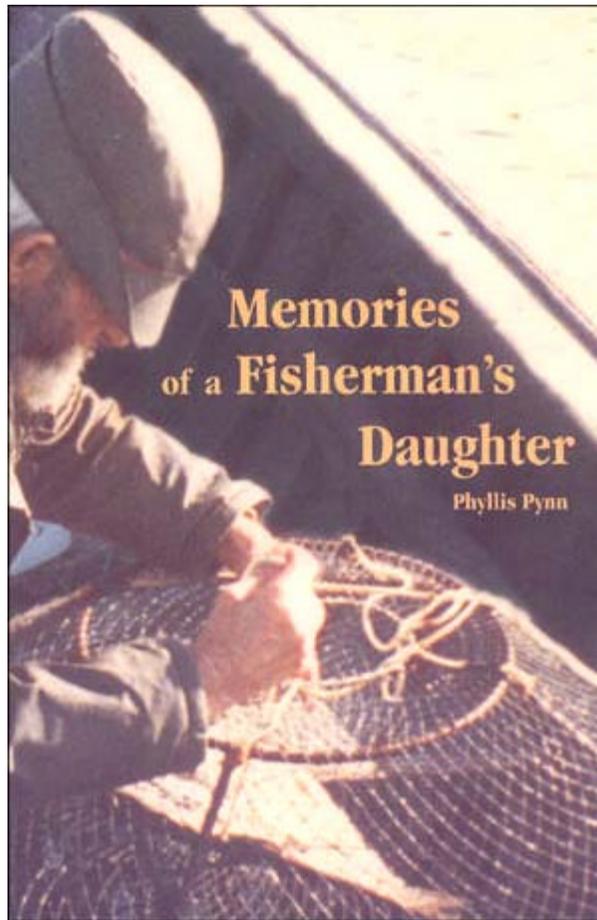


Memories
of a Fisherman's
Daughter



Phyllis Pynn

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Foreward

This is one of a series of four books. They all began in a workshop where writers shared ideas and life stories, as well as thoughts about the fears and joys of writing itself. During the workshop, writers used photographs of people and places as doorways to the past, as ways to get at their memories and the stories that are important to them. Writers wrote about whatever the photographs brought to mind, then read their drafts aloud. Other writers and workshop leaders gave comments and asked questions. Then the writers went home to face the winter and the work of rewriting alone. Like most writing, this book is a product of both community and solitary work.

Phyllis Pynn's *Memories of a Fisherman's Daughter* uses both a poem and stories to explore the world of her childhood. She wrote the poem several years ago but felt there was more she wanted to say about Quirpon where she grew up and the way of life there. Her father is at the centre of all her memories—as a fisherman, storyteller and “fiddler”: in Quirpon a fiddler was any entertainer or musician. There are other words here that might be unfamiliar to readers or that might have meanings different from the ones we know. Readers should not worry too much about exact meanings or pronunciation. Every place and time is a world of its own with its own language. With Pynn, we can travel to her world and enjoy its language the way we enjoy music.



Fishing was more than a job.
Centre for Newfoundland Studies Archives

Song of the Sea

Where are the fishermen
in from the sea,
Dancing their jigs in the old schoolhouse
Eating fish-n-brewis before dawn

Where are the children
tasting the salt tails of the fish
as they spread them on the flakes,
Wives hanging clothes on lines
in the warm sunshine

Where are the fishing boats
with groove worn gunnels
from jigger lines
Nets just taken from the ocean
kelp still clinging to the mesh
lying on the wharf

Where have the codfish gone?
Oh lonely village, weatherbeaten,
gray, ghostly.
No more laughter or old-fashioned times.
Old man telling his stories no more.



Quirpon
Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador

Quirpon

I grew up in Quirpon, a beautiful, scenic community on the tip of the Northern Peninsula. In English its name sounds and spells *Karpoon*, but *Quirpon* was named by French settlers long before I was born.

When I was a little girl I would sit on Dad's stagehead for long periods of time. I would squint my eyes against the sun's glare and watch the tiny fish that flitted around the shores of the wharf. I would gaze across to Noble's Island, which stretched from Cape Bauld almost to the government wharf. I could see the top half of the yellowish orange depot. This is where bait and other fish were kept in cold storage. A little farther out on this island was the fish plant. My dad and others carried their dried salted fish there, where it was sold. A couple of families lived on this island.

Sometimes schooners would tie up at the government wharf. There would be a long line of them tied side by side. It was possible to step from one boat to another.

