

Western University

Scholarship@Western

---

History Publications

History Department

---

2016

## Rites of Passage: Tourism and the Crossing to Prince Edward Island

Alan MacEachern  
amaceach@uwo.ca

Edward MacDonald  
University of Prince Edward Island, gemacdonald@upei.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/historypub>



Part of the [Canadian History Commons](#), [Cultural History Commons](#), and the [Leisure Studies Commons](#)

---

### Citation of this paper:

Edward MacDonald and Alan MacEachern, "Rites of Passage: Tourism and the Crossing to Prince Edward Island," *Histoire sociale/Social History*, vol.49 no.99 (Juin/June 2016), 291-308.



PROJECT MUSE®

---

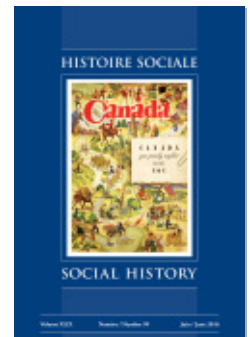
## Rites of Passage: Tourism and the Crossing to Prince Edward Island

Edward MacDonald, Alan MacEachern

Histoire sociale / Social History, Volume 49, Numéro/Number 99, Juin/June 2016, pp. 289-306 (Article)

Published by Les publications Histoire sociale / Social History Inc.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/his.2016.0002>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/619045>

# Rites of Passage: Tourism and the Crossing to Prince Edward Island

EDWARD MACDONALD AND ALAN MACEACHERN\*

*The tourism history of Prince Edward Island clearly demonstrates the dynamic importance of marine transportation to island tourism. The sea passage to an island is a visceral marker of “otherness,” yet mass tourism requires convenient access. Even as exporters and importers pressed the “rights of passage” (captured in Confederation’s promise of “continuous steam communication” with the Mainland), tourism promoters began to incorporate the “rites of passage” into their promotion of the island province. This paper traces over time this tension between the prosaic and the metaphysical: the desire for transportation efficiency and the tourist experience of islandness.*

*L’histoire du tourisme à l’Île-du-Prince-Édouard témoigne nettement de l’importance dynamique du transport maritime pour le tourisme insulaire. Si la traversée à une île est un marqueur viscéral de l’« altérité », le tourisme de masse exige toutefois un accès convenable. Même au moment où les exportateurs et les importateurs insistaient sur les « droits de passage » (saisis dans la promesse de la Confédération d’une « liaison permanente par bateaux à vapeur » avec le continent), les promoteurs du tourisme ont commencé à intégrer les « rites de passage » dans leur promotion de la province insulaire. Le présent article relate l’évolution de la tension entre le prosaïque et le métaphysique : le désir d’efficacité dans les transports et l’expérience touristique de l’insularité.*

IN MARCH 1954, that bleakest of months on Prince Edward Island, the provincial government’s Travel Bureau treated members of the local Innkeepers’ Association and the Charlottetown Board of Trade to a tantalizing slice of summer, a new promotional film called *Abegweit*.<sup>1</sup> This old Mi’kmaw name for Prince Edward Island was usually translated, somewhat loosely, as “Cradled on the Waves.” The phrase conveyed romance, after all, and the 15-minute film was all about selling the charms of the little island province to prospective tourists. “The crossing of the Northumberland Strait takes less than an hour,” its narrator reassured prospective

\* Edward MacDonald is associate professor in the History Department at the University of Prince Edward Island. Alan MacEachern is professor in the History Department at University of Western Ontario.

<sup>1</sup> Public Archives and Records Office of Prince Edward Island [hereafter PARO], 98-004, Box 3, Undated circular, Tourism Industry Association of Prince Edward Island fonds. See also Charlottetown *Guardian*, March 17, 1954, p. 15.

travellers, “and as the ship leaves the Mainland the feel of the warm sea breezes and the sound of the gulls circling overhead is for many the moment when an Island holiday really begins.”<sup>2</sup>

By the mid-1960s, tourism officials would claim that some nine million Americans (and an unknown number of Canadians) had seen the film.<sup>3</sup> Hundreds of thousands of tourists had made their way to the ferry dock at Cape Tormentine, New Brunswick, or Caribou, Nova Scotia, en route to Abegweit. Often, however, they failed to feel the magic. As the industry’s newsletter, *Tourist Talk*, explained in 1969, “It became pretty obvious this past season that for thousands of visitors getting to Prince Edward Island was anything but half the fun. As a matter of fact for those who broiled in a hot July sun without basic amenities like lunches, cold drinks and toilet facilities while they waited [up to six hours] for a ferry crossing, getting here was anything but fun.”<sup>4</sup> Within this dissonance between expectation and experience resides one of the essential challenges of the travel industry. In most cases, the sea passage to an island is an intrinsic part of the tourist experience, providing an almost visceral marker of “otherness” that is part of an island’s mystique for visitors. As Stefan Gössling and Geoffrey Wall observe, “Clear physical borders also constitute psychological borders, which aid the imagination of being isolated, and are thus attractive for visitors seeking to escape routines, stress and responsibility.”<sup>5</sup> The voyage itself, as John Jakle, observes, “could also amplify the sense of being in a unique environment, and of being on a unique adventure.”<sup>6</sup> Yet, to capitalize on this otherness, tourism operators reliably have to get travellers to their island destination. A subtle tension exists between these two roles. The experience of islandness can be cheapened for visitors if the island is too easily reached. On the other hand, mass tourism is impossible if access is difficult or inconvenient.<sup>7</sup>

Prince Edward Island offers a suggestive case study of the dynamic importance of marine transportation to island tourism. Separated from the mainland of Canada by the Northumberland Strait, a 13 to 43 kilometre-wide strip of water in the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence, Prince Edward Island was historically reliant on, yet bedevilled by, its sea links with the outside world. In summer the strait

2 *Abegweit*, produced for Prince Edward Island Tourist and Information Bureau by Patterson Productions, Ottawa (1953).

3 Annual Report, Department of Tourist Development, 1965, p. 19. How tourism officials came up with the figure is not indicated.

4 PARO, 98-004, Box 3, Tourism Industry Association of Prince Edward Island Fonds, “Is Getting There Half the Fun?” *Tourist Talk* [1969].

5 Stefan Gössling and Geoffrey Wall, “Island Tourism” in Godfrey Baldacchino, ed., *A World of Islands: An Island Studies Reader* (Charlottetown: Institute of Island Studies, 2007), p. 429.

6 John Jakle, *The Tourist: Travel in Twentieth-Century North America* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), p. 95.

7 While marine and coastal tourism has attracted its share of attention, particularly transoceanic passenger liners, the cruise ship industry, and, of course, seaside resorts, marine transportation as a component of island tourism has gone largely unaddressed. Gössling and Wall, for example, mainly focus on the difference between warm- and cold-water islands, while Mark Orams, *Marine Tourism: Development, Impacts and Management* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), is mostly concerned with the impact of tourism on marine and coastal environments. Phillip Vannini’s *Ferry Tales: Mobility, Place, and Time on Canada’s West Coast* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012) spotlights local users rather than tourists.

crossing required only a minor sea voyage, but in winter, when the Strait was choked by a shifting mass of drift ice, the passage long defied marine technology and frustrated Islanders.

