

12-1-2022

## The Bridwell Quill. Issues 50-52: The Daisies of Sointula

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### Recommended Citation

Elia, Anthony, "The Bridwell Quill. Issues 50-52: The Daisies of Sointula" (2022). *Bridwell Library Publications*. 30.

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# The Bridwell Quill

a note from the director



October–December 2022

Issues 50–52: *The Daisies of Sointula*

The 16:05 ferry loaded up and pushed off promptly and smoothly from Port McNeill. It was packed with locals and Vancouverites patiently waiting in their vehicles, some wandering up to the deck to watch the passing bay and oncoming cruise ship, which had just come up behind us about half a mile. It was a modestly warm afternoon with the sun bearing down with an ample glow across the straits.

The accompanying sea air blew heartily across our faces, teasing my hair into a symbolic flame. I'd spent the last 36 hours traveling from Dallas, by ride share, three flights (one jet, two props), a taxi, rental car, and now ferry. Not knowing the hours of the Malcolm Island co-op on the other side of the ferry ride, I gathered a few provisions of coffee, bananas, and dry cereal at the local IGA in Port McNeill and soon made my way across the last leg of the journey.

Driving off the ferry, my small rental car trudged up a ramp before I pulled off to meet the delightful Debra Frances, my host and workshop leader, who stood elegantly on the wharf with a broad-rimmed summer hat and sunglasses. Her artwork and experimental bookmaking designs drew me 2,500 miles northwest of my home to this remote island to participate in an extraordinary gathering of art book enthusiasts. She waited to greet all the guests as we made

it across the harbor that afternoon. I drove a mile up the single road on the island—named after a Georgian-era British Admiral named Sir Pulteney Malcolm (1768–1838)—and headed to my hotel. The primary settlement on Malcolm Island is Sointula, a small and isolated fishing village home to about 500 people. There are a few tourists, no police, and one store. And it is remarkably peaceful.



My hotel room was humble, with a kitchenette, bath, and a small table with fresh-cut daisies. It was abundant with coziness and situated in an old red barn that stood above the shoreline, where at night I could hear the sea waves wash tirelessly but calmly under the floorboards. When it was dark, you could see the majesty of the heavens, the vibrancy and clarity of a billion stars, while a soft glow of the horizon shimmered in the north. It was quieter than nearly anything else I'd ever experienced, since

there were no highways for hundreds of miles. And I slept in perfect repose under quilts and comforters made for snow-clad Canadians.

Sointula was a hamlet for a hundred and twenty years, settled in 1901 by disenfranchised Finns from Europe and Canada at the end of the 19th century and governed by Finnish theosophist Matti Kurikka (1863-1915). He and his fellow utopian socialists had hoped to cultivate a

paradise on this remote island, but due to financial difficulties and other issues, the experiment failed and disbanded in 1905. The name Sointula comes from the Finnish expression meaning “place of chord” or “place of harmony,” and was meant to evoke the values of the socialist community. Not all those who came left. A very small Finnish clique remained and a handful of Finns continued to be attracted to this unusual place for years to come, including an 89-year-old woman named Helga who came in the 1950s and never left. Every day at noon she still walks with the aid of ski poles up and down the main road, talking to anyone who stops and says hello to her; or the buoyant 30-year-old Franco-Finnish woman, who sold everything and bought a boat in the harbor, where she lives with her dog, and paints for a living.



The island is a beautiful place, where people hold jobs that harness the land and help one another, or support tourism and fishing. The local hotel is run by a delightful couple, who’ve been coming here for decades and remember the island as a wild party scene back in the 70s and 80s—nowadays it’s a more sober and somewhat steady place. All the Vietnam era conscientious objectors who fled here, and to a smattering of other nearby islands, are in their 70s or older and have slowed down. One of the proprietors of the hotel is a wonderful and gracious woman named Robin, who has a wide range of artistic gifts and talents and spent quality time patiently and enthusiastically demonstrating paper-dyeing techniques. She taught me and other group members how to gather wild foliage, berries, and found materials, and then use these to create luscious natural colored patterns by

staining, pressing, and boiling all types of paper in alum baths. She instructed us on the finer points of concocting eco-dyes made from salal berries and onion peels to seaweed and tidal grasses (image below) preserved with an array of natural suspensions like clove.

My days went by rather quickly, but they were abundant with the joy of creativity and the warmth of new friendships; but also with the call of fresh landscapes, vibrant horizons, and aromatic wild spaces of sea, mountain, and temperate rain forest. Each day might seem like there would be little to do outside of learning a new skill or continuing our practice with threads and needles, carving driftwood, or brandishing fiery blowtorches to decorate square blocks. But early mornings and evenings proved to be the times for reflection and communion with the island, its inlets and outlets, its spectra of colorful light and subtle darkness, its

blossom of seaside fragrances, and its meditative humming that made us recognize our purposeful solitude.

