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William Howell's Letter from Boston (1942)

Introduced by Patrick O'Flaherty

THE HOWELLS ARE one of the prominent families in Northern Bay,¹ a community about halfway along the North Shore of Conception Bay. (The North Shore, between Salmon Cove and Bay de Verde, is so called because it lies north of Carbonear, a major center in 18th- and 19th-century Newfoundland.) The ancestral home of the family is in the "West End" of the community, just north of the famous sandy beach and opposite the "South Side," possessed by the Woodrows and Jacobses. The Howells and their immediate neighbors, the Mullalys, Hogans, Hincheyes, and Johnsons, together with the South Siders, were Roman Catholic. A little further north (the "middle of the harbour") was the domain of another branch of the Hogans, and north of them were the Buckler, Butler, Puddester, and Moores families — a Methodist enclave. A few hundred yards beyond those was Long Beach, a suburb of Northern Bay with a mixture of Methodists and Roman Catholics. (Some claim, not without reason, that Long Beach is a separate community.)

To a casual observer, the West End and indeed all of Northern Bay in the early 20th century might well have seemed a good place to live. Nature, it could be argued, had not extended a generous hand to it, but neither had she been niggardly. Evergreen groves lay in back, coating the slopes that led to imposing tofts and ridges (and of course providing firewood, though most had to go beyond the adjacent hills to cut their annual supply). Cummins's Pond and Patrick's Pond were nestled in the trees nearby. A substantial brook tumbled into the fresh water swimming pool on the beautiful beach. (That beach, perhaps

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the finest in Newfoundland, is now a Provincial Park.) In due season, the barrens that stretched for miles inland provided berries, rabbits, and partridges to supplement the food supply. Ponds and brooks supplied trout. In addition to fish, the ocean gave turrs, salt-water ducks, and occasionally, when the spring pack-ice came to shore, seals.

But cod was king. It isn't practical to fish for cod from a sandy beach, and the high cliffs everywhere except Long Beach meant there was no easy access to the salt water. Thus fishing in most of Northern Bay was carried out with great difficulty, often using booms or trolleys (with ropes pulled by horses on the cliff-top) to get the catch up onto the bank to fishhouses and flakes. The harbour itself — it is an open bay rather than a harbour — was exposed to northeast and easterly winds. While rodneys could be hauled (using ways) onto the narrow beaches at the foot of the cliffs each day when fishing was done, skiffs had to be anchored on the collars just offshore and laboriously rowed to in dories every morning from the coves. These coves out of which men worked were little more than indentations in the cliff face. It was in one of these indentations that the Howells did their fishing in the early 1900s.

Demanding as conditions were, the place provided a precarious living for the inhabitants. Not everyone depended on the local inshore fishery: until the end of the 19th century, a small number left in June to fish in Labrador, returning in October. The spring seal fishery was also a factor in the economy. The population from 1874 to 1935 remained in the low to mid 400s. The 1911 *Census* gives the number of males catching and curing fish as 75, the number of females curing fish 69. Eighty boats brought in a total catch of cod of around 2,500 quintals, using, among other gear, 39 cod traps (a large number, surely causing congestion nearshore). Thirty-nine fishing rooms were in actual use, which made the shoreline crowded and busy in the fishing season. To walk along shore from Long Beach to the sands meant spending a lot of time in the shade under flakes. There were 81 houses inhabited, plus 86 barns and other buildings. Usable land was scarce. A great deal of land was under cultivation or in pasture, and much had been cleared back to the sides of the rocky ridges. The meadows and gardens were demarcated and protected by longer fences and rock walls. Narrow lanes led to the gardens and hay-meadows; along them moved boxcars, draycars (sometimes with haycrates on them), and, in winter, slides. To pull these, the community had 79 horses. Cows too, other horned cattle, sheep, pigs, goats, and poultry were essential to life. Northern Bay had an Agricultural Society in the early 1900s. Most food was locally produced: milk, cream, butter, eggs, fish, fresh meat, potatoes, turnips, cabbage, and other vegetables. Wool was carded, spun, and knit into clothing by the women. Hay was grown as winter fodder for the animals. A mine produced ochre which, mixed with cod oil, made paint. There were two forges, three mercantile premises, two liver factories, and a cooperage.

