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Eden & Ruin: Monhegan's Island Shepherd

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Silent Day by Amanda Moline – [See more](#)

"Over another rise of ground, below him, he saw a sort of sprawling house. It was not really a proper house—the boards went higgledy-piggledy in all directions—but it did seem to belong just where it was."

– Yolla Niclas, *The Island Shepherd*

I. The Trouble with Horizons

Understanding a local celebrity like Ray Phillips is a daunting task. After a considerable amount of time investigating his story and writing about it, I still feel myself working clumsily with the details of his life. Central to my uneasiness is an ever-present sense of insurmountable distance. Ray's daily horizon must have been very different from my own.

"[Ray Phillips] is depicted as at once a biblical shepherd, a Homeric relic of some seaward odyssey, an 18th century pioneer, an old fisherman with clever yarns, and a modern American consumer of canned pineapple and fortune cookies."

I approach Ray Phillips far removed from the time and place of his circumstances. I was born nearly forty years after he died. I have lived in Maine for four years, spent probably two cumulative weeks on its coastal islands, and less than twenty-four hours on Monhegan Island, while Ray spent nearly half a century living across Monhegan's harbor on an isle of his own. I did not hear Ray's story firsthand, but found it in a June 2013 *Downeast Magazine* article on "The North Pond Hermit," where he appeared on a list of historical hermits in Maine.^[1] I have spoken to only a handful of Monhegan residents on the matter of his life and possess one hour-long recording of a conversation with a man, now living in Brunswick, who visited the hermit as a child and was the subject of Yolla Niclas's 1959 children's book, *The Island Shepherd*.^[2] The rest is all textual fragments that, at times, provide contradictory information.

Furthermore, Ray's own lifestyle complicates even his generational context. He appears to have been living in a time period unto himself—an amalgamation of near-and-distant past and present that is incongruent with the actual time in which he lived. There are several historical traditions within his persona. He is depicted as at once a biblical shepherd, a Homeric relic of some seaward odyssey, an 18th century pioneer, an old fisherman with clever yarns, and a modern American consumer of canned pineapple and fortune cookies.

There is also the problem of focal length. How near or distant from the day-to-day physicality of Ray's life is my lens adjusted to capture? Am I working with the idealized hermit, dwelling in an Edenic landscape around which newspapers have "spun fantasies," and to which people are drawn from all over the country?^[3] Or am I looking at the hermit's habitat up close—mired in material ruin and personal inconsistencies, which complicate, if not collapse, the hermit's legend into fragments and ambiguity? Neither alone can address the complexity and significance of an individual who was both a private soul and public hermit.

I therefore attempt to draw Ray's image—the legend and the human—through several mediums—old newspaper articles, books, photographs,

conversations and necessarily, my own matrix of associations and memories, which even before I've digested the details of this man's life, begin to fill out that image with archetypal expectations for aged solitary characters. Sitting here – socially, geographically, temporally “from away” – I draw together a mix of hearsay and supposed fact to sketch out some semblance of an individual with a legacy in current memory. In short, I am apprehensive about making assertions. I prefer to call my findings what they are, and have been, for any hermit-seeker—speculations.

II. Somewhere Between Near and Far: The Life of Ray Phillips

Ray Phillips, the Hermit of Manana Island, lived on an islet off the coast of Monhegan from 1930, when he left New York in a sloop for Maine's southern coast, until his death in 1974. There is some speculation about what brought him to the island, because it was this part of his life that he kept hidden. Some say he had once worked in the meatpacking industry in New York City, had gotten tired of the “plasticity of it all” and decided to leave modern civilization.^[4] Some newspapers quote him saying that he disliked politics and disapproved of the course society was taking. One newspaper article called him a “Depression Dropout.”^[5] Others say he was “unsuccessful in love” and so “took to the sea.”^[6] Maybe his brief part in WWI and his exposure to mustard gas, which some claimed damaged his social skills, had something to do with it.^[7]

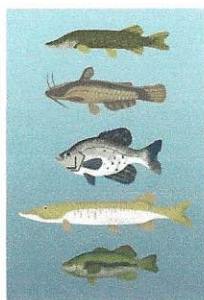
Whatever the reason, Ray came to live on Manana Island and built a driftwood shack for himself. There he tended sheep, would fish and lobster to suit his needs and lived on a small veteran's pension and social security checks. He had no electricity or running water, and likely ate a lot of canned and processed food, as there was no evidence of a garden near his shack. His sheep and a goose named Donald Duck reportedly kept him company in his isolated home. Their constant presence was said to have given him a distinct odor.

