

A Conversation with Bland Simpson

Author of *The Inner Islands: A Carolinian's Sound Country Chronicle*

Published October 30, 2006 by the University of North Carolina Press

\$34.95 hardcover, ISBN 0-8078-3056-9

Q: Your wife, Ann Cary Simpson, took many of the photographs for *The Inner Islands*. Tell me about your collaboration.

A: Ann and I were on the banks, walking from the ocean over to Currituck Sound one October day many, many years ago. Without too much talk about it we simply told each other that we would like to do such a thing—do a book together, pictures and text, about the coast. It was years later that we worked on *Into the Sound Country*, and then more years before *Inner Islands*. It's a wonderful way of spending time together, going to interesting and unusual places together, and then presenting a melded vision. We've been lucky to do this, the travel and the books.

Q: This book can be read as a companion piece to *Into the Sound Country*. Does one pick up where the other left off? How do these books function together? How do they work separately?

A: *Inner Islands* was originally to be a chapter in *Sound Country*—it simply got too big, and we pulled its unfinished self out of that text. Then it claimed its own life, and we were fortunate enough to get to do it too, in more or less the same fashion we did *Sound Country*. They're meant to be complementary works, of course.

Q: What exactly are the inner islands, and what inspired you to write about them?

A: Anything inside the barriers such as the Outer Banks, Core Banks, Bogue Banks is an "inner island." One inspiration was the fact that there is a lot of literature on North Carolina's Outer Banks, but I could find virtually nothing on these inner islands (most of them, anyhow—obviously Roanoke and Harkers islands have been much written about!). And, as the ones I knew about had always intrigued me, I decided I wanted to go exploring and see what would turn up. Places like Durant Island, which I could see from the Alligator River Bridge, and Harbor Island in north Core Sound, where my wife, Ann, took me by boat, really did intrigue me, and it's just plain and simple old-fashioned "wonder what's out there" sense of exploration that provided the inspiration to do this.

Q: Although some islands, like Durant and Currituck, are known, others, like Machelhe and Batts Grave, can't be found on many maps. Can these islands be reached by anyone? How do we find them?

A: Batts Grave is a disappeared island. It's now a shoal right near the mouth of Yeopim River; the last sandbar vestiges of it went under in the 1950s. Machelhe Island is the narrow body of land right over the Pasquotank River bridge from Elizabeth City—it's a lot of what one sees from

[more]

Contact Gina Mahalek for review copies/author interviews [919] 966.3561, ext. 234

Fax [919] 966.3829 | E-mail: Gina_Mahalek@unc.edu

the waterfront, and anyone can drive or walk over the bridge to it. There are a couple of boardwalks, as well as good small marinas, and a restaurant. Totally accessible.

Most of the islands in this book are accessible only by boat—some, such as Carrot Island, Bird Shoal off Beaufort, Huggins off Swansboro are easy and great fun to get to. Others would present a fair bit of difficulty to anyone who didn't know the territory or have local knowledge or a guide.

The most important matter here, though, is that many of the islands—the bird nesting islands—are under the lease and care of the NC Audubon Society's "NC Coastal Islands Sanctuary" Program and are *the* important nesting/breeding grounds for all sorts of important shorebirds: terns, pelicans, ibises, etc. And, as such, these islands for most of spring and summer *cannot* be landed upon. Battery Island off Southport, the ibis haven, is an example.

So it's best to know the ownership and regulatory status and visiting protocol before launching.

Q: What is your favorite least-known spot on the North Carolina coast?

A: There's a tiny, beautiful beach on the south side of Rumley's Hammock in the Cedar Island National Wildlife Refuge, where Ann and I and our family have often gone—you sit on it and look south down wide open Core Sound. A glorious spot. Reflecting on that, I start to think of several hundred other spots for which I feel equally strong and identical affection.

Q: Ephemerality is a main theme of this book. How much longer do we have to enjoy these islands?

A: Any number of them may not last another generation or two—others, those with higher elevations on them obviously, could be around for hundreds of years. It really all depends on rapidity of sea level rise, on how soon new and lasting inlets get cut through the banks, or, as coastal geologist Stan Riggs might put it, on how quickly the banks collapse.

Q: *The Inner Islands* is a blend of oral history, research, and your own exploration. How did you interweave these sources?

A: Each island that Ann and I looked at in *The Inner Islands* had its own tale to tell, so the blend varied, just as a jazz trio varies its approach, song to song. In part, I used methods of simple reporting; for example, what and where is this place, what has happened there, and what is interesting about it or about getting to it? And in part through thinking back, usually long after a visit and at a couple hundred miles distance, as to what was really striking or odd about the spot. I try to be intuitive or even imagistic, as a poet or songwriter would be, in looking for ways and words to reveal the spirit of the given place.

Q: The book is arranged in a north to south trajectory. Is there a particular reason for this?

A: Yes—I wanted to start out with the area I know the best, the northeast, where I lived as a

[more]

Contact Gina Mahalek for review copies/author interviews [919] 966.3561, ext. 234

Fax [919] 966.3829 | E-mail: Gina_Mahalek@unc.edu

boy. Then I wanted to move toward the central coast, which Ann has shared with me and introduced to me very well over the past twenty years, and then head to the Cape Fear country, which I've gotten to know through doing music shows and readings and some television. Also, as our coastline is quite complex, moving north to south seemed like a way to help a reader unfamiliar with this complexity have an easier time keeping straight where we were on the map, relative to where we were in the text.

Q: You are a very busy person. How do you find the time to teach writing at UNC-Chapel Hill, play in The Red Clay Ramblers, and write books? Which of these pursuits is your favorite?

A: What I am is a very lucky person, always with plenty to do and a lot of support for it, from my family, community, the University, and on and on. To get to go, in turn, from classroom to concert hall and then out into the field, the swamps, or out on the big open water, and then back again, is a pretty happy mix. A favorite? Impossible, like dividing up air in a jug.

Q: *The Inner Islands* is the fifth in a series of books exploring North Carolina's coastal plain and sound country. Do you have plans for a sixth? Are there any areas left to explore?

A: Sure, I'm already at work on a sixth. Any geography or topography, though finite, has other levels—social, historical, emotional—that go along with it, and these are infinite and inexhaustible. Eastern Carolina, its coastal plain and river and sound country, this all gets bigger to me all the time—I'll never run out of places to explore, ever.

###

This interview may be reprinted in its entirety with the following credit: An interview with Bland Simpson, author of *THE INNER ISLANDS: A CAROLINIAN'S SOUND COUNTRY CHRONICLE* (University of North Carolina Press, Fall 2006). The text of this interview is available at www.ibiblio.org/uncp/media/simpson.

PUBLISHING DETAILS

0-8078-3056-9, \$34.95 hardcover
232 pp., 54 illus., 4 maps, bibl., index
Publication date: October 30, 2006

The University of North Carolina Press
116 South Boundary Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27514-3808
919-966-3561 (office) 1-800-848-6224 (orders) 919-966-3829 (fax)

CONTACTS

Publicity: Gina Mahalek, ext. 234; gina_mahalek@unc.edu
Sales: Michael Donatelli, ext. 232; michael_donatelli@unc.edu
Rights: Vicky Wells, ext. 225; vicky_wells@unc.edu

**Contact Gina Mahalek for review copies/author interviews [919] 966.3561, ext. 234
Fax [919] 966.3829 | E-mail: Gina_Mahalek@unc.edu**