake of getting fire [wood] Scarce nine or ten Families will be left in the Harbour.
(SPG, Series B6, no. 158)

(Here, however, transhumance seems a flight from villainy rather than a natural adaptation to ecological conditions.) In 1819 the first Methodist Missionary Society (MMS) clergyman at Burin, John Lewis, explained his initial difficulties in his work:

. . . the times being so hard with the Poor that two thirds of my congrigation is gon from Burin for the Winter[.] They live here and there from ten Miles to 30 Leagues from this where they can Kill Dear Patriges Ducks or any other Game for their Sustenance so they are beyon the posibility of access to and must be without the Means of Grace and where they can indulge in any sin without the

fear of human Detection or reproffe. . . .

(MMS, Letters and Reports, North America, Box 2, no. 137)

Cormack remarked of the settlers on the southwest coast in 1822:

The residents here, as at St. George's Bay, and at most of the north and west harbours of the island, have both summer and winter houses. They retire to the residences or huts in the woods on the setting in of the winter, for facility of firewood and shelter; the labour attending the conveyance of fuel to their summer residences at the shore, which are exposed to every inclemency of the weather, being very great. They sometimes remove to a distance of thirty-miles and even farther, to the sequestered woods at the heads of bays and harbours, and on the banks of rivers; taking with them their boats, furniture, and provisions; and reappear at the coast in the month of April. (110)

The soldier Bonnycastle summarized his knowledge of the custom in 1842:

When winter sets in, or as soon as the fishing is over, this [summer] tilt is abandoned, and the family retire to the woods, and erect another somewhat better. There they are rather more comfortable, as the woods afford fuel and shelter, and they live on fish dried or salted, and potatoes, if they have been provident enough to raise them, with occasionally the milk of a goat. . . .

(11, 125)

Writing in 1866, and basing his account on his recollections of conditions in Newfoundland in the 1820s and 1830s, the Methodist missionary William Wilson stated that

In many harbours to the west, it is a custom for a number of families to go to the woods during winter, to do a winter's work, as building boats, cutting hoop-poles, or making staves for barrels. Sometimes they migrate for the sole object of catching fresh meat,—that is, of killing deer during winter, and wild geese in the spring, with both of which the country abounds. But going into the woods is not so generally a practice in Conception Bay. (214)

Near the end of the century F. E. J. Lloyd, the SPG missionary at Flower's Cove in the Strait of Belle Isle, offered a vivid description of the practice in his extensive mission:

At the beginning of November, all eyes are turned in the direction of the Winter houses, which are snugly built on a clearing in the midst of the sheltering woods. These houses are very necessary, the Summer houses being universally placed as near the sea as possible, where the situation is bleakest and most exposed to the severity of the weather. They are merely log huts, but are always rendered warm and comfortable. The chinks between the logs are calked, or "stogged," as they

say, with moss previously gathered and dried. The hut usually consists of four apartments, two downstairs, and a similar number upstairs . . . ; in addition to which there is a small "back house" or "porch," built on the warmest side of the hut, in which firewood is kept. In the kitchen near the partition stands a huge stove, like an engine boiler, in which there is always a fire like a furnace.

(76-7)

These citations bring out the essential features of winterhousing from the 18th century onward. Even in the small sample cited here, however, one sees different emphases in spite of the core of common traits. Indeed, one of the most interesting aspects of winterhousing (as of other forms of transhumance) is its variability. It varied according to the part of the island involved, the period of observation, the economic background of its practitioners and the activities that were pursued in wintertime. It is not easy to explain all these variations. From the beginning the custom, seen as a behavioural complex, was probably a volatile one in a state of flux and change, responding to various forces in different ways. What was true in one time or place was not necessarily true in others.

There was, for instance, a great deal of variation in the distances travelled between the outports and the winter camps. Here it must be emphasized that although generally the winterhouses were situated away from the coast, this was by no means always the case. They might be located at the head of a small bay or inlet, in a more sheltered section of the open coast, or on a small island where there were sufficient trees to justify settlement. In many instances the people merely moved from one side of the harbour to the other (the "winter side"), or from a headland near the fishing grounds to a spot further up the harbour. When travel was by land, the distances crossed inland were fairly modest: for example, at Cape Ray in 1822 it was two to three miles, at Old Perlican in 1823 about eight miles, at Burin in 1834 six to fourteen miles. Where travel was by water, however, the distances were usually much greater—sometimes astonishingly so. The Methodist missionary in Burin reported in 1817 and 1819 that some people went by sea from twenty-five to thirty-five leagues (seventy-five to over 100 miles) to their winter homes; a few years later Joseph Hollett's whole family was lost crossing Placentia Bay by schooner to winter in St. Mary's Bay, a distance of at least seventy miles.

The length of time spent in the woods also varied considerably. In 1834 the Burin missionary stated that his congregation left at the end of October and returned between the 15th and 20th of May—an absence of at least six and a half months. In Bonavista in 1833 the absence is given as six months,

and in Lower Island Cove in 1830-1 as "several months." In François in the early 20th century it was about four months. Perhaps a rough average for the island would be approximately five months, with the absences generally longer in the north than in the south. Several factors might have been responsible for the variations, but the dates of the beginning and end of the codfishery and the possibility of winter fishing were apparently the most important.

The proportion of the population of the outport that migrated in winter was similarly variable. In some cases, especially in very small communities, everyone left; missionaries on occasion mention passing through deserted outports on their winter tours. Grand Bruit's two families both migrated in 1822, according to Cormack. In Port de Grave in 1821-2 about half the people migrated; in Old Perlican in 1853-4 twenty-two families left; in Keels in 1835 only three or four families stayed out of a population of 296; in Lamaline in 1826-7 only three families remained out of several hundred residents. Neighbouring settlements might have quite different patterns. Keels in 1830 was almost deserted in winter because firewood was scarce, while nearby King's Cove, closer to the woods, retained its usual population all year round. In larger communities there tended to be a greater degree of sedentariness, but there were exceptions; thus in 1764-5 the missionary Balfour reported that only seven or eight families stayed in Trinity, Trinity Bay, for the winter out of a population of 900 people; the others went into the woods. In Burin from 1817 onward nearly every Methodist missionary emphasized the high proportion of the approximately 900 people who migrated in winter: more than two-thirds in 1819, and about seven-eighths in 1834. Yet in Fortune and Grand Bank on the other side of the Burin Peninsula winterhousing was apparently far less important in the 19th century, probably in part because of the winter fishery.

The same degree of variation is found for the populations of the winter camps. In the winter settlement he baptized "Wesley Vale" at Fresh Water Pond near Burin where he lived in the winter of 1826-7, William Wilson stated that there were fourteen Protestant families comprising sixty to seventy persons, and that a similar number lived in another camp at Mortier. At "Witless Bay" (now Whiteway Bay), Trinity Bay, in 1827 and 1828 there were about fifty persons in the winter camp. At Bay Bulls Arm, Trinity Bay, in 1835 there were at least four families; at Come-by-Chance in the same winter Wix noted at least seventeen people. The Anglican missionary William Elder visited a winter village—he whimsically called it "a sort of hibernacula"—of fourteen or fifteen tilts scattered over about half a mile

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on Change Island in 1856. In the 1840s the winterhouse community of Juniper Stump near Brigus contained about 200 persons drawn from neighbouring outports. This gives some idea of the range in population existing in the winterhousing places, and of course there were many isolated one-family tilts scattered about. Unfortunately, little is known about the distances between communities, or even between tilts in a single community; no such community was ever mapped, so their general layout is obscure. Presumably distances between camps would be greater in areas of sparse woods or where hunting and furring were poorer. The precise reasons for choosing a winterhouse site are rarely given, but the principal requirements seem to have been a good supply of wood, a reasonably sheltered location in a valley or under a hill, a reliable source of drinking water, and probably dry, flat terrain. The shores of lakes, ponds, and rivers were often favourite sites. There are indications that caribou migration routes may have influenced the location of some camps; thus Jukes noted in 1840 that at the Gambo Ponds, inland from Bonavista Bay, "their banks are generally inhabited during the winter by several families, who bring in their supplies and cut timber, or shoot the deer as they cross the pond in spring and autumn" (II, 96).

