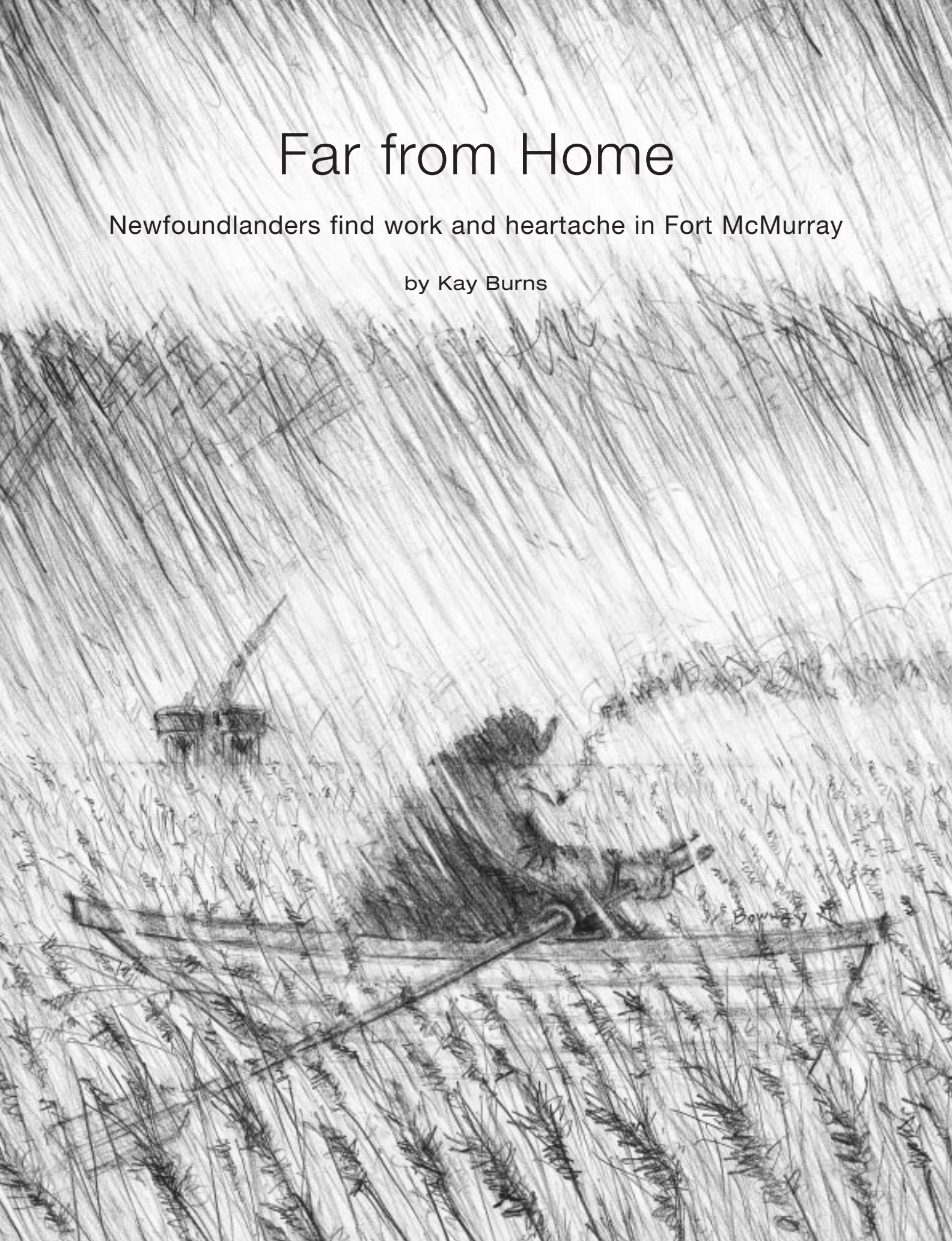


Far from Home

Newfoundlanders find work and heartache in Fort McMurray

by Kay Burns



After four more years of struggling to make ends meet, my husband and I decided to move west to Fort McMurray and try to build a future. I will never forget the last morning I woke up in my house. You see, I had this ritual where I would get up in the morning, look in at the kids and make my way to the living room to open the blinds. Every day, through my window, I paused to look across the bay at the beautiful mountains that stood tall and majestic just over there. On a calm morning, the water was like a mirror and the reflection of the pinnacles can only be described as breathtaking. Sometimes in the summer, the reflection would be disturbed by a humpback whale feeding on some capelin or squid or Uncle Somebody's boat breaking the water to head out the bay and try for cod. It seemed no matter how many hundreds of mornings I did this, I knew this would be the thing I would miss the most....

We arrived in Fort McMurray a little stressed and tired but in one piece. The first morning I woke up in our place, I made my way down the stairs to the patio doors that served as our living room window. There were no mountains or ocean. No whales and no Uncle Somebody in his boat. There was a fence, a road, houses and some trees. I knew life here would never be like home. I knew I would never look at anything in amazement, and I knew it would be a long time before I ever felt that same feeling of peace again.