Though he was new to the island, Ray was not new to Maine. He grew up in Newport, and attended the University of Maine where he was said to have studied horticulture. In 1918 he was drafted into WWI and, following his time in the army, moved to New York City where he was either a grocer, fisherman, food inspector, or stock broker. He'd heard the fishing was good off the coast of Monhegan so he set sail for the island with the intention of leaving “the New York traffic and dirt.”^[8] He did not settle on Monhegan, however, but built a home on Manana—a tiny islet just across the harbor. He owned one-sixth of the island but was its sole inhabitant.

Although a harbor separated Manana and Monhegan, making his dwelling somewhat remote, Ray's shack was visible from Monhegan Island as was Monhegan Island from his shack. While his position allowed him to observe the goings on in Monhegan from an outside perspective, making him to some a guardian of sorts, people in town always had Ray on their periphery—his shack and figure an anachronistic, yet comforting presence. Ray was an iconic feature of the landscape claimed by the people who saw him as part of the natural outline of an otherwise barren islet.

Despite his isolation, Ray was a social man. He often took his small fishing boat to Monhegan to get supplies and talk to fellow islanders. He also accommodated the journalists and tourists who visited Manana to ask him questions about his 19th century lifestyle and sneak a peek inside his peculiar home. In the 1950's photographer Yolla Niclas came to the island and photographed Ray with a local boy, David Boynton, who used to ferry tourists over to visit the hermit. The resulting images were published in a children's book called *The Island Shepherd*.

Some visitors would also write Ray letters seeking advice, to which he often sent friendly responses. Many painted Ray as a philosopher of sorts. Journalists drew comparisons between his lifestyle and that of Henry David Thoreau while highlighting an extensive collection of canonical literature in his home and reporting that he took notes on the walls of his shack. This is an area of dispute, possibly hyperbole, and where those who knew him say the real man confronts the legend.^[9] Ray, however, never solicited attention, nor acted differently because of it. He is described as regarding his publicity as curious and amusing.



Fish Illustrations by Colby Fogg – [See more](#)

Ray was well liked by the people on Monhegan, although some saw his lack of ambition as laziness. But as the decades passed, Ray reportedly grew more removed from the residents. While Monhegan acquired modern conveniences—electricity chief among them—Ray grew increasingly attached to his sheep. He often made “baaing” sounds in his speech to a degree of unintelligibility. He thought once of bringing a woman to Manana Island, but felt he had not the money or “skill” for marriage and as the years passed he stayed on his island increasingly often.

One winter afternoon, on a rare trip to Monhegan, Ray was paddling across the harbor when his hands froze to the oars. Stranded in frigid waters, Ray fell seriously ill with pneumonia; an illness from which he never fully recovered. People in town tried convincing him to move onto Monhegan where he could be looked after, but Ray preferred to live out his days on Manana. He told the concerned residents that he would light his kerosene lamp each night to signal that he was okay. So for the months that followed, the islanders turned west at sundown—reassured by the sight of that singular flame.

And then one evening in spring the kerosene lamp went unlit. Having suffered a heart attack, Ray was discovered dead the next morning alone on his island of nearly half a century. It was May 8th, 1974, and he was 83 years old.

