



# The Coastal Consciousness of John Gillis

By JOSHUA JELLY-SCHAPIRO

**C**LAMOROUS AND GUSTING, Superstorm Sandy blew ashore last fall with a force that felt at once scarily new and, in this, our own Age of Disaster, quite familiar. Watching its frigid waters gushing into Manhattan's subways and overtopping seawalls in the Rockaways and Atlantic City, we were reminded of other storms, like the monster that inundated the citizens of New Orleans—and then turned their plight into a touchstone of our politics. Katrina's aftermath helped torpedo a blustering president's second term, but the images of Sandy, looping past on YouTube and CNN, carried even more-far-reaching impacts. They brought urgency to a climate-change debate finally ready, it seemed, to make all of us envision a world where oceans will be several feet higher than those of today.

As Tropical Storm Andrea began the 2013 hurricane season, many of us were grateful for the warning calls. But as the conversations prompted by those calls grow increasingly suffused with hyperbole and guff, many of us commit that sin, anathema to historians, of condescending to the past. Was it really so, what New York's governor said in Sandy's wake—that “we had never seen a storm like this”? Sandy brought rain and high waters, yes, but Nor'easters have been buffeting America's Atlantic shores for centuries. It wasn't even close to the strongest storm to hit New York dur-



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*The historian John Gillis has spent almost half a century of summers at Great Gott Island, off the coast of Maine.*

sanguine, however, about what most people do when they get there. “Never,” he writes, “have shores been so rich in property values and so impoverished in what once had made them the first home of humankind.” One of his book’s guiding motifs, borrowed from a signpost that had stopped him short on a cliff-top hike in Northern California, is a simple admonition he thinks readers of *Coastal Living* magazine, and all those who’d love to inhabit the glossy million-dollar views it features, would do well to heed: Never turn your back on the ocean.

Gillis doesn’t want us to just remember that. He wants us to understand why we must, as he said this spring when I called to ask him what he hoped readers might take from *The Human Shore*. Gillis—who divides his time between two shores: San Francisco Bay and an island off Maine where he and his wife, the writer Christina Marsden Gillis, have summered for decades—was direct. “The first step is to start imagining our coasts as less a ‘natural’ artifact than the product of hundreds and thousands of years of human creation. If we do that, then I think we’d be a long way toward saving them, and ourselves, from utter destruction.”

**A**S BEFITS A SCHOLAR whose work has sought to trace both those “hundreds and thousands of years of human creation” and their larger effects on the earth, I first met Gillis in a department not of history but of geography. I was a graduate student at the University of California, and Gillis had retired from a long career at Rutgers University, back East, and come to live in Berkeley. This distinguished-looking fellow would turn up at our weekly colloquium and, when the speaker was through discoursing on landscape morphology or settler colonialism, ask incisive questions from behind his white beard. Gillis’s predilection for geography in his emeritus years signaled his trajectory in the half-century since he had completed his own Stanford University history Ph.D., as he recalls with a chuckle, on “the Prussian bureaucracy.”

After Stanford, Gillis returned to his native New Jersey, first for a brief stint at Princeton University and then up the road to Rutgers’s history department for 34 years. Leaving behind his early vocation for sifting Munich’s archives, he turned to British history, and, in exploring intimate questions pertaining to hearth and home, built a reputation as a social historian. *Youth and History* (1974) is a study of age relations in European society across time. *For Better, for Worse* (1985) traced the rise of the institution of marriage in Britain. And *A World of Their Own Making* (1996) explored the roots and effects of rituals, like wedding days and Christmas dinner, with which we forge family bonds and contend with their breaking.

Glancing back toward civilization’s dawn but locating many of those rituals’ birth in Victorian England, *A World of Their Own Making* offered a keen genealogy of the concept of “family” that doubled as a subtle excoriation of the Christian Coalition types who, at the time, were using “family values” as a club with which to bash sodomites and sex educators. Prompted in part by a family tragedy—the death of the Gillises’ son Ben when a small plane he was piloting crashed in Kenya—the book concluded the historian’s decades of studying family by synthesizing grand currents with the smaller scale at which we live them. It’s been no surprise, then, that as Gillis has expanded his scope, his most recent books have evinced a similar determination to examine history vis-à-vis the ways we imagine its unfolding.