Most winterhouses, at least until the 20th century, were tilts, that is, temporary structures belonging to the vertical-log tradition (O'Dea)—the ultimate expression of vernacular architecture and Newfoundland's most original contribution to that tradition. Some good descriptions of 19th century tilts provide a reasonable picture, but how typical these were is hard to say. There was very likely a good deal of variation in size, construction and finish. Broadly speaking, they were relatively small in size, with rectangular ground plans, involving simple and rapid construction methods with local materials, short lifespans and poor insulation and temperature control. There are several reported instances of living trees being incorporated into the framework—an excellent illustration of the intimacy of integration into the local landscape. In the earlier tilts there seem to have been few or no partitions, but by the late 19th century some winterhouses at least were more formally subdivided internally, sometimes with two stories and built of sawn timber and boards like outport houses. The traditional winterhouses were heated by open fires on stone hearths, sometimes with crude wooden chimneys; often the smoke escaped through a large hole in the roof. By the late 19th century stoves were in use, and there was apparently more interest in windows. In some cases dried caribou hides lined the inside walls.

The precise dimensions of the winterhouses or "bay tilts" are rarely given, or the number of people living in them. At Harbour le Conte, Fortune Bay, in 1835 Wix reported "16 souls in a tilt of 16 feet by twelve feet ten;" on the Isle of Valen, Placentia Bay, he mentions one that was twelve by ten feet in area, which contained fifteen people (44, 60). William Wilson gives a very detailed description of the winterhouse near Burin that he and his family lived in during the winter of 1826-7, and although it was not entirely typical it is worth repeating the original description here. Wilson, newly arrived in Burin, had decided that rather than spend his winter in relative indolence and inactivity in a nearly deserted outpost he would go into the woods with part of his flock:

I told the people that if they would build me a Winter-House, I would reside amongst them—In this proposition they acquiesced, and commenced the building the next morning. [In] five days it was completed, from which you may form some idea of the building, but as a further description of it may not be uninteresting I will briefly describe it. Its dimensions are 20 feet by 15 and 5 feet 6 inches to the Wallplate. The trees are cut down (or as they are called studs) the branches cut off some of them are partly stripped of the bark and others are not—in this rough state they are set up perpendicular and as close as possible, and the chinks or cavities between the studs are filled with moss. This is the only defence from the cold—It is covered with bark and a hole left at one end with a rough boarded flue—which serves as a chimney—The number of our apartments are three, viz two bed rooms and a kitchen[.] over the kitchen we have no ceiling under the rinds. . . . Some sticks are placed horizontally over the bed rooms and a Boat's sail is spread upon them which screens the rooms from smoke dust &c[.] The carpet which was in the Mission House we have brought with us and what is perhaps new, instead of wearing it under our feet we wear it over our heads—for it is tacked to the sticks under the sail and lines our Bed-Room entirely—We have three windows, one in each Bed Room, and one in the Kitchen—This is almost a phenomenon in a Newfoundland winter house for the only light the inhabitants have with the exception of an occasional piece of Glass put into one of the studs is what comes down the Chimney—The only appendages to the House, are a Linney in which our winter man sleeps and a porch—These are made by logs being placed horizontally and are covered with rinds, and board—Upon the whole though our winter house is somewhat superior, yet for a house it has an appearance the most singular and grotesque.

(MMS, Letters and Reports, North American, Box 6, No. 125)

Most descriptions of winterhouses emphasize their primitive character, their impermanency, their poor insulation and especially the smoke (the "cruel steam," as some settlers called it) that tortured the eyes and lungs of the visitors. One wonders if this aspect has not been overdone and the

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winter tilts given a bad press. Few missionaries, after all, were tempted to underplay the hardships of their experiences. Why were men who could build excellent boats, and were skilled woodworkers in other fields, content with such apparently casual, flimsy shelters for the long, cold months of a Newfoundland winter? True, many were meant to last only a few years, but there are some suggestions that the picture was overdrawn. Mountain describes winterhouses as rather comfortable places, as does Lloyd in 1886; while Bonnycastle, in the passage already quoted, states that the winter tilts were somewhat better and more comfortable than the summer ones. Unfortunately there are few illustrations of winter tilts from the 19th century (and none from the 18th), but the one published in Mountain's booklet, if it really is a winterhouse, looks quite solid and commodious (5).

There was also a good deal of variation in the importance of the activities carried out in the winter communities. The need for wood, especially for fuel, is the most frequently cited reason for migrating, and people seem not to have moved to treeless areas. The need for wood as building materials for outport structures or fishing gear (boats, oars, barrels, etc.) was also emphasized by observers, however. Fur trapping was important in some places, while hunting, especially of caribou and birds, was the magnet in other parts of the island, particularly off the Avalon Peninsula.

One of the most significant features of winterhousing is that changes in its intensity were at least in part linked to economic cycles. Missionaries frequently mention in their letters or reports that the numbers of people migrating varied from year to year. Local economic conditions were often responsible. Broadly speaking, when times were bad (because the fishery had failed, or prices were low) more people moved into the woods. Probably many were fishermen who had been refused further credit by the merchants. Thus in 1817 John Lewis wrote that the greatest part of the Burin people had left the harbour for the winter, "but should the times come better then would not as many leave the Harb[our]—but now they are forced to it as they cannot get food for themselves and children as the fishery has failed for three succeeding years" (MMS, Letters and Reports, North America, Box 1, No. 193). In 1826 Charles Bates, Methodist missionary at Bonavista, described the unusually bad fishery of the preceding year and the poor prospects, perhaps starvation, for the coming winter:

It must not be concealed from you however that many of our most useful members have in consequence of the prevailing poverty of this Harbour been obliged to leave us and go across the Bay to take up their winter's quarters

because of those places to which they go being more favourable for killing Birds, an article of winter's subsistence.

(MMS, Letters and Reports, North America, Box 6, No. 95)

Again, Thomas Boone, SPG missionary at Twillingate, reported in 1854 that

the population, or at least a great part of it, is very migratory, much more so than when I first came to Twillingate [in 1843] for then times were better & consequently there was not that necessity for removing.

(SPG, Series C, Box 11/23, f. 277)

Statements like these illustrate the important point that winterhousing functioned as a compensating mechanism for the vagaries of the fishery—perhaps the only such mechanism, apart from quitting the island, in the period before the seal hunt became important. In this sense, winterhousing operated to reduce the risk and unpredictability inherent in an economy based mainly on a single product in a marginal physical environment. Whether in unusually prosperous periods, such as during the Napoleonic Wars, winterhousing declined, is hard to say. Logically we might suppose so, and some communities may have given it up entirely in those times; on the other hand, there may have been a hard core of transhumant families who went into the woods in spite of economic conditions, while others moved only in the most desperate circumstances. Indeed, there are clear indications in some missionary letters that winterhousing was a class-linked phenomenon. The Methodist missionary at Burin in 1821, Thomas Hickson, stated this clearly enough:

One thing which I conceive makes much against the progress of the good work in the souls of the people, is their being necessitated to leave the place, and consequently a preached Gospel to live where they can procure a supply of fuel for more than four months in the winter season: this cannot be done while living in the Harbour as it lies so far from the woods; and none but the more wealthy part of them are able to employ men to bring it by water.