There are three parts to Quirpon. There is L'Anse au Bauld, Grassy Cove, and Little Quirpon. I was born in L'Anse au Bauld, in a little two-room house. This house was built on a beach, and when we had high tides the water would wash up around the house.

There were lots of places for us kids to explore. There was L'Anse au Bauld Point with its cliffs and coves. Wildflowers grew there in abundance. There were buttercups, dandelions or "piss-a-beds," as some called them. We had our bluebells, forget-me-nots and little white bell-shaped flowers among others I can not name.

Among the trees that grew on the hillsides, we would find squashberries and red and black currants. On L'Anse au Bauld Head and the marshes around the community, there were plenty of bakeapples. There were lots of partridgeberries, blueberries, and blackberries. There were also dogberries, and sometimes people made dogberry wine.



Young girl with goats
Centre for Newfoundland Studies Archives

Back then, there was no electricity, just kerosene lamps. Everyone burned wood and sometimes coal for heat. There were no roads, just foot paths. People travelled by boat in summer and dog teams in winter, to get from one community to another. Sometimes people walked the distance between communities.

People would walk quite a distance to go to church. The first Salvation Army church was built on Quirpon Island in a little place called The Grat. In winter people would walk about three miles across the frozen harbour and the island to go to church. About ten or twelve families lived on that island.

Quirpon was a thriving community. There were lots of fish and wild game for food, such as seals, wild ducks, turrs, rabbits and so on. Some families in our community raised cows, sheep, goats and chickens.



The *Northern Ranger* at Quirpon
Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador

In summertime the CN boats docked at the government wharf to drop off passengers and freight. Nearly everyone rushed to the wharf when one of those big boats came in. I remember visiting the *Bonavista*, the *Springdale* and the old *Northern Ranger*. The *Northern Ranger* had a tilt to her; she always looked like she was about to capsize. Sometimes two of them would come at the same time. One would anchor offshore as she waited for the other one to unload. Sometimes they would stay overnight. At night when they were all lit up, I thought they looked like beautiful fairy castles.

We moved from L'Anse au Bauld to Grassy Cove when I was ten. We needed a bigger house because by now there were ten children. We bought my Uncle Tom's house after he moved away. There was a tiny island just off from our new home. When the tide was out we could walk across to that little island. Sometimes Dad would let us have his punt, and one or two of my sisters would go for a row with me. Dad always warned my brothers and sisters and me about the shoals. I believe he knew where every shoal and rock, mussel, coo coo and berry were in Quirpon.



Dipping fish from the cod trap
Centre for Newfoundland Studies Archives

The Storyteller

Dad was a fisherman all his life and like many fishermen he had many stories to tell. He was a virtual library of stories. I enjoyed them, partly because he was a great storyteller. Here are two of them.

All Hands Saved but One

“I was nine years old,” Dad said, “and it was one of those stormy nights. I was trying to get a draw out of me father’s old pipe.” Dad’s sky-blue eyes twinkled.

I leaned forward on the couch and asked, “Did grandfather catch you?”

He grinned: “No, but mother did. She was sewing on her sewing machine and she looked up and caught me. ‘Put that down,’ she says, ‘you’ll turn green.’ I put it down but when she wasn’t looking I took another puff.

“Me father looked up. He was mending dogs’ harnesses before the winter set in. ‘It’s some stormy night. It’s not fit for dog nor man out tonight,’ he says. The wind was whistling down the stove pipe and the house shook. It was late fall, the snow was coming down thick and it was cold. Well, I was puffing at father’s pipe when I thought I heard someone bawlin out. Hark! What’s that? I said.

“Mother looked up. ‘There’s nothin out there,’ she said. ‘Now put down that pipe and go to bed.’

“But I heard someone bawlin out, I said.

“Then father spoke up. ‘Hark!’ he said, ‘I hear it too.’ He got up and went to the back door, with me tight behind him. Sure enough, there was a small boat coming to the beach with about a dozen people on board.”

My dad stopped telling his story for a second. He shook his head. “What a sight!” he said.

“Dad,” I interrupted, “Was there any youngsters on board?”

It was kind of exciting to think there was someone as young as myself out on a night like that.

“Yes,” said Dad, “I remember there was a fifteen-year-old boy.”

Oh well, I thought, he was only four or five years older than myself.

“Well,” said Dad, “when that boy saw me father, he jumped straight into his arms. ‘Thank God I am saved,’ he said. After we got everyone inside, Mother gave them some dry clothes. The women had on just their petticoats, and some of the people had just one stocking on. After they had hot cups of tea and something to eat, they told us what happened.