Issues of transportation efficiency and reliability permeated political discourse for decades, since communication with the Mainland was a federal responsibility with mostly provincial repercussions. The initial push for improved transportation came from Island exporters denied winter access to seasonal markets and from consumers hungry for imports. In the postwar era, however, the tourism industry became the principal driver for efforts to improve the ferry service to Prince Edward Island. Boards of trade, tourism associations, and provincial officials were all anxious to channel ever more tourists efficiently into the province.

Even as the transportation lobby pressed the “rights of passage” to minimize the barrier posed by the Northumberland Strait, tourism marketing incorporated “rites of passage” into its promotion of the province as a tourist destination. Tourism is a process in which the journey is inseparable from the sojourn. As geographer John Towner points out, “the journey itself becomes not only a matter of distance, time and cost, but a critical experience for those at leisure.”<sup>8</sup> That the sea passage itself might be part of the province’s tourism allure is evident from the promotional films—such as *Abegweit*—produced for the Island’s postwar tourist industry and the informal testimony of home movies. Yet the value of the sea passage to the tourism experience only entered into public discourse in the late twentieth century, as Islanders heatedly debated the merits of an expanded ferry service versus a fixed link to the adjacent Mainland.<sup>9</sup> This uneasy relationship between the “rites” and the “rights” of passage reflects the perpetual quest to find the metaphysical balance point between being “apart from” the Mainland yet a part of it.

### The Demands of Trade

In February 1881, Mrs. Cuthbert MacLeod and her bookkeeper husband left Pictou on the steamer *Northern Light* for Prince Edward Island. After passing Pictou Island, the ship encountered heavy ice and was soon stuck fast. Days passed. Fuel and provisions dwindled. The steamer drifted slowly down the Northumberland Strait towards the Gulf of St. Lawrence. As the ice tightened its grip, bending beams and warping door-frames, a sense of desperation set in. Mrs. MacLeod joined a party of ten who took the final lifeboat in search of open water and escape to the shore. Twenty-six hours later, they were rescued by onlookers just off Murray Harbour North. A week afterwards, the *Northern Light* finally made land at Souris.<sup>10</sup> It is perhaps superfluous to point out that none of the passengers was travelling for pleasure.

The tourism industry was scarcely born when Islanders first began to protest the new province’s marine links to the rest of Canada. In what became one of

8 John Towner, *An Historical Geography of Recreation and Tourism in the Western World, 1540-1940* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1996), p. 6. See, too, Jakle, *The Tourist*, p. 5.

9 “The Island” and “Islanders” will be employed in this essay as a shorthand for Prince Edward Island and its inhabitants, respectively.

10 “Recalls Voyage on the Old ‘Northern Light’,” *Charlottetown Guardian*, August 8, 1947, Section 2, p. 6.

the more contentious terms of Prince Edward Island's entry into Confederation in 1873, the federal government had pledged "Efficient steam service for the conveyance of mails and passengers to be established and maintained between the Island and the Mainland of the Dominion, Winter and Summer, thus placing the Island in continuous communication with the Intercolonial Railway and the Railway System of the Dominion."<sup>11</sup> In summer, the promise was not hard to keep. The federal government merely subsidized existing steamship lines.<sup>12</sup> Politicians and merchants might dispute schedules, fares, routes, docking facilities, or freight capacity, but the crossing itself was seldom in doubt. For the winter service, the federal government commissioned its own steamers, and their patent incapacity during the first five decades of Confederation has been well documented.<sup>13</sup> When pack ice chronically confined the winter steamers to port or stranded them in mid-crossing, the service fell back on specially designed ice-boats that were alternately sailed, rowed, and dragged across the Strait. No wonder there were periodic campaigns for construction of a tunnel across the Northumberland Strait seabed.<sup>14</sup>

The campaigns for better marine connections to the province were invariably couched in principle, citing Ottawa's constitutional obligation, but clothed in a need that was primarily commercial. As Lewis Carvell, president of the Charlottetown Board of Trade, put it in 1891, "The great loss which this Province suffers annually through its isolation in winter is difficult to estimate, but its existence is beyond question. By the early closing of the Strait, the Island people are prevented from taking advantage of the markets abroad at a time when good prices prevail."<sup>15</sup> The federal response was generally to address the need without conceding the principle. That approach meant a series of progressively more powerful steamers. While interruptions in passenger service were often mentioned in the same breath as timely access to goods and markets, the passengers in question were generally Islanders: politicians, commercial travellers, or merchants. The trickle of tourists into the province flowed mainly during the pastoral arcadia of an Island summer.<sup>16</sup>

For the province's handful of tourism boosters, "tourists" generally meant "Americans," measured in the hundreds, arriving direct from Boston by sea. Premier James C. Pope's confident prediction that construction of a trans-island railway would induce an influx of American tourists spending £300,000 a year had not come to pass, but, by the turn of the century, a small American breeze had begun to belly the industry's sails. "The year 1900 was undoubtedly the banner year for tourist travel to the Island," crowed the president of Charlottetown's

11 Dominion of Canada, Order-in-Council, June 26, 1873.

12 Report of Committee of the Privy Council, November 7, 1885.

13 For example, Mary Cullen, "The Transportation Issue, 1873-1973" in F. W. P. Bolger, ed., *Canada's Smallest Province: A History of P.E.I.* (Charlottetown: Prince Edward Island 1973 Centennial Commission, 1973), pp. 246-255.

14 See Edward MacDonald, "Bridge Over Troubled Waters: The Fixed Link Debate on Prince Edward Island, 1885-1997" in Godfrey Baldacchino, ed., *Bridging Islands: The Impact of Fixed Links* (Charlottetown: Acorn Press, 2007), pp. 29-46.

15 PARO 3147/1, Greater Charlottetown Chamber of Commerce Fonds, Annual General Meeting, Charlottetown Board of Trade, January 21, 1891.

16 The early tourism industry is chronicled in Alan MacEachern, "No Island Is an Island: A History of Tourism in Prince Edward Island, 1870-1939" (MA Thesis, Queen's University, 1991).

Board of Trade in his annual address. "This was owing in a great measure to the providing by the Plant [Steamship] Line of two palatial steamers for this port together with the growing favor of our Island as a healthy Summer resort."<sup>17</sup> When it heard in 1910 that the Canadian Pacific Railway would purchase the Dominion Atlantic Railway (linking Yarmouth and Halifax), would run a steamer from Boston to Digby, and was contemplating a branch line to Brule, Nova Scotia, on the Northumberland Strait, the Board was quick to resurrect the idea of a steamer service between Brule and Charlottetown. Pledging to assist "with all possible information and in every way," the Board postulated that "whereas this Province has every natural facility for a summer resort, ... if such transportation facilities were available from Boston to Charlottetown through the Annapolis Valley thousands of Americans would spend the summer here."<sup>18</sup> The fact that the DAR had essentially introduced mass tourism to Nova Scotia by playing to the massive popularity of Longfellow's poem "Evangeline" no doubt quickened the Board of Trade's pulse. The CPR did lease the DAR a year later, in 1911, but there was no extension to Brule, no steamer service to Charlottetown—and no pipeline to hordes of American tourists.<sup>19</sup>