(MMS, Letters and Reports, North America, Box 3, no. 229, letter 2)

Merchants, traders, their artisans and servants, the clergy, teachers and many of the better-off fishermen or planters almost always remained in the harbours during winter.

Two other factors exercised a strong influence on the prevalence and intensity of winterhousing: the nature of the local extractive economy, and the degree of economic diversification in the outport. Thus on the south

coast from Fortune Bay westward, where winter fishing was possible, winterhousing tended to be less important and the absences from the outports shorter. Again, the size and complexity of the outport were related to the emphasis on winterhousing. When there was a mix of economic activities such as shipbuilding, carpentry, sealing, herring- or lobster-packing, and other work in addition to fishing, a smaller proportion of the population migrated in winter. There were exceptions to this, but generally as an outport became a central place in the geographer's sense it became more sedentary. This is a reminder that many outports for which there is no documented evidence of transhumance may well have been semisedentary in earlier stages of their history. St. John's itself was perhaps an instance of this in the late 17th and early 18th centuries.

Whether there were differences in the emphasis on winterhousing among the several ethnic and religious groups in early Newfoundland is difficult to say at present. One missionary in St. George's Bay in the 1840s remarked that the local Acadian settlers practised it more than the English, but this may be related to the relative economic status of the two groups. One rather odd feature for which there is, as yet, no explanation involves the spatial distribution of the custom. There are references to it from practically every bay and coast on the island except, surprisingly, for the southern Avalon, in the zone south of Placentia and St. John's. None of the manuscript or published sources consulted mentions any instances there in the 18th or 19th centuries, and this is puzzling. Possibly it declined and disappeared early in this region; more likely it was present but perhaps not common and little recorded. Indeed, it is tempting to propose that the "Masterless Men" legend in this part of the Avalon has its roots in the practice and is a reflection, or rather a refraction, of the winterhousing pattern. As G. M. Story has pointed out in his biography of Peter Kerrivan, the legend has a very slender foundation in documented fact. Instead of outlaws and runaway sailors hidden in fugitive communities, it may refer more prosaically to English and Irish fishermen, with or without families, who like their contemporaries elsewhere retired routinely and peaceably inland to spend the winter months. Possibly, too, the "English hunters" reported by the French priest Jean Baudoin during D'Iberville's invasion in 1696-7 as spending the winter months in the woods in this area (Gosselin 66) were early winterhousing groups whose descendants were transmuted by the alchemy of local tradition into the mythic Peter Kerrivan and his rebels in their tilts on the Ferryland Butter Pot.

We now turn to how the winterhousing system functioned in the New-

foundland context, how it may have originated, and how it probably evolved and declined. Human social life, say those anthropologists of the cultural materialist persuasion, is a response to the practical problems of earthly existence. Whether one shares this philosophy or not, it is certain that the early Newfoundland settlers and their descendants had no shortage of practical problems. Winterhousing can be seen as one mechanism for resolving some of those problems, including the most important one: surviving in a difficult environment. The settlers did not migrate into the woods because of some innate compulsion or inherited cultural urge. Their behaviour, like that of other mobile groups, must be seen as rational within their peculiar environmental and economic contexts. But the transhumant pattern described here was a social and economic phenomenon of a special kind. Although it contained some of the subsistence features often found among aboriginal groups, the practitioners in Newfoundland remained firmly linked to the commercial economy represented by the international codfish trade, of which their summer activities were an integral part. In this respect the settlers resembled many of the North American Indians who became integrated into the European-dominated fur and hide trade.

The island of Newfoundland is a transitional geographical zone between the Arctic and temperate zones, with many boreal characteristics. There are marked contrasts between summer and winter temperatures. Many of the resources, especially the marine fauna, are only seasonally available, and others are unevenly dispersed spatially. Cultivable land is not abundant, and the growing season is short. These realities limit considerably the nature and scope of activities that can be carried out with an extractive economy. In addition, Newfoundland was the overseas possession of an European power that for some time declined to countenance permanent or official settlement, and, when this policy was eventually modified, furnished a minimum of the usual state and public institutions found in most other European overseas possessions. The reasons for this policy are well-known: the desire to maintain the island as primarily a base for the migratory fishery, which extensive permanent settlement might hinder, and the need to conserve this migratory fishery as a nursery for seamen. These two realities, one environmental and the other political, produced a settler economy that was markedly seasonal in nature and highly specialized, based for the most part on a single principal resource (codfish) that was uncertain and fluctuating in its seasonal availability and vulnerable to market price fluctuations. In what was virtually a one-crop economy, the settlers had little control over the natural and commercial forces that regulated it. But they could

modify their own behaviour to alleviate some of the stresses of the environment and compensate for some of the economic vulnerability. Winterhousing was one such modification, and a number of intermeshing elements can be identified as contributing to the dynamics of the phenomenon.

Early settlement was restricted to the coastline to exploit the marine fauna. Frequently the outports were located on exposed sectors of the coast or on headlands near the fishing grounds. The cold, stormy winters made it difficult to maintain these residences year-round once the nearby coastal forests had been depleted by overuse or fire. Outport houses were of wood and poorly insulated; fuel consumption in the open fireplaces was high. At a certain point it would be more economical in terms of time and effort to move nearer the more abundant sources of fuel than to transport the firewood to the outports. The anthropological maxim that sedentary life is often more energy-demanding than mobile life is fully applicable here. Grant Head has calculated that the useful forests had retreated from most settlements soon after they were founded, perhaps as much as three miles in less than two generations; and Newfoundland coastal trees grow very slowly and the forests renew themselves only gradually (19). The need for firewood, and secondarily for building materials, seems to have been the critical variable in most cases in promoting winter migrations, particularly in those areas where the codfishery ended in early autumn. The Methodist missionary at Blackhead, Conception Bay, John Haigh, was speaking for many other observers and outports when he wrote in 1826 that "now wood is become so scarce through the great consumption that it is become most difficult and laborious to get it so that many of our people have betaken themselves to the woods" (MMS, Letters and Reports, North America, Box 6, no. 15). The limited potential for crop growing and animal raising, and the low emphasis on producing more than garden vegetables and occasional small livestock (goats, sheep, pigs and poultry) were further encouragements to mobile life. The majority of settlers had no important investments in large livestock such as cattle and horses, stored crops, or agricultural facilities to tether them to the outports once the fishing season had ended.⁴

Finally, one other important factor facilitated winter mobility. This was the infrequency of civil, political and religious institutions resulting from the anomalous position of Newfoundland as a British possession. Government was not entirely absent, but it was a thin veneer, unevenly spread out. Local self-government such as parish or county organization was non-existent. Most outports lacked schools, churches, courts, police, medical

services and the other customary paraphernalia of colonial life. Once the fishery was over and winter supplies had been obtained, there were no official obligations (corvée, military service) to compel, nor remedial services to encourage, the majority of the inhabitants to remain in the outports. The government structure, such as it was, never (at least before the 20th century) intervened either to encourage or discourage the moves to the woods. The only external pressure on the settlers to migrate perhaps came from the local merchants or traders who (like the fur traders in northern Canada) may have encouraged, possibly energetically at times, the surplus population to withdraw in winter to the woods where they would be more self-sustaining and better able, through furs trapped and wooden gear manufactured, to reduce their indebtedness to their suppliers.⁵ The fishermen, on the other hand, may well have welcomed the opportunity to detach themselves from the outport, with its inevitable social frictions and sometimes coercive economic leadership, and escape for part of the year to the less confined and more egalitarian life of the winter forests. The existence of unlimited free land in the woods as a common-property resource acted as an enabling factor in their decisions to move. And for many, no doubt, the excitement of hunting and trapping added a spice to life that was absent in the outports in the long and dreary winter.

