

# Reflections from the Dassler Cabin

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*Glenn Freeman*

And what fine wilderness was revealed.

—John Muir

The Dassler cabin sits nestled in the pines of Isle Royale on the end of a long finger of land jutting out into Lake Superior. On the north side of the cabin, a cliff of columnar basalt rises from the clear water of Tobin Harbor, a long stretch of water that cuts into the island. From a rough-hewn bench perched on top of the cliff, you look across Tobin Harbor towards the main mass of the island stretching northeast up towards Blake Point, the very far point of the island. In the distance, an island lighthouse marks the far side of Blake Passage, a dangerous three-mile passage between Blake Point and the remote Passage Island, which ships cross on their way to Ontario. To the south, ancient basalt staggers down to a cove. On the far side of the cove's long stone beach, Scoville Point marks the southeast end of the island—a tiny spit of wave-washed rock with a few pines and wildflowers clinging to the craggy point. Beyond that, some 60 miles of Lake Superior stretch across the horizon towards mainland Michigan.

The main cabin is just about the size of Thoreau's cabin at Walden Pond, 10 by 15 feet. There are two small additions—a galley kitchen on one side with a propane stove and refrigerator, and in the back, a step down into a small bedroom with a low, sloped ceiling. Maps and old photos line the tongue-and-groove pine walls. No lines are quite plumb, no angle quite square. Birch log beams, still wrapped in their paper, cross the length of the main room. A wood table sits on birch log legs, and a bench made of birch—bark and all—sits against the wall. A dark wood table sits across from a stone fireplace next to a window, which looks out at the cove through a stand of young spruce and fir.

The lake is visible, but it's mostly hidden by pine and is often obscured by cloud and fog. It is almost always audible, though. Sometimes the sounds are subtle and sometimes they are overwhelming: the constant slap of waves on rocks at the base of the point surrounding the cabin. The lapping waves become a hum in stereo, a swarm of bees, and a breeze through pine: a dreamscape defined by water on rock. Even when the lake is nearly calm, small waves slap at the rocks in a constant rhythm rising through the pines. Loons call in the distance, or nearer by in the cove on the south side. The smell of fir is so thick in the air you can touch it; your whole body coated with the resinous air.

No electricity. No running water. A propane fridge, stove, and a few propane lights. For two weeks, this is my home.

I have been granted this little slice of heaven on Isle Royale National Park as an artist-in-residence. Every summer, four to six artists are offered time in the historic cabin to reflect on the park and to work. Next to the stone fireplace (the gem of the cabin) stand wrought-iron fire tools and a box of cardboard for kindling: Cheez-It, Cheerios, Wheat Thins—artefacts of what contemporary artists have brought to this piece of history.

It is not quite luxury and not quite wilderness (but Thoreau's cabin, too, was far from wilderness—not that this is here or there: I am not out to imitate Thoreau). Every morning, I hike down to the lake to fill my buckets with water and carry them up to the standing nine-litre Katadyn filter. I also fill a sun shower bag and lay it on the black rock to warm for an afternoon shower. Reclaimed from its human history of fishing, mining, logging, and resort travel, the island is not quite wilderness—or at least my experience of it is not. In a cabin on the edge of the 'busy' section of the island, it's hard to forget I am a mere two miles from the bustling center of Rock Harbor. Twice a day the ferry horn sounds in the harbour. From the cabin I can hear the distant whine of fishing boats rounding Scoville Point into Tobin Harbor or headed out to Blake Passage to round the island.

When I arrived, Chris Gale, a long-time resident of the island, picked me up and ferried me around to the dock, from which I hauled my bags of gear up a steep trail to the cabin. The trail actually cuts across the Connolly Cabin porch where towels blew in a lazy breeze. Chris had planned to introduce me to my neighbours, but no one was home.

I brought the staples of my many wilderness travels: rice, beans (of all kinds), and other dried goods, and hardy vegetables like carrots, onions, potatoes, and celery. But I also have things I would never dream of taking on a true wilderness excursion: a large bottle of brandy, for instance, or my wetsuit, fins, and snorkel and mask to help me explore the cold waters of Superior.

The island's 132,000 acres are US federally designated wilderness. No cars or wheeled vehicles are allowed. Because of its remoteness, Isle Royale receives very few visitors—about 20,000 people per year—fewer than most parks receive in a day. But the percentage of those visitors who obtain backcountry wilderness permits is among the highest of all parks: people who go to Isle Royale go to experience a pristine backcountry wilderness. I have had my share of backcountry wilderness excursions, and I would certainly like to experience as much of the island as possible, but the comfort of this cabin allows me a different kind of experience.

