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At least it's quiet out there in the Falklands

by
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FALKLAND ISLANDS – These islands are a desolate place. There are no trees. The sky is grey two-thirds of the daylight hours. It can snow and hail any month of the year, and the wind blows almost perpetually, strong and biting.

The only regular link that this British colony, isolated in the far reaches of the south Atlantic, has to the rest of civilisation is the twice-a-week flight to Pantagonia and a ship every three months to London. Even then, the Argentines, who run the planes, are claiming the islands as their own.

A visitor is told that late last year census-takers counted 1,812 people, including tourists, spread over the two main and 200 smaller islands that make up the archipelago.

Yet in the tiny sheep-farming settlement called Goose Green of only about 10 people, June McMullen could stop shoveling peet for a moment to say of the main town, Stanley, six hours away by dirt track, "It's too crowded in there."

"Life is better out here in the camp," she said. "I feel more freedom."

The islanders call themselves "Kelpers," after the seaweed that grows up to 50 feet long here, and like it, they are tough and resilient.

Medical service in the camp is an open line each morning to a doctor in Stanley standing by "on the box," the inter-island radio. Kelpers mend injured legs, patch skulls and give themselves injections under instructions from the box.

The ruggedness attracts a certain breed to come here, but most of the 1,812 either were born or just somehow ended up in the islands, adapting over time and coming eventually to prefer the isolation.

The islands are a virtual reserve for the upland goose and the penguin, the cormorant and the albatross, and a variety of sea birds that live in harmony with the sheep and their shepherds.

Yet there is still something disquieting. For all their physical hardiness and sentimental attachment to the sparseness, the Kelpers have produced no creative poets or writers or painters inspired by the loneliness.

Politically and economically the Kelpers seem equally apathetic. They mostly toil as shepherds, living in a feudal 19th-century English country society on large farms owned by companies back in England.

They say Leonard Minto tried to slit his throat after slitting that of his wife. Their 14-year-old son heard the screams.

Minto is now in Toddy McMillan's jail, charged with murder. Just nine months earlier a Chilean hand pulled his shepherd knife and killed a British worker in a drunken brawl.

They were the first killings in at least 40 years and it is hard on Toddy. He is only an acting police chief, his heart is not so strong these days and he is past the age of retirement. But the island officials have not found anyone qualified to replace him yet. They are recruiting in England.

Mrs Minto's death was probably to have been expected. She and her husband were separated and she was living with another man. Indeed, there are so many instances to this sort, it would seem that jealousy would lead to more violence.

At the root of the problem is a simple statistic: for every three men between the ages of 30 and 64, there are two women. It is even worse in the outlying areas. In a census of West Falkland Island eight years ago, there was one single woman over the age of 19 and there were 51 single men.

There is little reason to believe that the situation has changed. More men come from Britain for the work available here. More women go to Britain for the life style there, often as the bride of one of the 40 marines stationed here on one-year tours. This galls the local men.

"Women here are like hen's teeth – bloody rare," said Peter Clement, a 31-year-old sheep shearer. It is one of the reasons that Clement and many of his friends leave each year, joining a small band of wanderers who follow the sheep-shearing season around the world.

It has taken him to New Zealand, Australia, Norway and even the United States – as an illegal alien – but he always comes back.

Toddy McMillian is now waiting for a judge and psychiatrist to come out from Britain to try Minto. The only attorney in the islands is the registrar, a solicitor, and he has been appointed to represent Minto. Toddy has to serve as prosecutor.

For the last 50 years, the economy has been stagnant and the population has declined almost 20 per cent, creating a severe labour shortage. The fear is that the number of people will fall to a point at which the colony will not be able to sustain itself and will simply shut down.

The main difficulty is that there are jobs but little opportunity. More than two-thirds of the colony is owned by absentee landlords in Britain. One of these, the Falkland Islands Co., owns almost half the land – it also serves as intermediary for the islands in selling wool, providing financing and importing supplies, ranging from hammers to breakfast cereals.

A major British government study headed by Lord Shackleton in 1976 concluded that the absentee companies had been more beneficent than not towards their workers but had created such dependency that Kelpers had little sense of enterprise.

A young shepherd earns only about US$7,000 a year, but his house is provided, his meat is free, he is given a plot for growing vegetables and the prices of many goods and services are subsidised.