III. From Far Away: The Island Shepherd in Eden

David Boynton describes Monhegan during Ray's lifetime as "rhythmically different" from the mainland.^[10] Set apart from the faster-paced, mobile networks of transportation and communication in southern Maine, Monhegan's tempo has historically been a slower one. When Maine's mid-century tourism advertised motoring vacations around the state^[11] for example, Monhegan offered a more "rustic" tourist experience, like that "of a century or so ago," characterized by simplicity, moderate consumption, and a beautifully preserved, remarkably diverse landscape for recreation.^[12]

Though Monhegan today has modern conveniences like the mainland, it still maintains a sense of its past. The environment is carefully managed. Three quarters of its surface is covered in trees. It has headlands, rolling pasture, a freshwater pond and rocky coves—essentially, "almost all the natural landscapes of mid-coast Maine" are compressed in its one-and-a-half-mile length.^[13] There are pelagic and passerine birds – raptors, waterfowl, puffins, gulls and terns. Blueberries, conifers, and lupine grow beside small cottages and old captain's homes. The place evokes New England of a century passed—the last vestiges of a slower, easier, ostensibly *better* time—and is adorned in the summers with painters capturing it all on their easels. The whole scene is straight out of a Barbara Cooney children's book or a Sarah Orne Jewett short story. It's not quite paradise, but from the vantage point of the ferry deck, appears pretty darn close.

Ray Phillips, photographed often in this landscape, demonstrates an antiquated lifestyle on what is already, as Mark Warner deems it, a "fabled island."^[14] The coupling is ready-made for a timeless tale.^[15] Ray, with his photogenic features—a reportedly "very attractive man" with "nice eyes"^[16]—knit cap, billowing beard, flock of sheep, and lonely island hut, gives way almost instinctively to idealism and legend. Some primordial penchant for storytelling takes over and roots the man in deep time. His story seems to develop naturally out of our narrative traditions, often with little help from the "facts."^[17]

It is that same mythos of "non-reality" which governs what George Lewis calls "the Maine that never was."^[18] This Maine, advertised as a rural "Vacationland" for lost urbanites, "exists as an earlier, perhaps even timeless place...from which one can grasp and understand 'Life as it should be.'"^[19] Ray's life apart on Manana offers the curious tourist an analogous, if not identical, version of the transcendental ideal. The shepherd's story appears so entrenched in Lewis's mythic Maine paradise, one wonders if the Hermit of Manana Island could have existed without it; if *that* Maine made him—the hermit that never was.

In Western literary traditions, Paradise is an imaginary landscape—the ideal first landscape, fitted to the needs of humans—a story of a distant memory of a dream. Joseph Rykwert, in his study of the architectural manifestations of Adam's implied hut in Paradise, puts it this way: "All of these [architects] have spun fantasies around the framework of the lost plan, since paradise must, as Proust sharply observed, necessarily be a lost one."^[20] These spun fantasies, he argues, are evidence of a persistent vision haunting two horizons—one is of a distant past in which we are permanently barred from Paradise and the other is of a future in which we imagine ourselves to have regained what was lost. Keeping the memory of origins alive is essential to that ideal future. Rykwert thus echoes architectural philosopher Marc-Antoine Laugier's declaration, "Let us never...lose sight of our little hut."^[21] It is unsurprising national character is commonly exemplified in the architecture of small cottages and hermitages.^[22] Such huts represent an original form, performing as mementos of an origin story, reminding us to always keep it "in sight."^[23]

Ray's "rambling shack," as David Boynton refers to it, functions as a primitive hut very literally kept in sight. From Monhegan, Ray's dwelling once stood in clear view. David described the sight of Ray's home as "comforting," a staple in the periphery of their daily lives on Monhegan.

Today, Boynton says, "it's still a little odd" for him to look at Manana and not see the hermit's hut. About a decade ago, Ray's hut was burned down by a resident who felt that it was a "hazard" and a "liability," with all the summer tourists poking around it.^[24] Today, just above where the shack used to stand there's a new, "somewhat unusual" building, which Boynton feels is out of place—"That kind of jumps out at me still, that's wrong. It should be the hermit's dwelling." Boynton's observation points to a lost structure, formerly fundamental to Manana. Yet, the loss is replaced by what Rykwert calls, "the haunting persistence of the vision."^[25] Following the hut's physical erasure, the hermit's story remains—the spot where his shack once stood, a persisting memory of a man that represented a life lived apart, as one newspaper headline put it, "his way."^[26]

In a *New York Times* Letter to the Editor, a reader commented on "The Price of Utopia on One Island," praising the piece as a "letter from home," but asking the author for more current news on the island, as it had been a decade since her last visit. She specifically asked after Ray Phillips: "And the hermit, is he still grazing his sheep on Manana, taking them over to the island by boat?"^[27] The respondent is concerned about whether things have changed on Monhegan since she was last home. In her response, there's a hint of a wish, a desire that the island should always remain, as she quotes from the *Times* article, "a million light years away" from the rest of the world. The Hermit of Manana Island is essential to the integrity of that utopian landscape.