In short, in early Newfoundland the impediments to residential mobility in winter were few and weak, while the incitements were many and compelling. Both push and pull mechanisms were in operation. Movement away from the coastal home bases by families and even entire communities was simultaneously ecologically sensible and an economically (and perhaps socially) desirable strategy for coping with the stringencies of outport life—all the more so when we consider that there was generally no incompatibility or scheduling conflict between the requirements of the codfishery and the resource procurement activities (woodcutting, hunting, furring) pursued in the winter months. Indeed, the two seasonal strategies dovetailed neatly because of the complementarity of the different niches or resource zones; the forest resources complemented the marine ones, particularly in supplying indigenous food and materials for the fishing technology. This fluid settlement pattern with its rhythm of seasonal dispersal and aggregation was a reasonably efficient way to solve the problem of exploiting temporally and spatially dispersed resources in this physical and cultural environment. It provided an economic back-up for the risks involved in the narrowly specialized and precarious codfishery. Put in a slightly different way, it acted as a buffering mechanism which cushioned the effects of

seasonal and annual variations of natural resources and of short-term (and perhaps long-term) fluctuations in market prices. It took up some of the slack in the economy. There is no doubt a good deal of truth in descriptions such as McLintock's of the hardship and destitution in the outports when the fishery failed, but he was wrong in concluding that "there was nothing left for them to fall back on" (15-16). There was a fall-back position which McLintock, if he was aware of it, never mentioned.

Indeed, one can make a plausible argument that in the absence of this particular strategy, permanent settlement of Newfoundland would have been, not impossible, but certainly more difficult. The flexible pattern of residential dualism had the unintended effect of increasing the carrying capacity of the island for its settlers by enlarging the resource base available. It no doubt worked to retain on the island many individuals and families who would otherwise have emigrated permanently to mainland North America or returned to the British Isles. It also very likely attracted some of the migratory fishermen who would normally have returned home in the autumn. The permanent population of Newfoundland increased very slowly, and even suffered some declines, until the end of the 18th century. It would probably have grown even more slowly had the transhumant option not been available. Winterhousing can thus be seen, not merely as a shock absorber for environmental and economic stresses, but also as a device for maintaining a degree of demographic stability and even growth in unfavourable circumstances.

Another aspect should be emphasized also. Winterhousing functioned as a mechanism for indigenous colonization of the island by expansion along the coastline or short distances inland. Many modern settlements began as temporary wintering sites in coves, inlets and valleys, and later became permanent fishing, woodcutting or even farming communities; for example, Traytown and Eastport in Bonavista Bay, Shoal Harbour and Hickman's Harbour on Ransom Island, Hatchet Cove in Trinity Bay and Juniper Stump near Brigus. These in turn often gave birth to new wintering sites, and the process continued in leapfrog fashion as population increased. In this perspective we can view winterhousing as a device for expanding the frontier (often by trespassing on Beothuk territory), with the initial winter settlement acting as a tentative probe or scanning mechanism that tested the site for future viability. Those prosperous planters with seaworthy vessels able to sail long distances would of course have an advantage in first settling new and unexploited areas, with all the privileges that priority entailed. Most winterhousing localities were probably ephemeral and have been lost

sight of. Not all of those that survived as permanent settlements were inhabited by the descendants of those who had first exploited them, but undoubtedly many were.

There is another interesting twist to this aspect of winterhousing: the cases in which outports generated temporary winter camps which then became permanent settlements, while the parent outports were transformed into temporary winter or summer sites for logging or fishing, or were abandoned. This "reversion" seems to have occurred at Cow Head and no doubt at other places. It should be an interesting exercise to study the mechanisms whereby winterhousing localities were transformed into permanent communities. In some cases there seem to have been fairly rapid decisions by groups who had wintered in a locality to remove there and quit the parent outport for good. In other cases, no doubt, it was a slower process whereby the winterhousing families gradually lengthened their stays in the winter sites and almost imperceptibly detached themselves from their original homes.

When and how did this phenomenon of winterhousing begin in Newfoundland, and how did it develop or evolve in the long period it lasted? At the moment, unfortunately, there are no firm answers. The historical documentation is too meagre, especially for the earlier stages, and no other kinds of information (e.g., archaeological) are yet available. In the late 17th and for most of the 18th centuries we are dealing with what anthropologists would call proto-history: with people who left few written records of their own and are only fitfully illuminated by the observations of literate outsiders.

The early Newfoundland settlers, those emigrants from the West Country of England, the southern counties of Ireland, the Channel Islands and even France, and their descendants, adopted a pattern of residential mobility that bore little relationship to the one they had left behind in their homelands. What circumstances could have pulled these Europeans out of their traditional practices and launched them into a new one that was more characteristic of some North American aborigines? At some time during the approximately eighty years between the fading out of the chartered colonization attempts on the Avalon Peninsula and the year 1739, when we have the first reliable written record of winterhousing from Trinity, the settlers seem to have made the critical shift.

There is no evidence that the early settlers brought the custom with them or borrowed it from other European settlers in the New World. Although there was until recent times a pattern of transhumance in some parts of

Scotland and Ireland, this involved farming families with livestock which were transferred to upland pastures in summer. This is an unlikely source of inspiration for the Newfoundland case. Nor was it extensively practised by any of the settlers of New England, by other American colonies, or by the French of New France.

It is tempting to suppose that the European settlers borrowed the idea of winterhousing from the native inhabitants, the Beothuks, who also practised a seasonal migratory cycle; but this is most unlikely. For reasons still poorly understood, relations between Europeans and Beothuks after Guy's initial contacts in 1612 degenerated, with little evidence of friendly interaction. There was no intermarriage; apparently there were no cases of Europeans living among the Beothuks. Thus there was little opportunity for colonists to emulate the Beothuk pattern—which, in any case, often involved movements from the coast into the interior of the island rather than the normally shorter distances of the settlers' inland migrations. No doubt many Europeans were aware of the Beothuks' seasonal movements, but this does not explain why they adopted a migratory pattern themselves. Overseas Europeans in many other frontier situations were in contact with transhumant aborigines without imitating them. The similarity in Newfoundland is due to expediency in an environmental setting offering limited choices rather than to borrowing. Winterhousing is, after all, a fairly simple concept requiring no elaborate technology or know-how.

The genesis of winterhousing should probably be sought in the custom, already well developed in the 17th century, of fishermen and male servants going off for long periods into the woods in winter, furring, hunting caribou and other game, and cutting wood for various purposes. How early this began is unclear, but it was certainly present by 1681 when a naval officer reported that in the north, towards Bonavista, "the planters go a furring about the middle of September and take no provisions with them but bread and salt, finding beavers, otters, and seals enough to feed them; they carry guns, and kill also a great deal of venison, which they salt down for the winter; they return about the 1st May" (MacPherson 108). Abbé Baudoin's account in 1696-7, already cited, of several hundred English hunters who spent the winters in the woods hunting and were much feared by the French may refer to the same custom. Unfortunately he does not specify if the hunters were accompanied by women and children. It is also not clear if any of the French settlers at Placentia migrated to the woods in winter.

In a sense, the fishermen and servants involved in these activities were pre-adapted to such an unsettled life. Many were migratory fishermen who

had not yet made any irrevocable commitment to settle in Newfoundland, and very likely they did not regard any individual outpost as a fully permanent settlement. The scarcity of Old World place names reflects this outlook. With this ambivalent attitude they could have slipped into a pattern of seasonal mobility without much difficulty—they went off to the woods as easily as others returned to England or Ireland for the winter. The critical point came when, with the increase in the number of females, some settlers began to take their families into the woods with them. It then became a family oriented rather than a male-group oriented practice. This is all speculation, of course, but it may do as a tentative explanation.

