

# KNOWLEDGE AS VERB

*Working toward an encyclopedia of Newfoundland knowledge, Pam Hall recognizes the collaborative nature of understanding*

by **Maria Recchia**

Its origins and sources, its rich cast of characters, and its alternately quotidian and wildly adventurous plot can best be told the same way it has unfolded: layered in fragments and shards and revealing itself in moments of relation, encounter, and exchange.

—Pam Hall in *Towards an Encyclopedia of Local Knowledge: Excerpts from Chapters I and II*

**P**am Hall, a visual artist, documentary filmmaker and scholar who has lived and worked in Newfoundland for more than 40 years, has produced a stunning book honouring the people of rural Newfoundland and their wide-ranging expertise. *Towards an Encyclopedia of Local Knowledge* is not only a gorgeous art book, it is also a scholarly work on the nature of knowledge. Her insightful social commentary on our society's overreliance on scientific knowledge and marginalization of other kinds of knowing distinguishes this as a book about social change.

The *Encyclopedia* begins with 42 pages of text describing the author's creative research process and her discerning assessment of the power dynamics of knowledge in our society. Here she lays out a new relationship with knowledge documentation that is deeply respectful and holistic. Her work maintains the integrity of knowledge held by people in a place. Hall challenges mainstream society's treatment of science as sacred. She examines the power dynamics around knowledge and sets out to change them.

Both the introductory text and the *Encyclopedia* pages could stand alone. Hall's writing is as eloquent and compelling as her artwork. When I received this book in the mail, I first looked at the pictures. It includes nearly 150 pages of gorgeous plates,

collages of photographs, drawings and typed and handwritten text. Some of the images jump off the page as if three-dimensional. As I relished in the artwork, I got to know the people of Bonne Bay, the Great Northern Peninsula, Fogo Island and Change Islands. All 142 knowledge holders who participated in the project are listed at the beginning of the book, as collaborators who "shared their knowledge in person." This includes 14 children from Sacred Heart All-Grade School in Conche who became research assistants in the project. Hall's deep respect for her collaborators is rare among researchers. We meet her collaborators in the *Encyclopedia's* pages where they are often referred to by name: "What Lambert Kennedy Knows about how to build a longliner," "Uncle George Elliott's technique for making snow shoes," "Isabella Pilgrim's moose cutting skills," "Joe Reid's jams and jellies" etc.

With "encyclopedia" in the title, I expected something akin to the Britannica volumes I used to write school reports as a child. That is, pockets of general knowledge in alphabetical order with an exhaustive index to make sure you could find the morsel of information you required. But this book has no index and is organized geographically. Chapter I covers Bonne Bay and the Great Northern Peninsula and Chapter II is Fogo Island and Change Islands. With a page about knitting socks next to



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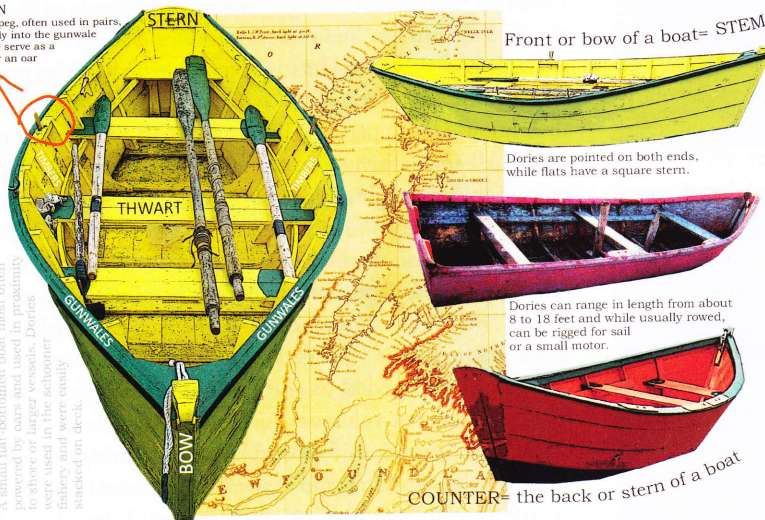
#### TOLE PIN

a wooden peg, often used in pairs, set vertically into the gunwale of a boat to serve as a fulcrum for an oar



#### DORY or FLAT

A small flat-bottomed boat most often powered by oars and used in proximity to shore or larger vessels. Dories were used in the schooner fishery and were easily stacked on deck.



a page about butchering moose next to a page about building a fishing boat, the *Encyclopedia* is not organized in a way that allows you to quickly locate information on a specific topic. Here one begins to see the political undercurrent of this work. The knowledge depicted in Hall's book is deeply imbedded in the people and the places that developed it and this is a radical approach.

