

THE ISLAND

Nancy McIntyre

*Dedicated to Everett Condon,
William Jamison &
Gloria and Billy Condon*

EVERETT CONDON

Everett Condon was the youngest son of John Anneas Condon, whose sister Marion left their home on Prince Edward Island around the turn of the century to seek her fortune in the United States. Marion found a job, paying 8 cents an hour, in Attleboro, Massachusetts, where she met and married William McIntyre and raised a family. Her son John is my father-in-law, Pappy. Everett and Pappy were favorite cousins. I first met Everett in 1971, on our honeymoon camping trip to Prince Edward Island, where we would come back, year after year.

Down East, or the Island, or PEI, we call it. But the people we know there have their own way of talking and a different name for the place: they call it "home," as if it were everybody's home. When they ask us, "Will you be home next summer?" they mean, will you be here.



ROW OF FISHING SHACKS

Bob had told me about the Island three years before I saw it. I was eighteen then, and my husband-to-be wasn't ready to be anybody's husband, but he told me that if I ever did get married, he knew just where I ought to spend my honeymoon. "It's the most beautiful place in the whole world," he explained: "Prince Edward Island, Canada. Where my grandmother came from, and where we used to stay every summer when I was little. It is so green on the Island, and the dirt so red, that when you take the ferry back to New Brunswick, everything there will look grey to you."



MISS HEATHER

Green fields on red clay are your first and last sight of the Island and the longest remembered, but those aren't the end of bright colors Down East. You can see startling shades of painted wood trim, both on boats and on houses: purples and aquas and Day-Glo reds; colors that jump right out from their white or weathered wood surroundings.



BOATS ON LAND

Everett's farm faces on the ocean, and in the old days they used to fish off their own beach. They had a lobster-packing plant down there, and after lobster season, Pappy remembers, they'd fish cod and hake, and salt them and lay them out to dry on the out-of-water lobster pots.

But just down the road there was potential for a real harbor: Graham's Pond. Everett and some others dug red sand and silt out of the short creek (always pronounced crik) that led from the pond to the ocean, then laid down stone and drove in high pilings to wall the channel they'd made. Everett himself built the arched iron foot bridge that spans the creek, though in all the times we motored under it together, he never bothered to tell us that.

1988, acrylic on paper, 22 x 15 inches.



LEANING SHACKS AT THE CREEK

Beside the creek are piles of lobster pots and rows of shacks, filled with gear. There is one sizable structure, a fish-packing plant that Everett helped build. Used to be, whenever anything broke in the factory, a pipe or an engine, they'd call in Everett to fix it. Says Pap, "Everett could do anything, Everett could have been anything, if he hadn't had John Barleycorn to wrestle with."

In the service, during World War II, Everett worked as a welder at the shipyard in Halifax. He invented ways of welding no one ever had seen before; he could weld inside an engine, so a junked one could be used again. They sent him all over Canada, even up into the Arctic Circle to Resolute Bay, welding tanks and engines. After he came home, Everett and his wife Marge raised seven children, in the farmhouse next door to the one he grew up in.



TROY AND CONNIE

Everett's first four children were grown up and moved out before I met them. Dorothy Condon was next, getting married the same summer we did. When we returned the following year, she and her husband and their new baby, Troy, were living in a trailer across from Everett's farmhouse. Now only young Connie and one older sister were still in the house with Marge and Everett. But the others remained nearby, or came home when they could in the summer. Each year we would invite everybody to an evening picnic at our campsite—a small way to return the hospitality they always showed us. We'd grill chicken or hot dogs over the fire, and play guitar and sing till late.



1988, acrylic on paper, 20 x 15 inches.

HOME FOR THE NIGHT

We always camped at Johnston's Park, away from the washrooms and into the woods, on a little clay cliff, with a short climb down to the shore and a good view of the boats coming up the Murray River. Sometimes on clear nights—and in memory they were all clear nights—Bob and I would walk down the beach to look at stars, and listen for the seals playing across the water.

Twice, we brought with us to the Island our best friend Caroline and her younger sister Alexine, who I'll never forget washing our cook-pans after each meal, down at the waterline, scouring them out with sand and seaweed. Every year after, Everett and his buddies would always ask if we'd brought "the girls."



