

REVIEW OF

**ROBERT J. SPILLER, *THE COTTAGE GIRLS AND WHALE COVE COTTAGES: AN ORAL HISTORY*. EDITED BY JOCELYNE L. THOMPSON, NEW ED.
FREDERICTON: UNIVERSITY OF NEW BRUNSWICK LIBRARIES, 2020.**

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In the early 19th century, Whale Cove Cottages on Grand Manan Island began hosting a special cohort of summer cottagers: adventuresome literary American feminists, the most famous of whom was Pulitzer-prizewinning Willa Cather (1873–1947). This charming and unique history of these American ‘cottage girls’ is primarily a literal transcription of interviews conducted by Robert Spiller in 1986, updated and edited by University of New Brunswick librarian Jocelyne Thompson, and republished in UNB Libraries’ New Brunswickana Project (<https://lib.unb.ca/newbrunswickana>). There are twenty historical photos in this book, eighteen of which are new to this edition.

The summer cottage community grew from the first cottage, purchased along with twenty acres of land by Sarah Jacobus, Sarah Adams, and Marie Felix in 1902, to several cottages and an inn that served meals, and, more importantly, hosted a daily cocktail hour. Spiller’s interview participants were either local Grand Mananers who cooked and served the cottagers’ meals, did their laundry, and provided them with other supports, including caretaker Red Flagg, and cooks and maids Kathleen Tatton and Kathleen Buckley, or cottagers themselves, such as Helen Southwick (niece of Willa Cather, who inherited Cather Cottage) and Barbara Coney Silbur (niece of cottage owner Alice Coney, who inherited a share of the original cottage). The Grand Mananers’ observations are a mixture of speculation and facts about the American women’s impressions of Grand Manan and their impact on local culture. For example, Helen Southwick noted of her aunt Willa Cather, “she didn’t come to socialize; she came here to work. She was very fond of the quiet” (46). While Cather liked the quiet, she apparently didn’t like the food, and when one cook left the inn, Cather encouraged Kathleen Buckley to take on the job. Most of the observations on both sides were highly positive and respectful, usually focusing on the cottagers’ exoticism, including their smoking habits and car ownership.

As local resident Kathleen Buckley explained, “The Cottage Girls had a very good time here. They ... used to go hiking all over the place.... And they went on canoe trips with the Indians who would come over from Pleasant Point. They tried to get a library going and were active in getting the town halls started.... They were Democrats and thought the labor movement would amount to many things.... They had their ideas and their standards, and they lived up to them” (56). Such passages suggest that the early cottagers had a reformist spirit common among middle-class women of the age, and I can’t help but assume that the earlier generation were suffragists, though that topic did not come up in the interviews. Neither were class differences raised explicitly; while the locals’ observations implied respect and even awe, they did not comment on the cottagers’ privilege, or the class differences with the locals who served them.

On some level this oral history is a border study because Grand Manan is equidistant to the east coasts of Maine and New Brunswick. Yet where many border studies emphasize the commonalities between Americans and Canadians and the porous nature of the border, this book highlights their differences. This may be more because the cottage girls were urban and middle class while the locals

were rural and working class. It is somewhat disappointing that this updated version did not address these issues of class and gender, especially given how much historical scholarship has been published since the first edition appeared in 1986. Nevertheless, the book is an engaging account of mutual respect between the cottage girls and locals, with much credit to the cottage girls for bringing an intellectual and feminist culture to a largely isolated Grand Manan.

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