

there and back again (part 2)



EPISODE DESCRIPTION

In Part 2, we explore the concept of "islandness" and how it relates to the feeling of home, how nostalgic home can feel when you're stuck living off-island. We also touch a hot topic: do you have to be born an islander, or can you become one by choice? Finally, we talk about what keeps islanders away today, whether that's lack of work, racism and xenophobia, and the way PEI is slow to accept other people.

Features guest interviews: Dr. Laurie Brinklow, Georges Arsenault, Dr. Ed MacDonald, Isabelle Gallant and Think Nguyen.

Ocean sounds. Rowing in canoe. Theme music introduces.

Welcome to the hidden Island – a podcast where we talk about local Island history. My name’s Fiona Steele, and I’ll be your host for this journey.

music swells up for a moment.

Welcome back to part two of ‘there and back again.’ I’m Fiona Steele and you’re listening to The Hidden Island.

Okay, so people have been leaving PEI to find work for hundreds of years. That’s still happening today, as Ed MacDonald said in part 1. But it’s the coming back that interests me. I wanted to know what makes PEI special. Why Islanders come back. Why expatriates miss this place so much they subscribed to a magazine about Maritimers. Why they dream about coming home.

So, I turned to Laurie Brinklow, proud Islander and interim coordinator of the Master of Arts and Island studies program at UPEI.

Laurie: In 1983, when I came to Prince Edward Island, I just fell in love with it immediately. I’ve often said I got off the boat and said this is home. And it has been for almost 40 years now.

Now, some might say Laurie isn’t an Islander because she wasn’t born here.

Laurie: This is something that comes up all the time in our classes in Island studies where I teach. An Islander as somebody who identifies themselves as an Islander. If they feel that they’re an island or they’re an Islander, of course, you get the whole, you know, story, the jokes about ‘Oh, an islander is somebody who’s seven generations born and bred, and the wonderful stories that people tell to back it up.’ But I think that if you feel like you’re an Islander, then you are.

Laurie studies islands – including PEI – and the qualities they share. The unique culture, economies, politics, all of it fits into this study of islandness. The way islands are so different from the mainland. Laurie said it has something to do with the sea, the way it creates this distinct limit you don’t find with bordering areas. PEI feels like home to many, even long after they’ve left. If you’re an Islander listening to this, you probably know what I mean. It’s hard to put into words, eh?

I asked a few people why the Island felt special to them. Here’s what they said:

EPISODE SCRIPT

Bold = interview quotes

Italics = sound effects

Regular = my narration

Laurie: Home feels like? Just home. It's a place where you can just be.

Georges: Well, it's my home. That's where my roots are my family, my relatives, most of my friends. And of course, I like the island. It's one of those beautiful places, say in Canada in the Maritimes. My father was a fisherman I was raised with a good view of the water. And so no, this, this is where I feel home, at home.

Ed: It's not some sophisticated, ideological concept of Prince Edward Island or Islandness. It's just as you were saying, home with a capital H.

Isabelle: Being back here, there's just this sense, there's the sense of connection. There's the sense of being known, and of knowing people. And I think that really resonates somewhere deep inside you when you know that. Yeah, it's kind of hard to explain. But when you know you have you have roots here, and you have you have a place here.

That last voice, that's Isabelle Gallant. She's a radio producer who moved back to the Island a year ago after living in Toronto for over a decade.

Isabelle: You know, I ended up taking a stress leave from my job. And having that time to think about my life and my future, my work really made me realize, you know that it was the right time for this kind of move. So we talked about it for about a week. And on June 8, we decided we were going to move back home. And on July 2, we left.

Yeah, we'd been away for 12 years. And we had talked about someday coming back. You know, I think for all Maritimers it's sometimes hard to live away, and you always have this yearning to come back. Almost all of our family was still back here. But I think we just didn't think we could because of our careers.

They ended up moving without secured jobs, but both Isabelle and her partner managed to find work quickly. Having been here for a year, they're sold. They're happy to be home again and have embraced living in the country.

You know though, Isabelle's story isn't that rare. Many former Islanders want to return but can't find work. I was checking out a study done in 2018 by UPEI and the Provincial Government on this, and the results were shocking.

So they surveyed almost 700 people, and more than 80% were interested in living on PEI again. For many, they faced barriers to returning. 83% of respondents – or around 550 people – said employment-related issues meant they couldn't live on PEI.

Of course, sometimes people leave for other reasons too. Laurie Brinklow helped work on this document, so I asked her about it.

Laurie: I was kind of shocked about the some of the things that kept people away. And that's the racism and xenophobia and those, that underbelly of the underbelly of Islandness of Island community that can be very insider-outsider and exclusionary.

That's the other side of living in a small town – or a small island. We're slow to change, and sometimes slow to accept other people. I'm white, and also raised here on the island, so my ability to understand these lived experiences is pretty limited. So, I reached out to Thinh Nguyen.

Thinh: My name is Thinh, and I'm currently a second year journalism student at Holland college. One of my specialties is that I write about diversity on PEI as well as a lot about immigrants and people from other cultures living on the island.

Thinh first moved to PEI from Vietnam in 2019.

