



Milmarin Museum, Paimpol - Richard Berrong.

Elaine: Could you tell me when was the museum set up and why in Ploubazlanec?

Richard: The museum was first set up not in its current location, but in an old fisherman's house, and it was set up in the 1980s by several men who wanted to preserve memories of the fishing off the coast of Iceland that was done from this area. Their fathers or grandfathers had been involved in it, and they wanted to preserve a memory of that. They were particularly triggered because they found lots of people here who had artifacts left from that era in their attic, and as the families moved on and the older people passed away, too often they saw that this stuff was being thrown away. So, they created the museum to tell the story of Iceland fishing. It was a major undertaking to set up all of these displays and for the moment, they are what I'm going to call "momentarily permanent."

Elaine: Well it's amazing; I mean it's just fascinating and obviously, in particular the actual photographs of the conditions that the fishermen were living in on these boats – it's really quite humbling. Why did the fishermen have to travel so far, though, from this area in Brittany to Iceland and Newfoundland to fish for cod?

Richard: Well, I can't explain the history of "work hard; like to go" so to speak, but there was a long history of fishing for cod off of Newfoundland, going back to the 17th century. They had found large schools of cod there, and evidently it was worth the trip that far to find it. You have to remember several things about cod. Cod is a relatively large fish, so if you catch one, there's a lot of meat on it. Cod preserved very well in the means that we use for preservation before the creation of refrigeration. Cod was either dried or it was salted. And cod – not all fish hold up the same under those conditions; cod holds up very well. So that made cod very appealing in an era that didn't have, for all intents and purposes, that didn't have refrigeration. Dried cod or salted cod could be sent long distances away from the coast and it didn't lose its nutritive qualities. So, it was really an ideal fish for an era before refrigeration. And, of course, an era where Catholics didn't eat meat on Fridays, so there was a huge market for fish.

Elaine: So they always had a meal on a Friday...

Richard: Exactly.

Elaine: ... if they went starving on the other six days of the week. So what were conditions like for the fishermen on those old boats?

Richard: Miserable. Truly miserable. There's a very wonderful book in French - the two authors did a lot of research - and the living conditions on these ships were just atrocious. There was, of course, no running water. There was bathing, was something that happened very seldom. The men shared bunks. When one was awake, doing work, the other would sleep. The bedding, which was stuffed with straw, didn't get changed for about seven months. I won't go into the details, because it would revolt most of our listeners, I suspect—you might just have eaten lunch. But, the conditions were really bad. These men, when you see pictures of these guys, these guys are solid. They put up with a lot. The doctor on these voyages was the captain, and he was given a box of medicine and not much instruction on how to use it. And, if there was a problem, he tried to take care of it. But that was it.



Elaine: In a very rudimentary way.

Richard: In a very rudimentary way. There were no helicopters to take people with problems to the nearest hospital. There was a hospital that was built by the French in Iceland. So, if they were close enough to coast to go in, that was a possibility. But, they didn't go in for cuts and bruises. It had to be a truly serious issue for them to stop fishing and to go on land to go to the hospital.

Elaine: So how did their wives and family manage back home when they were away for so long?

Richard: Several ways. First of all, the wives of these fishermen received a regular sum of money, which would be deducted from the salary of the fishermen. The fishermen were paid when they came back and they were paid by the number of cod that they had caught. So, assuming that the fishermen were going to keep fishing regularly, the ship owners would give the wives, every so often, an amount of money that would later be deducted from the salaries. But, you should not imagine that these women lived in luxury; they didn't. They had a household to maintain, they often, very often had children to feed. So, the women very often worked, whether on a farm or whatever. They may have taken in laundry, that was very common. They may have done sewing. But, they worked as well to support themselves and their children.

Elaine: And there must have been a huge though loss of life on these voyages, because it's a known fact, isn't it, that fishermen cannot always swim.

Richard: To begin with, in storms, some of the fishermen got washed overboard, and as you said, they couldn't swim, so that was a lost cause. Some of them, far too many of them died of infections. They had a cut that got badly infected, and that led to, eventually it became fatal. Or they came down with some disease that couldn't be treated. So all told, they estimate that between 1852 when the first ships set off for Iceland and 1935 when the last ship left, that about 2,000 men from here lost their lives, either in storms, because the ship went down, because they got sick at sea or whatever. It was very significant, because it was not a big population here.

Elaine: When we hear about this now, I see that, I heard that the name "Pierre Loti" comes up. I believe he's well known for the novels he wrote based on these fishermen's lives.

Richard: Pierre Loti was not from here. He was from southwestern France, from Rochefort, but he was a career naval officer and, as a result, came into contact with men from Brittany, many of whom were in the navy, the French navy. And, he became good friends with two who were from this region, so he would come to this region and he became fascinated by the story of these men who spent seven months of the year off the coast of Iceland. So, he decided to do a novel about that story, and the novel became an instantaneous bestseller. Because the novel was so famous, it made the story of these fisherman well known to all of the French. The book was translated into various different languages. There are seven English translations, for example. To use the cliché, Pierre Loti put Paimpol on the map, and more specifically, he made the rest of the French aware of the very hard life, not just of the fishermen, but of the fishermen's wives, because the novel spends more time talking about the women who dealt with this career, this trade than it actually does with the fishermen themselves.



Elaine: That's interesting that he focused on that aspect of it – on these tough, amazing, resilient women who would never know if their husband or their son or father, indeed, would come back. Is Paimpol still important in terms of fishing?

Richard: Paimpol's economy is more diversified now. Paimpol, tourism is a major part of the Paimpol economy. Things that live in the sea play an important part in the Paimpol economy. But, it's mostly mussels, oysters, clams, mostly, it's mostly shellfish of one sort or another.

Elaine: Well, thank you very much, Richard.