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The place was not immune from the periodic depressions of the disaster-prone Newfoundland economy, the soil was acidic, the fishery, as stated, hard to prosecute; but Northern Bay had a way of life, one based on exploitation of every available resource, familial loyalty and cooperation, hard work, religion, thrift, and other small-propertied conservative values. There was also an emphasis on education. In 1921, there were two female Roman Catholic teachers (with 121 pupils) and one Methodist teacher (23 pupils). In 1901, 70% of the population could read.

All these were assets, to be sure. Nor were they the only advantages the community possessed. Remote from the hum of commerce and the intrigues of the urban political world, inhabitants rarely saw policemen, magistrates, hawkers of merchandise, writers of books, and candidates for office. Governors did not intrude on them. Bishops, too, tended to keep their distance. Yet travel to other communities along the Shore and to the great world beyond the headlands was of course possible along the North Shore road and, for a time, on a railway branch line. Northern Bay people did not, however, stray far from home without good reason.

After World War I, a good reason would be found.

By the early 1920s, the fishing economy of the North Shore had fallen into sharp decline, driving emigrants to Cape Breton, Boston, and elsewhere. One of the many who left the West End of Northern Bay for the U.S. was William Howell, son of William and Bridget Howell (née Hogan, from the middle of the harbour). Three of his brothers and three sisters went to the U.S. as well. Jane (Howell) O'Flaherty, William's niece, recalls him as "a fine, hardworking man" who lived with his wife and three sons in an "apartment" in his father's house, from which he once operated a small shop.

William Howell wrote the following letter to his brother Edmund of Northern Bay, after an absence of twenty years. William was then about 55, Edmund in his late 60s. The letter says much about the economic pressures faced by migrant Newfoundlanders in the "Boston States," and reflects as well the values and work habits they carried with them to their demanding new environment. Historian W.G. Reeves says of the letter: "It illustrates quite nicely the contrast in American and Newfoundland cultures, the ties between old and new homelands, and the myth and reality of the American Dream for many immigrants."²

William Howell returned home for a brief visit in the 1970s. Edmund died in the early 1950s.

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[William Howell's Letter³ 1942]

Charlestown,⁴ Mass.

Dec 4th — 42.

Edmund

Dear old Brother:

My thoughts of the old folks at home, and the place where I was born, was a kind of slipping from my memory, but the good times and bad, the successes and reverses, marriages & deaths arguments etc. of twenty years ago has all come back to me on receipt of your letter, which I have read with great delight.

It seems to be a habit with us, to be neglectful — through long years of separation [not] to keep in touch with each other, but it peeps one up a bit you know, to hear the news from home or abroad, once in awhile. Well Ed if we were to meet it would take a long time to tell of all the things that happened since we parted. I was in my prime then and you middle-aged, now we are both old men, but you got the best of it[.] I am working hard for a living, and will be when I'm as old as you, (if I lives,) while you can just piddle around, with the little odd jobs, and take it easy. Well Ed, the times have certainly changed around here, the war has put the kibosh on everything especially the living conditions, and everything is being taxed to the utmost.

Where we could get along on 40 & \$45 per week last year, now it takes 60 & 65 to live the same. Everything is rationed here now tea, coffee, sugar, oil and meat pretty soon. Tea is the worst problem only 1/4 lb allowed to a customer, it cost \$1.25 per lb. Cheapest eggs are 60¢ now. Soon wont be able to buy meat. A fresh fish about 15 ins long cost 50¢ on the street — so this will give you an idea of what we're up against when we still have 7 healthy boys and girls sitting at the table and boy cant they eat.

Well Ed, the toughest part now is to get work enough, to match the high cost of living, which cant be done on the waterfront now, the way the ships are coming in. Would you believe it the first ship [that] came in here with cargo in two years, came here last week from Corner Brook, Nfld. with newsprint paper & pulp. We were talking to the mate and the crew, (some Nfld'ers) they told us, there was five cargoes left there within the last 3 months and their ship was the only one got through[h.] I guess they met the same fate as the Cariboo[.]⁵ I dont know how you feel about it, but I think you're a lucky man to have 3 boys working, if they were here, of age and physically fit they would have to go.⁶

Tom⁷ is married, he has 2 children, (boys) which saved him at least for awhile. Louis is gone over a year now, he went to N.Y. first, then Virginia, and New Orleans all summer[.] Now hes at Porta-Rica, B.W. Indies on his last lap for parts unknown. He's in the Army. Sebastian was working in Waltham as a Radio Technision at \$60 per week. He was called for the army too, but he was defered for 6 mos on account of job being a defence job. So he quit his job about 2 mos ago and volanted for the Navy. He didn't want to go in the army. Now he's at the Great Lakes Navel Station, Illinois. He [is] coming back on furlough in two weeks, and is getting marrie[d] before he goes away again. So you see how my boys are getting used up, the best family ever was brought up

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in Charlestown, so the neighbors say, and after all my hard work to keep them well dressed and well fed, look at the way they're going, can you beat that?

