

Islands of Tension

Edgar Anderson

Recalling a visit he made to the Boston Harbor Islands one raw April day during the 1930s, a master observer realized some three decades later that, far from being the "Green Isles of Romance" people said they were, they were in fact "islands of tension" whose harshness challenged plants and people alike

"Islands of Tension," an essay written by Professor Edgar Anderson, was published in Landscape magazine in 1966 (Volume 15, Number 3, pages 7 and 8) and again in Landscape Papers (Berkeley, California: Turtle Island Foundation, 1976), a collection of articles by Anderson.

A native of New York State, Edgar Anderson (1897-1969) grew up in Michigan, graduating from Michigan State College in 1918. He then came to Harvard University to work toward his master and doctor of science degrees, which he received in 1920 and 1922, respectively. From 1931 to 1935, he served as arborist on the staff of the Arnold Arboretum; thereafter, he was affiliated with the Missouri Botanical Garden and Washington University in Saint Louis, soon becoming the Engelmann Professor of Botany in the latter institution. While in Boston during the 1930s he helped found the Herb Society of America with—to use his phrase—"a small group of Boston Back Bay dowagers," whom he called his "herb ladies." In 1935 he became the Society's president.

Known for his sharp eye and unconventional ways, Anderson was a prolific author and a most unorthodox but effective teacher. Much of his research dealt with the genetics and taxonomy of maize. Details of his long and productive career are given in the Annals of the Missouri Botanical Garden, Volume 59, Number 3 (1972).

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If you are on the staff of a botanical garden or arboretum you never know when you answer the telephone what the call may lead to. With no warning a phone call one April afternoon began, "Dr. Anderson, this is the War Department calling. Can you report at the government wharf in South Boston at eight o'clock tomorrow morning for the committee's official visit to the islands in Boston Harbor?" Most of these islands were under the control of the War Department, the Coast Guard or the City of Boston and joint tours of inspection were made from time to time.

Since erosion was becoming a serious problem, a committee

had been set up to study it and to inspect tree plantings made some years before. As a staff member of the Arnold Arboretum I was one of the experts added to the group. Since I first saw these islands, fifteen years before, they had fascinated me. I'd ridden repeatedly on all the ferries or excursion boats which then plied across the harbor and climbed all those promontories along its margin which were accessible to the public. When I became a member of the Harvard faculty I looked into the possibility of visiting such spots as Governor's Island, but gave up the idea when I learned that one needed the blessing of the War Department.

The first week in April is not

the best time for planning a visit to Boston Harbor. The snow may be gone but the air is raw. Lawns are just beginning to green up; nothing much is in flower but pussy willows. The next morning brought us all that Boston can hope for at that time of year. Though cool, with a steady breeze, it was cloudless all day, pleasantly warm wherever you could get in the sun and out of the wind.

It was a mixed group of about thirty men who met at the wharf. A few of them were well informed about the islands. One of these, Patrick J. Connelly, president of the Dorchester Board of Trade, was an authority on the islands and their complex histo-

ries. He had recently published an attractive pamphlet, *Islands of Boston Harbor, 1639-1932, Green Isles of Romance*.

After winding in and out among the islands we landed on the largest, Long Island, to inspect tree plantings made in about 1910. They had not been well cared for and the choice of trees had evidently been made without technical advice. They were common European species, easy to grow in nurseries but not the most promising things for bare little islands swept by cold winter winds and salt spray. Some trees had died. Those that remained were English oaks, European white birches, Scots pines, and Austrian pines, of which only the latter were in fair health.

Although farther out in the Atlantic, other trials on Gallop's Island looked more promising. As the most prominent island in the outer harbor it has been a quarantine station since pre-revolutionary times. A doctor at the Quarantine Hospital had been trying out likely trees and shrubs since about 1927 and some of these seemed to be doing well: Manchurian ash, Carolina poplar, privet, sorbaria, and Amur cork tree.