By the time the Board's attention turned back to Ottawa, the focus had shifted to trade once more. After Prime Minister Robert L. Borden's new Conservative government announced late in 1911 that it would provide a purpose-built railcar ferry on a fixed crossing between Cape Tormentine, New Brunswick, and Carleton Head (now Borden), Prince Edward Island, the Board lent its shoulder to the province's push for better marine transportation. Its cable to Prime Minister Borden was armed with a resolution that Island industries "are not flourishing, due to the want of continuous transportation winter and summer to and from outside markets."<sup>20</sup> It took five years to deliver on Borden's promise, but, when the new railcar ferry, the *S.S. Prince Edward Island*, arrived in Halifax from Newcastle en route to Charlottetown in July 1915, it was front-page news. The Charlottetown *Guardian* lingered over its specifications: triple expansion steam engines generating 7,000 horsepower, 300 feet long, with a 53-foot beam, and a draught of 18 feet when fully loaded. With their plastered ceilings, parquet floors, and carved oak and mahogany panels, its public salons were self-consciously equipped like those of an ocean liner (see Figure 1). Not that its voyages would take long. The *Prince Edward Island* would prove a match for the worst winter ice after it finally commenced daily service from Borden in October 1917, connecting at last the Prince Edward Island Railway with the web of steel rails that spanned the continent.<sup>21</sup> In 1918, its first full year of operation, the new ferry made 506

17 PARO 3147/1, Annual General Meeting, Charlottetown Board of Trade, January 9, 1901.

18 PARO 3147/2, Special General Meeting, Charlottetown Board of Trade, June 23, 1910.

19 See Monica MacDonald, "Railway Tourism in the 'Land of Evangeline,' 1882-1946," *Acadiensis*, vol. 35, no. 1 (Autumn 2005), pp. 158-180; Jay White, "Canada's Ocean Playground: The Tourism Industry in Nova Scotia, 1870-1970," Nova Scotia Archives, <http://novascotia.ca/archives/virtual/tourism/early.asp?Language=English>.

20 PARO 3147/2, Annual General Meeting, Charlottetown Board of Trade, January 10, 1912.

21 "The New Car Ferry Steamer Prince Edward Island," Charlottetown *Guardian*, July 6, 1915, p. 1; Cullen, "The Transportation Issue," p. 256.



round trips across the Strait.<sup>22</sup> The Mainland, it seemed, was finally within easy reach.



**Figure 1:** Smoking Room, S.S. *Prince Edward Island*. The vessel's elegant interior spaces suggested an ocean liner more than a ferry on a two-hour cruise.

Source: *The Engineer* 16 June 1915, p.62

### Railcars and Automobiles

"Few subjects have been more generally or more persistently discussed than our tourist trade," the Charlottetown *Guardian* reflected in May 1921, "and very few of our undertakings have made so little progress." The province had the makings of a tourist mecca, the editorialist continued, but "[w]e are an island with an island's handicaps and until we have minimized these to the last possible limit we cannot hope to capture any considerable share of the tourist trade. The chief hindrance to the development of our tourist business is the difficulty in getting here and this difficulty lies between Sackville and our Island shores." Specifically, the problem lay with the miserable rail connection from Sackville, with its "third class, overcrowded, kerosene lighted car," followed by "three hours of stopping and starting between Borden and Charlottetown." Tourists subjected to such travails would not come back. "Prince Edward Island has every right to be the tourist paradise of America and with reasonable convenience for getting here it would become such. Without these our bidding for tourist business will be vain."<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> "Marked Progress Made in P.E.I. Railway Service During Past 3 Decades," Charlottetown *Guardian*, September 22, 1948, p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> "Our Tourist Trade," Charlottetown *Guardian*, May 16, 1921, p. 4.



The *Guardian's* complaint was nothing new. Almost as soon as the *S.S. Prince Edward Island* entered service, merchants, shippers, and tourist promoters began to lobby for more daily crossings. They also protested the snail-pace conversion of the Island's narrow gauge railway to the standard gauge of Mainland tracks and the inferior quality of the rolling stock employed between Sackville and Charlottetown.<sup>24</sup> In the early 1920s, as the Island's seed potato industry blossomed, there were chronic shortages of railcars during the fall shipping season. Ferry and train schedules also fell regularly out of synch, frustrating both tourism promoters and travellers. At one memorable meeting of the Board of Trade with assorted Island politicians, the mail and passenger service was denounced as "'Damnable,' 'Rotten,' etc."<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, freight rates soared, triggering an angry regional backlash known as the Maritime Rights movement.<sup>26</sup>

Behind the unintended smokescreen of bluster and indignation, two related trends gathered momentum. Each would have far-reaching consequences for the marine transportation issue. One was the growth of tourism itself. The other was tourism's great enabler, the rise of the automobile.

Geographer F. A. Stilgenbauer summarily dismissed the Island's tourism potential in his 1920s analysis of the Island economy. "A small proportion of the coastal population of Prince Edward Island is engaged in resort activities," he sniffed, but the Island's peripheral location made it too hard to reach for families with only one or two weeks of vacation per summer. As a result, he wrote, "Few visitors outside of Maritime Canada and New England visit the island."<sup>27</sup> Island tourism promoters might have agreed, but they would also have pointed out that the Maritimes and New England encompassed millions of potential visitors—with emphasis on "potential." This was tourism's "if only" era: "if only accommodations could be found to satisfy the 'worthwhile' tourist, if only the ferry service were more dependable, if only more promotional brochures were printed, if only Island roads were not always either mud or dust."<sup>28</sup>

In 1922, after several false starts, a permanent provincial Tourist Association was established, with a modest government subsidy and a former premier, Judge Aubin E. Arsenault, at its head.<sup>29</sup> "The Atlantic Provinces are at last waking up to the value of the Tourist Traffic," J. O. Hyndman, president of the Prince Edward Island Associated Boards of Trade, advised in a 1923 brief protesting the "lack of efficient transportation" to and from his province, "and the Island stands to benefit greatly from the efforts of the Provincial Tourist Association that has just been

24 PARO 3147/2, Annual General Meeting, Charlottetown Board of Trade, January 9, 1918.

25 PARO 3147/6, Council Minutes, Charlottetown Board of Trade, January 29, 1924.

26 This list was culled from assorted meetings of the Charlottetown Board of Trade during the 1920s (see PARO 3147/2). Lower freight rates, railway upgrading, and a new ferry were all on the Island's "Maritime Rights" agenda. See E. R. Forbes, *The Maritime Rights Movement: A Study in Canadian Regionalism* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1979).

27 F. A. Stilgenbauer, "The Geography of Prince Edward Island" (PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 1929), p. 31.

28 MacEachern, "No Island Is an Island," p. 85.

29 *Ibid.*, pp. 86-89, 98-100. The tourist organization went through several early name changes. For the sake of simplicity, we will use the same name throughout.

organized.”<sup>30</sup> As the decade wore on, however, tourism promoters began to realize that expanding the tourism industry would not depend on putting Pullman sleeping cars on the Sackville to Charlottetown stretch of railway or in coordinating the arrival times of the “Maritime Express” and “Ocean Limited” with the ferry schedule, but with accommodating the suddenly ubiquitous automobile.