The principal incentives for moving by family units into the woods have already been sketched here. Another that may have been important in the earlier phase was the disorderly conditions in some of the outposts in winter. Keith Matthews has questioned the old idea that 18th century Newfoundlanders lived in a state of anarchy and has argued that, because the magistrate system worked pretty well, the island was probably more peaceful than England or Ireland at the time (205). He is no doubt right for most of the century, but the situation before the appointment of magistrates in 1729 was probably very different. Male servants and single fishermen were often left stranded and unpaid in the outposts by their employers in winter, and formal means of control were virtually nonexistent. The naval commodore Lord Vere Beauclerk in 1728 reported that “The great misfortune, and which I think is the origin of all the rest that attend this country, is, that no body in the winter season is empowered to keep peace, and administer justice; that the sober and industrious are every day liable to be insulted and robbed by the idle and profligate, unless they can oppose them with greater force” (Reeves 81-2). In such circumstances, it would not be surprising if the “sober and industrious” heads of families were anxious to remove their provisions and especially their wives and daughters as far as possible from the “idle and profligate” during the winter months. At any rate, by 1739 the winterhousing pattern was already established. It is unlikely that the Trinity instance marks the very beginning of the pattern; its origins may go back further, into the earlier 18th century and very possibly into the last decades of the 17th century when the total settler population of the island averaged only a few thousand people. A somewhat ambiguous document of 1706 suggests that by that date families and not only males spent the winter furring and woodcutting.

The winterhousing tradition changed during its long existence. It came into being as a response to certain conditions, it shifted its emphasis as those

conditions were modified, and it declined and vanished when those circumstances no longer prevailed. It is too early to define developmental or evolutionary stages in its continuum with any certitude; the data base is still too weak. However, we can trace the main lines of its history in a general way, taking into account that there were some time-lags involved. It began in some areas earlier than in others, and persisted in the northern and western parts of the island and in Labrador—the “frontier” areas—when it had declined in the older-established zones. We might think of the hypothetical earliest phase of male hunters, furriers and woodcutters in the late 17th century as the embryonic, incipient, or formative stage. As the coastal forests were depleted and as population increased, some families took to spending the winters in the forests. The climax of the winterhousing tradition may be in the later 18th and early 19th centuries, as entire outports, or the majority of their residents, practised the transhumant pattern. Later in the century the tradition was for various reasons less accentuated. Fewer people migrated and in many places it was abandoned. It survived, though like a clock slowing down, into the 20th century in some places, but for all meaningful purposes it disappeared on the island after World War II and Confederation.

What were the forces involved in its decline and fall? We can class them, somewhat arbitrarily, in two categories: technological and economic on the one side, and sociocultural on the other. Traditional technology in early Newfoundland was small-scale and simple. In the 18th and early 19th centuries, by and large, the inshore codfishery on which the majority of settlers depended was based on small boats and handlines. After the 1850s trawls, cod traps and nets were increasingly used, while dory fishing offshore on the Banks increased in importance especially on the south coast. Winter fishing for cod became more significant, as did the herring fishery in many places. It is in this context of technological expansion and community growth and complexity that, as already mentioned, many outports became more sedentary. Very likely too, as the emphasis shifted in many places from individually-owned small boats to larger vessels with crews working for shares, there was less need for the individual fisherman with his family to resort to the woods in winter to prepare his fishing gear (boats, oars, flake and stage timber). This work could now be performed by teams of males hired by entrepreneurs, while the families were left behind in the outports. Logging increasingly replaced family winterhousing. Possibly the growing Labrador fishery had some effect, if only by contributing to the size and complexity of the east coast outports and, perhaps, reducing the

need for fishermen to situate their homes on headlands or in exposed coves near the local fishing grounds. We might also expect the development of the commercial seal hunt, especially after steamships were introduced about 1860, to have reduced the emphasis on winterhousing or at least to have shortened the period spent in the woods in late winter and early spring. Again, there is some reason to believe that in the 20th century the introduction of gasoline-driven engines for small boats influenced the settlement pattern. With less need to locate the summer fishing community as near as possible to the fishing grounds, the inhabitants could now live in more sheltered places that were in some cases the former winter residences. Motor boats also made it possible to bring firewood from greater distances to the outports and thus reduced the incentive to move into the woods for fuel. Finally, mining and other opportunities for wage labour probably contributed as well to its decline.

Another probable reason for the reduced emphasis on winter migration in the later 19th century was improved thermal control in the outport houses. With better building materials available, especially sawn lumber as local sawmills proliferated, insulation could be improved and fuel consumption reduced. More important than airtight houses, however, was the introduction into outport life about the middle of the 19th century of iron stoves and small coal grates, which gradually replaced the traditional open fireplaces that had consumed such great quantities of firewood. One of the most important incentives for residential mobility thereby disappeared. Very likely the increased emphasis on farming in the 19th century also had its effect. With a growing use of traction animals (horses and oxen), it was easier to transport wood from the forests in larger quantities and from greater distances than when human or canine power was the rule. And, as already mentioned, since it would be difficult to feed and stall draught animals in the woods in a Newfoundland winter, there was an additional incentive to remain in the outport or at least on the farm to look after the animals as well as the stored crops.

Yet when we point to technological factors as contributing to the decline of winterhousing, it is worth mentioning that in at least one case a technological innovation was responsible, in the 20th century, for reviving or prolonging the practice. After the branch railway line was built to the Bonavista Peninsula, many families took advantage of it to move to winter camps along the track (Cuff). From 100 to 150 Bonavista fishing families would load their household gear on the cars and get off at various sidings where log tilts were located. The main incentive was to cut wood for their

own fuel and for commercial logging; but they also trapped and fished for trout. There were some forty camps, ranging considerably in size (one even had a school); a family would use the same camp year after year. This variant of transhumance lasted from c. 1918 to the 1950s and is an excellent demonstration of the tenacity and adaptability of the old pattern in new circumstances.

Alongside these technological and economic factors, there were other sociocultural ones operating in the 19th and 20th centuries to undercut the traditional pattern and reduce, if not eliminate, the period of dispersal into the woods in winter. Possibly the winter poor relief measures introduced by the local government in the 1830s had some effect. But the most important of these sociocultural factors were the spread of churches and the growing emphasis on education in the outports. Traditionally the colonizing nations and Christian missionaries everywhere disapproved of nomadic or seminomadic life. Mobility is uncongenial to their aims, unless, of course, the natives were usefully involved in the fur trade. Thus it is not surprising to note, time and again, in the missionary letters and reports from early Newfoundland their disapproval of the unfixd way of life of the settlers. The plaint of William Wilson from Burin in 1828, when he lists the things that work against his mission, might be added to those already quoted:

The first [obstacle] is the desultory habits of the people—You have been previously informed that the Majority of the inhabitants of this place in the fall of the year, go into the woods and contin[u]e there until the following Spring: when their long absence from the means of Grace, and their mixer (sic) with irreligious persons, often erases any serious impressions which might have been made on their minds, ere they return to the Harbour.