I was disappointed that apparently nowhere in the harbor had the Japanese seaside pine, *Pinus thunbergii*, been given a trial. By the time of this harbor tour it was

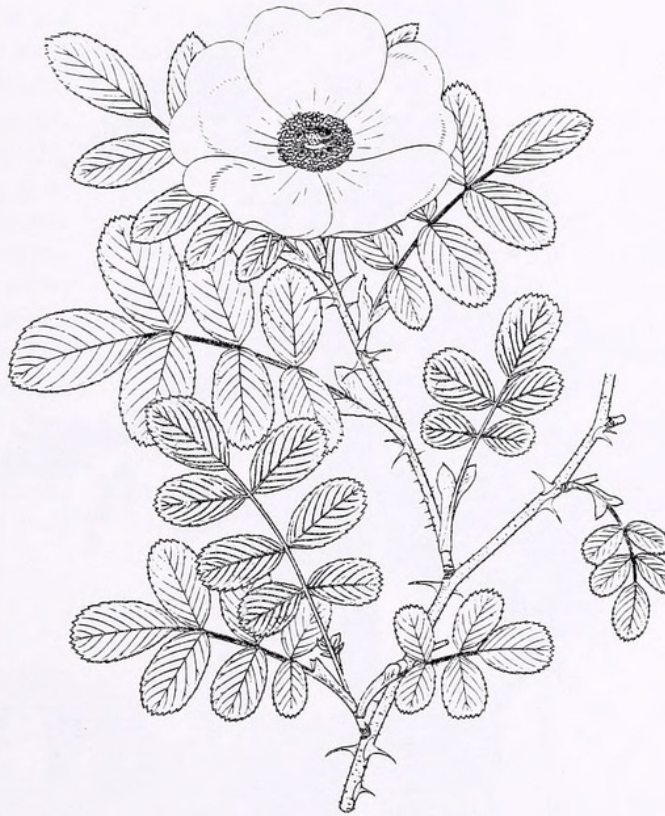
beginning to look promising at exposed oceanside locations in southern New England. Since then it has done spectacularly well at Jones Beach, and its peculiar merits are widely known along the East Coast. Long Island had been a kind of dumping

more earnest and vigorous members by narrow paths along the low cliffs above the beaches.

This route gave us an almost continuous view of the fore-shore. I was immediately struck by the great number of orange crates and unsightly rubbish in the zone of driftwood. Immediately above the orange crates were occasional low rosettes of an unusual rose, one of the [Arnold] Arboretum's Oriental introductions with which I was familiar, *Rosa rugosa* var. *kamtschatica*. It differs from the ordinary rugosas of our gardens by being generally smaller with a more spreading habit of growth. It had certainly not been planted there intentionally but was already of some importance in lessening erosion on the upper margin of the fore shores.* Its buoyant orange-red fruits had put down roots where they had been cast up by the high waves of winter storms. A month later I saw more of them along the magnificent beaches on the outer arm of Cape Cod, as well as a single specimen of the ordinary bushy *Rosa rugosa*.

From the technical literature I learn that the

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ROSA RUGOSA var. KAMTSCHATICA

Rosa rugosa var. *kamtschatica*, which Edgar Anderson recognized growing on the Boston Harbor Islands. From *Flora Sylvatica Koreana* by Takenoshin Nakai.

ground for the poor of Boston since 1885, and the plantings we inspected were near a cluster of hospitals, administrative buildings, and a fine new recreation center on a high bluff at its northern end. The schedule called for a tour of the whole island. Two of the officers led a half dozen of the

*Anderson seems to suggest that the Arnold Arboretum introduced *Rosa rugosa* var. *kamtschatica* into cultivation, but the Arboretum's records do not confirm this apparent claim. The first plants of that variety came into the Arboretum's collections in 1900, from Paris. By 1905, the species—*Rosa rugosa*—had escaped from cultivation in New England; by the time of Anderson's visit to the Boston Harbor islands (about 1932), it ranged from Nova Scotia to Cape Cod.

Kamtchatka rose was originally native to the same upper beach zone in the northern Orient. Now and then from an intensive flora of some New England island or estuary, I have learned that it is apparently still spreading along the northern coast of New England.