John Jakle has tracked the rise of automobile tourism in North America across the 1920s. In 1900 there were 8,000 cars registered in the United States. By 1920, there were 8 million; by 1930, 23 million. The Canadian statistics were in scale: 500 in 1900, 408,000 in 1920, over 1.2 million by 1930. At the same time, after spiking in the early 1920s, train travel declined steeply, by 22 per cent in the United States between 1921 and 1941, even as auto travel increased sixfold. By 1935, 85 per cent of all vacation travel in America was by auto.<sup>31</sup> As car ownership spread downwards through the middle and popular classes, the automobile democratized travel and spread it out over the landscape, breaking the tyranny of train tracks and steamship lines. Millions of North Americans took to the roads, and that change posed an enormous challenge for island tourism.

In July 1926, F. C. Coley wrote to his colleague H. H. Melanson of Canadian National Railways about his impending trip to Prince Edward Island. Was it “customary or practical,” Coley asked, to take a private car on the ferry from Cape Tormentine to Borden and thence to Charlottetown?<sup>32</sup> The honest answer was “no.” When the *S.S. Prince Edward Island* had been launched, the term “car ferry” had meant “railcar ferry.”<sup>33</sup> (See Figure 2.) Automobiles could only travel as freight, and that meant laboriously backing them onto flatbed railcars. In a telling little incident from July 1918, the General Freight Agent in Moncton, A. T.



**Figure 2:** This detail from a 1920s postcard captures a major trend in Island tourism: the travel freedom provided by the automobile. However, until the *S.S. Prince Edward Island* was renovated to create an automobile deck, the only way for tourists to get an automobile to PEI was on a railway flatcar.

Source: Boyde Beck collection.

30 Library and Archives Canada [hereafter LAC], Arthur Meighan fonds, Reel C-3470, 74626-31, Hyndman to President, Farmers' Institutes, December 18, 1923.

31 Jakle, *The Tourist*, pp. 121, 128, 169.

32 PARO 4135/21, A. E. Arsenaault Fonds, F. C. Coley, New Haven, to H. H. Melanson, CNR, July 9, 1926.

33 Ironically, the province had banned automobiles altogether from Island roads from 1908 to 1913. It was 1919 before the last restrictions were lifted.

Weldon, cabled the Charlottetown Board of Trade, stating “they will be forced to place [an] embargo on Touring Automobiles as they hamper handling of freight.”<sup>34</sup> The Board vigorously protested.

Even without such wartime strictures, and even after the *Prince Edward Island* was modified in the late 1920s to add a crude automobile deck, the ferry service remained unequal to the new breed of motoring tourists. According to the second annual report of the newly formed tourist association, 2,100 cars crossed to Prince Edward Island in 1925, compared to only 800 in 1923. Of the estimated 47,000 passengers, 11,000 were considered *bona fide* tourists, and some hopeful math put their expenditures at \$825,000.<sup>35</sup> As with so many statistics bandied about with reference to the Island’s tourist trade over the years, any estimates of numbers of passengers/tourists or their spending must be taken with a large grain of (sea) salt; yet things such as crossings and vehicles could be and were counted, and these figures highlighted unmistakable trends. The number of autos ferried on the Tormentine-Borden run continued to rise by 1,000 cars per year.<sup>36</sup> There were now two daily crossings to Prince Edward Island from Tormentine in summer instead of one, and boards of trade were pressing for a third.<sup>37</sup>

Still, it was not enough. Even in the late 1920s, tourism boosters were registering complaints from would-be tourists that freight continued to be given preference over their automobiles on the Tormentine-Borden ferry.<sup>38</sup> Judge Arsenault of the Tourist Association predicted that soon 200 cars per day would be seeking passage to Prince Edward Island, and the current ferry simply could not handle them.<sup>39</sup> As J. O. Hyndman had pointed out in a brief to Canadian National Railway officials in January 1926, inadequate transportation links meant that the Island “is deprived from participation in the full development of the Tourist traffic.” What was needed, he urged, was a second ferry, one “so constructed that automobiles will be able to run on and off the ferry under their own power.”<sup>40</sup> The *S.S. Prince Edward Island* had been in service for less than a decade. Already, it was obsolete.

Recommended by the Duncan Commission in 1926, budgeted in 1928, vetted by Island business interests, the *S.S. Charlottetown* was finally launched in 1931. Slightly larger and slightly faster than its predecessor, it had been designed to carry up to 19 railcars and 50 passenger automobiles.<sup>41</sup> The advent of the *Charlottetown*

34 PARO 3147/2, Quarterly Meeting, Charlottetown Board of Trade, July 10, 1918.

35 PARO 4135/21, A. E. Arsenault Fonds, Annual Report of the PEI Publicity Association, December 31, 1925. In comparison, rail passenger traffic was up 25 per cent over the previous two years. A considerably smaller number of autos, again carried as freight, reached the Island via the daily Charlottetown to Pictou steamship service.

36 PARO 4135/21, A. E. Arsenault Fonds, Annual Report, Prince Edward Island Publicity Association, January 1929, p. 3.

37 See, for example, PARO 3147/6, Council Minutes, Charlottetown Board of Trade, January 27, 1926.

38 PARO 4135/21, A. E. Arsenault Fonds, President, Charlottetown Board of Trade, to A. E. Arsenault, February 12, 1927.

39 PARO 4135/21, A. E. Arsenault Fonds, Annual Report, Prince Edward Island Publicity Association, January 1929, p. 3.

40 PARO 3147/6, Council Minutes, Charlottetown Board of Trade, January 27, 1926. Calls for a new railcar ferry had begun as early as 1921, but, at that point, the priority was to ensure that freight could be moved should something happen to the *Prince Edward Island*. See Cullen, “The Transportation Issue,” 257.

41 “New Car Ferry Latest Word in Icebreakers,” Charlottetown *Guardian*, May 14, 1931, p. 1. See, too, PARO

was a tipping point. While rail traffic remained important, particularly for shippers, the automobile had become the driver for Island tourism. With the new ferry in service and the *Prince Edward Island* in reserve, the question for those interested in marine transportation shifted for a time from vessel capacity to the frequency and cost of the crossings. When the daily double crossing was cancelled in 1934, the local Board of Trade again charged breach of Confederation.<sup>42</sup> Meanwhile, stubborn lobbying by the Tourist Association during the worst years of the Depression ground down the round-trip fare at Borden from \$7 to \$5 and then \$3. Auto traffic continued to climb by 15 to 20 per cent per year. In 1941, 8,742 cars trundled off the ferry in Borden. Of their 40,000 auto passengers, “at least half” were thought to be tourists.<sup>43</sup>

By then another tourist route to Prince Edward Island had opened, launching a whole new train of expectation, frustration, and possibility. Prince Edward Island’s various boards of trade and its Tourist Association had always worked closely with their federal representatives and the provincial government in the quest for Ottawa’s consideration, conferring regularly and frequently coordinating their political lobbies on marine transportation issues. That political lobby in 1937 yielded a federal commitment to construct docking facilities for a new, privately owned ferry service that would shuttle between Wood Islands, in southeastern Queen’s County, and Caribou, Nova Scotia, during navigation season (roughly May to December). Northumberland Ferries Ltd., an Island-owned company headed by a grocery wholesaler named R. E. Mutch, eventually won the contract to operate the service. War played havoc with its efforts to acquire a vessel, but at last, in June 1941, the company launched its service in a makeshift little boat, re-christened the *M.V Prince Nova*.<sup>44</sup> Its arrival was timely. Only a week earlier, the *S.S. Charlottetown* had been wrecked on the South Shore of Nova Scotia on her way to Saint John for refit, throwing the Borden-Tormentine crossing into turmoil and forcing the now venerable *Prince Edward Island* out of genteel semi-retirement.<sup>45</sup>

Although the carrying capacity of the Wood Islands ferry was minuscule, it managed to move a reputed 25,000 people and 6,500 vehicles during its first, truncated season. By 1946, those figures had doubled, straining capacity to the limit and creating purgatorial delays for travellers.<sup>46</sup> Traffic across both ends of the Northumberland Strait continued to burgeon during the war years. Quoting the Island’s bellicose premier, J. Walter Jones, R. E. Mutch asked the Charlottetown

3147/6, Council Minutes, Charlottetown Board of Trade, October 24, 1928.