(MMS, Letters and Reports, North America, Box 7, no. 34)

There is no evidence that any missionaries actively discouraged their people from migrating—its economic necessity may have been too evident for that—but by setting up chapels, churches, and Sunday and day schools, and in some cases by promoting highly emotional revivals, they tended to make the outports more attractive places in winter, at least for some of the people. Some families, even in the 18th and early 19th centuries, probably voluntarily abstained from winterhousing or shortened their stays in the woods, so that their children might benefit from the schools that were being introduced by the clergy in a few of the larger communities. In effect churches and schoolhouses acted as catalysts to alter the structure of the outports, changing them from rather fluid, impermanent sites to places with

which people could now identify more intimately and have a greater sense of community involvement. These institutions were thus symbolizing the new status of the community as well as creating it. It is not surprising to find the SPG missionary at Harbour Buffett, Placentia Bay, W. F. Meek, writing at Christmas, 1857, that since the establishment of the church there a dozen or so years before, "the people have generally discontinued the practice of leaving their summer habitations" (SPG, Series C, Box 11/25, f. 300). This process was probably at work throughout the 19th century as schools increased in number and the advantages of literacy and even of more general education were accepted. In the 20th century, as education became mandatory, moves by families into the woods in winter eventually ceased.

In our attempt to identify the causes of the slow decline and disappearance of winterhousing, it is finally not unrealistic to examine some of the less concrete, "cognitive" factors. To what extent did it decline because it was increasingly regarded by many people as a backward or primitive way of life, as Newfoundland developed a greater awareness of the outside world resulting from literacy, increased movements of people, and contacts with the North American mainland through visitors and emigrants? This is very difficult to evaluate. Certainly one gets the impression that winterhousing was a term of opprobrium or contempt even in the 19th century, and that the people who practised it came to be viewed as rough and improvident folk who would "sit in one end of the tilt and burn the other," as a derogatory proverb went (Moreton 40). It became increasingly associated with the poorer stratum of society, with poverty, ignorance, hard living and often squalid conditions. The attitudes of the clergy who deplored the practice may have contributed to this view. In the 20th century winterhousing was at times used as a pejorative expression: an outport parent might rebuke his children for their table manners by reminding them that they were not living in a winterhouse.⁶ While we can hardly regard this attitude as an independent variable in the process of decline, it may well have been a factor that lubricated a chain reaction caused by economic, technological and sociocultural agencies.

In the early 18th century or before, the settlers of Newfoundland swerved away—or were jarred loose—from the dominant mode of settlement in Western societies. It is no great exaggeration to say that it was not until well into the 20th century that the European population of Newfoundland was fully integrated, or reintegrated, into the pattern characteristic of the rest of the Western world. Implicit in the Newfoundland situation was a conflict between the traditional European model of sedentary life and the demands

and opportunities of the new setting. A dynamic tension existed with a built-in instability.

Cases like the Newfoundland one described here must have been rare during the process of European implantation overseas. In discussions with professional anthropologists, historians and geographers, one often meets with incredulity when describing the former Newfoundland transhumance pattern. This is not to say it was entirely unique. It was virtually duplicated in southern Labrador from Hamilton Inlet southward to the Strait of Belle Isle, and further west among English and French speaking settlers on the Lower North Shore of Quebec (albeit beginning at a later date, perhaps not before the early 19th century and possibly the result in part of diffusion from Newfoundland). There are also a few references to it among some of the 18th century Acadians in Prince Edward Island and Cape Breton who remained after the end of the French regime in 1763. Some European colonists on other continents also developed markedly mobile ways of life, the best example perhaps being the Trekboers in South Africa, who in some cases migrated regularly several times yearly with their herds of animals from one pasturage area to another, much like the aboriginal pastoralists. But in Newfoundland and the adjacent zones the migrations were made to satisfy, not the needs of domesticated animals, but those of the humans themselves: for fuel, shelter, equipment and game or fur animals. Such examples, if they existed in other Neo-European countries outside North America, must have been short-lived, ephemeral ones, quite unlike the intensive and long-lasting one found in Newfoundland.

Given the natural and political environments, the nature of the economy, the available technology and the population level, we can risk the generalization that this was probably the most efficient form of land use possible in Newfoundland at the time. In any analysis of a situation that stresses adaptation, equilibrium and the survival value of human behaviour, however, there is the danger of leaving the impression of Panglossian complacency: that all was well-adjusted, harmonious and for the best. But of course short-run adaptation, however efficient or necessary, may well have had certain drawbacks. While winterhousing in Newfoundland was a viable strategy for survival, it may also have exacted a heavy price from its practitioners in ways that are still difficult to define. Mobility as a feature of human life has its costs as well as its benefits, as anthropologists know well. To what extent was it, especially in its later phases, a maladaptation, and its negative features a drag on the development of Newfoundland society? Here one can only touch, very tentatively, on four aspects which might be

used in arguing that winterhousing was a factor in Newfoundland's traditional underdevelopment and structural dependency.

In education, as David Alexander has shown, Newfoundland lagged far behind other countries in North America by the end of the 19th century. It is quite reasonable to place at least part of the blame for the low level of literacy on the winter migratory pattern. In the 19th century missionary records we find over and over the complaint that in winter the schools were very thinly attended or were closed down because the children had been taken away to the woods. By reducing exposure to schooling in the critical non-fishing months of the year, it assured that even those young children who received some lessons in the summer months would acquire and retain only weakly the ability to read and write. We might expect that there was more literacy in communities and regions where the incidence of winterhousing was low. (Could there be a link, even an indirect one, between the high rate of literacy on the eastern Avalon, which Alexander mentions, and the apparently low emphasis on transhumance in the southern Avalon generally, touched on above?) It must be recalled of course that there was a reciprocal mechanism at work: the presence of schools no doubt encouraged parents to be less mobile, but churches and government also had more incentive to build schools and place teachers in just those communities that were already more sedentary. At any rate, this might be an interesting hypothesis to test when more quantitative data on winterhousing are available.

A second area which may have been inhibited by the winterhousing tradition is agriculture. As already mentioned, it would have been difficult for people committed to regular seasonal displacement to look after the larger livestock in winter; their transport, stabling and feeding in the woods would have presented serious problems. How far the mobility affected smaller livestock is hard to estimate, but it may have had a dampening effect by reducing the number kept. Again, the recognized availability of fresh meat in at least some places may have further reduced the incentive to raise livestock. Whether there was a parallel loss of incentive to grow crops beyond the garden vegetable level is not clear. In general, it is difficult to envisage serious attempts at other than marginal farming by people who practised such an unsedentary way of life, and it seems likely that this factor should be added to the other well-known features—the poor soils, short growing season, and until the early 19th century the absence of legal title to land—in explaining the slow development of agriculture in Newfoundland.

A third field in which winterhousing may have had negative repercussions

is that of community structure and local institutions. Communities that are partially vacated for up to half the year are hardly promising seed-beds for political institutions. We might expect that familial and religious affiliations remained the basic organizational foci of such communities, and local leadership remained weakly developed and narrowly based. In such contexts of weak institutional superstructure we might also expect to find a leadership pattern emphasizing the economic elite; a low level of involvement in and commitment to community affairs; an emphasis on individualism and family life rather than on cooperation at the community level; and virtually no formal inter-community cooperation. There is here, again, a reciprocal or mutually reinforcing relationship that must be kept in mind: the transhumance pattern was itself in part a reaction to the absence of "anchoring" institutions in the outports, and conversely the ambivalent attitude existing towards sedentary life inhibited the internal development or adoption of these local institutions. It may be no wild flight of fancy to suggest that the spatial arrangement of the typical or traditional outport reflects to some degree the consequences of this half-tethered past: the straggling paths, the apparently random clusters of houses, the absence of any recognizably rational layout apart from that imposed by the local topography and the requirements of the fishery. All seems helter-skelter, chaotic, disorganized. There are no deliberate street plans, public squares, and areas of official or ecclesiastical focus that we might look for in overseas towns created from an accepted model of how European man lives at home and abroad. The apparent disorganization and randomness are deceptive, of course, for the arrangements mirror an internal reality in the outport society. But even so, why should anything more overtly patterned have come about among people who for so long must have felt themselves only part-time residents of these fishing places where their sense of local identification remained so diluted and unfocussed? Like the Newfoundland tilt, the traditional outport was something transitional, partial, and in its own way original.