Ray Phillips, who preferred, according to David Boynton, "nineteenth century living" and "lived a much more primitive lifestyle than anyone else" on Monhegan during the mid-twentieth century, is an object of nostalgia. He was noteworthy largely because, to interested outsiders, he represented gestural "traces of us."^[28] He was more than a historical memento, a substitute for what David Lowenthal calls "the vanished landscape,"^[29] to which the nostalgic seeker glances backward. For visitors, Ray and his sheep living in isolation on a tiny island evoked "a congruent social universe...of an earlier epoch."^[30] When people saw Ray they were not looking at a static object in a museum. They were peeking in his windows for a glimpse of atavistic activity—a man interacting with the world as if that "earlier epoch" were still in play.

Lowenthal talks about nostalgia as a kind of existential homelessness. It is "to live in an alien present," he argues.^[31] Nostalgia is a "retreat," a "counterweight," an "absolution," and "atavistic longing for a natural order."^[32] It is a yearning for a distant imaginary landscape wherein lies some sense of origin, which offers redemption—a home. Rooted in a "sense of estrangement," nostalgia focuses on objects that represent those homebound sentiments but in their immediate present are out of place. In terms of nostalgia, Lowenthal argues, the "object of the quest must...be anachronistic."^[33]

This is particularly salient considering Ardis Cameron's sense of "true places...where authenticity and realness are said to dwell."^[34] Authentically *real* spaces, she argues, "find expression in the discursive imaginary topographies of Otherness." They are fundamentally intangible, defined by their inaccessibility, "and so come down, not in maps, but in stories of alterity that mark *home* from *away*."^[35] True places are found in tales told from and of *away*. Thus, the visitor—the "stranger with a camera," as Cameron calls them—is chronically estranged, bound to sit at a distance, telling stories about a

far off, imaginary scene, always just out of reach.

Hermits, as Edith Sitwell documents in *English Eccentrics*, traditionally embody that escapist ideal the “stranger with a camera” seeks: “Whilst these [hermits] of varying respectability were trying, in their several ways, to preserve their lives, others, equally, or more praiseworthy, were trying to escape the consequences of being alive.”^[36] The hermit’s choice to retreat from society for the sake of finding a spiritual home provides a model for other, less visionary, common folk fettered to the trivial material concerns of society.

Ray Phillips is similarly defined by remoteness. A visitor takes a trip “away”—from home, from mainland Maine, from Monhegan Island—to the hermit’s isle and addresses letters to that same far-off place seeking counsel. Ray’s lifestyle, sustained by sheep and sea, is furthermore antiquated, and thereby eccentric, to the urbanite visitor who does not know a goose from a duck.^[37] “His way” on an island of his own, in a home of his own making, among sheep that were “like family,”^[38] bears qualities fundamental to “the good life”—namely, freedom and self-sufficiency. Ray’s hermit persona exemplifies the modern state slogan, “Maine: Welcome to the way life should be. The place where you can establish your life’s course, where you set your own boundaries.”^[39]

“There are also the practical problems of economy and environmental sustainability. Given Monhegan’s economic dependence on summer tourism, this involves constant negotiation between islanders who want to work and live by their own terms and the kind of experience—‘the rustic kind of a century or so ago’—which the island markets to summer visitors.”^{[1]”}

Yet, the need to maintain a sense authenticity creates problems for the Mainer identity. Nathaniel Lewis points out that language advertising Maine tourism—“The reality,” according to *Frommer’s*—describes a vast, untouched wilderness, attractive for its physically and spiritually redemptive qualities.^[40] The result, argues Lewis, is “a long-enduring tension in our identity: Whether Maine is ‘The Way Life Should Be’ as the welcome signs at the state border once read, or whether it is ‘The Way Life Used to be.’”^[41] Maine as “Vacationland,” depends on the vestiges of the state as it existed in its romanticized pioneering past. Visiting is supposed to signify a return to a “true place,” an ‘original’ American place, and, insofar as vacations have historically been designed as “getaways” from the tedium of daily life, one that is all the more *real* because of its perceived distance from the precincts of (over)civilization. Thus Maine, like Monhegan’s hermit, offers a true “homeland of the soul” for its annual pilgrims.