Poor old John J⁸ went off, before his time I guess. If he had stayed home, he would be alive today. He came here and went in the cold storage plant, and got chilled to the bone, trying to get every hour and every day in, trying to save money. The last year he worked, he felt plenty bad enough to go to bed days & days but he went to work, just the same and got the day in somehow. He started on \$23 @ week when he came here first, he was staying with us then, and getting the best of food. There was plenty work on the ships then. I was making \$60 to \$80 @ week and working every night. Could you imagine his state of mind at that time, you would pity him, when he would lay there after supper and smoke, & smoke & think for hours. I could read his thoughts alright, and the flesh just crept off his bones when he knew I was making 4 & 5 times as much as he was @ week. He never thought, that would happen the summer I worked with you fellows for four qtls of fish out of 100, with the use of John Buzzans⁹ horse, and a dory that I built, trailing after the skiff all the summer, besides washing all the fish with Paddy Colbert and Johnie Pottles,¹⁰ and wind up in the fall then with 14 qtls for my share @ 6 per qtl, \$84.00. I was married then,¹¹ and wanted money to live on as well as either one of you, but you fellows would be happier, if I got 84 cents for my share instead of \$84.00 as far as I was concerned at that time, because neither one of you had any use for me. And coming back to Jack,¹² he did save money, and plenty, and a lot of good it did him. He was the meanest and most selfish man I ever knew, and he ended it all in a most miserable death. Cause: cancer of the stomach.

Now Ann¹³ is following in his footsteps[.] She's been dying for the past year, cant keep nothing on her stomach. Doctors x-rayed and found she needed an operation[.] She's in the Hospital now, and have been operated on, but has only a 50-50 chance of recovery. Family thinks it the same case as John Jo's. Since I started this letter a week ago, Ann has been under an operation, and survived. She is home again now, but ha[s] to go back for another operation late[r]. It dont look so good for her.

Jim¹⁴ is another of us that's putting in a great life. He would be far better off if he never saw Boston, in fact any of us, sisters or brothers. Jim spent 6 months of the summer on Deer Island,¹⁵ where they send all the prisoners, he's been there before plenty and he's always broke. Anytime we happen to meet it's the same old question, Bill got any money. So I got disgusted with him, he's just a bum anyway, and some day he'll be passing out the same as Mike,¹⁶ beaten up by thugs or killed by a motor car or something. After coming from deer Island, he got drunk, and was hit by a car crossing the street, and knocked unconscious, he was picked up in a pool of blood. He survived that and after getting out of the Hospital he was just as bad as ever. We pays \$6.00 a week for insurance [fo]r the family in case of death, but that bum or Mike either [n]ever thought of taking out an insurance policy. But I had to pony up a grave I paid \$78.00 for, the time [Mick?] died, to pay my share of the expences [of h]is burial, (I had no money at the time) [Anyti]me Jim comes to the house we argue over that [and I t]ell him to pay 25 or 50¢ a week to protect himself. [It] is no go, [he] dont believe in insurance.

If I had thought that he was going to stay around here like he is, I would have went home, and lived on the old place. In fact if I had my time back again, I would've went back anyway, all that's ahead of me here is hard work, with no enjoyment. I saw by Pa's will that Pat¹⁷ drew up, that I still have some land there to call my own, and Pat or

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anybody else can't claim anything that Pa leaved me. No doubt you saw the will, and you know what I have there as well as I do. Before Pa made the will I didn't own a thing, except the back house and stabl[e.] I didn't own the land it was built on but now I actually own it and I can dispose of it to whom, and how I please[.] Sooner or later Ed I will decide and of course, you or your sons will be the only party I would give it to. It aint worth much, but it would be a benefit to your sons to build a house on if need be. I only wish I had ten or 15 acres of good land to let you have, and sometime later on I'll let you know, why you did'nt have half of my own ground, instead of giving it all to Pat.