These scattered bits of information have more significance now that the whole problem of evolution on beaches is being rigorously and comprehensively studied by my former student J. D. Sauer, jointly Professor of Botany and Professor of Geography at the University of Wisconsin. In his world-wide analysis of tropical beach vegetation he is demonstrating that life on beaches is so rigorous that precious few species of the world's flora can persist there. The few that can take it have little competition so, in general, on sea beaches many individuals of a few species are spread over wide areas. Furthermore, now that Sauer has pursued these studies in both the Old World and the New, he is demonstrating for an increasing number of beach plants that when they find their way from one hemisphere to the other they fit into the same kinds of situations in their new home as they left in the old.

Though it was the general problem of eroding sea cliffs and

foreshores that had taken me to these islands, as our trip continued I became more and more impressed by the sociologically specialized environments of the human communities which shared these islands. The local and national needs the islands served fell in a few widely diverse categories. They regulated and

effectively with city parkways.

On Long Island we came upon a beach with a protecting cliff above it, where some of the inmates had built themselves little "clubhouses" out of driftwood and other scraps. They varied from crude hovels to weather-tight structures with chimneys and windows. What other reactions to the harbor's

peculiar environments would one find if he made a real study of the whole problem? There is a little to be gleaned from Mr. Connelly's eloquent compilation. Those living on these islands were under increasing and varied stringencies in the three hundred years covered by the booklet. The lighthouses, the quarantine stations, the military installations, the public parks, the institutions for unfortunates, the garbage disposal plants, had not only taken increasing space, they operated through different offices. It is bad enough to have your fate in the hands of a government bureau; it

is worse to have it decided by bureaus which may be at odds with each other and whose certainty of public support varies with the times.

One of the changes I wonder about is the effect of mass-produced pleasure boats of all kinds. On other shores I have witnessed



A one hundred-foot-tall specimen of Pinus thunbergii photographed in Japan by E. H. Wilson. Edgar Anderson "was disappointed" that this species had not been planted on the Boston Harbor islands, where, he thought, it would do well. From the Archives of the Arnold Arboretum.

protected maritime traffic. They served to isolate contagious diseases and social misfits. Their potential for recreation had been realized only at Castle Island and even there only when its ancient forts became obsolete (as well as increasingly picturesque) and filled land connected the island

their increasing effects not only upon human existence along water-fronts but the chemical and biological changes they bring to the beaches and the very water itself, as well as to the plant and animal communities within and near it. Since World War II speed boats must have brought complex problems to Boston Harbor and its islands.

The overall effect of such various and shifting pressures on human existence is even more violent than the stringencies reported for the plant communities of sea beaches by J. D. Sauer. The urgent and conflicting demands of national defense, protection and control of maritime traffic, waste disposal, recreational needs of a crowded city, isolation of contagious diseases and of social misfits are reflected in the human population of the islands.

A few details are reported in Connelly's booklet: after the old fort on Governor's Island had

been abandoned a squatter made his home in the ruins and his body was found there after his death. During King Philip's War (1675-1676) whole villages of captured Indians were confined on Deer Island and hundreds died there from starvation and exposure. The boys' reform school on Rainsford Island was abandoned after the boys cornered the Keeper down on the beach and stoned him to death. During the Civil War a whole group of Southern generals were confined in the military prison on George's Island. For many years a hermit lived in a hut on the southern shore of Slate Island. Before modern hospitals were available, Bostonians ill with contagious diseases were buried in the little cemetery near the Quarantine Hospital.

Even the plant communities reflect the violence of these various tensions. Just as ordinary sea-beaches are limited to many individuals of a few species, so on

these islands they may be restricted to even fewer. At the time of our visit, Governor's Island was covered by the most rampant thickets of poison ivy I have ever seen. The watchman's dog had died from repeated exposure to it. It seemed to be growing in practically pure stands. On two islands where summer homes or hospitals had been abandoned there were thickets of Staghorn Sumac. These were not accompanied by other woody plants as in ordinary beachside communities, but were solid masses of sumac.

Before our tour the islands of Boston Harbor had appealed to me, to use the phrase of Mr. Connelly's title, as "Isles of Romance." Since that day I have increasingly come to think of them as islands of tension, tensions so violent and so various that their interactions might profitably be studied in some detail.



Anderson, Edgar. 1988. "Islands of Tension." *Arnoldia* 48(3), 28–31.

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