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“The wave-lined edge”

by Laurie Brinklow

In 1985, during my first job at the now-defunct Ragweed Press, we published a grade six social studies textbook called *Abegweit: Land of the Red Soil*. Until then, most textbooks were from Ontario, and, before that, England or the US. Except for *Exploring Island History: A Guide to the Historical Resources of Prince Edward Island* (also Ragweed), created for and with the high school Island History course in 1977, there wasn't anything local about our textbooks. Indeed, our children would see photos of the Great Lakes or the CN Tower or six-lane highways and wonder if they lived in the same country.

*Abegweit* changed that. I remember going to the post office (when it was still the Dominion Building) and having Blaine Murphy from the popular dance band, Phase II, hand me our mail – and joke how he was famous with the kids now that his photo was in “the new book with the green cover.” Suddenly our children were seeing, in their book, people and places they knew. Suddenly Prince Edward Island was important.

People ask why having our history and culture mirrored back, through books and music, plays and movies, paintings and drawings and photographs, is important. Beyond the beauty they might bring to the world, or joy to their creators, artistic expressions celebrate who we are, feeding our individual and collective identity. They are the story – the glue – that holds our culture together.

Here, on the Island, we have held on to our distinctive culture more tenaciously than many locales, making it a particularly attractive place for artists to express their creativity. Partly it's because the Northumberland Strait provides a psychological shoreline – Milton Acorn's “wave-lined edge of home” – that has defined our storyline. Back in the day, before radio and TV and Netflix, when we had to make our own fun, our Island had a rich oral tradition. There wasn't much to do – especially in the ice-bound wintertime – but tell stories, write poetry, make music, sew quilts, and paint pictures that told those stories. And the shoreline provided an emphatic frame for those shared experiences, emplacing them, beyond any shadow of doubt, on the Island.

The Island was – and still is – a creative place. We take inspiration from the beautiful bounded landscape, and the ocean's limitless horizon that becomes a metaphor for creativity. We like being set apart from the mainland, the mainstream. We appreciate the scale: the smaller the place, the more intimately we know it; the firmer the ground of action on which we plant our feet. When the tide comes in, we learn from the people and cultures that wash up – and when it goes out, we send a bit of the Island to the rest of the world. The resulting fusion is part of what keeps our culture vibrant, dynamic, making it a living, breathing, authentic experience, and not some static museum piece caught in a time warp.

People ask why supporting cultural producers, such as local publishing houses like Acorn Press or Island Studies Press, or local filmmakers, artists, and musicians, is important. It's because they are a mark of cultural confidence that feeds itself – telling our story that empowers us to make and tell more stories.

And it's because, if history shows us anything: we need to be in charge of telling our story. If we don't do it, then someone else will.

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