What I really want to do is get to know this little corner of it, the fading community at the end of the harbour, the wedge of land between harbour and cove where the cabin sits, and the finger of ancient volcanic rock on the other side of the cove, Scoville Point. I want to see the lake from the Point in as many different lights as I can, to sit in the cabin and watch the light

fade, to sit above the harbour and watch the stars and northern lights emerge, to watch the storms and fogs roll in from the sea (how quickly I've taken to calling the lake the sea after just a few days).

In order to learn about my little corner of Isle Royale, I have decided to take the same hike twice a day, into Rock Harbor along the shoreline trail, morning and evening. This is not my only experience of the island of course, but I made the decision to try to know one trail intimately, one slice of the island, and the most 'civilized' area at that.

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Isle Royale sits parallel to the northern shore of Lake Superior, roughly 15 miles from mainland Canada. The area is actually an archipelago, dominated by the one large island running 45 miles southwest to northeast, and spanning nine miles at its widest. Towards the northeast its width is closer to two miles, reaching out to a branch of fingers jutting to the northeast until finally the island ends at Blake Point, a spit of land just visible from Scoville Point.

Because it is a remote island, it has fewer mammals than the mainland (11 at this point, two of which, the moose and wolf—the island's most famous inhabitants—arrived recently, the moose in 1910 and the wolf in the winter of 1948/49). At water's edge the island is rock, rugged cliffs with the scrappiest of plants. The lowlands are defined by bogs and fen. Then there are sloped woodlands—aspens groves, spruce and fir forests and grass and ferns—leading up towards the island's backbone, the Greenstone Ridge that runs down the middle of the island lengthwise. Along the ridge, the island is mostly rock again, "balds" now covered with grasses, thimbleberry, blueberry, and reindeer lichen (*Cladonia rangiferina*). On a hot morning, tiny grasshoppers jump en masse with every step one takes through the grass, and the white admirals flit through shaded patches of thimbleberry.

Many say the island is beautiful but not spectacular. There are no snow-capped peaks. No glaciers or gorges. But anyone who thinks this wilderness is not spectacular has not really bothered to notice the glow of the elegant lichens (*Xanthoria elegans*) on the cliffs, a stunning display of shifting colours—brilliant oranges and subtle greens—or has not watched the waves beat against rugged shorelines, or seen, as I did, a fox trotting down the trail with a snowshoe hare drooping from its mouth before it skitters away into the dense woods with its feast. What happens here is your attention slowly shifts from the macro to the micro, the brittle quality to life that hugs the exposed rock shoreline, tiny bluebells shivering in the breeze after emerging from the long dark freeze of this northern land. Isle Royale requires a different mindset altogether.

In Colorado, you could stay in a hotel in Estes Park, have a nice breakfast, drive up into the morning light, crawl up the gravel of Fall River Road, maybe hike out to Sundance Mountain,  
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then drive down the brilliant tundra-lined Trail Ridge Road back to Estes in early afternoon for a cocktail, or perhaps back to Denver for a night on the town or to catch a flight. I'm not suggesting doing this, but I don't say it condescendingly; I have done similar things. You wouldn't say you *know* the environment, but you may have some genuine, profound, maybe even life-changing experience there among the glacier-lined peaks. But Isle Royale demands something different. You can have a life changing experience, but not by walking an hour on the trail. It takes time to seep into your bones, to really begin to know the place.

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Human impact on Isle Royale goes back millennia. The island was a common hunting ground for First Nations from nearby Minnesota and Ontario, and there is evidence of copper mining extending back some 2,000 years. The first European visitors were French fur trappers in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In 1837, the first fishery on the island was established, and fisheries—whitefish, herring, and lake trout—were quickly established around the main island and its archipelago over the next century. In the mid-1840s, a report by Douglass Houghton, Michigan's first state geologist, set off a copper boom, and the first modern copper mines were soon opened on the island. But the remoteness of the island combined with the small veins of copper caused most of the 19th century mines to fail quickly. Between the miners and commercial loggers, much of the island was deforested by the late 19th century.

When the mines failed, many companies turned to tourism, touting the island's supposed health benefits. The moist, cool air provided a popular escape from the Midwest summer heat. As Midwest cities grew, Isle Royale became a summer getaway for the rich, and resorts and summer camps were established across the island. By the 1920s, the extensive loss of the island's forests, coupled with its rising popularity as a tourist destination, led to efforts to preserve the island. Albert Stoll Jr. of the *Detroit News* spearheaded a movement to claim the island as a national park. In 1930 the Michigan legislature created the Isle Royale National Park Commission. Establishment of the island and surrounding areas as a national park was authorized when Herbert Hoover signed legislation on March 31, 1931. However, no money was initially authorized for its establishment, and due to the Depression and World War II, park lands were not fully acquired until 1946. But since its dedication as a park in '46, the forests have been restored and the island has largely been returned to its wild state.