In *Islands of the Mind* (2004), he traced the grip that islands have exerted on human imagination since the ancients began thinking of them as paradises or prisons; as places to be marooned, reborn, or transformed. Exploring how the West’s long obsession with islands “made the Atlantic World,” *Islands of the Mind* included as many citations from poets and writers as from historical theorists or government documents, indicating Gillis’s long-nurtured frustration with disciplinary boundaries. He has always bristled at the ways academe rewards narrow expertise and the cultivation, across a tenure-winning march of monographs and articles, of a discrete field. When I asked him why, he explained with a typically geographic metaphor. “The

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ing the century that precise wind speeds and rainfall have been recorded. Climate change is real and serious, but was not last fall’s “natural disaster,” like Katrina and like all the rest to come, as much about human failures—in infrastructure, planning, and our proclivity for building homes on shifting sandbars—as it was natural catastrophe?

Those questions aren’t new. But their new urgency may account for the feeling of providence that accompanied the arrival of the historian John Gillis’s latest book. Reaching back into the days when early hominids became human, *The Human Shore: Seacoasts in History* (University of Chicago Press, 2012) also looks forward to what will happen if we don’t change how we relate to seacoasts. The book represents a fitting capstone to the career of a remarkable historian whose arc of interests has anticipated two key, entwined strands in his discipline—the rise of environmental history and global history—and whose work has long exemplified how, in our changing present, the ways we imagine the past can and must change as well.

Gillis well understands the age-old human urge to find our way back to what Rachel Carson called “the great mother of life.” He’s less



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field’—it’s so redolent of territory, and property, isn’t it?” he said. “I don’t want to be trapped in a field. I want to trespass!”

Even the practitioners of “Atlantic history,” the vogueish subdiscipline that his work helped to create by treating the world that mariners made in crossing the ocean as a subject for study as worthy as any nation lapped by its waves, can get his gourd. “Historians connect all these dots, across the Atlantic, and they get to feel they’ve gone beyond America’s shores,” he says. “But they don’t really have to do so, or have any apt way, as many critics have started pointing out, to address the degree to which [the Atlantic] is connected to other bodies of water.”

Gillis thinks the rise of maritime history has helped correct that—but suffers from the opposite problem: “It turns out to be sea-locked,” he says. “It has its jaunty sailor out there, but he never really comes ashore. And so again the shore, and coastal people, end up betwixt and between. They don’t have a history, or a geography, to call their own.”

*The Human Shore* is Gillis’s attempt to fill that gap. His book places coasts, and their minders, at history’s heart. But as befits a historian who has “grown only more and more aware of how much history is an imaginative activity,” what most distinguishes his work is the depth he brings to combining the arc of human imagination with its effects—to synthesizing our thinking about seacoasts with the material history of how those ideas will shape the prospects of the planet.

Opening his narrative in earth’s amniotic seas, Gillis extends what we all know—that life began in the ocean—to sketch a broader argument about the central role of coastal peoples in the development of civilization. Most modern historians and archaeologists in the West have inherited a bias for the landed from forebears for whom the Bible was a bible of not only history but also geography—a bias visible in our picturing Eden as an inland garden, and, in terms of science, our evolving ancestors as transient hunters on the plain who, thanks to good fortune in the Fertile Crescent, began cultivating wheat and evolving complex societies.

Finding evidence in newly discovered ruins of homes along the marshy coasts of Wales and the huge shell-mounds, built by Ohlone Indians, that still line San Francisco Bay, Gillis argues that it was early humans’ engagement with the sea, not their activities on the savannah, that led to their divergence from primates. Echoing the Berkeley geographer Carl Sauer’s famous view that “the shore is the primitive home of man,” Gillis reminds us that on the shores of Africa, Eurasia, and the Americas alike, aquaculture predated agriculture. Long before our forebears planted wheat, they were setting aside areas for cultivating clams and shellfish. Scholars may disagree about what all this means. But Gillis shows how our historical underplaying of those muddy margins where land and water meet is manifested in the difficulty that our intellectual traditions, like our laws, have had in contending with places that don’t definitely belong to either land and sea.

