Fisher Folk: Two Communities on Chesapeake Bay

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Abstract
In the backwaters of Chesapeake Bay many people spend days crabbing or shellfishing alone from small boats, speak with local accents reminiscent of Old World forebears, believe and practice fundamental religion, and value their work on the water and raising families over education. Cut off by the water and marshes that provide their livelihood, they have tenaciously maintained their traditional ways of life. In this new book, Carolyn Ellis, who lived among these fisher folk, provides an intimate view of everyday life in two communities on the Bay. She describes the work of crabbing, oyster tonging, and oyster shucking in the seafood plants. She enters households to observe the people within their family circle and notes their activities within the community and their churches. Although similar in their economy and their resistance to outside control, the two communities have evolved different patterns of social organization. In one the church has come to play a dominant role. It serves as the only local government, even providing street lights and nursing services. It supports an ethic of hard work and the pursuit of a higher standard of living. In the other community, kin loyalties exercise paramount control. The people exhibit a marked individualism, and family members assist and fill in for one another. Living more on a day-to-day basis, they supplement their seasonal fishing income with wage labor. Yet even in these relatively isolated reaches of Chesapeake Bay the practices and values of the mass society intrude, and Carolyn Ellis shows the changes already taking place in the two communities. Although likely, she suggests, that they will go the way of other small towns in America, now hardly distinguishable from one another Alternatively, they might become tourist towns or museum communities, preserving a quaint blend of tradition and progress.

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