When the government was acquiring the lands, landholders could take money or a "life lease" which would allow them to hold their land for the rest of their lives. Most of these life leases are now running out; the original leasees are now aging and many of them have died. Disputes over the leases continue, however, as many children and grandchildren reasonably argue they are inhabitants and should be allowed to maintain their cabins. The National Parks Service is

ready to move on, though, and is acquiring the lands of the dozen or so remaining cabins—many of these in the summer resort community in Tobin Harbor where the Dassler Cabin sits. Step in to any of these cabins and family histories and the history of the island is palpable. Sepia-toned photos line planked walls along with old kitchen implements, snowshoes, fishing rods, maps, and stuffed fish and animals. Every cabin is a kind of ad hoc museum.

Hiking the trails or canoeing up and down the harbour, I discover the fading remains of this once thriving community: cabins and boat sheds and fisheries collapsing back into the forests, docks etched away with winter storms and thaw. I love the look of decay, the bleached wood, the forest growing through old foundations, the return of the wild, but such scenes force me to ask what we mean by wilderness: do we preserve wilderness or do we *make* it? Wilderness, as famously defined by the 1964 Wilderness Act, is an area where:

the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor and does not remain...retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions and which generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint man's work substantially unnoticeable.

Is this, I wonder, a real or an artificial wilderness? As the island is, as James Felding refers to it, being "rewilded," it is losing much of its human history and character. But human history is an integral part of this landscape and as it disappears, the very character of the landscape changes accordingly, not returning to some pre-human state, but to a version that is in part the result of interaction between humans and this landscape.

The language of the Wilderness Act retains a sense of culture and nature as absolutely distinct, but I'm most interested in the intersections. The risk is for wilderness to exist, as a concept and in practice, as a kind of museum rather than a changing, evolving entity. If humans had brought the moose to this island, they would be removed and banned. But since they swam here of their own ("natural" as opposed to "human") accord in 1910, the changes they have wrought to the ecosystem are considered natural. And the moose has radically changed the character of the island; their taste for yew, for example, means that the once dense thickets of the shrub described by early settlers are no more, mere pockets remaining on certain slopes. The change is neither good nor bad, but it does raise the question of what 'natural' state should be preserved: pre- or post-moose? Obviously we have accepted a post-moose Isle Royale: the moose are an essential element of the island, but we would not accept such a state so easily had it been the result of some human intervention.

Every morning, as I rise to the early summer sunrise and go down to the water's edge to breathe in the morning and gather the water for my day, I ask myself if it's possible to have a cabin in a wilderness. Are the terms an oxymoron? Ecologist Adolph Murie, who was instrumental in establishing Isle Royale as a wilderness, would certainly consider it impossible by definition: you cannot have a cabin in a wilderness any more than you can have a trail running through it. Murie argued vehemently against a trail like the Greenstone Trail that runs the length of the ridge, insisting that, rather than going *through* the wilderness, such a trail actually cuts the island into two smaller wilderness areas. The trail is, by definition, the boundary of each wilderness area. Every trail subdivides our remaining wilderness areas. While the Park Service has been more than willing to disagree with Murie and construct trails throughout the island—almost 170 miles of trails cover this rugged terrain—the Wilderness Act itself perpetuates this artificial and absolute boundary between nature or wildness, and culture.

The natural and human histories of Isle Royale are so enmeshed that it seems impossible to disentangle them without an arbitrary definition of either. The island is no less wild if we admit—and admire—the human history here. In fact, as William Cronon has pointed out, it would actually “celebrate . . . the robust ability of wild nature to sustain itself when people give it the freedom to flourish in their midst.”<sup>1</sup> Cronon argues that wilderness areas need not erase human presence altogether, but interpret it, embracing the fact that the contemporary landscape has been irretrievably altered by its interaction with humans.

And this is why I have come here.