Maintaining this sort of authenticity is hard work. It is a tricky balancing act between one’s own sense of identity and the expectations of the outsider. There are also the practical problems of economy and environmental sustainability. Given Monhegan’s economic dependence on summer tourism, this involves constant negotiation between islanders who want to work and live by their own terms and the kind of experience—“the rustic kind of a century or so ago”—which the island markets to summer visitors.^[42] Monhegan Island’s downtown area is called Monhegan Plantation, which summons associations with national landmarks and museums like Plimouth Plantation. In direct conversation with these overtones, Ted Bernard insists, “[t]his is a working island culture, *not* a living history museum” (emphasis added).^[43]

One year-round resident Bernard interviewed for his study on Monhegan’s strategies for social, economic, and ecological sustainability put the problem this way: “If we’re not careful, success will cause us to change this place to accommodate the tastes and meet the expectations of these short-termers. Then we’ll no longer have something unique to show.”^[44] Simultaneously, there is the matter of too many tourists. As Bernard points out, “Might Monhegan tourists at some point be repelled by too many encounters with other tourists?”^[45] At issue here are the islanders’ self-awareness of the gaze of the outsider and how that awareness implicates them in an inauthentic project of building authenticity. Bernard surmises that at the root of this problem is how to simultaneously create a haven for the self and a haven for the tourist, “Island people don’t want to ruin either what tourists come to experience or what they themselves cherish.”^[46] How then does one live life *their own way*, while accommodating the ways of others?

While Ray Phillip’s popular reputation paints him as Manana’s sole shepherd, a reclusive holy man, with emphasis on the books he kept in his home and the notes he was said to have scribbled on his walls,^[47] “[Ray] wasn’t a particularly deep thinker, or doing it for philosophical reasons, so much as, this is just how he enjoyed living,” says David Boynton.^[48] In an interview with the *Boston Globe*, Ray recognizes that his simple life apart identifies with American transcendentalist ideals, but suggests that such comparisons are more unconscious associations, by-products of his lifestyle choices. Ray maintains they are not are not intentionally ideologically motivated:

“I don’t think I’m different from other people; any number of people think the same as I do...It’s people from the city and freak journalists who want to look for something to write about. There are 500 people just like me up the Maine coast who live on islands, maybe with some sheep, practically alone. I’m nothing unusual.”^[49]

Ray insists on his normality and rejects the idea that his lifestyle is reactionary to the urban New York scene he left forty years before. He is not making a political statement, or asking for attention.^[50] He is simply living a life that fits him.

Ray, however, was said to bear all of the speculation and publicity with modest incredulity and a good-natured indifference. Ray did not solicit attention, and at times was said to “baa” at tourists who overstayed their welcome, but he often let people come into his home to poke about. In fact, he had a remarkable sense of humor about it all.

David Boynton tells a story about Ray’s interaction with a man who came to survey the electrical needs of Monhegan when electricity was to be installed: At first, Ray told the surveyor he didn’t need or want electricity in his home, but as the man turned to leave Ray suddenly thought of something for which he could use it. He told the surveyor: “I’d like to get a big red flashing sign that says ‘The Shepherd’s Club’ and put it on my front porch and flash it at Monhegan.”^[51] Ray knew that he was one of Monhegan’s tourist attractions—a “real icon” along with a set of unverified Norse runes one could find on Manana—which curious visitors may ogle at in person or purchase a postcard photo of to send home.^[52] Yet, there is no evidence that Ray felt his lifestyle was spoiled by the presence of others. Ray’s handling of tourists is admirable in that it is hospitable, but also largely ignores their expectations. Regardless of whether or not Ray was under a spotlight, he went on living his life as he always had, while laughing at outside interest.