The unique shoreline included a hard-to-reach stretch of beachfront called Bere Point. It is the only known place where orcas make annual pilgrimages to rub up on inlet rocks *en masse*, as if getting a group belly massage. Less than a mile offshore in the thousand-foot trenches that slice through the straits, sperm whales spin and slap the surface to stun krill and sea otters do backstrokes through calm waters. One evening out on an old trawler, more than two-hundred dolphins followed us across the bay in perfect synchronicity. The vibrancy of life in these waters was stunning and magical—far from the pollutions of matter and sound that

come from most modern cities. It almost felt too vibrant, knowing the state of global peril.

I sat by bonfires in the early autumn drizzle and met locals who fish off surfboards and drink Bud Light; there was the local waterbus driver named Cap'n John, who ferries scores of children around the islands to school each day, and moonlights as a contract whale watching guide. I walked up and down the main road every noon and met people milling about—the young Russian couple who run a café that serves heavy egg and gravy sandwiches and specialty coffees with clever names; the college student staffing the desk of the small public library and village museum (right), replete with historical photos, maritime displays, and replicas of seafaring vessels and equipment; and the officious men managing the ferry office, which had a prominently displayed Canadian flag and a resplendent bouquet of fresh flowers on its bench in honor of Queen Elizabeth, who had recently died.

From the first evening, the participants got to know one another. We drank seltzers and red wine and tea, and bantered about life, art, book making, printing presses, and the majesty of British Columbia's natural environment. Some of the workshop teachers helped prepare



homemade meals, many of which had been gathered from fresh caught crab or salmon that were brought in by a local who put out traps and lines in the bay right in front of where we were working. And it became quite clear that

there was a contentious debate around so-called “farm-raised” fish! Wild salmon is incredibly flavorful and simultaneously dense, yet wonderfully delicious. The shrimp and other fresh seafoods were incomparably fine.

Throughout each day, we had multiple sessions dedicated to the particularities of art book craft and design, as well as construction. For several hours I stood around a makeshift workbench, which was made from the old pool table in the hotel restaurant's bar. One of my co-participants working with me didn't say much



at first but wore an array of T-shirts with rather daring statements, which made me think she wanted to elicit a debate. Eventually, we did begin to talk and I learned that she was a retired academic from California. For more than a decade she had been an active member of a socialist movement that sought to promote world revolution and defeat capitalism—not what I'd expected at a book arts seminar! While we disagreed on various points, I found her commitments and passion to be compelling. One evening after a fervid discussion, while we had been printing ink etchings, I went to my hotel room and found her dissertation online and read it well into the evening. The next day, I began by telling her that I'd read her work and our worlds melded into a thoughtful and constructive friendship. We talked about fairness and class, about education and equity, about Cuba, Marx, and systems of governance and democracy. I learned that she actively raised money for an



organization that had long-advocated for African reparations, and that she personally tithed a specific amount each month in support of that vision of a global action toward unity.



The cadence of the week ebbed and flowed like the tides around the island. One moment we would be sewing a binding and pulling colored wax threads through the punctures of folded quire signatures as the tide rushed out; the next, we'd be trimming bits of tea-stained papers from our driftwood books and the sea was kissing the pier pilings beneath our feet. The focus of handwork accompanied by pauses and further instruction was an effective way to learn. Micro-lessons in eco-friendly projects yielded serendipitous and often humorous results. Debra focused on cover design and bindings, Sue led us in etching and printing, and Robin taught us about dyes, inks, and gathering materials—they all worked seamlessly in their collective artistry and commitment to these crafts. In one instance, we were viewing experimental bindings made of bone, feather, and twigs (photo on previous page, left), when we were encouraged to find natural materials to test new styles of book production. One of the instructors showed us a jawbone of a seal that had washed ashore, so I rushed out to comb the cobbled beach for something unusual. My excitement was only matched by my own naïveté, when I brought three finely sea-polished bones to my teachers, only for one of them to declare: *those are my dog's beef bones that I tossed on the beach!* So much for gathering natural elements!

As the week ended, we gathered for a final meal just as we were preparing a group exhibition. We displayed our art in the restaurant on the converted pool table, where I'd been arguing about Marx. Our hosts invited the whole island. Twenty or so people gathered at the reception and were thoughtfully engaged with all of us, as we sipped chardonnays and deconstructed our aesthetics. A joyous success, new art, new friends, a renewed sense of the world. As the guests departed, the last



sunset melted away and the workshop members exchanged goodbyes. I browsed the Finnish language library adjoining the restaurant pub one last time before departing into the northerly darkness. Harbor seals and seagulls were asleep as I took the last ferry that night back to Port McNeill. The world surprises, bit by bit, but people surprise us even more. It's hard to imagine one might experience such wonders of humanity around damp bonfires, revolutionary bookbinders, Finnish socialists, and a library of seaweeds and driftwood. "No man is an island," said John Donne in 1624, but certainly *a community can be an island, and a very human one at that.*

Pax vobiscum! ~ AJE

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