42 PARO 3147/3, Quarterly Meeting, Charlottetown Board of Trade, October 11, 1933.

43 LAC, RG 12-A-1, vol. 4236, file 3658-11, Canadian Travel Bureau Fonds, B. Graham Rogers, Supervisor, Prince Edward Island Travel Bureau, to Leo Dolan, Canadian Travel Bureau, Ottawa, September 17, 1941.

44 See Marian Bruce, *Saltwater Road: Tales of Travel on the Northumberland Strait* (Wood Islands, PEI: Wood Islands and Area Development Corp., 2014), pp. 24-43, 48-52.

45 “Ferry Steamer Charlottetown Sinks Off N.S.,” *Charlottetown Guardian*, June 20, 1941, p. 1. See, too, Boyde Beck, *Prince Edward Island, An (Un)Authorized History* (Charlottetown: Acorn Press, 1996), pp. 161-163.

46 These figures were 53,706 and 12,825, respectively. They were supplied to the Board of Trade by Graham Rogers, the Province’s Director of Transportation (PARO 3147/9). See also PARO 3147/3, the Board Minutes for November 5, 1946.

Board of Trade to endorse the idea of hourly sailings, day and night, at Wood Islands.<sup>47</sup> He had to settle for five per day.<sup>48</sup>

Even as it decried Northumberland Ferries' incapacity, the Charlottetown Board of Trade amplified the provincial government's repeated demands for a new, all-season ferry at Borden to replace the lost *Charlottetown*.<sup>49</sup> For several years, war priorities trumped civilian needs, but by 1945 the design of a new ferry was taking shape, "the best that science could produce."<sup>50</sup> On August 8, 1947, the Island finally welcomed Canadian National Railway's new vessel, the *M.V. Abegweit*. As with its predecessor, the *Abegweit* was said to be the largest, most powerful ice-breaking ferry in the world. Its arrival in Hillsborough Bay merited a whole special section of the Charlottetown *Guardian*. "The new Ferry will attract thousands of visitors," predicted Premier Jones in his own congratulatory message, "especially from the United States.... In so doing these visitors will want to enjoy a sail on the 'Abegweit' and hence will visit our communities in increasing numbers."<sup>51</sup> Whether or not visitors might be drawn by the new ferry, locals certainly were. When the *Abegweit* held an open house at Charlottetown that Sunday, an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 Islanders showed up to tour the vessel.<sup>52</sup> Transportation, it was clear, had become the key to Prince Edward Island's postwar reconstruction.

### "Gulls and Everything!"

In the summer of 1955, David Macdonald of Toronto returned to his native province after an absence of 34 years. Carefully adjusting his rose-coloured glasses, he was delighted to find that so little had changed in "Canada's 'Garden of Eden,'" which continued to be "'in the world but not of it.'" The reason, he felt, was its islandness. "Indeed, the Strait of Northumberland, like a mighty moat, has rendered the red shores of P.E.I. inassailable to the pernicious forces that have so easily rendered so much of the 'outside world' to the debris of inhuman automatism and loss of human dignity and respect for the individual as a person."<sup>53</sup> Not only had Macdonald hit upon the key to the Island's tourist appeal as an anti-modern mecca,<sup>54</sup> but also, he had identified the biggest single obstacle to exploiting it: how to breach the moat that insulated the Island from paying tourists as well as change.

As in the past, the main issue continued to be the marine crossing to Prince Edward Island, and provincial politicians and boards of trade continued to worry

47 PARO 3147/3, Annual General Meeting, Charlottetown Board of Trade, January 26, 1944.

48 See Charlottetown *Guardian*, August 8, 1947, Section 2, p. 10.

49 For evidence of behind-the-scenes coordination between the local business lobby and the provincial government, see Minutes of Charlottetown Board of Trade, November 6, 1941; March 9, 1942; April 14, 1943; January 26, 1944; and April 10, 1945.

50 According to a letter from the federal Minister of Transport. See PARO 3147/3, Quarterly Meeting, Charlottetown Board of Trade, April 14, 1943.

51 J. Walter Jones, "What the Arrival of the M.V. 'Abegweit' Means to the Province of Prince Edward Island," Charlottetown *Guardian*, August 8, 1947, section 2, p. 7.

52 "Thousands View 'Abegweit'; C.N.R. Accepts Ship," Charlottetown *Guardian*, August 11, 1947, p. 1.

53 David Macdonald to Editor, Charlottetown *Guardian*, September 23, 1955.

54 See Edward MacDonald, "A Landscape ... with Figures: Tourism and Environment on Prince Edward Island" in Claire Campbell and Robert Summerby-Murray, eds., *Land and Sea: Environmental History in Atlantic Canada* (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 2013), pp. 61-77; MacEachern, "No Island Is an Island," pp. 111-113.



at it with terrier-like tenacity, pressing Ottawa to provide more and larger ferries, better facilities at the modestly appointed terminals, and asphalt for approach roads. Although freight traffic had doubled in the decade between 1938 and 1948, there was less and less talk of train schedules and freight cars and more and more about truck traffic—and tourists. When the Turgeon Commission on Transportation convened in Charlottetown in July 1949, the Prince Edward Island Boards of Trade and the provincial government collaborated on their respective briefs.<sup>55</sup> Both hammered at the need for a second “auxiliary ferry” at Borden to supplement the *Abegweit* in summer. It was, the Boards of Trade asserted, “essential to the satisfactory development of all our industries, particularly the tourist industry.” Their brief continued, “It is well known that a large percentage of American and Canadian tourists, desirous of holidaying in this Province, abandon their plans and turn elsewhere when, before reaching Prince Edward Island, they learn of the uncertainties incident to their crossing, or have the misfortune to actually encounter these vexatious delays.” Yet tourism might potentially become “a third great industry,” after farming and fishing: “Given adequate transportation facilities, our very isolation, which is such a handicap to us in the development of other industries, can become an asset in relation to the tourist business.”<sup>56</sup> In a telling shift of emphasis, the brief specified that the proposed new summer ferry need not carry railcars.