—CATHY, A DISPLACED NEWFOUNDLANDER

Anyone who has moved away from a place they were fond of knows this feeling of displacement—a homesickness for the place left behind, no matter how eagerly the new home was anticipated. Fort McMurray, with its abundant oil sands employment opportunities, has become a new home for many. While it has attracted immigrants from around the world, a significant proportion have come from Newfoundland.

Luther Bowers left his hometown of Pacquet, Newfoundland, to find work, and after stints in Jasper and the Yukon he ended up in Fort McMurray. "I didn't leave [Newfoundland] because I wanted to," he says, "I left kicking and screaming." Like many Newfoundlanders in Fort McMurray, Bowers says he's glad to have work, but he'd move back home in a minute if there were jobs.

Most Newfoundlanders who move to Fort McMurray know someone who's already working there—a cousin, an uncle or an aunt who reported back to family at home, "Hey, there's lots of work here—why don't you come." The large community perpetuates itself and generates a sense of home away from home. Doug Faulkner, the mayor of Fort McMurray, came from Newfoundland in 1980 after his cousin told him about the job opportunities. Faulkner claims Newfoundlanders are the "most resilient people in the world and bounce right back.... They go wherever they can find work and feel at

home, and a lot of them feel much at home here." Faulkner says that somewhere between 13,000 and 18,000 Newfoundlanders live in Fort McMurray—about a third of the population. "We have a saying here, a joke here, that we're Newfoundland's third largest city."

NEWFOUNDLAND HAS A LONG HISTORY of displacement. Around 1000 AD, Viking settlers arrived on the island and set up homes that they vacated a few years later. British and European fishermen built summer dwellings in the 1500s, and less than 200 years later the British began establishing permanent settlements. (As the British population grew, the native Beothuk population declined, eventually to extinction.)

In more recent times, a controversial resettlement program implemented in the 1950s and 60s by then-premier Joey Smallwood resulted in the moving of homes and people from isolated outport villages to more densely populated communities. That moment in Newfoundland's history is hauntingly recorded in photos and TV documentaries. One striking archival photograph shows three children standing on the shore watching their home being towed across the water.

Newfoundland's distinctive history defines its people and is embedded in their literature, food and music. They share a love of the sea, an ability to endure hardship, and a relaxed, fun-loving, gentle and hospitable spirit.

NEWFOUNDLANDERS IN FORT MCMURRAY have almost identical answers about what they miss from home. First, they miss family. "It took me almost three years to get used to being away from Newfoundland," says a cook at the Newfoundland Club. "And even to this day when I talk to my mom on the phone I get lonely for Newfoundland." Second, they miss the ocean. Paulette Dobbin, the president of the McMurray Newfoundland Club sums this up: "I miss the ocean, I really miss the salt water. When I go home, that's the first thing I do—take a walk along the waterfront and breathe in the salt air."

But there is also a deeper sense of longing for a way of life left behind. Tana Adams, from Robert's Arm, Newfoundland, writes a weekly column called "From the

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Rock" for the *Fort McMurray Today* newspaper. She says, "Newfoundland represents a feeling. A lot of Newfoundlanders have this feeling in their gut—a sense of longing, of homesickness to a way of life, things we took for granted when we were growing up."

This feeling is especially strong among those who have children. Luther Bowers wrote a letter to Newfoundland's *Downhomer* magazine expressing concern about his two-year-old son. "If he does grow up here [in Fort McMurray], I can't help but think of how different it will be compared to how I grew up. The peace and quiet of small-town Newfoundland, playing around the beaches, ice pans and 'badicators,' playing hockey on the frozen harbour, mummering at Christmas, and in summer, swimming over in the brook, out in the boat for a jig, fish 'n' brews on the rocks, and being awed by huge icebergs as they drift by and sometimes 'founder' with a thunderous noise, much to our delight. I know we can bring him back and show him some of these things, but you can't have the same appreciation and feeling if you didn't grow up with them." Many Newfoundlanders speak of this kind of creative outdoor play and freedom that they remember from their childhood in Newfoundland outports. Their children in Fort McMurray play in designated parks or organized sports and spend many hours in front of the TV.

For many, though, Alberta has become home in spite of the longing they feel for Newfoundland. Those who have been in Alberta for 20 years or more, whose children—and even grandchildren—have grown up in Alberta, no longer think about returning to Newfoundland; the presence of family makes Alberta home for them now. "The oddest thing is when your children grow up, they are Albertans," says Catherine

Davis-Herbert, an education instructor at Keyano College. "They do not think of themselves as being Newfoundlanders. Newfoundland might be a place they visit occasionally, but they are Albertans."