Thinh: So actually, when I first got to Canada, I went by the name Andy, like a lot of Asian immigrants. Moving to Canada, they often choose some kind of anglicized name, so that they can easily integrate into the culture and the community. And they are told, and I am also told, by a lot of people that having an English name could get you a lot of employment opportunities, instead of having a name that people cannot pronounce. So I initially went by the name Andy. But then I realized that the reason why I came to Canada is that it's a very inclusive country. A lot of immigrants, a lot of people from other cultures coming to Canada. So I figure, why do I need to kind of hide my identity? So I decided to go by my real name. And a lot of people, PEI, they have been really respectful of my name, they always try to pronounce it right. always asked me about the spelling, about the pronunciation of it.

I asked Thinh if he could talk about what he's found out through his reporting on diversity on PEI. He talked about immigration being the future of PEI because of young people leaving the province to find work. As we know now, young people have been leaving the province to find work for centuries. I also asked about island communities being exclusionary, specifically PEI.

Thinh: Amongst all the good things happening on the island, I guess there's a small minority of Islanders who do not see this wave of immigrants as a good thing. I have spoken to a number of people from other countries who are now a resident of Canada. They feel that they have faced a lot of, you know, racism on the island. For example, just, I think, just a few days ago, a friend of mine, she has a brother. And her brother just got called out by some racial slurs on the street of Charlottetown by a group of white men in their car passing by. I mean, the boy tried to get like a picture or something. But you know, they were in a car – very fast. So that is one of the things that I have recently heard, but I also talked to some people. They were immigrants, and I mean, they have also faced similar incidents like that. So I guess, even though I believe, generally PEI is still a good place to live, there's still a small minority of islanders who have that kind of attitude.

Fiona: Right, and how small do you think that minority of people is?

Think: It's very difficult to tell, because there hasn't been any kind of report or research being done to look into that. But you know, I hope, and I feel it's a minority. I'm not sure how small it is. But I hope it is a minority.

Fiona: Based on what you've seen as a reporter, do you think it's an individual thing we have to change with people? Or do you think it's more of an institutional thing as well?

Think: I guess, I guess it should be something institutional, that is what I really hope should be done. I can only, I can only speak from the perspective of a member of Asian communities like me, because I'm a member of the Asian communities on the island. So for example, I remember I think, in early April this year, when there was an increase in the anti-Asian hate targeting members of the Asian communities because of COVID. Many people in Canada believe that Chinese people or Asian people in general bring the virus to the world, which is not true. So, at that time I feel like there's an increase in you know, that kind of hate. But then I look around I don't see any action being taken on PEI... I know like I said, I hope that that kind of racism only, you know exists in a very small group of people on PEI, but still, someone needs to speak out. But then I don't see anything being done on an institutional level.

Racism has existed on PEI for hundreds of years and isn't tied to a single government. I believe we have a responsibility to acknowledge the history and our role within it so we can learn how it's still impacting the present. There is definitely work to be done, as Think pointed out. We can be proud of this island and still know we're not done yet.

So, to sum it up: People have been leaving this island to find work for hundreds of years and they still are. This isn't a comment on government policy, or the lack of jobs, but just to acknowledge the massive history there is in leaving. It's not like the oil rigs caused this; we have a centuries-old tradition of leaving the island to find work. But also, we've got centuries of books, magazines, and songs written by expatriates that are nostalgic about PEI.

Another thing I found interesting in that report I mentioned earlier was the connection many people felt to PEI while living away. The majority of people surveyed had been gone for over 10 years but 97% of them still felt tied to PEI in some way. That's huge.

Of course, this could tie into the concept of Islandness we talked about, or how Isabelle explained it's about having roots here. In any case, it reminded me of something Ed said:

Ed: There's a great quote, Sandy Ives had provided it (who was folklore At the University of Maine) and did a lot of work on folk songs of the lumber woods, many of which originated on Prince Edward Island. And he quoted some Maine person who talked about their parents who had come from Prince Edward Island. And he remembered the way they talked about being home. And he said, it was like a place I would never get to go - like your Heaven, or the garden behind the moon. And that sense of longing thickened by nostalgia is at the heart of that rootedness.

Is it nostalgia, is it community, or is it this sense of Islandness that makes coming home again special? I'll leave it to you to decide.

Theme music swells up for a moment.

I hope you liked this episode – if you did enjoy it, please check out the PEI Museum and Heritage Foundation on our social media and our website at peimuseum.ca. I'll add in too that we are a not-for-profit organization, so if you want to buy a membership or donate, we really appreciate it.

Speaking of money, we have official sponsors. To Nimrods and Upstreet Brewing, thank you for putting your faith in my rambles.

I want to thank everyone in this episode who lent me their time to interview. As well, shout out to Adam Gallant, who's responsible for our intro music. Thanks for joining and I'll talk to you next time on the hidden Island!

ADDITIONAL READING

"Logjams and Widow-makers" *J. Clinton Morrison*

"If You're Stronghearted" *Edward MacDonald*

"The Island Acadians" *Georges Arsenault*

"The Garden Transformed" *Verner Smitheram, David Milne, Satadal Dasgupta (Editors)*

"Mi'kmaq Campfire Stories" *Julie Pellissier-Lush*

"An Introduction to Island Studies" *James Randall*

"Ni'n na L'nu" *A. J. B. Johnston and Jesse Fancis*

Think Nguyen's Blog: <https://thepeithinhker.wordpress.com/>