Many postwar Islanders might still have agreed with the 1930s-era MLA who continued to equate the tourism industry with expatriate Islanders. “Tourism! Tourism!” he scoffed in the Island legislature. “What good are tourists anyway? They bring home an old shirt, and then they go back to the States with all your strawberry jam!”<sup>57</sup> But the face of tourism was changing, and the tourist lobby was growing in strength. In January 1940, after two decades as the Prince Edward Island Tourist Association’s main funder, the provincial government finally took over the Association’s Travel Bureau and lodged it under the Provincial Secretary’s Office.<sup>58</sup> Without its principal function, the Tourist Association quietly lapsed, and private sector promotion of the tourism industry passed to the PEI Innkeepers’ Association, founded in 1946.<sup>59</sup> In 1958, recognizing the direction of its growth, it would re-brand itself as the Prince Edward Island Tourist Association.<sup>60</sup> Agriculture and fisheries might still dominate the Island economy, but, as Eugene Cullen, Minister of Industry and Natural Resources, reflected to the assembled innkeepers in 1954, there were “limits in this Province to most everything he could think of—except the future of our Tourist Industry.”<sup>61</sup>

55 PARO 3147/8-1, Council Minutes, Charlottetown Board of Trade, April 20, 1949.

56 University of Prince Edward Island, Robertson Library, PEI Collection, Submission by the Prince Edward Island Boards of Trade to the Royal Commission on Transportation, July 1949, pp. 2, 4.

57 Re-told in Bruce, *Saltwater Road*, p. 48.

58 “Address of Justice Arsenault on the Tourist Industry,” *Charlottetown Patriot* [May 1940]. The Travel Bureau was subsequently attached to the Department of Industry and Resources.

59 “PEI Innkeepers Association Holds Annual Meeting,” *Charlottetown Guardian*, June 28, 1947, p. 9.

60 PARO 98-004, Box 3, Tourism Industry Association of Prince Edward Island fonds, Directors’ Meeting, April 19, 1958.

61 PARO 98-004, Box 3, Tourism Industry Association of Prince Edward Island fonds, Minutes of Special General Meeting, March 16, 1954.

Put simply, the spectacular growth in postwar North American tourism was fuelled by more money, more leisure, and better roads. Automobile ownership soared, the work week shrank, disposable incomes expanded, and the state spent billions of dollars on highway construction.<sup>62</sup> As John Fisher, director of the Canadian Tourism Association, reminded his Island counterparts in 1958, “Nearly every worker gets an annual holiday with pay, and that holiday period is stretching from one week to two weeks to three weeks—not to mention all the special holidays in between.”<sup>63</sup> This conjunction of money in their pockets, time on their hands, and wheels beneath their feet unleashed a tidal wave of tourists on America.

Of course, the local industry’s future depended on finding ways to turn the tourist gaze towards Prince Edward Island. For decades print literature had promoted the Island as a “relaxing retreat from the modern world.”<sup>64</sup> Alan Field, the new head of the Canadian Government Tourist Bureau, was only preaching to the converted in 1959, when he told Island tourist operators, “One of the greatest motivating forces in travel is the desire to see and experience something different.” In the case of their province, he added, that “something” was the distinctive character that came from being an island.<sup>65</sup> And the clearest marker of coming to an island was the sea passage to it.

While promotional literature tendered practical advice about how to reach Prince Edward Island—blithely minimizing the distances involved—the postwar era’s promotional films made more of the journey itself—the short, safe voyage across the Strait on an ocean-sized vessel—as part of the tourist experience. Sometimes the sense of island arrival was implicit, as in *Seaside Holiday: Prince Edward Island National Park* (National Film Board, 1948) or *Holiday Island* (PEI Department of Tourist Development, 1967) or *Prince Edward Island: Come in from Away* (PEI Department of Tourism, 1976), with their lingering shots of approaching ferries (usually the queen of the Strait fleet, the *Abegweit*), which disgorge carloads of eager tourists. Sometimes it was overt. In the 1953 film *Abegweit* (quoted in the introduction), an “Island holiday” actually begins as the ferry leaves Cape Tormentine. The child-narrator of Canadian National Railway’s *Memo to Mom* (c.1963) is similarly rhapsodic: “From Montreal we took the Ocean Limited and our train went straight on board the *Abegweit*. Daddy says it’s one of the biggest ferries. It’s only nine miles across the Strait of Northumberland,

62 As described, for example, in Jakle, *The Tourist*, pp. 183-189. According to Leo Dolan of the Canadian Government Travel Bureau, 96 per cent of tourists coming to Canada by 1954 were travelling by automobile. See PARO 98-004, Box 3, Tourism Industry Association of Prince Edward Island fonds, Minutes of Special General Meeting, March 16, 1954.

63 PARO 98-004, Box 3, Tourism Industry Association of Prince Edward Island fonds, “Tourist Association Director Stresses Value of Industry,” undated newspaper clipping, May 1958.

64 Alan MacEachern, “The Landscapes of Tourism: Scenic Images in Prince Edward Island Tourism Literature,” in Edward MacDonald, Joshua MacFadyen, and Irene Novaczek, eds., *Time and a Place: An Environmental History of Prince Edward Island* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press), forthcoming.

65 PARO 98-004, Box 3, Tourism Industry Association of Prince Edward Island fonds, Semi-annual General Meeting, May 19, 1959, and “Tourists Seek New Angles” [Charlottetown *Patriot*, newspaper clipping], May 20, 1959.



but it's a real sea voyage, gulls and everything!"<sup>66</sup> The tropes are unmistakable: the Island is near and yet far; tinged with romance, yet prosaic; an adventure, but convenient.<sup>67</sup>

Was the tourist message received as sent? A pair of home movies made by tourists chronicling multiple holidays to Prince Edward Island in the 1950s and 1960s would suggest so. In both cases, each successive visit is announced by extended footage of the Northumberland Strait ferry.<sup>68</sup> The footage invariably shows the passage *to* Prince Edward Island, not from it.

In the end, the importance of a rite of passage in attracting visitors to Prince Edward Island can only be conjectured. That they came is incontrovertible. Tourism statistics for Prince Edward Island (as elsewhere in Canada) are notoriously unreliable, but they chart a remarkable arc of growth between the 1950s and the 1970s. The 11,000 tourists of 1924 had become 57,000 by 1949. In 1954, the number was 92,000. Six years later, when the estimate topped 208,000, the province belatedly established a Department of Tourist Development. A decade after that, in 1970, 572,000 tourists poured into the province.<sup>69</sup> Only a fraction of those travellers arrived by air.<sup>70</sup> The rest came by boat.

All through these postwar decades demand and supply played leapfrog at the ferry terminals on the mainland and the Island. Every improvement in transportation facilities only seemed to stoke tourist traffic, creating new traffic bottlenecks and triggering fresh calls for more ferries and more crossings.<sup>71</sup> In 1918, a single ferry had made 1,100 crossings to Borden. In 1942, with two ferry crossing points, the number was 3,900. Between 1965 and 1976, the combined number of round-trip ferry crossings at Borden and Wood Islands rose by 40 per

66 Copy in possession of Edward MacDonald. See also "Screenculture," Canadian Educational, Sponsored, and Industrial Film Archive, <http://www.screenculture.org/cesif/node/2265>.

67 Similarly, the 70-minute rail journey from Winnipeg to the town of Winnipeg Beach was widely regarded as part and parcel of the tourist experience of the beach resort as well as the necessary prerequisite for mass tourism. See Dale Barbour, *Winnipeg Beach: Leisure and Courtship in a Resort Town, 1900-1967* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2011), pp. 15, 19, 23-26, 34-35, 40.