Finally, there is the most elusive and hazardous problem of all, although it overlaps in part with the previous one. What was the effect, if any, of this pattern of seasonal displacement on the social life and even on the inner life and ideology of the people involved? Was winterhousing an important component in creating the traditional Newfoundland outport culture that so many writers in recent years have attempted to describe and define? One gets into very deep water here. Ever since the American historian F. J. Turner's famous frontier hypothesis attributed so much of American

character and institutions—individualism, egalitarianism, democracy, inventiveness, mobility, materialism, etc.—to the frontier experience, scholars have not ceased to debate the value of the thesis, not only in the United States but elsewhere. Certainly winterhousing was one facet of the frontier and pioneer experience in Newfoundland, albeit a peculiar and long-lasting one, and we at least follow in worthy footsteps if we look to it for some insights into Newfoundland society and culture. Insofar as the social structure of a human group exhibits evidence of adaptation to the natural environment and prevailing economy, then the emotional and psychological structure of its members is also likely to show some commensurate responses. Just what happened to these people in the course of their dual lives, when they withdrew from the “public” life of the outport to the more hidden, “private” life of the forests, we cannot say for sure. How satisfying was it, especially for women and children and the aged? There are few means of knowing. The quick glimpses we get from the occasional perceptive visitor are tantalizing but insufficient to reconstruct a reliable picture or to measure the differences in the two contexts. We have to fall back on speculation and on cautious analogies from other peoples and places where transhumant systems operate. How much of the celebrated endurance, fatalism, self-reliance, individualism and versatility of the “Newfoundland character” was brewed in the silence of the Newfoundland woods we may never know. But it is plausible to suppose that winterhousing contributed, possibly as much as did the activities based on the sea and ice, to its capacity to endure hardship and low economic standards for the sake of survival, and to persist in deeply conservative ways that at times entailed a resistance to change. Phrased in a somewhat different way, winterhousing was one instance of the more general resilience and adaptability which it both exemplified and reinforced through its long existence. Rather like a biological refugium, Newfoundland was a place where archaic cultural forms could persist and develop their own peculiarities in relative isolation. Certainly of all the archaisms that characterized Newfoundland life, winterhousing was probably the most peculiar when looked at from outside. Its persistence for so long must have helped to internalize certain features including attitudes towards time, towards work and leisure, towards authority, towards accumulation of possessions and towards mobility itself as a valued and necessary kind of behaviour.

It is a paradox that the phenomenon described here was both archaic and innovative: archaic because it harked back to a much more ancient phase of European life that had been largely superseded for the past two millennia,

and innovative because it seems to have been a reinvention by Europeans in a new setting, in circumstances that required a non-traditional response. It was not a "primitive" adaption by people who had not learned to live in fully settled communities; it was an alternative line of specialized behaviour that, like many innovations, was produced on the periphery rather than at the centre of Western society. In Newfoundland it was a complex and intricately balanced system that, whatever its dysfunctional features, contributed in an important degree to a reasonably successful settlement of the island. We should think of it as a creative transformation in which the settlers maintained a certain degree of freedom of action in the face of constraints that facilitated, as well as limited, that action. This may sound like mere playing with words, but let us look at another example of North Atlantic colonization by Europeans that followed a different track. For some five centuries the Norse inhabited Greenland, at the time the westernmost outlier of European settlement. After the initial centuries of prosperity and growth, a marked decline in population and welfare set in, and the last colony vanished sometime in the 15th century. The reasons for this decline and disappearance remain controversial, and many explanations have been offered, including deterioration of the climate, gradual loss of contact with Europe and attacks by hostile Inuit. Recent archaeological research, however, has emphasized the degree to which the Norse settlements and society were maladjusted to frontier conditions (McGovern and Jordan). In addition to a rigid and hierarchical society, political system and religious organization, there was a remarkable degree of residential inflexibility. The economy was based on farm homesteads situated in the inner fiords which provided pasture for the domestic animals. Hunting by male groups was important, but apparently the Norse were unable to shift their population concentrations quickly back and forth to the coast to match fluctuations in marine resources. It is tempting to speculate that had the Norse possessed the social resilience and freedom of movement of the Newfoundland settlers, with some degree of community transhumance to and from the coastline and an economy less oriented to farming, they might have survived in Greenland until contacts with Europe were renewed in the 16th century.

We might in fact move closer to home and ask whether the chartered colonies of early 17th century Newfoundland may not have suffered from the same weakness as the Greenland settlements: an overemphasis on sedentary life. There seems to be no indication that any of these colonists ever wintered in the woods, and the picture we get is of an orthodox model of

settlement imposed by planners who were not always familiar with the drawbacks of settled life in Newfoundland. They were clustered communal settlements rather than dispersed ones, clinging like limpets to the shoreline and arranged in a social hierarchy with governors and leaders, indentured servants, apprentices, etc. And they did not succeed. The projects for colonization had to be abandoned for several reasons, political and financial as well as ecological, but the basic reason for the discouraging results was that they required too much expenditure for the profits the shore-based fishery produced. A more eclectic model, based on a combination of fishing and subsistence farming with a less concentrated and less sedentary settlement pattern, was required. Even Calvert might have fared better at Ferryland (a notoriously cold spot) had he and his people retired to the woods in 1628 before the "sadd face of wynter" set in in that "wofull country, where with one intolerable wynter were we almost undone" (Cell 292, 296). A more flexible pattern did develop sometime after 1660, when the remaining settlers were left to their own devices and when, as Cell points out, they were probably better off without the supervision of their former leaders, free to disperse along the numerous beaches where they dried their fish (57). There was retrogression, in a sense, to a simpler level of sociopolitical integration more attuned to their circumstances. Just how long it took for them to develop a regular pattern of retiring in family groups to the more sheltered woods in winter and exploiting the resources of that environment remains one of the intriguing problems to be resolved. Perhaps by about 1700 this was already accomplished.

In studying the phenomenon of winterhousing in Newfoundland we are examining, to paraphrase the words of the historian Peter Laslett, a partial world we have lost. For centuries it was an integral part of the entire coping strategy and settlement pattern of the people of Newfoundland. Today those half-forgotten names that still cling to the outskirts of many outports—Winterhouse Path, Tilt Hill and so on—or those that survive in the official toponymy of the province as the Tilt Coves, Tilting, Maison d'Hiver and many others, are the ghosts of a once viable system that has receded almost to the vanishing point in the collective memory of Newfoundlanders. Winter migration was an institution in Newfoundland life whose significance has been largely overlooked. One looks in vain for references to it in the standard 19th century histories of Pedley, Hatton and Harvey, and Prowse. Even that literary vacuum cleaner, Philip Tocque, fails to mention it in his several volumes, though he once announced his intention to publish a book called *The Shanty of New Brunswick, Log Hut of*

Nova Scotia, and Tilt of Newfoundland (Doyle 161); nor does Gosling refer to it in his book on Labrador. Rowe's attempt to synthesize Newfoundland history (1980) deals with it in a few lines. In his excellent collection of essays, *Lectures on the History of Newfoundland: 1500-1830* (1973), Keith Matthews makes no mention of it. The topic was apparently not discussed at a 1982 symposium in St. John's on early European settlement and exploitation in Atlantic Canada (Story, *Early European Settlement*). A discreet veil of silence seems to have descended on the subject. This is very odd, at least to the unsuspecting anthropologist.

