

REVIEW OF “THE LAST FISH TALE” BY MARK KURLANSKY

by

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Do people in Gloucester run around saying, “That’s Gloucester” whenever something the least bit provocative or odd happens as Mark Kurlansky says they do in his moving and rambling *The Last Fish Tale* to which he adds the sub-title “The Fate of the Atlantic and Survival of Gloucester, America’s Oldest Fishing Port and Most Original Town.” Maybe so, but I doubt it. Indeed, the saying reminds me of an equivalent saying—“That’s Bisbee”—in Richard Shelton’s *Come Back to Bisbee* (1992). The history, situation and future of the former copper mining town of Bisbee, Arizona parallel that of Gloucester, In this case, however, the town in question is an inland town surrounded by copper-toned hills a short distance from the life-threatening and life-giving Mexican border. Kurlansky’s book cannot, however, be dismissed lightly for while some of his statements are exaggerated or veer toward the ridiculous, they are also provocative because they challenge readers, particularly readers who have lived in Gloucester, to weigh them carefully, in which case there is enough substance in them to provide nourishment of an ample, digestive character. (Digestion, or the culinary part of it, is a prominent sub-theme in the book.)

During the Depression years when I grew up at the very edge of a damp, foul and smelly Gloucester inner-harbor before the Fish Pier, built in 1938, obliterated Five-Pound Island, I was aware of a “Gloucester spirit.” Part of this had to do with the fact that within my own family and within the families of all of my neighbors there were direct ties to the sea and to fishing and to the knowledge that came from experiencing the loss of people who had drowned while wrestling for their’s and their families livelihoods from the tumultuous and, treacherous sea. But death is a fact of life, whether on land or sea, in the ocean, in the mines, in bed, or in the trenches.

As in so many towns in the United States, the “Gloucester spirit” had a lot to do with the feats of local high school football, baseball, and basketball players. (In the 1940’s it was mainly football) It was these players who were, for a season at least, the city’s heroes. But regardless of whatever was first in public conversation or in newspapers, the fickle and haunting presence of the sea was always in peoples’ minds, shaping their thoughts and fears and hopes. More than Lord Byron and Walt Whitman, who were fascinated by the sea’s tidal ebbs and flows, the poet and novelist Rudyard Kipling, in his book *Captains Courageous*, sensed the challenge and the response the sea evoked. Kipling’s tribute to manliness and egalitarianism was in the “Gloucester Spirit.” In as much, as people need art to understand themselves, Kipling gave them what they needed. Other artists also expressed the “Gloucester sprit,” most notably the sculptor Leonard Craske who gave Gloucester its most well-known icon, the Man at the Wheel who looks steadfastly out to the ocean and steers his and mankind’s ship into the

unknown and infinitesimal beyond. In recent years, poets Charles Olson, in an obtuse (he would say “archaeological”) fashion, and Vincent Ferrini in a more down- to the-water manner have kept the “Gloucester spirit” alive.

The painter Fitz Hugh Lane was a native son of Gloucester who acquired fame outside the city. His paintings are best seen on walls rather than in books as they do not reproduce well. The settings tend to be placid and, carefully composed, though there are exceptions in which brigs, schooners and yachts appear to be responding to wind and wave. Unlike Fitz Hugh Lane, artist Winslow Homer was not a native son; yet he sensed the drama of the ocean and of fishing in a more intense manner than Fitz Hugh Lane. (Somewhere Charles Olson, Gloucester’s best-known if not best poet, takes an opposite point of view.) Ironically, Homer’s dynamic paintings of waves crashing against rocks were not painted in Bass Rocks, Gloucester, but in his family’s compound at Prout’s Neck, Maine. But summer people in Gloucester, like Winslow Homer and the young poet T. S. Eliot, were, in the main, interlopers. A few were so insulated by their money and taste that they contacted local people only when they were buying goods at local stores. The exceptions were beachgoers, in Good Harbor and Niles Beaches in Gloucester, where interchanges took place between young summer people—principally girls—and local Lotharios.

Summer was an exciting time in Gloucester for families, who, having been isolated by cold and inhospitable winters, found an exhilarating opportunity for social interaction. A similar person-to-person interchange occurred in public schools where the mingling of so many ethnic groups fostered assimilation even while parents of the students—immigrants from Portugal, Italy, Greece, Finland, the Ukraine, Nova Scotia and elsewhere—fought against it.

All generalizations are wrong, but, at the risk of being wrong, I maintain Portuguese who lived on “Portagee Hill” were the first twentieth-century ethnic group to assimilate. After the third generation, many descendants could not speak Portuguese. Finns, Sicilians and Jews maintained their insularity for longer periods. Here again in third and subsequent generations divisions had softened but had not altogether disappeared. It is comforting to know that Gloucester people, from whatever stock they came, have adhered to and perpetuated their heritages.

Sunday has always been an important day in Gloucester for it meant a respite from the toils of other days, and, as with the beaches and summer, an opportunity to meet others, even if worship of God was the ostensible reason for the getting-together. Insular and provincial as local people may have been, there was a sense of pride in being part of a community. Even while this community had its minorities, these divisions were often complementary and inter-dependent.