‘Captain Goodyear’s schooner ran ashore,’ they said. We found out later that the schooner had run ashore on L’Anse au Bauld Point. The captain was the last one on the schooner. No one never knew what happened to him until years later. He had gotten lost in the dirty weather and strayed in over L’Anse

au Bauld Head. He ended up at Lower Room, and that's where he perished. Years later meself and Jake found the remains and I carried the bones down in a sack on my back."

My eyes were fairly popping. "Dad! You carried a dead man's bones on your back? That must have been spooky!"

"Go on maid," he said, "nothing scary about that. A dead man is not going to harm you."

Almost Lost on Grand Galley Head

My dad had some narrow escapes himself. I was about nine years old when he told me this one. I found it both scary and exciting. His eyes twinkled as he began to tell it.

"It was in the late fall," he said. "Meself and Walt was walking along Grand Galley Head. It was blowing a storm and drifting a bit. There was ice along the cliff, when down I goes sliding towards the edge of the cliff. I lost me old muzzle loader and me powder horn right on over. I figures I was going over too, when I stopped. One leg was buckled under me and the other one was hanging over the cliff."

Dad paused and took a gulp of his tea, while I squirmed in my seat, anxious to hear more. I leaned forward, eyes wide. "What happened then, Dad, was you afraid?" I asked.

"Well maid, I didn't have time to be afraid," he said, "but poor Walt was above me crying like a baby. He says to me, 'I am coming down.' I says, no Walt my son, don't try to come down here, cause the two of us will go over. If I go over there'll be only me to worry about. But I says to meself, *Ches, you're going to get up out of this.*

"I pulls me cuffs off with me teeth. Then I starts hitting the top of the icy snow, with one fist at a time. I digs handholds, one over the other, and begins pulling meself up slow like. My knuckles was bleeding where I had cut them from pounding the icy snow."

Dad paused for another sip of tea, causing me to squirm again as I waited for him to go on.



Dog team at nearby Griquet
Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador

“Well,” he finally said, “I was almost to the top and Walt was just going to grab me when I started sliding backwards again. Oh my! I am going over this time for sure, I says to meself. I scabbled, trying to dig my toes and fingers in the handholds. Then my toes caught. I was almost to the edge of the cliff again. I waited to catch my breath. Then I started to crawl back up again very slow. I finally got to poor old Walt. He grabbed ahold of me, hugging me and crying.”

“My, Dad,” I said, “you was some smart, digging holes like that for your hands and feet. And what about your gun, did you ever find it?”

“Yes maid,” he said, “we got it that same day, but it was all buckled up though. It was smashed, lock, stock and barrel. If I went over, I would have been smashed up too.”

I shook my head, “Dad, you was some lucky!”

“Luck had nothing to do with it,” he said. “My time just wasn’t come yet, my time just wasn’t come.”



Chesley Pynn the fiddler
Pynn Collection

The Fiddler

My dad had a way with stories. He was also a great one for music.

There is a little community about three miles outside Quirpon, called Straitsview. When I was a little girl, it was known as Spillard's Cove. Every year the Orangemen had a parade there. After the parade, a supper and games and a dance would be held at the Orange Lodge. My dad and I would walk the whole three miles to this "time." As soon as dad walked into one of those times, someone would shout, "Here comes the fiddler!"

Some man would clap Dad on the back and give him an accordion. "Here, Chesley b'y," he'd say, "play us a tune for the square dance." Dad would beam from ear to ear, sit down and squeeze out a tune. His feet would tap in

time to the music while his fingers danced over the keys. I watched, fascinated, as the dancers twirled around keeping time to each reel Dad played.



At a time
St. John's Folk Arts Council

Many dancers dropped into nearby chairs, fanning themselves and panting, too tired to go on. But there were always other dancers to take their places. My dad just played tirelessly on until it began to get light outside.

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Participants and staff at the Rabbittown Leaners Program in St. John's, the Learning Centre in Edmonton, and the Discovery Centre in Bay Roberts field tested earlier drafts of the books. Their comments and suggestions helped us improve the series.

Phyllis Pynn's *Memories of a Fisherman's Daughter* is a fond memoir of her father--a fisherman, storyteller and musician in the small Newfoundland community of Quirpon. By using her father's stories and her own memories, she brings to life a place, time and language--a whole world of its own.

Readers say...

"A story about life, culture and relationships."

"There should be more stories about the way of life in Newfoundland and how people lived."

Phyllis Pynn lives in Kelligrews, Newfoundland. She has been writing for over twenty years, and her work has appeared in other ABE Writing Network publications. Phyllis attended an ABE program at the Labrador Community College.