

The Resettlement of Pushthrough 6

Final Thoughts and Reflections

Introduction

Some 240 people were resettled from Pushthrough between 1965 and 1970 according to the statistics tabulated by the Department of Community and Social Development of the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador. This represented 56 households, most of which moved in 1969. Although I have not verified the statistics compiled by government, the communities of Milltown, Fortune, Burgeo, and Hermitage were the most popular communities for those leaving Pushthrough.

Interest in Resettlement

I have been truly surprised – and extremely delighted -- by the interest in the few pages I have written about the resettlement of Pushthrough in the last few days. There have been nearly 1,000 visits to the website. I have also received a number of emails and comments from residents of Pushthrough and a few from some of the surrounding communities that were resettled during the same period. They have related personal memories of the resettlement of Pushthrough and other communities along the South Coast of Newfoundland, showing that we all have vivid recollections of those past events.



All those individuals who lived through the resettlement of Pushthrough have their own stories to tell, and they have certainly talked to their friends and family about what happened in Pushthrough. More recently, many have shared wonderful photographs on-line, especially through Facebook and other social media. All of these individual photographs are important and have contributed to creating a series of visual memoirs and, when taken together, they have helped to create a collective memory of the resettlement of Pushthrough as well as life in Pushthrough before resettlement.

(Ben Blake standing among the Pushthrough Ruins,2006)

Constructing the Collective Memory of Pushthrough

There will be, I suspect, no museums or monuments or films or other memorials erected to commemorate Pushthrough, the people who called it home, the resettlement of the community, and its demise. Yet, there is a shared history of Pushthrough, a shared identity of those who lived there, and, a shared sense of community that continues even if the community disappeared in 1969.

Simply being from Pushthrough remains a real and important part of the lives of the people that once lived there; it is also an important part of the identity and lives of their children. In my own case, my two boys, Robert and Ben, identify with Pushthrough, even though they have never lived there and have never even lived in Newfoundland. They identify with Pushthrough through my own reconstruction of it



(Robert and Ben Blake with their Dad at the Pushthrough Cemetery by their Grandfather's Grave in 2006.)

for them in various ways: in the bedtime stories I told them (some of which were true), photographs we have, and through our visits back the years. I remember vividly Robert's reaction when he first visited the cemetery in Pushthrough and saw his Grandfather's name, Benedict Blake etched in the white headstone. Before that, I am not sure he believed that his grandfather ever existed. I showed them the baseball diamond and the little pond where we learned to skate. They continue to make comments periodically about those "sports facilities" that we had and the organized teams, completed with uniforms and team crests. They know about the Pushthrough Guards, though less about the Dawson's Point Beacons.

Memories of Resettlement

The story of the resettlement of Pushthrough is more than a narrative of a historical event. The act of remembering and commemorating the resettlement serves to construct a group and collective identity for those of us who lived in Pushthrough and were a part of the resettlement of the community. It is each individual memory that constructs a viable history of Pushthrough.

The memories of the resettlement of Pushthrough -- as they are throughout Newfoundland and Labrador -- are contested, meaning that we might often disagree over developments and policies such as government-sponsored resettlement. Some people believed that resettlement was beneficial while others considered it a curse on Newfoundland. I suspect our views on resettlement have changed over time and will continue to evolve.

Opponents of Resettlement

Resettlement or centralization – the two terms used most frequently to describe one of the largest migrations of people in the history of Canada – is wrought with emotion and sentimentality and, for some, a symbol of much that went wrong in Newfoundland and Labrador after confederation in 1949. The history of resettlement has become largely the domain of songwriters and artists, such as Simani and David Blackwood, who now largely shape public memory of the programme. The resettlement songs of Simani have become well-known classics, though Bud Davidge told *The Coaster* two years ago that "There's no doubt that resettlement was the best thing that ever happened to some of the resettled people as they moved to communities that had electricity, where they could find work at home, where they had better school and other amenities of life." Still, resettlement left its emotional scars, especially on older people.

The critics of resettlement see it as a policy of social engineering and government interference that they claim the people neither sought nor wanted. People are today told that resettlement came because callous state elites and misguided politicians intruded into the lives of ordinary, hard-working people in an attempt to transform the province into a modern industrial society. In 1971, the *Evening Telegram*, the major St. John's daily, compared resettlement to the Nazi's relocation of the Jews. Two professors at Memorial University composed a ballad to their colleague, Parzival Copes, the outspoken economist and proponent of resettlement, promising his executioners safe passage through the pearly gates of heaven. Farley Mowat, who has his own troubled relationship with the South Coast, was also a bitter opponent of resettlement.

Mom's View of Resettlement: Too Many White Enamel Slop-Pails

Some of the loudest critics of resettlement never lived in an outport such as Pushthrough and the many other isolated communities around the coasts of Newfoundland and Labrador. Others had left their isolated communities to make a living in St. John's and other urban centres and never once entertained the notion of returning to those communities except for a summer holiday, though they were very critical of the people who succumbed to the resettlement programme.