When Kurlansky is not giving recipes of dishes which people in Gloucester made from scratch with whatever was available—mostly fish—he recites a harrowing tale of the dangers of fishing. Much of what he has to say is well-known due to similar re-counting by Sebastian Junger in *The Perfect Storm* and accounts in the media of

disappearing fish, It's a distressing story, but , whether or not shocking, depends on how it affects one's family and one's people financially.

To say that Gloucester is changing does not make it special, nor does it make it "America's Most Original Town." This is Kurlansky's greatest solipsism. Nevertheless Gloucester exerts an appeal on residents and visitors that is only partially shared by other coastal communities like Boothbay Harbor, Boston, New Bedford, Nantucket, Monterey and San Diego. Kurlansky devotes his next-to-last chapter to trying to place the microcosm Gloucester within a greater macrocosm. He makes comparisons and connections with conditions and metropolises in Canada and Europe. He found the Cornish fishing village of Newlyn to be the most like Gloucester, not only in its "picturesque" blue-collar character, but in its coping with problems caused by over-fishing and the institution of governmental quotas. In recent years Newlyn has become a major supply source for fish and shell species for the rest of Europe and, to date has held the encroachments of tourism and non-fish related industries at bay.

This placing of Gloucester's concerns in a larger context provides a helpful service for Gloucester is an island in only a metaphorical sense. The fish it ships—once caught in large and now in small quantities—went out to markets all over the world. Even poet Charles Olson, the alien tenant in Gloucester's cheap-rent Sicilian-American Fort district, knew that Gloucester included the mainland. The "polis" he admired had both local and archetypal dimensions.

To Olson the fourteen self-reliant fishermen on Cape Ann in 1623 embodied "polis" while intruders acting on behalf of the Plymouth Company, represented "all sliding statism, ownership, getting into the community, as Chamber of Commerce, or theocracy, or City Manager" (*Maximus*, 105). In more concise terms, authoritarianism threatened the vitality and dignity of free people. Gloucester had to wait until 1642, about seventeen years after the valiant fourteen fishermen had dispersed, for the Massachusetts Bay Colony to give it its name. (The name may indicate that some of the town's inhabitants came from the city of Gloucester, a seventeenth-century bastion of Puritanism on the eastern banks of the River Severn, in England.) Unlike "separatist" Pilgrims who came to the New World to serve God and themselves and whose ties to the Plymouth Company were short-lived, practical-minded Puritan settlers in Gloucester, Massachusetts came together to form a self-sufficient, self-governing "parish", though Olson would consider "parish" to be yet another face of "sliding statism." In a sense, Gloucester is today, as it has been in the past, a community of hard-working, civic-minded people—as is also many towns in the United States that have not forgotten their pioneer beginnings and have not become suburbs of sprawling megalopolises.

More people leave Gloucester than stay. Each high school class produces a crop of expatriates. Some of these wipe the soil of Gloucester from their feet and the spray from their skins. A few look back disdainfully at the squalor and dirt of their grubbing pinch-penny town. These escapees come from the poorer classes who did the menial and backbreaking work on the wharves and in the canneries that kept the collars of so many better-paid and educated people clean. One of the many fascinating tidbits gleaned from

reading Kurlansky, is the idea, by no means universally held, that fishermen who brave the Stellwagen, Georges and Grand Banks actually enjoy fishing and find other occupations “boring.”

In the 1930’s and 40’s fishing Captain Ben Pine and financier Roger Babson were Gloucester’s most famous citizens. Its all-time hero was, however, Howard Blackburn, a doryman from Nova Scotia, who in 1883, while lost in a fog rowed his dory one-hundred miles from the Burego Bank to the shores of Newfoundland, his fingers, which he lost, being frozen to the oars. A living legend, in 1901 Blackburn, his arms changed to stumps, sailed in a specially designed sloop from Gloucester to Lisbon in thirty-nine record days. As time is not static others names are now or will be added to the list of luminaries.

Among all of Gloucester’s re-settled and re-located people, there is something about roots. As Sicilians at the Fort remember Sicily, as the Portuguese on the “Hill” remember the Azores, as Jews remember the Ukraine, so ex- Gloucesterites look back on their native city as a collage of scenes—from Stage Fort Park, from Bass Rocks, from Rocky Neck, from Eastern Point, from Dogtown, from Annisquam, from Riverdale, from Rockport, etc.—Gloucester is a place its distant children return to in memory, if not in fact – a city of contrasts and conflicts, of meager resources and occasional animosities, but also a city that has grown from its soil and waters, from its rocks and trees and shrubs, from its local animal and close-by aquatic life and has so ramified that it has become a beacon of courage and love. It is these positive attributes that Kurlansky found in his interviews with Jews, Italians, Portuguese, Finns and Wasps and, as in my case, French Canadians. I heartily recommend *The Last Fish Tale* as a primer that presents most of the facts one needs to know to begin to understand the reason why Gloucester has maintained a steady and now tottering place in the imagination of the American people and why it has become the source of so much poetic and pictorial description and praise.