



An “Unpretentious Exercise”

David D. Platt

A summer weekend in the mid-1970s, Charles McLane placed telephone calls in search of three elderly former islanders, in hopes of arranging interviews with each. Their recollections, he knew, would add to his understanding of Maine island communities, whose history he planned to research and publish when he retired from the political science faculty at Dartmouth College.

The phone calls brought disappointment. All three of the hoped-for informants had died within the past month; their knowledge of and insights into a particular way of life were lost. Losses can become lessons, however, and this one would have a positive effect on McLane’s island-history research project. “At a certain point,” he wrote in the preface to his first volume of *Islands of the Mid-Maine Coast*, published in 1982, “the idea of piecing together the history of these islands acquired an urgency” — because the living record, at least, was slipping away with the lives of the islands’ older residents; because McLane was himself near retirement age and facing a project he knew would take him years to complete. “The study,” he had realized by 1982, “would not wait until the illusory ‘retirement.’ It had to be done now.”

What McLane and his wife, Carol, called their “unpretentious exercise” for retirement quickly evolved into something much more ambitious: a definitive history of three centuries of island habitation and use, covering hundreds of islands that lie along the Maine coast, all the way from the Kennebec River to Machias Bay.

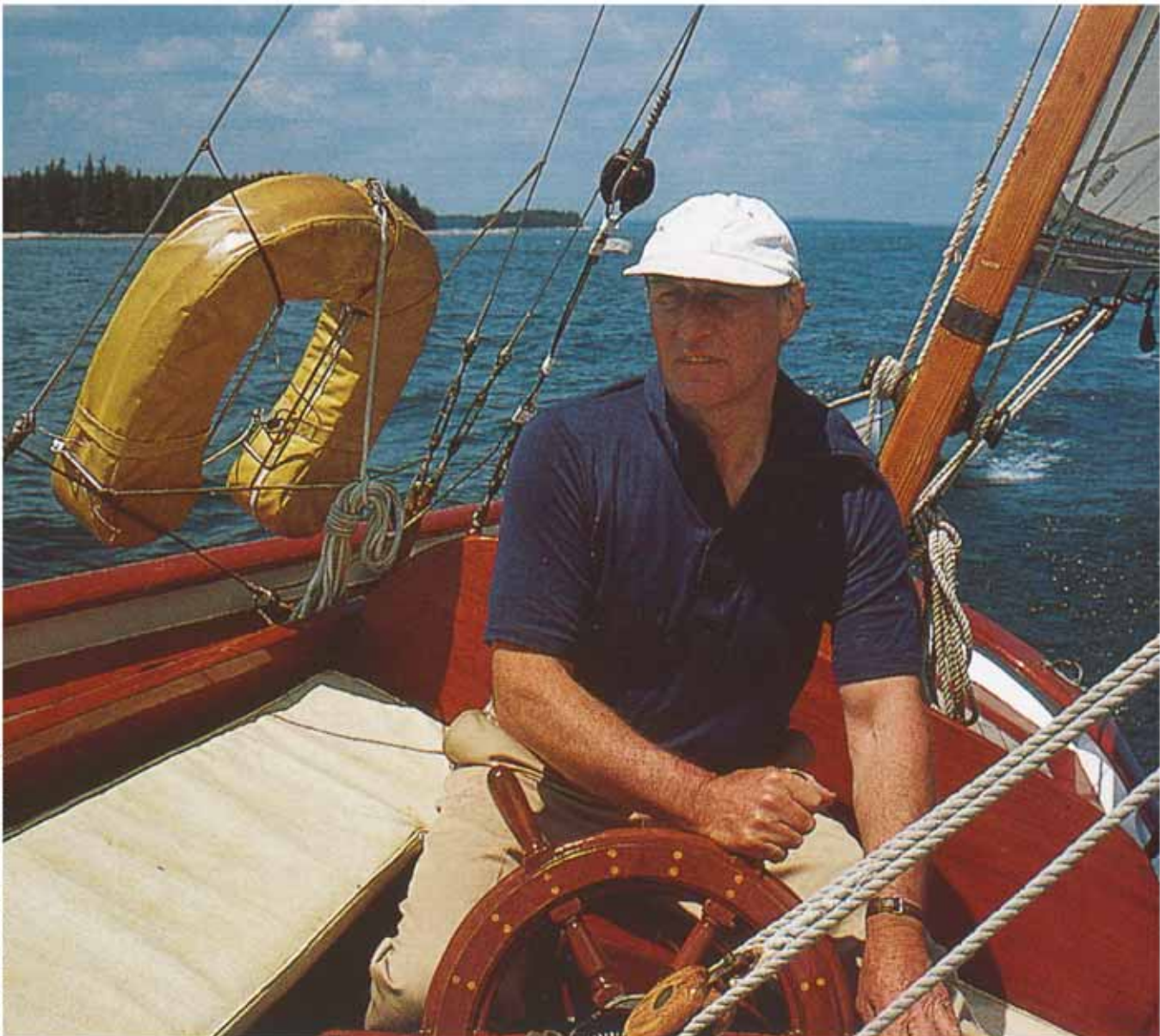
The project took 20 years to complete. Undeterred by the deaths of those three former islanders they had hoped to interview in the 1970s, the McLanes went on to speak with scores of other island elders, incorporating their memories into the histories of the islands where they or their families had lived. More significant in terms of historical technique, however, was the McLanes’ recognition that much valuable material lay forgotten in the records of towns and counties along the Maine coast — registries of deeds, court and tax records, town meeting reports — and in the statistics gathered each decade since 1790 for the U.S. Census.

History, like much of science, is largely an exercise in focus and perspective. How one looks

at the available facts — how one assembles and analyzes them — is fully as important as the facts themselves. What Charles and Carol Everts McLane learned through interviews, or ferreted out of family records and registries of deeds, wasn’t particularly startling, revealing or surprising; what was new was the way the McLanes used the available facts to tell a story that had not been told before....

After 20 years of research, Charles McLane can generalize, just a little. “Islanders,” he says, “have an innate capacity to submerge their differences in order to get along.” The success of an island community “depends on who you’re dealing with — the chemistry of who is on an island at what age, vitality, health, makes a lot of difference. What makes for success or failure on an island would be a damned good study....”

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COURTESY OF CHARLES B. McLANE (2)