Moving rapidly through the centuries, Gillis describes how the first *Homo sapiens* to leave our species’ East African cradle reached the Indian Ocean’s shores 125,000 years ago and then migrated north, across the Red Sea, as “coasting” people whose descendants, from there, moved along the shores of the Arabian Peninsula and on to the Indian subcontinent and beyond. Eventually they surrounded the Indian Ocean, turning its rim into a contiguous web of seaboard civilizations, crosscut and interlinked by shipping routes that have existed for some 5,000 years.

Describing the varied mythological traditions by which people everywhere came to distill their views about the sea, he notes the commonality of belief in land symbolizing order and sea chaos. Coasts, accordingly, were looked on as shifting zones of sharp rocks and deadly sirens: scary sites that belonged more to the realm of the god Oceanus than to the land. It was only as the old maritime empires became modern states (and tamed Oceanus, at least in mind, by dividing its contiguous mass into “seas” with their own names) that the modern urge to transform our shores’ terra infirma into territory, and thus to fix the frontier between order and chaos, grew ascendant.

Gillis describes how the “water people” of such marsh-and-island landscapes as England’s vast Fens looked on helplessly as their coastal-wetland home was filled in—a drama that was replayed, again and again, from Holland to Boston to the shorelines of the South China

Sea, as such projects came to represent harbingers of progress. Re-counting how Europe's seamen stitched together a new world in their old one's image, Gillis explains that, at the end of that continent's great Age of Exploration, in the late 18th century, the word "coastline" entered our vocabulary. That moment, he writes, marked the start of a new phase in the life of the shore—typified by ever-expanding human efforts to fix our coasts in place, but also suffused with a new Romantic interest in the sea. The ocean became not merely a terrifying abyss but also a vision of beauty, to be admired.

This conception of the sea, which spread throughout Western culture in the 19th century, is nowhere more visible than in the uniquely modern mania for the beach—for lazing about on the shore three-quarters naked as a form of recreation. It was only at the end of the 1800s that visiting the "beach" (a neologism derived from an English word for coastal stones, Gillis tells us) became common as a leisure activity; it took a few decades more for the beach to grow, in Europe and beyond, into the destination par excellence for another modern invention: the vacation. Gillis reads those developments in terms of the larger social history of leisure and of work. But his discussion of the beach's changing meaning is also a means of examining the far more worrisome effects of its shifting uses, in literally concrete terms.

Whether made of sand or pebbles, beaches are formed by the movement of water. They are, by their nature, ever-changing. "No wonder our ancestors had no name or affection for them," Gillis writes. Few examples so starkly illustrate our changing relationship to the shore as the fetishization of a once-worthless substance—white sand—and the billions of dollars we pour, each year, into keeping the stuff in place. Such efforts, along with the billions more spent on "fixing" coastlines in general (half of New Jersey's shore is engineered in place) bespeak a larger contradiction of our era: that even as more of us than ever settle near the sea—some three billion people now live within 100 miles of its edge—we grow only more ignorant of its protean ways.

A similar disconnect is visible in the ways that our cities' working waterfronts, once the haunt of stevedores and sailors, have been turned into maritime theme parks—New York's South Street Seaport, San Francisco's Fisherman's Wharf, Baltimore's Inner Harbor. Once working wharves, these sites are now for shopping and wave-gazing, mirroring our once-industrial cities' evolution from sites for labor into shrines to conspicuous consumption.