The work is based on a definition of knowledge as a process, a verb. This dynamic definition of knowledge, along with a deeply collaborative documentation process, is a most valuable aspect of this work. The process is built upon genuine respect for people and places and the knowledge that emerges from the marriage of the two.

Not only a preservation tool for knowledge in danger of being forgotten, the *Encyclopedia* pages also depict undeniably modern concepts like how to read the electronics on the bridge of a 60-ft dragger or processing and selling sea cucumbers to China. Other pages describe the marriage of old techniques with new materials like the story of Linda Osmond's husband Winston, a gardener who likes to try new things. When he grew kohlrabi in his garden Linda made it into pickles:

Just because it is an old recipe doesn't mean it will not work on new things. A pickle is still a pickle. I might not know about kohlrabi but I know about pickles.

Local knowledge, like scientific knowledge, is not an island in time. It is based on generations of observations that are passed down from grandparents to parents to children, from neighbour to neighbour, from business partner to business partner. Just as scientific knowledge is based on the careful work of past scientists, local knowledge is based on the observations and theories of previous generations and ingenuity.

Clearly the impetus behind many of the *Encyclopedia's* pages is to preserve knowledge that is in danger of being lost, as



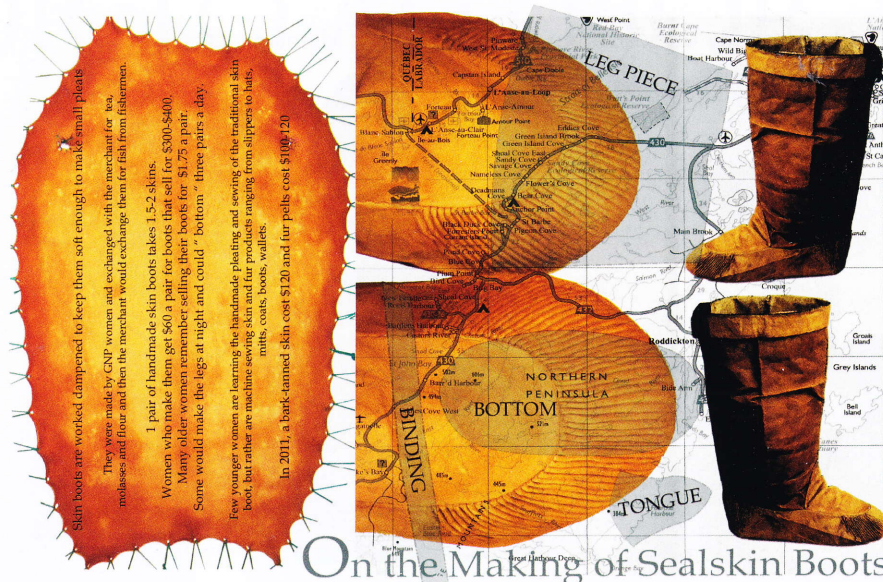
evidenced by the many pages dedicated to wooden-boat-building techniques. But also there are many examples of the resurgence of traditional craft to fill a modern need. On Fogo Island, historic wooden-boat-building techniques are used to create chairs for a luxury inn. Similarly, throughout Newfoundland interest is resurging in traditional low-impact fishing techniques like cod traps and hook-and-line gear to ensure a sustainable harvest as the cod stocks return. And state-of-the-art fish processing is being developed to provide a profitable high-quality product to get the most from a limited resource.

The value local knowledge brings to our society is unequivocal. Science alone is unlikely to adequately solve today's environmental problems without the knowledge of the grassroots. In a time of constant worry about climate change, the page about Derek Young's 30-year daily weather calendar is a tremendous opportunity to study environmental change. What may seem a mundane endeavour becomes a rare and invaluable resource to help understand what the future may hold. As Hall writes:

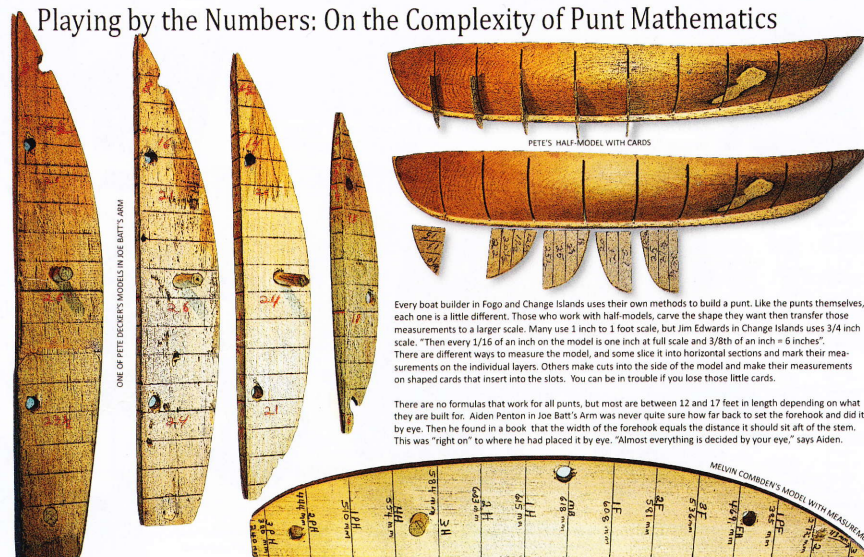
We have privileged the quantitative, the data-driven, and the statistical forms of knowledge to a dangerous degree—one that erases the qualitative, the embodied, the value-laden, and many individual and cultural ways of knowing that form and inform our embedded relationship within our now endangered ecosystems.

When society values scientific knowledge above all else, not only does it sideline other types of knowledge, it also sidelines people. I see this over and over again in my work with commercial fishermen who are rarely treated as the experts that they are. Local knowledge is often taken from people and removed from place. Usually it is mapped or listed in a very reductionist way and used by government agencies to make decisions on behalf of the fishing communities.

By proposing that knowledge is most



## Playing by the Numbers: On the Complexity of Punt Mathematics



Historic Halifax  
Streetscapes  
then and now  
three walking tours, v.1



## Halifax Historic Streetscapes then and now, three walking tours, v.1

Barbara DeLory—ISBN 9781895814514—\$14.95; e-book—\$9.95  
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## On Everyday Breadmaking and the Power of Memory



When Elsie had all 8 of her children at home she would make her bread every other day, since the 8-9 loaves she made would be gone by then. That bread disappeared fast with all the jam and jelly she made.

"IF YOU'RE EATING HOT BREAD  
YOU'RE EATING A LOT!"

Home-made bread is still a staple in rural Newfoundland— even when women no longer bake their own, it is widely available in stores provided by local and regional bakers. It is served with jam and jelly— and even with molasses— which was a traditional treat called bread and lassy. In some homes— the only staples that were bought from the merchant or the store was flour, salt, sugar and tea. Salt beef and salt pork were also purchased, but in some homes everything else provided by the household.

### TRIGGER MITT!



Rita Fillier in Main Brook and Mary Jane Simmonds in Conche both report that if they see something they like, they will "count it off" or just "go home and try it".

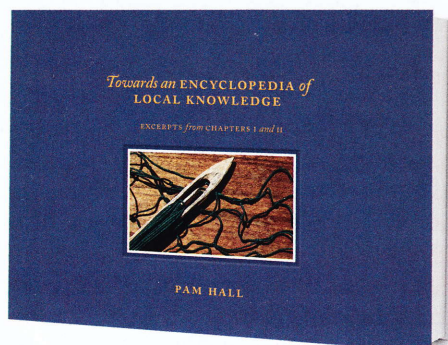
g in the woods or on the water easier.

n.



Elsie Howell in Norris Point often makes up "patterns" as a way to use up leftover bits of wool. She is at the handwork whenever she has a minute and knits mitts and socks for all her children and grandchildren. Her grandson yanked off his rubber boot to show me the socks his Nan knit. They are his favorite pair.

Knitting knowledge:  
what the hands remember



**Towards an Encyclopedia  
of Local Knowledge**  
 Pam Hall  
 Breakwater Books

valuable when the connection to people and place is maintained, Pam Hall's work calls for a different management model, one that involves preserving the integrity of the knowledge and knowledge holders. She envisions deeply democratic, transparent and collaborative decision-making—a change that is sorely needed.

*Towards an Encyclopedia of Local Knowledge* is a book to be savoured. It is not a quick reference book but rather the place to go to sense the wide breadth of knowing and the ever-evolving landscape of knowledge. It is a rare presentation that can bring this level of richness and depth to the outside world.

The knowledge captured here is imbedded not only in the places and people of today but in the people and places of old. It recognizes and celebrates the dynamic nature of local knowledge that is continuously forming and reforming as people interact with places and each other.

Even the democracy of visual images and written words cannot convey the totality of the knowledge to the outsider. It can never be more than excerpts. But this remarkable glimpse into the world of rural Newfoundland and the people who shape it gives the outsider a sense of the richness of life in this place. And it inspires us to value our own local knowledge; those things we know how to do, that our mother or grandmother or aunt or father taught us. ■

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