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How different my daily rhythm becomes on the island, sleeping and working in short fits throughout. At midnight, the white-throated sparrows outside the cabin sing me awake. On clear nights, I hike down to Scoville Point and lie on the rocks stargazing or watching the aurora. Late at night, I wander back to bed for a bit of sleep before rising again at first light. I do my morning chores then hike or canoe around the harbour. By mid-day the northern summer sun sears and blinds. I find dense woods to sit in but the bugs appreciate such spots as well. I go to the cabin for relief and to write, but the cabin steams like an oven. I work a bit then usually drift into a sweaty, fitful afternoon nap, rising again late in the afternoon to hike or canoe again until dusk, when the liquid spiralling voice of the Swainson's thrush rises from the firs. The northern twilight lingers late and I would sit to watch the gloaming, but now is truly the time of the mosquito. So I sit inside and work by propane lamp, occasionally wandering back to water's edge then returning, or crawl into my bed with headlamp, books, and notepads. I read, I write,

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<sup>1</sup>William Cronon, “The Riddle of the Apostle Islands,” in *The Future of Nature: Writing on a Human Ecology from Orion Magazine*, ed. Barry Lopez (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2007), 169.

and I drift in and out of sleep as the gloaming lights the two small windows at the end of the bed. The room is cast in a magical half light as if some door in my consciousness that the whole of my experience here seems to represent. I feel myself change; my body now rocks internally to the motion of Superior's swells that lift and drop my canoe. The sparrows will soon awaken me again, and I will rise into the darkness, alert and happy in the throes of some new love.

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Chris Gale is a generous, affable man, who grew up in large part on the island but whose future in the park is now in limbo. His grandfather built a cabin on a small rocky outcrop in Tobin Harbor now known as Gale Island. He no longer has a lease in the park but manages to spend much of his summers here offering his services as a guide in Tobin Harbor and helping out with the artist-in-residence program. He spends time at the cabin with his brother Tom who has published a pictorial history of the island. Gale Island and Tom's cabin are just around the bend from the Dassler Cabin, and he checks in with me daily. He offers his services, as he does to all the artists, taking me to points around the island, toting me over to Passage Island, the northernmost island in the archipelago, to the Edison fishery, or hauling my canoe up to the end of Tobin Harbor so I can climb over Mount Franklin and down to the northern shore of the island, then canoe back in the same day. He invites me to share a dinner of fresh whitefish. His history of the island is invaluable; he takes me to fishing holes, blueberry patches, moose terrain, telling me stories of the inhabitants he remembers. He introduces me to Ellen who stays in her family cabin, the Connolly Cabin, and who similarly shares stories. The Connolly Cabin is lined with old artefacts over which I spend a pleasant afternoon poring. While Chris is still working on some kind of deal with park officials to allow him to use the cabin in return for his services—a deal that seems out of reach—it appears that Ellen may only have a summer or two more of access to her family cabin. They both love this place and the island benefits from this love. The few remaining families are working hard to preserve a cultural, historical presence on the island, even as it is fading away in the park like the shells of rotten buildings I explore on my travels.

Don't get me wrong. I want pristine wilderness. We *need* wilderness. I know we have to make hard decisions about how to achieve and maintain it. The remaining families have good claims on the cabins, but to whom do we ultimately allow such concessions? I would certainly love to have such a cabin myself, as would many others, so whom do we allow to live in a park? At some point it's the easiest route to say no one is allowed. But during my time on the island, I am forced to consider what we risk losing when we lose those real human ties to a place, where we all become, in terms of the Wilderness Act, visitors rather than inhabitants. While I long for the experience of pristine wilderness as much as anyone, I wonder if the effect of labeling and partitioning "the human" away from "wildness" might be harmful. If our effects are inherently

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unnatural then we don't have a base to think of our connection with our own wildness. Might the divide keep us from finding healthy ways to interact with our environment?

I don't want to suggest that we shouldn't have areas designated as wilderness and preserved as such. I know no other way to save them. But we might do well to redefine the term, to consider the ways that humans have been, and are, a *part* of wilderness, rather than distinctly and irreversibly separated from it. If the "wild" is separate from the human, a separation that implies "nature" equals good and "human" equals bad, I wonder where that leaves us in terms of evaluating our impact. We can preserve certain places, small oases in a devastated world. But being aware of our wildness, of our "natural" effects, might help us to act differently elsewhere as well as in those areas we've designated wilderness.

If we go into wilderness to find true nature, an experience separate from us, it's easy to return to our city lives as if nothing has changed, treating the environment the way we always have. But if we go into wilderness to find our own wildness, to see the ways in which we have been a part of nature all along, perhaps it is easier to see the connection back in our normal lives. Perhaps it's easier to find nature even in the city and to treat it accordingly. As William Cronon argues, we need to rewild in ways that avoid:

the negative implication that past human history consists solely of exploiting, damaging, and destroying nature...If we're to tell stories about ecological restoration as surely we need to do if we're to envision a sustainable human future, we need to leave evidence on the ground that will bear witness to such stories.<sup>2</sup>

If the wilderness is seen as a kind of relationship between nature and culture, human and nature, then perhaps it's easier to see this relationship in all contexts. A living relationship with the wilderness in a place like Isle Royale is one such story.

