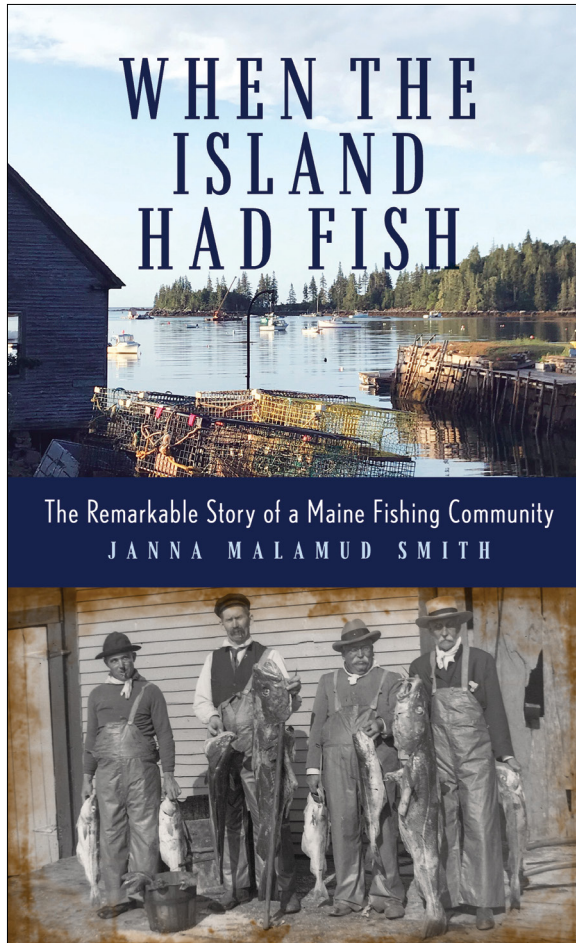




WHEN THE ISLAND HAD FISH: THE REMARKABLE STORY OF A MAINE FISHING COMMUNITY

By Janna Malamud Smith, Downeast Books, 2023

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Stories of Maine fishing communities abound. Beginning in the early twentieth century, journalists began running human interest pieces to give readers context for various issues hitting the fisheries. And, since even earlier, artists and politicians have often used Maine fishermen to personify idealized Americanness—however it may have been defined at the time. More often, however, such coverage was more about readers’ anxieties than the concerns affecting fishing communities themselves: throughout the twentieth century, writers and politicians presented fishing as traditional even while the industry itself sought to be seen as modern and dynamic. As a result, the now century-long tradition of writing about declining New England fishing communities has often presented those communities as a warm blanket of tradition to fend off the cold winds of change.

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Not so Smith's treatment, however. In a refreshingly open, honest, and meticulously researched account of Vinalhaven, Smith reveals the complex and tension-filled story of a fishing community adapting to a world changing about it. Like past writers, Smith relies upon interviews and archival evidence, but she makes human those who past writers presented as icons. Impressively, Smith brings order to coastal Maine's messy and often confusing colonial history. She details the almost constant eighteenth-century conflict between many groups, which hindered and imperiled Vinalhaven's first settlers, in ways no other historian has managed.

Additionally, she folds in the changing ecology upon which Vinalhaven relied, how residents' actions and others shaped and changed that ecology, and how the community adapted to such changes. She cites the most current work published by leading figures in the field: Karen Alexander, Bill Leavenworth, Jeff Bolster, and John Gillis, among others—all people who have spent decades uncovering and analyzing previously untapped government records, personal papers, archaeological findings, and historical marine ecological modeling. In this remarkably fresh, interdisciplinary approach, Smith makes clear that Vinalhaven was no static place, but one bounded by visible and real natural and human changes that upended islanders' lifeways on a regular basis. In doing so, she challenges the unitary category of "fisherman" by revealing through clear and engaging prose the many different ways "fishermen" found to make ends meet in a very lean world. Vinalhaven's people simply did what they needed to do to get by. Drawing upon the last decade's cutting-edge historical ecological research, rich archival dives, and engaging and honest interviews, Smith shows us that at least this fishing community defines "traditional" not as dogged commitment to past ways, but as the embrace of dynamic and creative responses to far-flung change.

This is an important book for those interested in the wider community effects Maine fishing had over the past five hundred years. In Smith's presentation, however, the outside world seems far more distant than it appears Smith's subjects felt it was in their lives. When life outside Vinalhaven enters into the discussion, it does so abruptly, shattering the aura of blissful separation Smith presents. Perhaps that was her point: that while people residing in this island community may have been aware of the outside world, Maine's cold coastal waters kept it largely at bay—until those waters could not do so any longer.

Those interested in a well-researched, un-nostalgic, and honest history of one Maine fishing community will find Smith's work worth their time. She eschews past tropes of "quaint," "traditional," and "artisanal," and evades temptations to replicate past caricatures of Maine fishing communities as some sort of ideal American town. Instead, she presents an honest and open story of a community adapting to change, holding on to itself, but allowing that self to roll with new ways—sometimes successfully, but often not. For this reader, Smith's book is a welcome addition to a long list of New England fishing stories. And this one is not one to let get away.