EVERETT'S BRIDGE

By the time I met Everett, he had mostly given up summer fishing. He would fish lobster in the spring, and then usually pull the boat out of the water for repairs, and spend the summer drinking too much and entertaining visitors to the Island such as ourselves. In the fall, he taught welding at the college in Charlottetown. Every winter, he built a boat in his barn. The way I understood it, someone would come by with a picture of a pretty-looking boat on the back cover of a magazine, and Everett would make him one to look like that. He'd built Pappy's boats: the Li'l Liz, and, after Pap sunk that, the Woogus. The last boat Everett built, the one he didn't finish, was supposed to have been Pappy's Island boat, to use when he came Down East.



TAKING TROY FISHING

When Everett wanted to recommend an activity he thought we might like, he'd always say, "It'll be something different for you," and it usually was. The only place I've ever caught a fish was on the Island. If the weather was blowy, we could still go out for a ride on a boat, but for mackerel fishing, we'd look for the sea to be "flat ca'm." We'd motor out to a likely spot, and stop and throw out chum—handfuls of dogfood & oatmeal. Floating in the calm water, it would shine in the late afternoon sun and attract the first mackerel, which when caught would be cut up as bait for the rest.



FISHING BOAT

The creek is always lined with fishing boats, rigged all sorts of ways, some for scallop, some for herring, some radio- and sonar-equipped, a few bare of any such inventions. For power they generally have car engines, boxed in by plywood, with the hot exhaust pipes running straight up in the air from the middle of the boats.



THE CREEK

"The creek" is the name given not just to the body of water but to the whole working port now grown up around it. There is a stark and fresh feel to the creek, and to all the eastern shore of the Island. Everything gets washed clean, by the ocean and the sun and the winters. The paint washes off, and the shacks, the barns and the farmhouses stand till they fall. When the farmhouses go, they are replaced by new pre-fab construction; the simplest solution, as was building farmhouses by hand in their day.



CABIN

We loved the Island so much, we were tempted when the farmhouse on the other side of Everett's went up for sale. We did realize that life there has its dark side: winters are long and lonely; opportunities, sparse. Failed farms and rotted boats may have a graceful look, a harmony with the earth where they're heading, but they don't speak of easy times. We also knew that drinking on the Island is widespread, though sometimes hidden. King's County is mainly dry; it is a 25-minute drive from Murray Harbor North to the nearest liquor store, in Cardigan. So the local bootleggers do a pretty good business. When a dance or a party is held, the women will have set out a spread of home-made sweets, with tea and coffee. No liquor is offered. But in the dark just outside the door, a group of men is always gathered, joking, around a bottle.



Harry Allright, 1988

LYMAN JACKSON

Most of the men we know on the Island fish. The seasons are short, so they take other jobs as well, when jobs can be found, or collect unemployment and live on that, or both.

Lyman Jackson, with his red hair and beard, looked the perfect fisherman to me. We were friends of his brother Gordon, who had come to find us at our campsite the first time we ever came to the Island, because he'd heard that Bob and I played guitar. Gordon played guitar well, and had a beautiful singing voice. Crippled by polio, he had modified his car to operate by hand control. It was uncomfortable for him to sit on the ground, so Gordon would sit in that car with the door open and play and sing, and the car itself would add to the fullness of the sound in the same way that the box of the guitar did. I've never heard anything prettier than the way he made those songs sound, our first year.



BROTHERS

Gordon Jackson's brother Lyman took us all out for a boat ride one day: Everett and his older brother Dan, Bob and his little brother Beowulf, Pappy and me. It was the summer of '77. Beowulf and Pappy had driven to the Island with us from Attleboro, a little like the old days, when Pappy often used to put 2 or 3 of his boys in the car and head Down East.



1988, acrylic on paper, 22 x 30 inches.

LOWELL AND HIS HERRING

As a special treat, Everett arranged for all of us and a couple of his buddies to go tuna fishing out of North Lake Harbor, in his friend Lowell's tuna boat. The odd thing about tuna fishing was, we didn't seem to expect to catch one. We motored about this way and that, talking back and forth on the radio in hopes of a tuna sighting, and drinking varying amounts of the beer and liquor we had picked up in Cardigan on the way. (The amounts varied all the way down to none, in the cases of Pappy and Beowulf.)



1988, acrylic on paper, 22 x 15 inches.