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I have come here to try to know this place, but how? Paul Gruchow, one of my favourite writers, once said:

Experiencing a landscape is an act of creativity. Like any creative vision it cannot be forced or willed. It cannot be organized on a schedule or happen by appointment. If you would experience a landscape, you must go alone into it and sit down somewhere quietly and wait for it to come in its own good time. You must not wait ambitiously...The

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 175.

solitude is necessary, the silence is necessary, the wait is necessary, and it is necessary that you yourself be empty, that you may be filled.<sup>3</sup>

I appreciate the tone, the bowing towards what goes on without us, to what needs attention in the world, but I also find myself wondering why it takes solitude and silence to experience a landscape. Do we not experience a landscape, say, when we are farming it in a community, listening to its seasons and needs? Gruchow is pointing to a particular kind of experience, an important one, but certainly not the only way to know a landscape. I would venture to mention the miners and loggers knew this landscape far more than I do, and far more than most of us who take the ferry here for a week in the wilderness—no matter how intent my attentiveness or my spiritual desire for a relationship with this place. Or at least they knew it in a *different* way. It's the difference, perhaps, between spending time walking a favourite spot of woods and going into those woods to hunt: whether I go to hunt or not (I don't) isn't really the point. I'm keenly aware the hunter is aware of things of which I am not, with senses attuned to things to which mine may not be. Our understanding of a landscape depends to some degree on what our relationship is to begin with.

The idea of sitting in solitude itself has value, to listen to a place. But where do we sit? On Scoville Point, the 'place' is remarkably different if you move just 50 yards. On the island side of the Point, the mid-summer heat is unrelenting. The mosquitoes and black flies swarm in dense sheets, and the noonday sun is ferocious. Hike up to the hard basalt ridge and over the lakeside of the spit and the cool breeze rises up over the hardscrabble rock, the sun, while still blazing, casts a comfortable field of sparkling turquoise to the horizon, the bugs vanish, and the place feels like a completely different land altogether. Sitting in place doesn't teach us about a place necessarily. A place is dynamic. We come to know a place in motion. To truly know a place how much do we need to know? Both sides of the spit? Do we need to hike in to Rock Harbor? Do we need to cover the whole island? Then why not the Canadian shoreline just north of the island, as well? Where, that is, does one place stop and another begin? In the end, we can only experience an environment in flux; we develop a relationship with place, and we ourselves become part of that place.

We become a part of by living in place, to learn its seasons, to see the fogs roll in, the winds of nor'easters, the thunder over the Canadian hills. We become part of by working in it, feeling its rhythms and ours blur into one. We become part of by being in dialogue with, by learning where and when the thrush will begin its metallic trill, and when the white-throated sparrow will return. We learn of wilderness by actually being part of it, not by an arbitrary separation that keeps us at a distance, looking ever longingly towards home.

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<sup>3</sup>Paul Gruchow, *The Necessity of Empty Places* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 1999), 145.  
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Letter left in the Dassler Cabin journal:

To All Future Residents:

I will confess I came to this cabin with a bit of resistance. I have read all the previous reflections of artists about the magical qualities of the place and the cabin. I will not deny such qualities, but I want a place to earn its labels. I resist the sentimental. John Muir, late in life, spoke of his desire to edit out all of his “gloriouses.” I suppose I have a desire not to put them in in the first place. As soon as we do, we impose ourselves, our emotions, onto the landscape. My concern has always been to know a place on its own terms, to learn its language rather than mine. And so I will not sentimentalize. Yes, the light is hypnotic, the water and loons are pure music, and the colors stunning, but it’s also a hard, indifferent landscape, a land of bugs and heat, of hardscrabble rock, water and sky. It is not wilderness. You have a cabin, a bed, a stove, and a water filtration system. But it *is* wild; it is elemental. Getting your drinking water from the lake is not more difficult than getting it from a faucet back home—a little bit, but not much. It is, rather, of a different order altogether. It represents a relationship between you and the element, *its* rhythm, *its* substance.

I came here to know the landscape, but the landscape required that I know myself. And now I risk the very language I resisted. But such is the nature of the place. You who will come after me have been granted a great opportunity. May it change you forever. Gather your water from the great sea; spill a drop of whiskey before you leave.

Yours truly, GF