It is clear that what for one person is a retreat, for another is life and livelihood and most certainly hard work. Ray Phillips perhaps teaches us that expectations “from away,” should be challenged—not anticipated and imitated. While Ray’s celebrity as a “hermit” drew many to him, I speculate his true charm—like Maine’s—arises from instances in which he challenges that characterization, dismisses its idealistic implications, and dismantles his own legend as the Hermit of Manana Island.

IV. Up Close: The Hermit in Ruin

It’s difficult to address Paradise without its loss, Eden without ruin. Their interaction is what *makes* the story after all.[53] Likewise, the simple, obvious fact of island life—its particular sensitivity to the reality of edges and entropy—deems the latter term unavoidable and necessary to discuss.

As Joseph Rykwert demonstrated in the many architectural manifestations of Adam’s implied hut, conceptions of Eden or Paradise are not stationary artifacts of cultural memory, but constantly subject to process. Caitlin DeSilvey points out in her analysis of the mutability of cultural artifacts, that this holds true for the job of any archivist and often poses considerable challenges to scholarly analysis. She observes in her work that perhaps “the drive toward stabilizing the thing was part of the problem.” The problem is that “protected stasis” is illusory.[54] Loss due to decay is always part of the picture whether we acknowledge it or not.

Acknowledging ruin has value in that “the disarticulation of the object may lead to the articulation of other histories, and other geographies,” says DeSilvey.[55] In ruin, we recognize other possible lives—tales—amongst the eroded bits of an object, because decay also possesses its own direction and movement. It is in this “admixture of waste and life, of decadence and vitality,” through which the “procreative power of decay” is at work, making re-creation possible.[56]

Upon inspecting the details of Ray Phillip’s life, his legend begins to break down. He loses some of his mystique. The image is gap-ridden, discordant and ill-fitted in places—perhaps too puzzlingly *human* for our liking. Tales of Ray, the bearded, reclusive holy man on a mythic Maine isle are much easier to tell. Collecting all of these eroded bits and erroneous details, which are the most tangible materials of Ray’s life, undercuts the felt-presence his legend provided.

The mystical fallout is all part of the natural processes of storytelling—the discrepancies between stories as they happened from some vantage point and the stories we tell ourselves and others at a displaced time. Yet, the ruins of those forgotten, half-told tales are valuable in that they have the potential to offer a more complete picture of a story’s ethos. I turn, then, to those perplexing, oft-discarded, details of Ray Phillips’ life and circumstances in the hopes that it will lead me to a fuller articulation—“other histories,...other geographies”—of the hermit’s saga.

Folklore surrounding hermits often foregrounds the hermit as a redeemer, some kind of solution to the ruinous forces affecting the alienated modern individual. Yet, how the hermit’s answer to the human condition plays out – in other words, how the hermit secures their own survival and preserves their person – is often dramatized for effect.

In popular imaginings Ray lives simply and enjoys “the good life.” Monhegan artist Elaine K. Miller writes in her blog: “[Ray] would walk along the island, gazing out to sea, contented with his life” on tiny tree-less Manana, a place “only suitable for seagulls,” though somehow “perfect” for him.[57] However, the closer we get to *how* he managed to survive its logistics, obstacles, and everyday monotony, the magic of it all begins to lose some of its quality. It seems that any real Paradise *is* necessarily interacting with its own ruin.

Island living, Ted Bernard explains in *Hope and Hard Times*, involves a constant awareness of limits and boundaries, outside of which is an ever-changing, at times volatile, expanse unfit for habitation. Keeping a small island like Monhegan habitable is a primary concern. Given that islanders continually ferry waste and needed goods to and from the mainland, residents are careful to moderate their resource use, repurpose where possible and compost organic materials.[58] Island living is a continual interaction with waste—a respect for both its threats and possibilities.

