

# THE LAST FISH TALE: THE FATE OF THE ATLANTIC

And Survival in Gloucester, America's Oldest Fishing Port and Most  
Original Town

Mark Kurlansky

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*The Last Fish Tale* by the prolific, multi-talented Mark Kurlansky is one of the books that geographers in New England should have on their bookshelves for a relaxing read at the end of the day. Born in Hartford, pacifist, food writer, sometime commercial fisherman and dock worker, newspaper foreign correspondent, author of novels, non-fiction and children's books, Kurlansky is most famous for a series of historical accounts of commodities and the people who exploit and use them. The progression includes *Cod: a Biography of the Fish* (1997), *The Basque History of the World* (1999), *Salt: a World History* (2000), *The Big Oyster: History on the Half Shell* (2002) (New York City gastronomy) and now *The Last Fish Tale: The Fate of the Atlantic and Survival in Gloucester, America's Oldest Fishing Port and Most Original Town*. This is not a methodical portrayal of four centuries of Gloucester's historical geography but a mélange of sad Gloucester stories and triumphant Gloucester fish tales embedded in themes that beg for further research. But strip away the lighthearted flavorful elements and the grim message of Kurlansky's body of work is loud and clear. The fertile Atlantic has been ecologically desertified and fishing communities on both its sides progressively reduced to a tenacious few.

To hold Kurlansky accountable for the tenets of geographical scholarship would be quite unfair but he has excellent geographical instincts and understanding of the nature of places and their interconnections. Both *Salt and Cod* were magisterial understandings of the importance of a resource in the daily life of Europeans and the flow of these resources between places. One might expect the story of Gloucester to be earmarked by leftovers from this research, but it is based on considerable archival research about Gloucester and its relationship to New England's coastal waters and the farther off fishing grounds on Georges Bank and the Grand Banks. The book is well illustrated by photographs and advertisements from various collections and by his own line drawings and interviews which yield the recipes with which the text is garnished. These sources contribute to the book's breezy anecdotal quality which sometimes masks the profound devotion of Gloucester to fishing, the cruel cost of this enterprise and the progressive overfishing of one fish species after another.

The book is organized chronologically, more or less, beginning with the forces shaping the

natural environment and ending with the contemporary assault of tourism profits on the fragile fishing economy. Nevertheless, each of the chapters represents a discernible and significant theme. But the themes are not tightly contained in time periods and Kurlansky is cavalier about where he puts his information so the book has a choppy and sometimes confusing quality.

After a prologue celebrating the Sicilian Festival of St. Peter with its parade and greasy pole walk competition, Kurlansky's short first three chapters deal routinely with the early settlement of Gloucester up to 1700. Perhaps the most significant event was the digging of the Cut, a short canal through the narrow neck of land just south of the town that joined Cape Ann to the mainland. Gloucester, Rockport, Dogtown and the rest of Cape Ann thus became an island. It is this feeling of separateness and distinctiveness that, for Kurlansky, defines Gloucester.

The fourth chapter addresses Gloucester's deep sense of community developed from the commitment to fishing. Sadly, the community was bound together by the frequent loss of life by the fishermen, especially in large numbers when the fleet was overtaken by storms. These fish stories are the city's folk lore.

Chapter 5 addresses the changing ethnicity of Gloucester, its evolution into an Irish, Scandinavian, Portuguese and Sicilian town. The Puritan Yankees were first infiltrated by Nova Scotians and Newfoundlanders of an Irish background who came to comprise the majority of the skippers by 1900. Overlapping that migration came the Portuguese from the Azores, initially as whalers. They established a neighborhood on Portuguese Hill that reminded them of home and dominated the fishing fleet until the 1950s. Fishing families from the northwestern coast of Sicily were by far the largest component of twentieth century migration. They settled on the Fort Peninsula, spoke dialects of Sicilian and are the most distinctive ethnic group today, being the last to cling to the fishing way of life. This chapter contains the essence of the character of Gloucester as all the distinct ethnic groups absorb Gloucester traditions and are bound together by the struggle with the sea. Of all the themes this is the one that most deserves further exploration in theses and monographs. Kurlansky's chapter would benefit from a detailed map of Gloucester harbor and landmarks to supplement his generic location maps of New England and of Cape Ann. Future research would require a systematic survey of Gloucester inhabitants today. The colorful anecdotes, many obtained while hanging out in Cafe Sicilia, suit Kurlansky's purpose only.

Chapter 6 broadens the view to briefly characterize Dogtown and Rockport, two other communities on Cape Ann. Dogtown, both wooded and swampy, featuring a pile of morainic boulders in its center, was settled at the beginning of the eighteenth century and progressively abandoned, giving rise to many gloomy and strange Gloucester stories. Rockport at Cape Ann's northern end had fishing, agriculture and granite quarrying to give it a different character from Gloucester. Its economy succumbed by the end of the nineteenth century to wealthy Bostonians and today it is a place of commuters, second homes and tourism. Painters came also. Chapter seven continues this theme and extends it to the famous art colony that co-existed with the locals and celebrated the landscape and fishing activities of all of Cape Ann. The chapter is an interesting introduction but readers will want to know more of luminaries such as the poet Charles Olson.

Chapters 8 and 9 are the heart of the book and of Kurlansky's message. Here his knowl-

edge of changing fishing technologies and the species of fish at different locations and depths enables him to elaborate the increasingly desperate search for profitable catches and progressive depletion of the North Atlantic fishing grounds. Gloucester's schooner fleet, like many fleets in Atlantic fishing ports, did not have the capacity to destroy fishing grounds. After World War Two the fishermen turned to stern trawl draggers which wastefully destroyed immature fish and scooped up large amounts of by catch. The real damage, which closed the Grand Banks to cod fishing in 1992 when only ten percent of cod stocks remained, was done by factory ships, huge stern draggers from Japan and Russia as well as ports closer to the fishing grounds. Gloucester responded by repeatedly changing the target fish catch and changing its offshore dragger fleet to inshore and otherwise responding quickly to desperate changes in New England's fishery regulation. Today the iconic Gorton's of Gloucester, so visible in the harbor, specializes in processing Pacific pollack and Gloucester's main catch is lobster. Nevertheless, Gloucester has 500 working fishermen, mainly of Sicilian origin, and is the tenth largest fishing port in the United States in value of catch.

Chapter 10 reviews the replacement of fishing by tourism in the North Atlantic and Mediterranean and the final chapter expresses Gloucester's fragile hold on its fishing traditions. In New England only Gloucester, New Bedford and Point Judith remain as fishing ports. On the fishing coasts he surveys--Basque, Breton, Sicilian, British--Kurlansky finds that Newlyn in Cornwall is most similar to Gloucester. Neighboring fishing communities have succumbed to tourism but Newlyn survived by operating smaller boats and keeping options open among the many fish species that suddenly declined or became marketable. Gloucester's future as a fishing port depends on continued public resistance to the invasion of its waterfront by condominiums, hotels and yacht marinas. Its fishermen live in hope of the revival of profitable species but further overexploitation of the biological system of the Atlantic will signify the final and saddest fish tale.