68 DVD copies, personal collection of Edward MacDonald. The provenance of each set of films is incomplete. The first, "A Trip to Cable Head," was taken by an unidentified family, probably in the early 1950s. A copy of the second was provided by Katherine MacLeod of Alberton, PEI, in 2002, and spans the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s. For another example, see "Prince Edward Island (circa 1940s)," Prelinger Archives, Internet Archive, [https://archive.org/details/6381\\_HM\\_Prince\\_Edward\\_Island\\_01\\_00\\_47\\_14](https://archive.org/details/6381_HM_Prince_Edward_Island_01_00_47_14).

69 Statistics are culled from annual reports of the Department of Tourist Development and minutes of the Prince Edward Island Tourist Association and the Charlottetown Board of Trade.

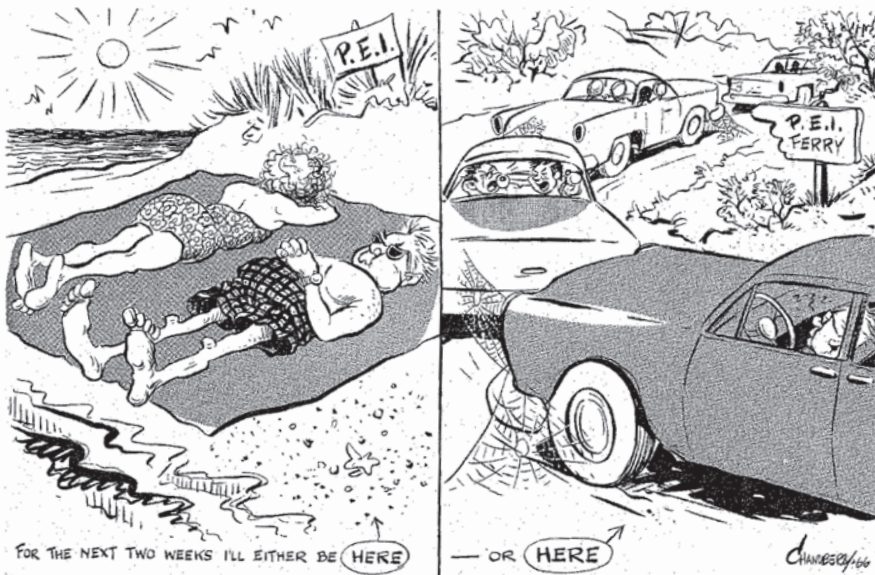
70 Statistics compiled from multiple provincial government departments put air traffic (both arriving and departing) at 24,620 in 1946 (with no attempt to single out tourist arrivals and excluding charters), climbing to an estimated 49,000 tourists by 1976, although changes in the multiplier used to calculate size of tourist parties reduced the number of tourist arrivals by air to only 29,000 for 1978. For overall air travel statistics from 1970 to 2000, see H. Spierenburg, comp., *Historical Statistics of Prince Edward Island* (Charlottetown: Department of Provincial Treasury, 2007), Table 10.01, [http://www.gov.pe.ca/photos/original/pt\\_historical.pdf](http://www.gov.pe.ca/photos/original/pt_historical.pdf).

71 See Cullen, "The Transportation Issue," pp. 259-262; Edward MacDonald, *If You're Stronghearted: Prince Edward Island in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Charlottetown: Prince Edward Island Museum and Heritage Foundation, 2000), pp. 244-245, 304-305. Transportation systems analysis has long sought to deal with the problem of induced demand. See J. J. Leeming, *Road Accidents: Prevent or Punish?* (London: Cassell, 1969).

cent, from 9,500 to 13,000. At Borden alone, the number of passengers rose 128 per cent between 1965 and 1985, to 1.6 million people per year.<sup>72</sup>

Still the marine transportation system could not keep up. As highway officials grimly noted in 1968, even eight to ten crossings daily did not seem to help with the daunting ferry line-ups at Wood Islands-Caribou. This situation was “consistent with the pattern established by both ferry services over the years, i.e. that each improvement in accommodation or operating schedules generates so much additional traffic that the ferry services appear to be losing ground in their efforts to reduce traffic lines and waiting periods to an acceptable level.”<sup>73</sup> Since the tendency was for tourists to arrive on the Island at Borden and depart from Wood Islands, the expected arrival of a new all-season railcar ferry, the *John Hamilton Gray*, also promised to make things even worse at Wood Islands, where a third ferry was urgently needed.

Newton’s first law of motion, as applied to bottlenecked tourist traffic, produced predictable reactions. Mrs. B. M. Bayne of Montreal was unusual only in that she wrote directly to the Island’s premier. “I would suggest,” she fumed, “that your intensive campaign to bring tourists to your gorgeous Island borders on the immoral when you do not warn people of the horrors of reaching and leaving it.”<sup>74</sup> Editorial cartoonist Bob Chambers of the Halifax *Chronicle-Herald* broadcast the



**Figure 3:** Bob Chambers cartoon from Halifax *Chronicle-Herald* (1966).

Source: Courtesy of the estate of the late Bob Chambers.

<sup>72</sup> David Hinks, “Prince Edward Island Transportation Systems,” Canadian Transportation Commission Research Branch, Directorate of Transport Industries Analysis, Report no. 20-77-7, July 1977; MacDonald, *If You’re Stronghearted*, p. 304.

<sup>73</sup> Annual Report, Prince Edward Island Department of Highways, 1968, p. 45.

<sup>74</sup> PARO RG 25.36, 1968-69/1090-4, A. B. Campbell fonds, Bayne to A. B. Campbell.

dilemma to a much larger audience. “For the next two weeks,” his cartoon caption reads, “I’ll either be here”—pointing to a couple sunbathing on a deserted beach signed “PEI”—“or here”—a ferry line-up so long and stationary that his car is festooned in cobwebs (see Figure 3).<sup>75</sup>

As a stopgap measure to relieve congestion, a second-hand ferry, re-named the *L. M. Montgomery*, was acquired in 1969.<sup>76</sup> In 1971, two more “ro-ro”—roll-on/roll-off—ferries were commissioned, the *Holiday Island* and the *Vacationland*. These three vessels’ names reflected their purpose: to handle summer tourist traffic (see Figure 4). Despite the augmented fleet, ferry arrangements only approached adequate when visitor numbers began to flatten out in the mid-1970s. Finally, the 250-car capacity of a massive new ferry (like its iconic predecessor, christened the *Abegweit*), put an end to dolorously long ferry line-ups when it entered service in December 1982.<sup>77</sup> The escalating cost of replacing ferries helped direct Ottawa’s attention towards a different alternative for fulfilling its constitutional obligation to secure the rights of passage. That vision, in turn, cast the tourism merits of the crossing to Prince Edward Island in an entirely new light.



**Figure 4:** Beginning in 1962, “ro-ro”s – roll on, roll off ferries – were introduced for rapid loading and unloading. The names of the two so-called “hot dog” boats, *Vacationland* and *Holiday Island* (1971), reflected tourism’s dominance.

Source: Authors’ collection.

<sup>75</sup> Editorial cartoon from *Halifax Chronicle-Herald*, reproduced in Copthorne MacDonald, *Bridging the Strait: The Story of the Confederation Bridge Project* (Toronto: Dundurn, 1997), p. 40.

<sup>76</sup> PARO 98-004, Box 3, Tourism Industry Association of Prince Edward Island fonds, “New Ferry Purchased for Borden Operation,” *Charlottetown Guardian*, January 23, 1969.