Miller writes in her blog that Ray Phillips was “a smart recycler long before it was savvy.”[59] Known to re-use even the envelopes he received to write back to his many pen pals, Ray was a master salvager. His dwelling was made of driftwood and recycled parts of old ships. He used his bathtub for storing sheep sheerings, and decorated his home with old fading buoys. The construction of his home itself was a restitution of ruined parts, taken from their original contexts and brought into a new order, which seemed to be decaying itself.

DeSilvey reflects that decay “[sparks] simultaneous—and contradictory—sensations [for her] of repugnance and attraction.”[60] Ruin disrupts order, confuses the articulation of an object, and makes structures unsafe for human occupation.[61] The resulting ambiguity is thus repulsive, even threatening. Simultaneously, as Hans Grumbrecht elaborates in “Identifying Fragments,” there is something attractive about things which are out of place or do not look as they should. The constant play of “emerging” and “vanishing” forms, means that we never reach, “a state that we would associate with ‘completion’ or ‘rest,’” and so are continually refused “the corresponding sense of relief.”[62] Our “intuition of a lack” immediately stimulates an imaginative “restitution” of the ruined object.[63] In other words, loss to ruin compels us to explore the gaps.

Given the compelling nature of ruined objects, it’s no wonder Ray’s “rambling”—structurally dubious—shack attracted so many curious visitors, eager to gain entrance, draw speculations and take home animated accounts as souvenirs. Ray’s home therefore easily gains currency within Lewis’ “invented” Maine—an idiosyncratic portrait of “quaint folkways, downeast humor, and the [parodied] accent.” This Maine effectively “transforms a potentially negative image,” by “minimizing or romanticizing local poverty [and] other pressing social issues.”[64]

David Boynton repeatedly referred to the physical details of Ray’s life euphemistically, as “interesting.” He says of Ray’s house, “well it was interesting. It was pretty dirty because the sheep lived there,” adding, “not a place that I’d want to live.” Ray’s “interesting lifestyle” is characterized by a dwelling mired in ruin—floors littered in sheep feces, rooms in disrepair, and the whole home sitting on a foundation of, what looked like, eroding toothpicks.[65] Additionally Ray, says one interviewee in Elisabeth Harris’s documentary, looked like a “homeless person,” adding “it wasn’t someone you’d want to invite home for dinner.”[66] Boynton said that because the sheep lived with him, an unpleasant odor usually hung around Ray, so “people didn’t want to stand real close”—likely difficult to address as Ray never installed plumbing in his home, though he’d purchased the materials.[67]

Seeing Ray in the context of ruin, in the context of what many considered to be poverty, complicates his popular characterization. Some, said David Boynton, thought the hermit was “lazy,” that “his lifestyle was at a very low level and... [he didn’t have] the ambition to fix it up.” This creates a very different picture of Ray in contrast to higher ideals about idyllic isolation. Ray’s income comes largely from social security checks and he often discussed the prospect of a wife, plumbing, and electricity as “too expensive” for him. Yet, there was no mention of laziness in the newspaper articles on Ray—only commentary on the distinction between his “civilized life” and the day he decided to “go fishin” and never returned.^[68]

“Year-round residents on Monhegan, too, have struggled to maintain the economic and environmental sustainability of their island in the face of external changes on the mainland, which marginalize them, and make it difficult to participate in larger markets. When tourists come to Monhegan they do not see the natural environment of Monhegan in the same way that locals do; specifically, the work that goes into maintaining its beauty or supporting its summer residents.”

As one of the poorest states in the nation, Maine historically wrestles with high poverty rates. Local writer Sanford Phippen characterizes the region as a challenging place to make a living: “this Maine is frustrating; it is hard on people. It is a life of poverty, solitude, struggle, lowered aspirations, living on the edge.”^[69] When Ray characterized his lifestyle as commonplace and referred to the “500 people just like [him] up the Maine coast” in an interview with the *Boston Globe*, he was not only directing the journalist’s attention to other reclusive Maine folk, but to their circumstances, the few resources many possess to meet the challenges of an unforgiving landscape. Like many hard-working, resourceful Mainers, it’s clear that Ray, too, was constantly “living on the edge.”