BAITING FOR TUNA

The first tangible step toward landing a tuna, we eventually did achieve: we managed to catch a herring and a sea perch, which were then attached to the big tuna hooks as bait. We never did sight a tuna.

Undaunted, the crew broke ever more often into rowdy song. When Lowell opened the cabin window with such force that it fell out entirely, into the sea, the boisterous response was one more variation of "You Picked a Fine Time to Leave Me, Lucille," the number one tune of the afternoon, followed by the local favorite "Prince Edward Island is Heaven to Me."



1988, acrylic on paper, 22 x 15 inches.

PAPPY AND EVERETT

Pappy had come to the Island with us mostly, I think, out of concern for his cousin Everett. Everyone was worried about Everett. His drinking had gotten the better of him, and everybody was looking for one last way to save him. Pappy loved Everett, but knew nothing to do. Everett loved Pap, but could only put up his best front while Pappy was there.



Pappy and Everett

Nancy McIntyre June 1988

PAPPY IN UNCLE BILL'S KITCHEN

He was sad for Everett, but still, if ever I've seen Pappy in his element, it was Down East. Puffing a fat cigar, sitting first in Marge and Everett's kitchen, then down the road at Uncle Bill Jamison's, listening to stories and telling a few, Pappy was at home entirely.

He had brought to the Island, as always, some thing or another for Everett to use in the boat-building. Twice Pap had hauled down whole engines; another time, it was a collection of giant drill bits he'd salvaged from an out-of-business New England boat factory. No matter what trouble he'd gone to, Pappy would never admit it, but act like the gift had appeared of its own accord or was all someone else's idea.



1988, acrylic on paper, 22 x 15 inches.

UNCLE BILL WITH A STORY

The way of talking on the corner of the Island we know is a completely charming mix of Canadian and Scotch-Irish, with a singular way of speaking while taking in breath: "Yeah," in particular, is most always inhaled. It is a pleasure to hear anyone speak there, but my very favorite to listen to was always Uncle Bill, Everett's father-in-law, and the best story teller I ever knew. Pipe in hand, he would spin long, macabre, hilarious tales, with the transportation of corpses during his railroad days a favorite theme. Most of the other characters being now also long gone, the stories were punctuated with "God bless him"s. Finally, the tale done, William would look far away and breathe out, "Po-o-or John McCar-r-rthy," (or whoever had starred) and then maybe breathe back in even lower, one last "God bless him."

1988, acrylic on paper, 22 x 15 inches.



UNCLE BILL'S BUREAU

Uncle Bill's older brother, Jack, had lived with them, and had taken to bed in his mid 80s, ready to die. When a year or two passed and there he still was, he grew restless, got up, and by age 89 Jack rowed daily to Panmure Island, living out his last years in good health. William himself seemed to grow younger continually. At 84, having just put a fresh coat of paint on his house, he got us to take a picture of him up on the ladder, his pipe in one hand and a big grin on his face.



1988, acrylic on paper, 30 x 22 inches.

MARGE'S BED AND CHAIR

Marge Condon, William's daughter, was in those days a most vivacious woman, hard-working and fun-loving both. Our first years there, I remember whole Mondays she and her daughters spent washing clothes, starting by heating the water. (I guess it's no wonder my mother-in-law, Mammy, with many young ones herself, was not always enthusiastic about her summers on the Island.) Later, with nine grandchildren, Marge was still the best dancer I'd see when a fiddler was called to play at a party or dance. There is a spark about her, that Everett had too, and which all their children inherited from them.