<sup>77</sup> John Edward Belliveau, Silver Donald Cameron, and Michael Harrington, *From Iceboats to Superferries: An Illustrated History of Marine Atlantic* (St. John’s, NL: Breakwater Books, 1992), pp. 87-93.

### A Bridging Narrative

One summer day in the late 1950s, Nova Scotia's most influential travel writer, Will Bird, took the ferry to Prince Edward Island.<sup>78</sup> To pass the time he eavesdropped on conversations. "Two men sat near us," he later recounted, "and they began to argue rather loudly about the good old days, and the present. One claimed that when fox farming was at its peak the Island had the best times it would ever know. The other declared that when a Causeway was built travel to the Island would double and it would become the greatest vacation land in the east."<sup>79</sup>

Talk about some sort of fixed link to Prince Edward Island was nothing new. Islanders' hunger for one, though, historically mattered far less than Ottawa's lack of appetite. By the mid-1980s, the federal attitude had undergone a sea-change. Anxious to cut costs, keen to promote a mega-project in the region, and philosophically inclined towards privatization, the Conservative government of Brian Mulroney made it clear that a fixed link would be forthcoming—if Islanders wanted one. The resulting plebiscite campaign and subsequent environmental assessment phase, spanning the late 1980s to early 1990s, engendered fierce debate about the physical, economic, social, cultural, environmental, and even metaphysical merits of fixed crossings versus marine ferries.<sup>80</sup>

Tourism was a principal driver in the pro-Link lobby, most visibly embodied in the group "Islanders for a Better Tomorrow."<sup>81</sup> But even opponents, who rallied around the anti-Link alliance called "Friends of the Island," played the tourism card. For example, whether or not an island could still be considered an island once tethered to the Mainland raised tacit questions of uniqueness.<sup>82</sup> Then there was the crossing itself. "I think it could be sold as one of the modern wonders of the world," Tom McMillan, Island MP and federal Minister of the Environment, told a CBC documentary. "It could enhance the Island's attractiveness as an island and could be a tourist attraction."<sup>83</sup> The Island's Tourism Industry Association concurred. Surveys showed, it claimed, that "the ferries were a deterrent to coming to the Island."<sup>84</sup>

Marine Atlantic vigorously disagreed. It cited exit surveys done by the provincial Department of Tourism and Parks to argue that 70 per cent of respondents felt the ferry ride was actually one of the Island's attractions.<sup>85</sup> "Our PEI ferries are much more than simply passive vehicles which take tourists from one shore to another," it argued. "The ships themselves and their nine-mile voyage across a body of salt

78 Bird figures largely in Ian McKay and Robin Bates, *In the Province of History: The Making of the Public Past in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010).

79 Will R. Bird, *These Are the Maritimes* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1959), p. 192.

80 See MacDonald, "Bridge Over Troubled Water."

81 See, for example, Martin Dorrell, "The Media and the Fixed Link" in Lorraine Begley, ed., *Crossing that Bridge: A Critical Look at the PEI Fixed Link* (Charlottetown: Ragweed Press, 1993), pp. 136-145.

82 For example, "Time for a Causeway?" *Charlottetown Patriot*, April 3, 1985, p. 4.

83 Dorrell, "The Media," p. 136.

84 "Fixed Link Main Concern for TIAPEI," *Charlottetown Guardian*, March 4, 1987.

85 "Marine Atlantic Brief," *Environmental Assessment Panel Reviewing the Northumberland Strait Project: Compilation of Submissions...*, vol. 2 (Charlottetown: Queen's Printer, 1990). It was not alone. "Coming to the island by ferry is part of coming to the island," Dorothy Marks of Montague told *Summerside's Journal-Pioneer* in 1987, "and a crossing will certainly destroy something unique to the island." See "The PEI-NB Fixed Link: Will It Ever Become a Reality?" *Journal-Pioneer*, November 17, 1987.

water offer visitors a suitably brief nautical experience—a unique experience for many people—that occupies a prominent place in the total package that makes a vacation in our province so enjoyable.” Of course, Marine Atlantic was hardly an objective observer; since 1986 the Crown corporation had been responsible for the ferry service between Borden and Tormentine.

In the end, the fixed link went forward, a billion-dollar private sector project guaranteed by federal subsidies, and, in May 1997, the Confederation Bridge opened with more fanfare than had accompanied the launch of any Northumberland Strait ferry. In the short term, tourism numbers spiked, topping a million visitors for the first time, before flat-lining once more.<sup>86</sup> Both critics and proponents felt vindicated.

### “Once Upon a Time ...”

The crossing between Cape Jourimain, New Brunswick, and Borden, Prince Edward Island, now bridge instead of boat, remains what it has been since 1917: the principal point of entry for travellers crossing to the Island. It represents a culmination of sorts. What had begun in the nineteenth century as a protest about moving freight across the icy winter Strait had developed into an argument about trans-Strait rail connections, then become a crusade to move as many people as quickly as possible into “Holiday Island.” Finally, the debate over a fixed link had forced thousands of Islanders to consider how the Northumberland Strait—and the act of crossing it—defined them as a tourist destination. In the end, the “rights of passage” would seem to have trumped the “rites of passage.” The Confederation Bridge is undeniably convenient, but the drive over it is underwhelming. Some might even say boring. The bridge’s purposely high guard rails block the view from most vehicles.

Of course, it is still possible for tourists to reach the Island by sea. It takes something over an hour to sail from Caribou, Nova Scotia, to Wood Islands—not including potential line-ups at the terminal. In 2013, 366,000 passengers travelled on the ferry. After the initial post-Bridge decline by about a third, passenger numbers have held steady for the past decade or so.<sup>87</sup> Judging from the number of YouTube videos that show it, the marine passage retains a certain cachet.<sup>88</sup> Northumberland Ferries evidently thinks so. In a recent video advertisement, viewers have the ferry virtually to themselves as the camera plays over its decks and pans to sea and sky. “Once upon a time,” the narrator intones, “the ferry was the only way to visit Prince Edward Island. Some say ... it still is.”<sup>89</sup>

86 Godfrey Baldacchino and Annie Spears, “The Bridge Effect: A Tentative Score Sheet for Prince Edward Island” in Baldacchino, ed., *Bridging Islands*, pp. 47-66.

87 *Province of Prince Edward Island Twentieth-Six Annual Statistical Review, 1999* (Charlottetown: PEI Statistics Bureau, 2000), p. 61. By contrast, 1.47 million vehicles took the Confederation Bridge in 2013, 41 per cent of them in the prime tourist months of July and August. As for the ferry totals, the number of vehicles has actually declined by 8 per cent since 1999. See *Province of Prince Edward Island Twentieth-Six Annual Statistical Review*, p.61; *Province of Prince Edward Island Fortieth Annual Statistical Review, 2012* (Charlottetown: PEI Statistics Bureau, 2014), p. 92, [http://www.gov.pe.ca/photos/original/pt\\_annualreview.pdf](http://www.gov.pe.ca/photos/original/pt_annualreview.pdf).

88 A random survey in August 2014 turned up 57, some 50 of them evidently amateur in origin.

89 “Northumberland Ferries – Ferry Tale,” Northumberland Ferries Ltd., September 1, 2014, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=n-dPVvipVU0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n-dPVvipVU0).