There seems to be a lot of bad feeling and bone-picking going on since Pa & Mom passed away over the old place, theres one thing I would like for you to tell me, if you ever write again, about how much money did Pa leave when he died. Maybe its a secret with you to [two?] and all around. I figure he leaved about \$5,000.00 [.] It's not that I expect anything. But I would just like to know, that's all.

Well Ed I expect this is going to be the worst winter ever we had in Boston as far as work is concerned. It's tough enough now. Most longshoremen are looking for jobs outside. We're back to coal & wood again now after [4?] years burning oil, I spend all my spare time [c]utting wood in the cellar. Everything is changed here for the worst, and we're preparing for it. The worst fire in Boston's history was here two weeks ago, when nearly 500 lost their lives. I'm sending you some papers about it. My old bum knee is still hanging on, and the 12th shot worked out last Oct. My knee keeps sore for a week when they break through the skin. I dont really know what year that happened.

Well Ed, before I make you fall asleep over this letter I think I shall make it brief.

Fr Johnson¹⁸ was here to visit us he's a nice fellow. He was struck on my sailboat, he wanted to take it along with him for a Survivor but it made to big a package to take on the train. It's worth \$75.00. They had a dance over South Boston for him before he leaved for the north-west.

Ed if I were you, I would write to Ann quickly before she dies and ask her to sell you a peice or two of land or a potato garden. You should have written after J. Jo died. I'm pretty sure you would be successfull, if you explained things to her.

With the war on as it is, young or old are not much interested in houses and land just now, and it may last for 5 or 10 years, who knows. Mat Howells wife¹⁹ died last week we were down to her wake. Jim Hogan²⁰ was inducted into the army. Steve is to big to work. Phonce and Mary²¹ or [sic] separated. She's working.

Ed I'm awfull sorry that I can't send you an overcoat. I've only had two since I came here. But I think I can send you the one I [am] wearing after New-Year. Julia and family sends you, Bess²² & family their greatest regards.

Remember us all to Aunt Ellen[.]²³

We all join in wishing you all a happy Xmas, with health & strength and plenty of luck for the Coming New-Year.

So Long. Bill.

(P.S. I will send a smoke for Xmas).

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Notes

¹See Clarke Dale, "The Economic History of Northern Bay," ms, Maritime History Group, 1983; and Gerald J. Howell, "A History of Northern Bay," ms, Maritime History Group, 1971. These papers are available in the Centre for Newfoundland Studies, Queen Elizabeth II Library, Memorial University.

²Private communication. See an article by Reeves, "Newfoundlanders in the 'Boston States': A Study in Early Twentieth-Century Community and Counterpoint," *Newfoundland Studies* 6, 1 (1990): 34-55.

³The letter is in the possession of the Howell family of Northern Bay.

⁴A residential section of Boston, on the Inner Harbour.

⁵The *Caribou*, a ferry operating between Port aux Basques in Newfoundland and North Sydney, Nova Scotia, was torpedoed and sunk in the Cabot Strait on October 14, 1942.

⁶That is, go into the armed services.

⁷William's son Thomas, born in Northern Bay. Louis and Sebastian, mentioned in this paragraph, are also his sons; they too were born in Northern Bay.

⁸John Joe Howell, William's brother.

⁹John Buzzan was a resident of Northern Bay.

¹⁰These two men were from Job's Cove, a few miles north of Northern Bay.

¹¹William Howell's wife was Julia MacDonald from Western Bay, a community south of Northern Bay on the North Shore.

¹²John Joe (see note 8).

¹³Ann Howell (née Hogan, of Northern Bay) was John Joe's wife.

¹⁴Jim Howell, another brother.

¹⁵Deer Island is a point of land north of the entrance to Boston Harbour; location of a prison.

¹⁶Another brother.

¹⁷Patrick Howell, another brother.

¹⁸Fr. Morgan Johnson, son of Philip and Liza Johnson of Northern Bay.

¹⁹Matt Howell is William's first cousin; his wife was Nellie Hogan of Northern Bay, sister of John Joe's wife Ann.

²⁰Jim, Steve, and Phonce Hogan were John Thomas Hogan's sons from the middle of the Harbour in Northern Bay.

²¹Mary MacDonald of Western Bay, sister of William's wife Julia.

²²Elizabeth Howell, wife of Edmund. She was a Woodrow from the South Side of Northern Bay, where the house in which she was born still stands.

²³Ellen Hogan, Bridget Howell's sister and thus William's aunt.