Newfoundlanders have also made Fort McMurray feel like home. In the city's grocery stores, you can buy cod tongues and Purity biscuits. Cable TV offers Newfoundland Television. There are two "Mary Brown's Chicken" franchises. You can walk into almost any store or business and hear someone speaking with a Newfoundland accent. And the McMurray Newfoundland Club provides hospitable surroundings for Newfoundlanders (and guests) to gather for music and conversation.

NEARLY EVERYONE IN FORT MCMURRAY is from somewhere else; it seems the only true Fort McMurrayites are children and First Nations people. A worldwide recruitment by Syncrude (one of the city's two major employers) in the 1970s led to remarkable cultural diversity. Mike Rogers, an organization development adviser for Syncrude, says this diversity is great for children—the schools are like a "mini U.N."

The Newfoundlanders stand out, though, because of their numbers and their active involvement with the community at large. Rogers describes them as "culturally significant to this community." He says: "They are here as a presence and I think it's a positive presence. They are friendly, generous, fun-loving, caring people, and they have their own unique brand of humour. They have a culture from the island. They brought it with them, and they've maintained it." And they share this culture not just with other Newfoundlanders but with the whole community. According to Davis-Herbert, "People get involved, get networked in the community, through the sense of fun and positive outlook brought by the Newfoundlanders."

Kathy Fitzgerald, an instructor of Canadian and native studies at Keyano College, sees parallels between the Newfoundlanders and indigenous cultures. "It's very interesting," she says. "I've talked to some other people around [the college] and we find theirs is a very similar culture to the aboriginal culture. They have that same sense of family, and they bring nieces and nephews out here on spec to see if they can get jobs. They have that same kind of closeness."

Art history instructor Marie Leduc describes a kind of formal politeness of her college students. When she started teaching at Keyano, Leduc was surprised that the students called her "Miss." And it wasn't just the Newfoundland students: they seemed to have set the example that others then followed from elementary school through college.

MANY NEWFOUNDLANDERS BELIEVE their move to Fort McMurray will be temporary—a few years of good wages to help get them on their feet to set up a business or establish themselves more securely back home. Often, they find they can't save enough to move back. The wages

sound good, but much of their paycheques are consumed by the high cost of housing, food and other necessities. (A typical classified section of *Fort McMurray Today* shows a two-bedroom basement suite for \$1,095 a month; a three-bedroom townhouse for \$1,500; a bungalow for \$239,900—“Wow! What a bargain!”; and a 740-square-foot one-bedroom condo for \$116,500.)

Others hope their work experience in Fort McMurray will help them land a job in Newfoundland. Lee Dehann, a young Newfoundlander, has been in Fort McMurray for only 10 months, and he’s already looking for a job back home. “I’m going home for a holiday, and when I go up there I’m going to check around Bull Arm and Come by Chance. They’ve got oil up there, and I’ve got a bit of experience at it. A lot of people recognize Syncrude. So hopefully when I get back there I can get a full-time job. Up here is not a long-term plan, hopefully. I’ll ride it out while I can. The ultimate goal is to go back home.”

But the economic future of Newfoundland remains uncertain, and it’s unlikely the oil industry there will become a sustaining force for the locals. According to

Calgary-based offshore oil analyst Ian Doig (creator of *Doig’s Digest*), oil companies are hesitant to embark on business projects in Newfoundland, because offshore pursuits are expensive, especially with the climate and iceberg-laden waters off the coast. The hope for new jobs that arose from Husky Oil’s and PetroCan’s decision to proceed with the White Rose offshore project was muted, as the decision came shortly after Chevron pulled out from the Hebron/Ben Nevis project. And White Rose anticipates employing only 1,000 people—a small number considering that Fort McMurray alone is home to more than ten times that many Newfoundlanders.

The classified columns in Newfoundland’s local papers have numerous advertisements for oil industry and service industry jobs in Alberta—strong encouragement for locals to leave. The long-term effects of the continuing employment exodus are unknown for Newfoundlanders at home and in Fort McMurray. Will they ever be able to return home? Will they retain their strong sense of identity and culture? Will a sense of displacement remain?

Fort McMurray has been good to us... I love my job and the people, and the money is really good. The knowledge and experience I have gained are going to be very beneficial for my future working in the oil industry, and I am very thankful. The children are another story. They just don’t like it here, and I don’t know if that will ever change. They miss the freedom of home... They miss being able to get on their bikes to go and visit their friends without having the riot act about strangers and traffic read to them before they go. It’s a different life for them. They spend a lot of time with the babysitter and the television... The cost of living is atrocious; we can barely make ends meet, so we have to work...

We live in hopes of being able to go back home someday, but for now it has to be a memory... The ocean is in our bones; I don’t think that will ever change. True happiness will come when we can look at it through the window again. This will never be home to me.

—CATHY, A DISPLACED NEWFOUNDLANDER



Murres at Fink Island, Newfoundland.

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