(Robert with Uncle Lloyd at Pushthrough, 2006)



(Ben with Uncle Hayward at Pushthrough, 2006)

As I wrote in an earlier segment, my mother never much talked about resettlement and life in Pushthrough after we resettled in Hermitage. Still, I recall vividly her talking later about her delight in having a larger school with qualified teachers for my brothers and I and access to better medical facilities even if it was just a lone doctor at the community health clinic. Other modern conveniences such as running water instead of buckets in the porch filled daily from the community well, electric lights that replaced our oil lamps and temperamental generator, indoor flush toilet rather than a white enamel pail at the top of the stairs that had to be dumped every day, a hot water tank in the closet rather than a large cast-iron boiler simmering all day on the wood-burning stove surely made her life much easier. My grandmother, however, never adjusted to life in Hermitage, even though she had moved several times earlier in her life, most recently shortly after the Second World War to Pushthrough from Saddle Island – a bleak pimple of an island a half mile to the west of Pushthrough. Resettlement was not kind to the elderly.

My Interest in Resettlement

I teach at the University of Regina in Saskatchewan, admittedly a long way in many respects from Pushthrough, and I am interested in resettlement for a book I am writing on the relationship between Newfoundland and the Federal Government in Ottawa. I am trying to show how the Resettlement Programme represents a moment of co-operation between Newfoundland and Canada when the two governments shared a common set of policy objectives for rural-outport Newfoundland and, indeed, all of rural Canada. In their view, resettlement was, in part, a way to bring a level of public services, such as electricity, water and sewage, and decent educational facilities to all Canadians. As we saw in recent times with Danny Williams, the relationship between Newfoundland and Ottawa has been tumultuous, but the two levels of government were able to co-operate on the resettlement programme.



(Blake-Lilly Family Gathering with friends from McCallum, 2006.)

However, the whole episode of the resettlement of Pushthrough calls for much further study and investigation. The displacement of a community like Pushthrough is, of course, not merely a physical relocation of the people who lived there nor was it always detrimental to those involved. Indeed, it involves the uprooting and dismemberment of the social, cultural, moral and economic webs of life that had been built up over generations. Resettled people like those from Pushthrough confronted their challenges and adopted sustainable and successful rehabilitation strategies in their new communities.

How, one must wonder, did the young children fit into their new communities: were they the victims of teasing and other forms of abuse? Yet, most recipient communities often experienced a new dynamism and growth that enjoyed greater prosperity and diversity with the arrival of the newcomers. Take Milltown, for instance. It had a population of 560 according to the Census report from 1966; one can only imagine the impact that the arrival of 14 families and 51 people had on the community. More people moved there from outlying communities. Hermitage, Fortune, and Harbour Breton are other examples of towns that grew rapidly because of resettlement. Many of those resettled people went on to play prominent roles in their new communities.

What Next?

Everyone can -- and should -- contribute to the collective memory of Pushthrough. Photographs are an important part of that memory and former residents such as Wayne Kendall and members of the Courtney Family have contributed immensely to the Pushthrough Website and the collective memory of the community. I suspect there is more than each of us can do. I have been remiss in not taking a great interest even though I must admit I often "surfed the net" by googling Pushthrough.

Over the coming year, perhaps we can each commit to writing and sharing a few lines about the final weeks in Pushthrough or life in our new communities. Perhaps some will remember the visits from C.A. (Carl) Evans, the Field Worker who came to Pushthrough to discuss resettlement, and the discussions – and rumours, too – about who was leaving and where people were going. And, of course, more memoirs and memories of life in Pushthrough are needed to preserve and strengthen our sense of identity.

If we need an incentive to do this we might recall that in April 1969, when the people of Pushthrough circulated the Petition indicating their desire to resettle, the average age of those who signed the petition was 57.6 years. Most of the names on that petition are no longer with us; if they were alive today the average age would be nearly 102 years.

Our generation is now the only one that can preserve Pushthrough's past and its history and preserve it for the future.

About Me

I am Raymond Benjamin Blake. Ben and Minnie Blake were my parents, and my sister and brothers are Mary Francis (Lilly), Eric Lilly (now deceased), Roland Lilly, Hayward Blake, and Lloyd Blake. My Grandmothers Caroline Blake and Eliza Garland, and my Uncle Wilfred Garland all left Pushthrough in 1969. When I visit public institutions such as museums, churches or anywhere where I have to sign my name and give hometown, I will frequently write Pushthrough, NL. Not many people can claim to have a hometown with such a unique name, and when I do use it, it often elicits a few questions. Wanda and I have two teenage boys, Robert and Ben, and we now live in Regina where I teach Canadian History at the University of Regina. The boys are avid rowers, having competed successfully at numerous rowing competitions across Canada, the United States and Ireland, and expect to compete for Team Saskatchewan at this year's Jeux de Canada Summer Games in Sherbrooke, QE. We have been fortunate to have lived in several provinces and I have been fortunate to have taught at several Canadian universities. We recently spent an exciting year at University College Dublin in Dublin, Ireland where I held the Craig Dobbin Chair in Canadian Studies and some time earlier held the Visiting Professorship of Canadian Studies at Philipps-Universität in Marburg, Germany. I have written and edited 12 books, most recently *Narrating a Nation: Canadian History Post-Confederation* which is used in some university courses across Canada. I hope to finish my next book in 2013. (Raymond.blake@uregina.ca)