Just why this should be so cannot be determined with certainty, but it seems to be linked to the way the past has been interpreted and used in Newfoundland. It is significant that virtually all the useful published references we have on winterhousing are from the pens of outsiders, missionaries and other visitors, who did not see themselves as permanent residents of the island. Even the native-born Cormack may have seen himself as a Scot temporarily doing business in the colony. In some cases the resident historians, through familiarity, may have failed to see winterhousing as anything remarkable or interesting, but the real reason could lie elsewhere. As Matthews has reminded us, it was the middle class elite of St. John's that formulated the ideology of Newfoundland nationalism and culture in the 19th century. It was more natural to focus the mythology upon the dynamic life of the seaman, fisherman and sealer in their struggles against the sea and ice than on that part of their lives passed in the winter woods in more mundane and obscure tasks. This may be why there are no ballads or stories about winterhousing preserved in Newfoundland folklore; it did not exhibit the same overt qualities of courage, endurance and adventuresomeness that were displayed in the codfishery, the seal hunt, and even logging. The Newfoundland tilt, unlike the American or Canadian log cabin or prairie sod house, is not the focus of sentimental or romantic mythology about heroic pioneers or frontier life. Rather, it became a metaphor for the opposite image.

One also wonders if there was not in the later 19th century a real aversion towards calling attention to this "backward" feature of Newfoundland life on the part of many local writers who were concerned with emphasizing the progress, modernization, and economic promise of Newfoundland. For these boosters—as for political leaders and intellectuals today in many underdeveloped countries with nomadic or transhumant minorities—winterhousing may have been a primitive and obsolete custom associated with the poorer classes in remote areas, and they had little interest in

describing it and exposing it to outside criticism. It was less a conspiracy of silence than a kind of self-censorship. In the eyes of the indigenous literati it was probably regarded in much the same way they viewed the Newfoundland dialects—as something nonstandard, parochial, even primitive, and therefore to be ignored if not despised. At any rate, winterhousing failed to find a place in Newfoundland's oral tradition or in the standard history books, and a blind spot, which might even fancifully be called a collective amnesia, has developed and persists to this day.

The study of the nature and the consequences of winterhousing in Newfoundland (and Labrador) requires far more research than is reflected in this preliminary paper. Certainly the unpublished documentation available in Newfoundland and other archives has merely been skimmed. We need many detailed case studies of individual communities and of regions in order to distinguish local variations in the distribution and the development of transhumance through time. Much valuable information also waits to be collected in the realm of oral history, through timely interviews with the rapidly declining number of people who participated in the winterhousing practice early in this century or who have secondhand knowledge of it. Finally, there is a very promising and desirable opening for archaeological research, which should liberate us to some degree from the tyranny of the written record. No remains of early winterhouses or of winterhousing communities have ever been studied, or even identified as such; yet there must have been many scores of such house sites in existence in the past several centuries, and even in the relatively thin and acid soils of Newfoundland there will be some remains—not so much of architecture but concentrations and scatterings of such cultural debris as metal, ceramic and glass objects (some of which could probably be dated accurately), hearthstones, and, in favourable situations, animal bones, charcoal and organic artifacts. In some cases the localities of former winterhousing communities can be fixed fairly closely from written descriptions by eyewitnesses (e.g., Wilson's "Wesley Vale" near Burin), and careful surveying should bring others to light. Archaeology may be the best, even the only tool to explore the earliest stages of transhumance in Newfoundland in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, as well as to solve specific problems such as whether in fact the southern Avalon was an important winterhousing region.

Academics are fond of closing their works on a note of irony, so let us indulge in two examples. First, there is irony in the fact that at a time when the European conquerors in the New World were often doing their utmost to encourage or force many of the aboriginal populations to live in seden-

tary settlements and even to become farmers, some of their fellow Europeans in Newfoundland were developing a semisedentary and largely nonagricultural way of life under the nose of the colonizing nation. Second, Newfoundlanders have long cherished the image of themselves as a people who until the 20th century declined to be integrated into North American life. "Our face towards Britain, our back to the Gulf" went the feisty old anti-Confederate ballad of our forefathers. So there is more than a little irony in the realization that as early as the 18th century many of them had already turned their backs on, not only the typical Euro-American pattern of settlement, but on the traditional European one practised by their ancestors and contemporaries in the British Isles. Without being aware of the fact perhaps, they had in this respect turned their faces towards the non-European, aboriginal world of North America.⁷

Notes

¹Cormack 110. Among those who have helped with information or suggestions for this paper I particularly thank Gordon Handcock, Thomas F. Nemeč, Shane O'Dea, Ralph Pastore, Gillian T. Cell, Frederick Jones, Paul Charest, A. S. Bell (USPG librarian, Oxford), and David Touchings for letting me read his manuscript, "Winter Housing in François on the South Coast" (1975), based on the winterhousing recollections of Mr. Matthew Marsden. George Story encouraged me to write this essay for *Newfoundland Studies*. James Dobson was also helpful.

²There were, of course, two other forms of residential mobility in Newfoundland. One was the Labrador fishery in which entire families migrated in summer for temporary residence on the Labrador coast. The other was the custom, still persisting in some places in Newfoundland and on the Lower North Shore of Quebec, whereby families moved short distances from the outport home base during the summer to a temporary fishing station. Within living memory this was even practised in St. John's, and has recently been revived in some resettled outports.

³In this paper the concentration is on the winterhousing phenomenon on the island of Newfoundland, although from the early 19th century onward a very similar pattern existed among the coastal fishermen of southern Labrador. The kind of settler transhumance that developed in the Lake Melville-Hamilton Inlet region, where fur trapping was the main activity, differs in some important ways from that of the coastal fishermen; inland the winterhouse or community was the principal residence, not the secondary one as among the coastal people or on the island of Newfoundland.

⁴Farming was not an absolute deterrent to winter migration, however. Cormack observed in 1822 that the settlers at Barachois River, St. George's Bay, had well-stocked farms, including cattle; yet when he was there the inhabitants were in their winterhouses under the shelter of the woods, having recently left their summer residences at the shore (96).

⁵This is a feature not taken into account by Sider in his recent discussion of the problem of winter supply under the truck system (22). It is likely that winterhousing served to alleviate to some degree the dependence of the settlers on the merchant. Those fishermen who were refused all credit had some opportunity to avoid complete destitution, while for others who were allowed a reduced stock the forest resources served as a supplement to get the family through the winter until the next fishing season.

⁶Based on personal knowledge.

⁷Here it may be worth emphasizing the extent to which some Newfoundlanders as late as the early 19th century had gone in this direction. Newfoundland may have been the only overseas colony in which European settlers, whose economy was based almost exclusively on fishing, hunting and furring, felt their livelihood threatened by newly-arrived aborigines who competed with them for the same natural resources. The observation by the Anglican clergyman Edward Wix, made while visiting Pushthrough in Hermitage Bay in 1830, illustrates this point:

The influx of Canadian Micmac Indians who, by the progress of cultivation, have been driven from their own hunting and fishing grounds & have taken refuge in search of game in the woods and barrens of Newfoundland is said by the inhabitants hereabouts to have had a sensible effect upon the game, & to have impoverished the European settlers who depended upon the furs, upon the hunting & lake- & river-fishing for their subsistence.

(SPG, Series C, Box 1a/21a, f. 258, no. 12)

This is an extraordinary reversal of roles, and illustrates well the extent to which the lives of at least some of the settlers and aborigines had converged. It also, of course, suggests the context in which competition between settlers and Beothuks in earlier times had led to almost im- placable hostility. There is no room to develop the theme in this paper, but it is likely that one of the keys to understanding this hostility is to be found in the winterhousing phenomenon and its associated attributes.

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