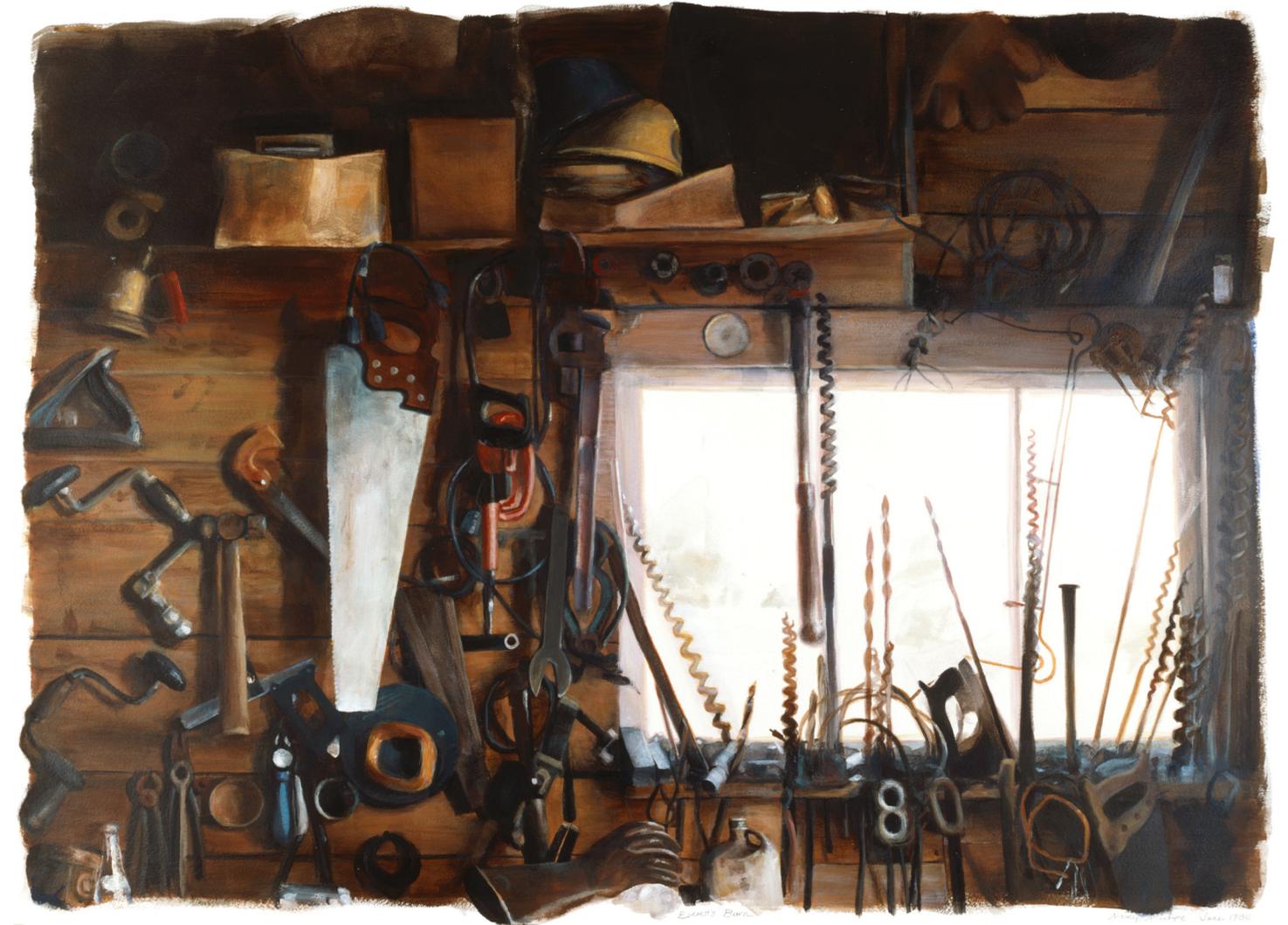


1988, acrylic on paper, 22 x 30 inches.

EVERETT'S BARN

Everett's boat-building barn was a marvelous place, crammed with every tool needed for the building of a boat, all kinds of welding equipment, and a tremendous collection of old odds and ends.

As the wooden hull of a new boat was being constructed, Everett would brace it in every direction against the floor and frame of the barn itself, to hold it in place. His last boat, which was not completed at the time of his death, sat there so long that gradually the roles were reversed, until the boat was holding up the barn. When the boat was finally removed, the barn took on such a lean that it is no longer safe to enter.



MARGE AND EVERETT'S KITCHEN

At Marge and Everett's, as at Uncle Bill's, the main gathering place of the house was the kitchen. It had a wood-burning cook-stove, a gas stove, a big formica table where they always ate (with dinner in mid-afternoon and a light supper later on, in the Irish way) and a built-in corner couch where Bob or Gordon Jackson would sit and play guitar, or a drinking buddy not fit to drive home could stay the night.



JOE'S BEDROOM

Next door, across a field of unmowed grass, Everett's brother Joe lives by himself, in the falling-down house he was born in. Like Everett's and Bill's, Joe's house is adorned with images of Jesus and the Virgin Mary. The rooms otherwise are sparsely furnished, full of stillness and light. The upstairs tilts, but the rooms still have a rightness of proportion that I found to be true in all the old houses, and none of the new.