**R**ECONCEIVING OUR RELATIONSHIP to the shore in the way Gillis recommends is plainly sensible; translating that reconception into large-scale shifts in our behavior and policies is daunting. Stop building homes ever closer to the edge; protect and restore the coastal marshes and wetlands; redesign the levee systems. Those steps are necessary, but part of what slows their being taken is an ingrained recalcitrance that Gillis finds expressed in a term from Canada's Prince Edward Island: "chasing the shore." It was long used, Gillis writes, to describe poets or idlers who venture down to the sea for purposes other than hauling lobster traps or digging clams. He notes it in discussing the suspicion with which we have historically viewed activities on the shore as not at home in the rational world—and also to suggest how, in our hyper-rational age, the shore's lure has seemed only to strengthen.

It certainly has for me. Although I've never heard the words "chasing the shore" spoken on Prince Edward Island, where I've spent some of every summer of my life, it is precisely what I've always done there. Sleeping in a fisherman's shack that my great-grandparents turned into a seasonal cottage, making memories on the red sandbars and mussel-covered rocks of PEI (as the island's lovers and locals call it), I realize that "chasing the shore" is something my family, like many, has turned into a core vocation and value. In our summer home's refashioning, and in the larger transformation of the shore it sits on, from the old aquaculture of the indigenous Micmac through to that of the hardscrabble Scots and Irish, is distilled much of what Gillis discusses about our human shores' past—and their future. The plot on which that cottage sits has been losing a foot of shorefront a year; locals say the erosion is speeding up, apace with waters of the Northumberland Strait, whose level may rise by at least a yard this century.

In our era when climate-change deniers are beginning to resemble

those who once denied that germs make us sick, geographers are beginning to speak of the Anthropocene—the epoch of the earth's history defined by *Homo sapiens'* impress on it. For Gillis, turning toward the environment is only logical, as is his recent turn to the shore. "We need to stop looking at [history] as something that emanates from centers," he told me recently, "and begin to think of it as something that has its origins and dynamics on margins. And coasts, of course, are one of our chief margins."

The rhetorical flip, grounding his metaphor in real geography, is typical Gillis. But in an academy still structured by old disciplines and ingrained fields of expertise, his call may yet be heeded. In recent years, not a few institutions and scholars have embraced proliferating programs and centers for environmental studies and global affairs to try to address our era's most pressing concerns. Many such initiatives, in abetting cross-disciplinary work by climatologists and

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anthropologists who study, say, the linked scientific and social effects of global warming, have shaped public debate on the issue in crucial ways. Reading Gillis, though, one is struck by how few have met that rarest of intellectual challenges: to produce scholarly work not merely made timely by its engagement with varied fields and modern problems, but also enriched by a historian's understanding of how the human imagination of our planet has helped shape it—and how that history, as Gillis insisted when I visited him at the place that has inspired much of his work, may yet contain seeds for the solving of its problems.

**G**REAT GOTT ISLAND, where Gillis has spent summers for almost half a century, is a gorgeous bit of evergreened granite with no driveable roads (and no cars), a summer population of some 20 families, and a little wooden shack, down by the wooden jetty in the little harbor, affixed with a sign reading, U.S. Post Office. It's another place whose evolution from a year-round outpost for a few hearty fisherfolk to summer place of memories for a few bohemians and scribblers mirrors much of what Gillis, a self-proclaimed "islander by choice," has mined in his books.

Stopping off to see him there, after my yearly pilgrimage to PEI last summer, I strolled around the island with Gillis on a spotless August afternoon. We looked out at white lobster boats bobbing in the glinting blue waves. Gillis took me to the 19th-century wood-frame house that he and his wife bought for \$3,000, back in his Prussian-bureaucracy days, then led me toward the small cemetery plot where Great Gott's minders and lovers—including the Gillises' son, Ben—lie at rest beneath stone graves.

Walking past the little cemetery, I asked John about how he thought this little place, and his life here, had informed his determination to write histories of the world entire. He gestured out toward the waves. "Go west, young man!" That's the line people draw; they think of history as moving west, across the land. But that's not how it actually went, except for during a small chapter of history."

His eyes glinted to match the waves as he invoked a local expression for the bit of human shore I'd just traveled, from Canada's Maritimes down into New England. "I often say that history went more 'down east' than out west. You know how journalists say 'Follow the money'? Well, follow the wind, follow the tide, follow the shore—you'll find what you're looking for." ■

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