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First Impressions

by Graham Brazier

Apart from those born on Denman Island, we all experienced sharp first impressions of the place we now call home. These are frequently recalled enthusiastically in everyday exchanges amongst ourselves but are seldom found on the printed page, whereas it seems that non-residents and visitors are more likely to record their first impressions of Denman Island. Four examples may offer an opportunity to test the veracity of Franz Kafka's unequivocal declaration that "First impressions are always unreliable."

In 2005 Denman Island drew the attention of Sharon Weaver, a student at the University of Guelph, who found it provided material for her PhD Thesis in history. Between 2005 and 2008 she conducted a series of in-depth interviews of Denman residents familiar with the 'back-to-the-land' movement of the 1970s. She also recorded her first impressions of Denman Island: "After conducting five interviews on Mayne and Salt Spring Islands," she wrote, "I learned of others [back-to-the-landers] on Denman Island and so drove north. To my great surprise, ten short minutes on a ferry across from Buckley Bay, I drove off into a distinctly different world. There is a quiet, pastoral tranquility to Denman Island, much like an eddy in a rushing river, where the flow of mainland traffic is unheard and unheeded."

Sharon Weaver's bucolic impressions of 2005 however are quite at odds with those of the unnamed non-resident authors of a 1971 report published by the Regional District of Comox-Strathcona who wrote: "There is widespread opposition on Denman to more parks and recreation facilities which might attract more tourists or more subdivisions. Tourists are seen as causing inconvenience with the ferry service, disturbing the peace of the residents and as contributing little or nothing to the welfare of the island." The regional district then went on to chastise Denman Island residents for holding such views with the words: "a policy of discouraging tourists and prohibiting subdivision becomes socially irresponsible and politically unacceptable after a certain point." As bold as the authors were, they didn't attempt to define that 'certain point'.

Nevertheless, the harsh words of the Regional District express a quite exceptional impression of Denman Island. More often, the 'pastoral tranquility' noted by Sharon Weaver is reflected in the first impressions of visitors such as Alec Merriman who, in 1980, wrote an article in the *Times Colonist* of Victoria titled: "Quiet time on islands of delight" which he opened with: "For an outdoor trip that is a little different try visiting Denman and Hornby Islands...a trip that entails two delightful short ferry trips, some scenic travel along quiet Gulf Island roads and visit to some fine sandy beaches."

Similar sentiments were expressed by Edith Bendickson who, in 1969, wrote: "Often, driving down the Vancouver Island Highway, we have gazed across the water to Denman Island,

wishing we had time to hop on the ferry at Buckley Bay and pop over to this island of lush growth and interesting homes, seen from this side.”

“My opportunity to fulfill this wish came when my friend Mrs. Frances Duncan, president of the North Island Women’s Institutes, invited me to go with her to a W.I. Conference, held in the large hall on Denman on April 10, 1969.....I did not attend the morning business session, but went on to explore a bit of the island... My first visit was to the general store, which also houses the post office and a coffee bar. There a very friendly woman suggested I might be interested in an oyster shucking business, which could be reached by a short walk along the beach. I am very interested in rocks and shells, so was happy to trek along the beach picking up the old [sic] shell to pop into the plastic bag I’d brought along for the purpose.”

“It was not long before I heard a ‘plop plop’ sound on the beach and looking up, discovered the sound was made by oyster shells as they dropped off the conveyor belt. I walked around the back of the long white building and knocked on one of the three doors.”

“I was greeted by a friendly man who was gathering up cartons of oysters...He took me into the next room where I met the co-owners of the Fjord Oyster Business, Bert Smith and his son-in-law, Ron Haest-Larsen. They were busily shucking oysters but welcomed me in and I had my first lesson in the handling of oysters....Mr. Smith and Mr. Haest-Larsen told me much of interest while their hands flew with the sharp knives especially made for shucking oysters.” Edith Bendickson then goes on at some length to describe the process of preparing oysters for shipment to retailers on Vancouver Island as well as the smorgasbord prepared by the W.I. before concluding her article with: “This was my first trip to this historical spot, but it will not be my last.”

If we accept Kafka’s assertion that ‘first impressions are always unreliable’ we would have to conclude that Sharon Weaver was wrong to declare that Denman Island is “a distinctly different world”, and that the Regional District was wrong to state “a policy of discouraging tourists and prohibiting subdivision becomes socially irresponsible and politically unacceptable after a certain point” and that Alec Merriman was wrong to suggest “For an outdoor trip that is a little different try visiting Denman and Hornby Islands” or finally, that Edith Bendickson was wrong to plan a second visit to Denman Island.

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Sources:

“Making Place on the Canadian Periphery: Back-to-the-Land on the Gulf Islands and Cape Breton”, Sharon Weaver, Guelph, Ontario, 2013, p. 21.

”Denman Island Planning Study” Regional District of Comox-Strathcona, 1971.

“Quiet time on islands of delight” Alec Merriman, *Times Colonist*, May 11, 1980

“Trip to Denman Island”, Edith Bendickson, 1969