1988, acrylic on paper, 30 x 22 inches.

CONNIE'S OLD ROOM

The last year we saw Everett was 1978. Connie had gone off to school. Marge believed herself to be no further use to her husband, and had moved back in with her father. So Everett had the house to himself.

Bob and I had been so busy, we'd not been able to take our "summer" vacation until October. Though the trees were still mostly green in Washington, we thought we'd find some bright fall colors on a side trip to Cape Breton. But we were too late. The trees were bare, and one morning on the Island it snowed.



1988, acrylic on paper, 30 x 22 inches.

WINDOW AT BILL'S

We spent a lot of that 1978 visit in Uncle Bill's warm kitchen. A number of us were gathered around it one morning passing the time, when Marge declared that there was some sort of electrical problem down in the root cellar; none of the lights would go on. Bob was sent down to investigate the fuse box and wiring, since he knew about such things. When he did not return for quite some time, a second fellow was sent after him to lend a hand, and soon a third, to see whatever had become of the first two. The crew in the cellar kept growing in size, but it was Marge herself who finally came up with the solution: "Now wouldn't it be a comical thing if the whole problem was that the two bulbs had simply blown out at the same time?" No one had thought to check on that.

1988, acrylic on paper, 22 x 15 inches.



RED ROOM

I asked permission to photograph the rooms in all three of the old houses. There was a resonance of familiarity in them, partly just from all the times I'd been there. Some details, some materials in these homes also did remind me of the houses of my childhood: the chenille, the linoleum, the sheer soft plastic curtains (gradually replaced by cloth). But it wasn't that being there made me remember my own particular old home, so much as that it made me think they were right: this really was home, in that all-encompassing way they used the word here. There must be other versions of it, everywhere. Home, the place you can always go back to; the place you want never to change.



RAKE AND KITCHEN WINDOW

The days were bright and clear, as always, but it was so cold those October nights that we took Everett up on his offer, when he invited us to stay at his house instead of camp out. There was plenty of room, although he insisted that we sleep in his bed while he kept to the couch in the kitchen. Everett's kindness to us never faltered, and we only wished we could do something for him.



EVERETT'S PLACE EMPTY

Everett and Uncle Bill both died the year our daughter Molly was born, never to meet them. It was hard to return to the Island, and we did so uneasily the summer of '83, after Molly's third birthday. It was a sadder place. Everett's house was empty, and no one could agree who should take it and take care of it before it fell to ruin. The squabbles also had begun over who should inherit the lobster fleet, which consisted of the gear, the traps, the hard-to-come-by license and the half-finished boat still resting in Everett's barn. The boat was later completed by Everett's brother Dan and son Billy, but the fighting hasn't let up, and the house now seems destined to follow the barn to the ground.



DOROTHY

Nonetheless, it was fun to introduce Molly to the grandchildren, three of them fairly near her age. The focus suddenly had shifted downward two (and three!) generations. Troy had grown as tall as his mother, Dorothy. Our last evening on the Island, we all put together a cook-out on the Condon's beach. We'd not had room in the car for Bob's guitar, so it was a quiet night, but beautiful. A full moon rose out of the ocean as we watched. When the fire started to die down and it was too dark to fetch more branches, lobster traps were thrown on instead. The Condons told us the traps were old broken ones, but Bob and I didn't like to see them burned, even if they did make a beautiful high blaze.



1988, acrylic on paper, 15 x 11 inches.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

The paintings of scenes and people from Prince Edward Island, Canada that are reproduced in this book are based on Nancy McIntyre's frequent visits to the Island since 1971.

Nancy McIntyre is well known in the Washington, D.C. area for her silkscreen prints, which according to the Washington Post “deserve their popularity. . . . [T]heir textures are so many and their colors are so subtle that they have the sort of decorative weight one associates more with paintings than with prints.”

McIntyre's works have been shown at numerous galleries and museums, including the Jane Haslem Gallery, the Smithsonian's Museum of American Art, the Phillips Collection, the Library of Congress, Boston Printmakers, and Associated American Artists in New York City, as well in international exhibitions. She was born in Torrington, Connecticut in 1950, and is a 1972 graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design.