Year-round residents on Monhegan have also struggled to maintain the economic and environmental sustainability of their island in the face of external changes on the mainland, which marginalize them, and make it difficult to participate in larger markets. When tourists come to Monhegan they do not see the natural environment of Monhegan in the same way that locals do; specifically, the work that goes into maintaining its natural beauty or supporting its summer residents. Michael Burke similarly reflects on the relationship between Mainers and their surroundings: “their experience and conception of the environment was not a rural fantasy, not a restorative wilderness, not a refuge from the realm of culture, not simply an idea at all, but a real place to be put to use, and heavy use at that.”^[70]

In one well-known anecdote concerning Ray, yet another man arrives on Monhegan to offer the islanders his services. This time, instead of marketing modern electricity, the man on the dock was pitching spiritual salvation. When the pastor approached the old hermit, supposing the destitute-seeming elderly man to be in desperate need of saving, Ray said, “Well that’s great but can you come over to my island and help me put my roof up first?” The pastor told him he didn’t have time to help with a roof, and Ray replied, “Well that’s too bad. I guess you don’t have time to save my soul either.”^[71] In this episode, Ray privileged the physical demands of household upkeep over the pastor’s spiritual idealism. Ray was devoted to a temple of his own—with all its broken parts, slanting driftwood shutters, and animal debris—his home, his way.

Maine realist writer Carolyn Chute sees the true Maine, the version most honest in its exhibition, in landscapes “studded with the detritus of human work and play.” She writes:

Home is supposed to be private isn’t it? Lots of us have assorted useful stuff around our yards—tractors, tractor parts, truck tires, wooden skids, plastic industrial pails, rolled up chicken wire, tree houses (the lopsided kind made by kids), old cars, old appliances. This comes from freedom, from not worrying what other people think. Visitors don’t look at your stuff anyway...They mostly look at *you*. They come to visit *you*, the person they know quadrillions of rumors and truths about...There’s no hiding *you*. You don’t need to. *That’s* freedom.^[72]

Freedom for Chute, as I suspect it did for Ray, emancipates the individual from the illusion of preserved charm. Freedom is to openly acknowledge and engage with the ruinous forces that are fundamental to the “admixture of waste and life, of decadence and vitality,”^[73] which constitutes any home.

When Ray was asked in an interview about whether he was happy living on Manana Island he said: “I’m very contented I have everything...except youth. I’d like to be young, I’d like to be 16...I’d like to get hold of that ram standing up on the mountain. I’d like to slit his throat.”^[74] Ray confronts the reality of his own mortality and is unashamedly nostalgic for his youthful contests with nature in heroic, imagined fables of his own making. In Ray’s statement, too, there is a wish that he could have stayed a bit longer with his sheep on Manana; that there, where he tended his flock, ate canned pineapple, flipped through *Reader’s Digest* by kerosene light, and opened his shack to countless visitors—there, by the shifting sea water, clear as day on the horizon, *that* was his Paradise.

About the Author

Taylor Cunningham graduated from the University of Maine in May 2016 with majors in English and Anthropology and a minor in Folklore. Her honor’s thesis, “Persuading the Secret: In Search of Maine’s Hermits,” explored Maine’s most fantastically idiosyncratic hermit characters and the important roles they play in regional oral histories. Taylor now lives in Boulder, Colorado with some stellar pals from Maine, works as a juice bar barista at Whole Foods, and writes for *WhoWhatWhy*, a nonprofit news site, in her spare time. She will be attending New Mexico State University in the Fall to pursue an MFA in fiction.

Notes

[1] “Haven for Hermits,” *Dowd Magazine*, June 2013.

[2] Yolla Niclas, *The Island Shepherd* (New York: Viking Press, 1959).

[3] Joseph Rykwert, *On Adam’s house in Paradise: the Idea of the Primitive Hut in Architectural History* (Greenwich: Museum of Modern Art, 1972), 13.

[4] Marguerite Del Giudice, “He lives his way—alone on a Maine isle,” *Boston Globe*, Feb. 2, 1975.

[5] Phyllis Austin, “Depression Dropout Going Strong at 76,” *Evening Star* (Washington D.C.), May 25, 1973) A-3.